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By Zoe Alexandra and Vijay Prashad
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Is This the End of French Neo-Colonialism in Africa?

Author Bio: This article was produced by [Globetrotter](#).

Zoe Alexandra is the co-editor of [Peoples Dispatch](#).

Vijay Prashad is an Indian historian, editor, and journalist. He is a writing fellow and chief correspondent at Globetrotter. He is an editor of [LeftWord Books](#) and the director of [Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research](#). He has written more than 20 books, including [The Darker Nations](#) and [The Poorer Nations](#). His latest books are [Struggle Makes Us Human: Learning from Movements for Socialism](#) and (with Noam Chomsky) [The Withdrawal: Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan, and the Fragility of U.S. Power](#).

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[Article Body:]

In Bamako, Mali, on September 16, the governments of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger [created](#) the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). On X, the social media platform formerly known as Twitter, Colonel Assimi Goïta, the head of the transitional government of Mali, [wrote](#) that the Liptako-Gourma Charter which created the AES would establish “an architecture of collective defense and mutual assistance for the benefit of our populations.” The hunger for such regional cooperation goes back to the period when France ended its colonial rule. Between 1958 and 1963, Ghana and Guinea were part of the Union of African States, which was to have been the seed for wider pan-African unity. Mali was a

member as well between 1961 and 1963.

But, more recently, these three countries—and others in the Sahel region such as Niger—have struggled with common problems, such as the downward sweep of radical Islamic forces unleashed by the 2011 North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) war on Libya. The anger against the French has been so intense that it has provoked at least seven coups in Africa (two in Burkina Faso, two in Mali, one in Guinea, one in Niger, and one in Gabon) and unleashed mass demonstrations from Algeria to the Congo and most recently in [Benin](#). The depth of frustration with France is such that its troops have been ejected from the Sahel, Mali [demoted](#) French from its official language status, and France’s ambassador in Niger (Sylvain Itté) was effectively held “hostage”—as French President Emmanuel Macron [said](#)—by people deeply upset by French behavior in the region.

Philippe Toyo Noudjenoume, the President of the West Africa Peoples’ Organization, explained the basis of this cascading anti-French sentiment in the region. French colonialism, he said, “has remained in place since 1960.” France holds the revenues of its former colonies in the Banque de France in Paris. The French policy—known as *Françafrique*—included the presence of French military bases from Djibouti to Senegal, from Côte d’Ivoire to Gabon. “Of all the former colonial powers in Africa,” Noudjenoume told us, “it is France that has intervened militarily at least sixty times to overthrow governments, such as [that of] Modibo Keita in Mali (1968), or assassinate patriotic leaders, such as Félix-Roland Moumié (1960) and Ernest Ouandié (1971) in Cameroon, Sylvanus Olympio in Togo in 1963, Thomas Sankara in Burkina Faso in 1987 and others.” Between 1997 and 2002, during the presidency of Jacques Chirac, France [intervened militarily](#) 33 times on the African continent (by comparison, between 1962 and 1995, France [intervened militarily](#) 19 times in African states). France never really suspended its colonial grip or its colonial ambitions.

Breaking the Camel’s Back

Two events in the past decade “broke the camel’s back,” Noudjenoume said: the NATO war in Libya, led by France, in March 2011, and the French intervention to remove Koudou Gbagbo Laurent from the presidency of Côte d’Ivoire in April 2011. “For years,” he said, “these events have forced a strong anti-French sentiment, particularly among young people. It is not just in the Sahel that this feeling has developed but throughout French-speaking Africa. It is true that it is in the Sahel that it is currently expressed most openly. But throughout French-speaking Africa, this feeling is strong.”

Mass protest against the French presence is now evident across the former French colonies

in Africa. These civilian protests have not been able to result in straight-forward civilian transitions of power, largely because the political apparatus in these countries had been eroded by long-standing, French-backed kleptocracies (illustrated by the Bongo family, which ruled Gabon from 1967 to 2023, and which leeches the oil wealth of Gabon for their own personal gain; when Omar Bongo died in 2009, French politician Eva Joly [said](#) that he ruled on behalf of France and not of his own citizens). Despite the French-backed repression in these countries, trade unions, peasant organizations, and left-wing parties have not been able to drive the upsurge of anti-French patriotism, though they have been able to assert themselves

France intervened militarily in Mali in 2013 to try to control the forces that it had unleashed with NATO's war in Libya two years previously. These radical Islamist forces captured half of Mali's territory and then, in 2015, proceeded to assault Burkina Faso. France intervened but then sent the soldiers of the armies of these Sahel countries to die against the radical Islamist forces that it had backed in Libya. This created a great deal of animosity among the soldiers, Noudjenoume told us, and that is why patriotic sections of the soldiers rebelled against the governments and overthrew them.

Anti-Intervention

After the coup in Niger, the West hoped to send in a [proxy force](#)—led by the Economic Commission of West African States (ECOWAS)—but the African military leaders demurred. Across the region, people set up solidarity committees to defend the people of Niger from any attack, with the threat provoking “revolt and indignation among the populations,” Noudjenoume explained. Nigerian President Bola Ahmed Tinubu was even forced to back down from ECOWAS's crusade when his country's Congress rejected the measure and mass protests occurred against militarily intervening in the neighboring country. As ECOWAS's ultimatums to restore the deposed Nigerien leader Mohamed Bazoum expired, it became clear that its threat was empty.

Meanwhile, not only did it appear that the people of Niger would resist any military intervention, but Burkina Faso and Mali immediately promised to defend Niger against any such intervention. The new AES is a product of this mutual solidarity.

But the AES is not merely a military or security pact. At the signing ceremony, Mali's Defense Minister Abdoulaye Diop [told](#) journalists, “This alliance will be a combination of military and economic efforts [among]... the three countries.” It will build upon the February 2023 [agreement](#) between Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Mali to collaborate on a fuel and electricity exchange, to build transportation networks, to collaborate on mineral

resource sales, to build a regional agricultural development project, and to increase intra-Sahel trade. Whether these countries would be able to develop an economic agenda to benefit their peoples—and therefore guarantee that France would have no means to exert its authority over the region—is to be seen.