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Red Alert no. 17: No Military Intervention against Niger

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Why is there an increase in anti-French and anti-Western feeling in the Sahel?

From the mid-nineteenth century, French colonialism has galloped across North, West, and Central Africa. By 1960, France controlled almost five million square kilometres (eight times the size of France itself) in West Africa alone. Though national liberation movements from Senegal to Chad won independence from France that year, the French government maintained financial and monetary control through the African Financial Community or CFA (formerly the colonial French Community of Africa), maintaining the French CFA franc currency in the former West African colonies and forcing the newly independent countries to keep at least half of their foreign exchange reserves in the Banque de France. Sovereignty was not only restricted by these monetary chains:

when new projects emerged in the area, they were met by French intervention (spectacularly with the assassination of Burkina Faso's Thomas Sankara in 1987). France maintained the **neocolonial structures** that have allowed French companies to leech the natural resources of the region (such as the uranium from Niger, which powers a third of French lightbulbs) and have forced these countries to crush their hopes through an International Monetary Fund-driven debt-austerity agenda.

The simmering resentment against France escalated after the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) destroyed Libya in 2011 and exported instability across Africa's Sahel region. A combination of secessionist groups, trans-Saharan smugglers, and al-Qaeda offshoots joined together and marched south of the Sahara to capture nearly two-thirds of Mali, large parts of Burkina Faso, and sections of Niger. French military intervention in the Sahel through Operation Barkhane (2013) and through the creation of the neocolonial G-5 Sahel Project led to an increase in violence by French troops, including against civilians. The IMF debt-austerity project, the Western wars in West Asia, and the destruction of Libya led to a rise in migration across the region. Rather than tackle the roots of the migration, Europe tried to build its southern border in the Sahel through military and foreign policy measures, including by **exporting** illegal surveillance technologies to the neocolonial governments in this belt of Africa. The cry 'La France, dégage!' ('France, get out!') defines the attitude of mass unrest in the region against the neocolonial structures that try to strangle the Sahel.



Why are there so many coups in the Sahel?

Over the course of the past thirty years, politics in the Sahel countries have seriously desiccated. Many parties with a history that traces back to the national liberation movements and even the socialist movements (such as Niger's Parti Nigérien pour la Démocratie et le Socialisme-Tarayya) have collapsed into being representatives of their elites, who, in turn, are conduits of a Western agenda. The entry of the al-Qaeda-smuggler forces gave the local elites and the West the justification to further squeeze the political environment, reducing already limited trade union freedoms and excising the left from the ranks of established political parties. The issue is not so much that the leaders of the mainstream political parties are ardently right-wing or centre-right, but that whatever their orientation, they have no real independence from the will of Paris and Washington. They have become – to use a word often voiced on the ground – ‘stooges’ of the West.

Absent any reliable political or democratic instruments, the discarded rural and petty-bourgeois sections of the Sahel countries turn to their urbanised children in the armed forces for leadership. People like Burkina Faso's Captain Ibrahim Traoré (born in 1988), who was raised in the rural province of Mouhoun and studied geology in Ouagadougou, and Mali's Colonel Assimi Goïta (born in 1983), who comes from the cattle market town and military redoubt of Kati, represent these broad class fractions. Their communities have been utterly marginalised by the hard austerity programmes of the IMF, the theft of their resources by Western multinationals, and the payments for Western military garrisons in the country. Discarded with no real political platform to speak for them, large sections of the country have rallied behind the patriotic intentions of these young military men, who have themselves been pushed by mass movements – such as trade unions and peasant organisations – in their countries. That is why the coup in Niger is being defended in mass rallies from the capital city of Niamey to the small, remote towns that border Libya. These young leaders do not come to power with a well-worked agenda. However, they have a level of admiration for people like Thomas Sankara: Captain Ibrahim Traoré of Burkina Faso, for instance, sports a red beret like Sankara, speaks with Sankara's left-wing frankness, and even mimics Sankara's diction.

Will there be a pro-Western military intervention to remove the government of Niger?

Condemnations of the coup in Niger came quickly from the West (particularly France). The new government of Niger, led by a civilian (former finance minister Ali Mahaman Lamine Zeine), told French troops to leave the country and decided to cut uranium exports to France. Neither France nor the United States – which has built the largest drone base in the world in Agadez (Niger) – are keen to directly intervene with their own military forces. In 2021, France and the United States **protected** their private companies, TotalEnergies and ExxonMobil, in Mozambique by asking the Rwandan army to intervene militarily. In Niger, the West first wanted the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to invade on their behalf, but mass unrest in the ECOWAS member states, including condemnations from trade unions and people's organisations, stayed the hands of the regional organisation's ‘peacekeeping forces’. On 19 August of this year, ECOWAS sent a delegation to meet with Niger's deposed president and with the new government. It has kept its troops on stand-by, warning that it has chosen an undisclosed ‘D-day’ for a military

intervention.

The African Union, which had initially [condemned](#) the coup and suspended Niger from all union activity, recently [stated](#) that a military intervention should not take place. This statement has not stopped rumours from flying about, such as that Ghana might send its troops into Niger (despite the Presbyterian Church of Ghana's [warning](#) not to intervene and the trade unions' condemnation of a potential invasion). Neighbouring countries have closed their borders with Niger.

Meanwhile, the governments of Burkina Faso and Mali, which have sent troops to Niger, have said that any military intervention against the government of Niger will be taken as an invasion of their own countries. There is a serious conversation afoot about the creation of a new federation in the Sahel that includes Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali, and Niger, which have a combined population of over 85 million. Rumbblings amongst the populations from Senegal to Chad suggest that these might not be the last coups in this important belt of the African continent. The growth of platforms such as the [West African Peoples Organisation](#) is key to the political advancement in the region.

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