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زبانهای اروپایی

By Vijay Prashad
26.03.2023

The Long Arm of Washington Extends Into Africa's Sahel

On March 16, 2023, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken [announced](#)—during his visit to Niger—that the United States government will provide \$150 million in aid to the Sahel region of Africa. This money, Blinken said, “will help provide life-saving support to refugees, asylum seekers, and others impacted by conflict and food insecurity in the region.” The next day, UNICEF issued a [press release](#) with information from a [report](#) the United Nations issued that month stating that 10 million children in the central Sahel countries of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger need humanitarian assistance. UNICEF has appealed for [\\$473.8 million](#) to support its efforts to provide these children with basic requirements. According to the [Human Development Index](#) for 2021, Niger, despite holding large [reserves](#) of uranium, is one of the poorest countries in the world (189th out of 191 countries); profits from the uranium have long [drained](#) away to [French](#) and other Western multinational corporations. The U.S. aid money will not be going to the United Nations but will be disbursed through its own agencies, such as the U.S. Agency for International Development’s Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance.

Northeast of Niger’s capital Niamey, near the city of Agadez, is Air Base 201, one of the world’s largest drone [bases](#) that is home to several armed MQ-9 Reapers. During a press conference with Blinken, Niger Foreign Minister Hassoumi Massoudou [affirmed](#) his country’s “military cooperation” with the United States, which includes the U.S. “equipping... our armed forces, for our army and our air force and intelligence.” Neither Blinken nor Massoudou spoke about Air Base 201, from where the United States [monitors](#) the Sahel region, trains Niger’s military, and provides air support for U.S. ground

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operations in the region (all of this made clear during the [visit](#) by Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force JoAnne S. Bass to the base at the end of December 2021). The U.S. will [spend](#) \$280 million on this base—twice the humanitarian aid promised by Blinken—including \$30 million per year to maintain operations at Air Base 201.

Blinken is the [first](#) U.S. Secretary of State to visit Niger, a country that his own department [accused](#) of “significant human rights issues” like “unlawful or arbitrary killings, including extrajudicial killings by or on behalf of government” and torture. When a reporter asked Blinken during the press conference what the U.S. will do “to bring democracy” to Burkina Faso and Mali, he [replied](#) that the United States is monitoring the “democratic backsliding, the military coups, which so far have not led to a renewal of a democratic constitutional process in these countries.” The military governments in [Burkina Faso](#) and Mali have [ejected](#) the presence of the French military from their territories and have indicated that they would not welcome any more Western military intervention. A senior official in Niger told me that Blinken’s hesitancy to directly speak about Burkina Faso and Mali might have been because of the distress about the faltering democracy in Niger.

Niger President Mohamed Bazoum has faced serious criticisms within the country about corruption and violence. In April 2022, president Bazoum [wrote](#) on Twitter that 30 of his senior officials had been arrested for “embezzlement or misappropriation,” and they would be in prison “for a long time.” This was a perfectly clear statement, but it obscured the deeper corruption within Bazoum’s own administration—including the [detention](#) of his Communications Minister Mahamadou Zada on corruption charges—which was [revealed](#) through an audit of the country’s 2021 spending that highlighted millions of dollars of missing state funds. Furthermore, a third of the money spent by Niger to buy \$1 billion in weapons from arms companies between 2011 and 2019 was pilfered by government officials, according to a [report](#) by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project.

In December 2022, during the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit, President Bazoum joined Benin’s President Patrice Talon to [be part of](#) the U.S. project known as the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC). The U.S. government pledged \$504 million toward facilitating transportation between Benin and Niger, to help increase trade between these two neighbors. The MCC, set up in 2004 in the context of the U.S. war on Iraq, has been [expanded](#) into an instrument used by the U.S. government to challenge the Chinese-led [Belt and Road Initiative \(BRI\)](#). Senior officials in Niger, who requested anonymity, and several [studies](#) by independent authorities indicate that this MCC money is being used to

upgrade African farmlands and that the corporation has been [working](#) with U.S.-funded institutions such as the [Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa](#) ([funded](#) by the Bill and Melinda Gates and Rockefeller foundations), and turn these agricultural resources over to multinational agribusinesses. The MCC grants, the senior officials said, are used to “launder” Niger’s land to foreign corporate interests and to “subordinate” Niger’s political leadership to U.S. government interests.

At the press conference, Blinken was asked about Russia’s Wagner Group. “Where Wagner has been present,” Blinken [said](#), “bad things have inevitably followed.” Statements have been made recently about the Wagner Group operating in Burkina Faso and Mali by the U.S. State Department’s [Vedant Patel](#) after the second coup in the former country in [September 2022](#), and by the RAND Corporation’s [Colin P. Clarke](#) in January 2023. Governments in both [Burkina Faso](#) and [Mali](#) have denied that Wagner is operating from their territory (although the group [does](#) operate in Libya), and informed observers such as the Nigerien journalist Seidik Abba (author of *Mali-Sahel, notre Afghanistan à nous*, 2022) [said](#) that countries in the Sahel region are being wary about any foreign intervention. Despite repeating many of Washington’s talking points about Wagner, Niger Foreign Minister Massoudou [conceded](#) that focus on it might be exaggerated: “As for the presence of Wagner in Burkina... the information that we have does not allow us to say that Wagner is still in Burkina Faso.”

Before Blinken left for Niger and Ethiopia, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Molly Phee [said](#) that Niger is “one of our most important partners on the continent in terms of security cooperation.” That is the most honest assessment of U.S. interests in Niger—largely about the military bases in Agadez and Niamey.

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Source: Globetrotter

Tags: Politics, Human Rights, Economy, Africa/Niger, United Nations, Africa/Burkina

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