

The *Françafrique* : Unveiling Anti- French Sentiments and France's Complex Role in Africa.

BUILDING RESILIENCE IN THE SOUTH SERIES – COMMENTARY

By Yasmine Akrimi – North Africa Research Analyst

"We're forgetting one thing. It's that much of the money in our wallets comes precisely from centuries of exploitation of Africa. Not only Africa. But a lot of it comes from the exploitation of Africa. So we need to have a little common sense, a little justice, to give back to the Africans, I'd say, what we've taken from them. Especially as this is necessary, if we want to avoid the worst convulsions or difficulties, with the political consequences that this entails in the near future."

Former French President Jacques Chirac – 2008

In November 2021, a French military convoy crossing Niger to reach the town of Gao in northern Mali was met with protests from locals in Téra, west of Niger, who were opposed to the French military presence in their lands. French-Nigerian military

[The Françafrique : Unveiling Anti-French Sentiments and France's Complex Role in Africa.](#)

Yasmine Akrimi

Brussels International Center

officers responded violently, leading to three deaths and seventeen wounded amongst the protesters. The latter are amongst a young African generation that did not experience colonialism firsthand, but that is dealing with increasing French military presence in the Sahel and a harsh disenchantment with the reality of the “France-Africa partnership”. What is considered an “anti-French sentiment” in the global North seems to echo another concept many consider outdated: the *Françafrique* – France’s neocolonial ties with its former colonies in sub-Saharan Africa on economic, monetary, diplomatic, and military levels.

FRANCE’S ECONOMIC INFLUENCE, NIGER’S URANIUM, AND THE “RESOURCE CURSE”

Since the 1970s, France has justified the existence of its nuclear power plants based on the energy independence they supposedly provide France in terms of electricity production thanks to the uranium needed to run the plants – all of which has been sourced from abroad since 2001. This is, in fact, a longstanding myth that has made it possible to conceal the importance of African uranium in the history of French nuclear power, as well as the environmental, health, economic and political conditions of this supply.

The record of fifty years of uranium mining in Niger by subsidiaries of the French nuclear company Areva – the world’s leading civil nuclear group until its dismantlement – is illustrative. Areva’s sales have consistently far exceeded Niger’s GDP, and Niger’s mines have always been considered strategic by the company, even after the diversification of supply countries. Niger’s uranium has contributed to a third of the electricity produced by French nuclear power plants, playing a significant role in keeping it among the world’s leading economic powers. Until the present, France remains 100% dependent on Niger’s uranium for its military nuclear power.

[The Françafrique: Unveiling Anti-French Sentiments and France’s Complex Role in Africa.](#)
Yasmine Akrimi

Among the world's three poorest countries, Niger has only benefited from around 12% of the market value of the uranium produced, scoring the worst human development indicators in the fields of health, education, malnutrition and infant mortality. As one of many examples, most Nigeriens still have no access to electricity, which is still largely imported from neighbouring Nigeria.

In 1945, when the French Atomic Energy Commission (CEA) was created, a major prospecting campaign was launched in France and its colonies. In Africa, the first valid site was discovered in Gabon in 1956, and exploited from 1961 onwards. However, it was on Niger that the greatest hopes rested, with the discovery of the Arlit site in 1966. After the failure of the *Organisation commune des régions sahariennes* (O CRS) project, control of uranium and oil was integrated into the main French interests within its former colonies. Independent Niger was entrusted to Hamani Diori, a convinced Francophile who established an authoritarian one-party regime supported by the metropole. With the emergence of the *Société des Mines de l'Air* (Somair) in 1968 to exploit the Arlit site, Niger obtained only 20% of the shares and had to concede advantageous tax arrangements to France. In 1970, the second mining company, Cominak, did not fundamentally renegotiate the pact.

Following numerous scandals, the Areva group was absorbed by *Électricité de France* (EDF) and renamed Orano in 2018. Like Areva, Orano is still a state-owned company; however, Nigerians will long bear the consequences of Areva's activities, which resulted in an ecological and health disaster: radioactive and chemical pollution, mining waste used by local residents, air (by radon), soil and water contamination, and the exhaustion of the fossil water resources. Additionally, hundreds of permanent and subcontracted employees lost their jobs since Orano announced the closure of Cominak in 2019, whose reserves are running out. In Akokan and Arlit, two towns in northern Niger totally dependent on mining activity, employees and

their families feel abandoned by the company while millions of tons of radioactive waste are still stored in the open. A similar scenario was the shutdown of the Mounana site in Gabon in 1999, turning it into a ghost town overnight, with Areva's only legacy being radioactivity and its dangers. Although no serious decontamination of the Gabonese site occurred, radiation-induced illnesses suffered by mine workers are still denied by French authorities.

