

Washington is halting some aid to Niger even as it eyes greater support for Burkina Faso's military coup-maker.

Theme: Intelligence, Militarization and
WMD

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African dignitaries at the opening ceremony for Flintlock, U.S. Africa Command's largest annual special operations counterterrorism exercise.

The Intercept previously reported that [Brig. Gen. Moussa Salaou Barmou](#), who headed Niger's Special Forces and now serves as [chief of defense](#), also attended the National Defense University and trained at Fort Benning (now Fort Moore), Georgia. On Monday, Barmou told Nuland that [the junta would execute Bazoum](#) if neighboring countries attempted a military intervention to restore his rule, a U.S. official told The Intercept.

"It's a disturbing trend, and a sign of how badly misallocated our national security spending is on the continent," [wrote Sen. Chris Murphy](#), D-Conn., on X, formerly known as Twitter, drawing attention to The Intercept's coverage of the latest in a long parade of U.S.-trained military mutineers.

It appears that the United States trained yet another coup leader in Africa. It's a disturbing trend, and a sign of how badly misallocated our national security spending is on the continent.

1/ A short thread on some of what's gone wrong. <https://t.co/waVCuwJvaE>

— Chris Murphy [@ChrisMurphyCT](#) [July 29, 2023](#)

Two weeks after Niger's coup, the State Department has still not provided a list of the U.S.-connected mutineers, but a different U.S. official confirmed that there are "five people we've identified as having received [U.S. military] training." The official spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak to the press.

"The U.S. is using security assistance and military training too broadly in sub-Saharan Africa. Doing so means you're putting the United States in a position where it's implicated in human rights abuses and the malign behavior of local security partners," said Elias Yousif, a research analyst with the Stimson Center's Conventional Defense Program. "Our experience in the Sahel should be especially cautionary. Over many years, we've seen a remarkable series of coups as well as deteriorating security with a rise in militancy, Islamist insurgencies, and criminal networks. I would be hard-pressed to point to a success that could justify continuing on the same path."

"A Model of Democracy"

In March, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken called Niger "[a model of democracy](#)," even though the latest State Department human rights report on the country refers to "[significant human rights issues](#)," including "extrajudicial killings by or on behalf of [the] government."

The State Department has offered similarly confused responses to The Intercept's questions about the coup in Niger. When asked about the training provided to members of the Nigerien junta, a nameless spokesperson replied by email: "This is an evolving situation and it is too soon to characterize the nature of ongoing developments."

That spokesperson also insisted that the "U.S. Government does not provide training to the Presidential Guard." A 2017 and 2018 joint State and Defense Department "[Foreign Military Training Report](#)," however, mentions "In Country Training" for members of Niger's

presidential guard.

“We are pausing certain foreign assistance programs, and will continue to review our assistance as the situation evolves,” [Blinken posted on X](#) last week, but also said in a [press statement](#) that the U.S. was continuing some “security operations” in Niger.

The provision of United States assistance to the government of Niger depends on democratic governance and respect for constitutional order. We are pausing certain foreign assistance programs, and will continue to review our assistance as the situation evolves.

— Secretary Antony Blinken (@SecBlinken) [August 4, 2023](#)

Following military coups, U.S. law generally restricts countries from [receiving military aid](#). But The Intercept recently found [security assistance still trickling into Mali](#), even though that country is ruled by a U.S.-trained officer who overthrew the previous government and its military has been implicated in the killing of civilians. Military officers twice overthrew the government of Burkina Faso in 2022, but the U.S. [continues to provide training](#) to Burkinabe forces [according to Gen. Michael Langley](#), the chief of Africa Command, or AFRICOM. In April, less than a month after Langley informed members of the House Armed Services Committee about the continued support, the Burkinabe military reportedly [massacred at least 156 civilians](#), including 45 children, in the village of Karma. Langley has also argued against constraints on U.S. military aid following coups.

On Monday, Nuland met with Barmou, warning the new defense chief of “the economic and other kinds of support that we will legally have to cut off if democracy is not restored.” Barmou — who U.S. commandos previously helped set up specialized [mobile units](#) designed to target terrorist groups and criminal gangs — was apparently unmoved. “They are quite firm in their view on how they want to proceed,” [said Nuland](#), noting “it was difficult today, and I will be straight up about that.”

Last year, [The Intercept asked Nuland](#) what the U.S. was doing to slow the parade of African officers overthrowing governments the U.S. trains them to protect.

“Nick, that was a pretty loaded comment that you made,” she replied. “Some folks involved in these coups have received some U.S. training, but far from all of them.”

Since then, five more U.S.-trained officers have been involved in coups. Reporting by The Intercept indicates that at least 14 U.S.-trained officers have taken part in coups in West Africa since 2008.

Ineffective and Counterproductive

[Senior officials at the State Department and Pentagon](#), meanwhile, are reportedly lobbying to increase [security assistance](#) to Burkina Faso, which neighbors Niger, at a time when human rights defenders and journalists say the government is cracking down on critical voices and [forced disappearances](#) are [on the rise](#).

“It’s getting much worse. The government is suppressing free speech,” a journalist working in Burkina Faso told The Intercept on the condition of anonymity, due to fears for his safety.

“People who speak out are being abducted. The situation is scary.”

The Biden administration’s push for increased security aid to Burkina Faso comes despite a coup last year by U.S.-trained [Lt. Col. Paul-Henri Damiba](#), who was swiftly overthrown by another military officer, Capt. Ibrahim Traoré. Last September, The Intercept asked AFRICOM if Traoré was also trained by the U.S. “We are looking into this,” said AFRICOM spokesperson Kelly Cahalan, noting that the command was “still digging” into possible “engagements” with him. “I will let you know when I have an answer,” Cahalan wrote. A request this week for updates yielded no response.

Experts say that the U.S. track record of pouring money into foreign militaries instead of making long-term investments in humanitarian aid, strengthening civil society, and bolstering democratic institutions has been short-sighted and detrimental to wider American aims. They also question the ability of the United States to build foreign military capacity, a task the Pentagon sees as a [core competency](#).

“When you look at the big picture, from Afghanistan to Somalia to Burkina Faso, the U.S. government’s funding and training of other nations’ military and police forces in counterterrorism has largely been ineffective and counterproductive in regards to the pursuit of meaningful safety, for either Americans or anyone else around the world,” Stephanie Savell, the co-director of the Costs of War project at Brown University, told The Intercept.

Ukrainian troops trained by the U.S. and its allies have [floundered during a long-awaited counteroffensive](#) against Russian forces, raising questions about the quality of the instruction and the efficacy of tens of billions of dollars in U.S. assistance. In 2021, an Afghan army built, trained, advised, and armed by the United States over [20 years](#) evaporated in the face of Taliban forces. In 2015, a \$500 million Pentagon effort to train and equip Syrian rebels, [slated](#) to produce 15,000 fighters over three years, yielded just a few dozen before being [scrapped](#) by the United States. A year earlier, an Iraqi army created, trained, and funded — to the tune of at least \$25 billion — by the U.S. was [routed](#) by the far smaller forces of the Islamic State.

In West Africa in particular, Yousif noted, security aid has not been tethered to a more diversified whole-of-government approach. “It really illustrates the lack of tools in the toolkit that the United States has in this part of the world. It’s the one mechanism that the U.S. thinks it has for garnering influence and delivering foreign policy benefits, but it seems like a very poor tool, especially in a place like the Sahel, where militaries are also increasingly a threat to the civilian government.”

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