OPERATION BARKHANE AND THE FRENCH MILITARY PRESENCE IN THE SAHEL

In terms of duration, volume and geographical reach, the military Operation Barkhane in the Sahel, launched in the summer of 2014, is France's largest external operation since the Algerian War. While this operation has become the main leitmotif for maintaining a French military presence in Africa, it receives minimal media coverage and almost no political debate in France, as is often the case when it comes to overseas operations (OPEX) under the Fifth Republic. Yet the situation in the Sahel continues to deteriorate, which casts serious doubts on the French military interference's effectiveness and ultimate objectives.

As early as October 2012, former French president François Hollande fully embraced the institutional legacy of French interference in Africa in his Dakar speech. Addressing Senegalese representatives, Hollande began by asserting that "the time of *Françafrique* is over", contrasting it with what was to be framed as a "partnership between France and Africa". From the French president's standpoint, the difference lies in the fact that "emissaries, intermediaries and agencies are no longer welcome at the French presidency or in government ministries". Yet the relationship between France and its former colonies (and beyond) was hardly going to be reconsidered, as some of Hollande's speech elements indicated: "development aid", "fairer trade

relations”, “reinforcement of European regulations in favour of transparency in the accounts of extractive companies”.

More importantly, the Head of State claimed “a perfectly clear definition of the French military presence in Africa”, without ever calling the presence itself into question. Hollande’s only requirement was that the French presence should continue “within a legal and transparent framework”, in line with the overhaul of defence agreements launched by Nicolas Sarkozy in 2008. To put an end to its image as “Africa’s police force”, President Hollande pledged that “France will provide logistical support, but where it belongs”.

However, barely three months later, preempting the jihadist militia – which had just seized the town of Mopti (in central Mali) and was about to attack Bamako – France decided to launch a ground intervention in a country that has been in crisis since President Amadou Toumani Touré was ousted by a military coup in March 2012. This was the start of Operation Serval, which signalled a strong return of the French military presence in Africa. The terms of the intervention seemed to have been in the making for a while as some elements suggest: the presence of special forces, increase in air assets in neighbouring countries, the French president’s trip to Algeria to obtain an airspace right of passage, and so on.

Replacing the Operations Serval and Épervier, Operation Barkhane represented a novelty due to its scale and its cross-border operation involving five African countries: Chad (where the command of the French military force is located), Mali (where the largest contingents are present), Niger (where an air intelligence base has been established), Burkina Faso (where the Special Operations Command has its headquarters), and Mauritania.

The election of Emmanuel Macron in 2017 brought little change to France's military strategy in Africa. The "very profound turning point" announced during the Pau summit in January 2020, in the presence of the G5 Sahel's heads of state convened by the French president, resulted in an increase in Operation Barkhane's resources and an intensification of its actions in the three border areas, thanks to armed drones in particular.

However, the resilience of jihadist groups remained strong, and the number of civilian victims continued to increase. Maintaining a strictly military logic proved not simply insufficient; it also hijacked the search for a political and social resolution to the crisis. The security approach worsened food insecurity, reinforced the social and identity divide upon which jihadist groups thrive, and allowed the latter to radicalise their ideology and their means of action without slowing down their progress. These pernicious effects were further reinforced by foreign interference linked to the French and international military presence. A similar case has been observed after the Western interventions in Afghanistan in 2001 and in Somalia in 2007, which strengthened the jihadist groups Al Taliban and Al Chabab, in addition to the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq following the second American intervention in 2003. The French military presence served as a breeding ground for the propaganda of jihadist groups, which painted themselves as "resistance fighters" against an "occupying army", further strengthened by France's support of authoritarian regimes.

The Barkhane force also appears to be linked to numerous abuses committed by the African forces it supports. Operating in regions they are unfamiliar with, the Malian and Burkinabè troops indistinctly attack civilian populations – often Fulani – suspected of supporting the jihadists, resulting in yet more victims, which naturally strengthens jihadist recruitment efforts.

But perhaps the most significant source of grievances is what is called “collateral damages”; in other words, the civilian victims for which the French army is responsible. Although they are much smaller in number than those caused during the American and allies bombings in Afghanistan and Iraq, these victims nevertheless exist, and might be more frequent since the use of armed drones. For example, the bombing of civilians attending a wedding in Bounty, Mali in early January 2021 constitutes a particularly bloody example documented by a UN investigation report – an incident still denied by French authorities, who consider the accusations to be part of an “informational war”.¹

French soldiers on patrol also engage in police-like activities (searching people and houses, ripping mattresses, interrogations, taking fingerprints and DNA, confiscating suspect phones or motorcycles, etc.), which may be taken as evidence that the French African strategy of “conquering the hearts and minds” of local populations is a mere illusion.

In June 2021, as a way to face the economic (nearly 1 billion euros annually) and political (a growing hostility in France and Africa) cost of Operation Barkhane, Macron announced another “profound transformation” of the French military presence in the Sahel. It involved drastically reducing the number of French troops, internationalising the military presence to supervise African troops, and continuing the aerial bombardments – touted as the most efficient tactic of “neutralising” jihadists – in direct continuity with the security approach.

¹ The wedding bombing seems to confirm the French army operates “signature strikes” in the Sahel, which are prohibited precisely to reduce the risk of civilian victims. That is to say, that targets are set on the basis of circumstantial evidence indicating membership in an armed group, and not on the observation of direct participation in hostilities.

[The Françafrique: Unveiling Anti-French Sentiments and France's Complex Role in Africa.](#)

Yasmine Akrimi

ON “ANTI-FRENCH” SENTIMENTS

Throughout francophone Africa, the rejection of Paris’ African policy is increasingly palpable. France’s condemnation of the military coup of August 2020 in Mali – although acclaimed by the country’s youth – ignited the streets of Bamako, following weeks of repression of large popular mobilisations denouncing the negligence of Malian authorities and the French interference in Malian political and military life. Yet it was especially during the Senegalese riots at the beginning of 2021 –which followed two years of mobilisation on the theme “France get out” – that the general French public discovered what is now called the “anti-French feeling” in sub-Saharan Africa.

In the columns of *Jeune Afrique* in November 2020, Macron opted to denounce “a strategy at work, sometimes led by African leaders, but especially by foreign powers like Russia or Turkey which play on post-colonial resentment. We must not be naive on this subject: many of those who speak out, who make videos, who are present in the French-speaking media are paid by Russia or Turkey.” By singling out the spectre of foreign manipulation to explain the rejection of France’s Africa policy, the French president, who regularly reiterates he was not there when colonisation happened, nevertheless relies on one of the most salient themes of French (neo)colonial thought: putting the blame on competing powers – Britain and Germany in the twentieth century, and now Russia, China and Turkey.

The Burkinabè army announced in February 2023 the end of the operations of the French Saber force in Burkina Faso, a few weeks after the transitional government’s denunciation of the defence agreements linking the two countries. In July, Niger witnessed a military coup which resulted in the announcement that French troops would leave the country by the end of the year, after the military junta accused

France of preparing an aggression against Niger through its deployment of military forces in several neighbouring West African states.

These “anti-French sentiments” are not limited to the Sahel. In Algeria, France’s refusal to present an apology for its colonial crimes, although Macron qualified colonialism as “a crime against humanity” in 2017, has been fueling resentment. More recently, and amidst the unconditional French support of Israel and its complete ban on protests in support of the people of Gaza, Tunisians have been protesting in front of the French embassy, tagging the walls of the French cultural centre with the inscription “*Colonizer one day, colonizer every day*”. African youth is thus clearly contesting both what French represents symbolically, but also very real French policies like visa restrictions, support for brutal dictators, unfair trade deals, and protracted military presence.

The rejection of French policies in Africa is becoming increasingly evident, from Mali to Senegal, Burkina Faso, Niger, Algeria, and Tunisia. These sentiments are not mere rhetoric; they reflect a growing frustration with both symbolic and tangible aspects of French influence, from colonial legacies to present-day policies, trade relations, and military presence. The events in the Sahel and the broader “anti-French sentiments” in Africa serve as a wake-up call for France to reevaluate its relationship with its former colonies, reorient its policies in a manner that genuinely benefits the people of Africa, and respects their sovereignty and aspirations. It underscores the urgent need for a more equitable, respectful, and transparent approach to France's engagement with its African partners.

About the BIC

The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.

Beyond Securitization: Building Resilience in the South Series

Moving beyond a sole focus on securitization and border management, we undertake a bottom-up approach to issues as regional integration, traditional and new mobility patterns, border economies, democratic transition and socioeconomic wellbeing, using both quantitative and qualitative data.



Author

Yasmine Akrimi | North Africa Research Analyst

**BRUSSELS
INTERNATIONAL
CENTER**

 @BICBrussels  @bicrhr  BIC

 www.bic-rhr.com  info@bic-rhr.com

 Avenue Louise, 89 1050, Brussels, Belgium  Tel:+32 027258466