
Interventions

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A New World Born from the Ashes of the Old

Since the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States, changes have taken place in the new confederation comprised of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger which show the anti-imperialist character they embody. Hanna Eid goes beyond the headlines to show how the imperialist domination in West Africa and pseudo-sovereignty through Françafrique have led to this point.

**A NEW WORLD BORN
FROM THE ASHES OF
THE OLD**

HANNA EID

The principal contradiction globally remains the struggle between the collective imperialism of the triad, led by the United States, and the working peoples of the Global South.¹ This imperialism expresses itself through massive financialisation of global markets, war, and degradation of national sovereignties of the countries in the periphery and semi-periphery. Neo-colonialism is one iteration of imperialist domination on a world scale; the reality of French neo-colonialism in the Sahel is one of total domination disguised through regional blocs, economic ties, military adventurism, and political manipulation.

However, in the last three years, coups in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger have started these nations on an anti-imperialist path. Signing the Liptako-Gourma Accord on 16 September 2023 and forming the Alliance of Sahel States ('Alliance des États du Sahel' or AES) has been a first step in this process of reclaiming sovereignty.² Between the signing of the charter and the announcement on 6 July 2024 of a rotating presidency, work was being done to create a unified polity in the form of a confederation. The ink is now dry on this agreement, and a new chapter of West African history has opened. Before detailing the contours of these renascent African states, let us place this movement within its context.

The history of post-independence West Africa is also the history of the CFA Franc, the currency controlled by France and used to some degree by 14 West African states. Ndongo Samba Sylla and Fanny Pigeaud's work describes the constraints on economic independence caused by using an externally controlled currency. Sylla and Pigeaud argue that instead of regional integration, the CFA and West African 'community' provided the means of re-surrendering sovereignty to the French, albeit in a more complicated fashion:

The new states were obliged to entrust to the French state the management of their national sectors... foreign policy, defense, trade and exploitation of raw materials and strategic products, the economy, currency, finance, higher education, merchant shipping, civil aviation...³

For CFA Franc countries, all foreign exchange transactions must go through the French treasury, which, in turn, answers to the French Ministry of Economy and Finance, which determines the external value of the CFA Franc.⁴ In such a scenario, any political sovereignty enjoyed by these states has clipped wings. This engenders a scenario expressed through dictatorial regimes, or governments which hold on to a gossamer thin veneer of democracy, in the exclusive form of multiparty elections, so long as they facilitate value drain from their countries to France and the EU.⁵

After achieving independence in 1960 under socialist leader Modibo Keita and the Union Soudanaise ('Sudanese Union'), Mali attempted to leave the CFA Franc zone and move towards a more independent currency and economic system. This was met with a battery of sanctions by the French, which collapsed Mali's economy and ended with them retaining the CFA. Yet, it is not just monetary sovereignty which is limited by imperialist forces, but equally political and military sovereignty.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is another structure of control on which the imperialists rely. Called the 'EU of Africa' by those sympathetic to its aims, ECOWAS has been tasked with regional economic integration under the auspices of the CFA Franc and other neocolonial regimes since it was started in 1975. ECOWAS has also militarily intervened in various countries across West Africa: Liberia in 1990, Sierra Leone in 1997, Guinea Bissau in 1998, Mali in 2013, and The Gambia in 2017. ECOWAS's military interventions came only after the French suffered what they deemed an 'unacceptable' number of casualties in their regime change operations and 'peacekeeping' missions.⁶

The creation of the G5 Sahel in 2014, accompanied by an increase in US presence regionally indicated a more multilateral approach to securitisation of the Sahel. Germany has signaled interest in the region as well, through its various economic foundations. Considering these dynamics, these recent coups in the Sahel have taken an aggressively anti-imperialist stance.

The Army and the Nation

Anouar Abdel-Malek posed a critical question which can guide us in geopolitical studies: 'How do we define the... vexed problem of the relations between the army and national movements?'⁷ Recognising the tipping point created by the French-led Operation Serval, US Africa Command (AFRICOM), and the ability of national movements to emerge from armies, is crucial to understanding the region today.⁸ This section will provide a recent history of the AES as it relates to the army and the nation, and past imperialist military adventures in the Sahel.

West Africa's disarticulated entry into the capitalist world-system through the structural constraints of neocolonialism has rendered the region servile to the interests of imperialist capital. The AES countries – as well as many West African nation-states – suffer from export dependency, an anti-democratic comprador class which feasts on the surplus of this export sector, an insufficient internal market, and a process of semi-proletarianisation. Semi-proletarianisation is a phenomenon where individuals and family units partake in wage labour as well as other

forms of subsistence work such as agriculture or handicrafts due to the deflation of wages by external (imperialist) pressure. This is expressed through the neocolonial CFA Franc and other arrangements with Western capital which facilitate the extraction of surplus value in the mineral, oil, and uranium markets.

The imperialist destabilisation of the Sahel has both general and particular characteristics. In general, this destabilisation, since at least 2011, is a response to increased Russian and Chinese economic engagement with African states which is seen as a threat to imperialist capital. In particular, the existence of Libya as an independent and sovereign centre of accumulation which promoted African independence threatened imperial ambitions. The destabilisation took an accelerated, kinetic turn with the The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) destruction of the stable and ambitious Libya under Muammar al-Gaddafi. This aided in the proliferation of small arms regionally, especially to Al-Qaeda affiliated groups. In the post-2011 period, myths of 'Chinese colonialism' and fearmongering about the Wagner Group frame the current discourse in the West.⁹

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The next step after the destruction of Libya was the attempted dismemberment of Mali vis-a-vis the Tuareg People's Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MPLA) separatists. Worth noting is that Mali's first independent government, led by Keita and Union Soudanaise: 'managed to unite in one nation the Bambara of the south, the Bozo fishermen, the Songhai peasants, and the Bella of the Niger Valley from Mopti to Ansongo... and even got the Tuaregs to accept the liberation of their Bella serfs.'¹⁰ An embryo of this unity remained up until 2011, and was confirmed in a US military cable exposed by Wikileaks which read: 'A significant majority of Malians... see the country as a unified whole and identify themselves overwhelmingly as Malians first...'¹¹ One should not be surprised then that the declaration of Azawad's independence and secession from Mali was announced from Paris.¹² The task of the imperialists, then, was to break this unity to better facilitate the transfer of surplus towards the center of the system in the form of gold, oil, and uranium.

On the other hand, reactionary Islamic groups like Al-Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) which feature in most French-language and Western presses have never endorsed breaking up Mali but have aided in the instability. While a great number of people in West Africa are Muslim, Islam, extremism, and terrorism have been overdetermined in the imperialist discourse surrounding the instability of the region. This fits in neatly with the AFRICOM agenda and the United States' war on terror apparatus. Much of the separatist and insurgent activity is centered around the tri-border Liptako-Gourma region, which is richly endowed with mineral resources and arable land.

The degradation of national armies and social fabrics in the Sahel countries is indeed part and parcel of the imperialist strategy to siphon value away. In Mali, for example, weapons shipments to the armed forces were blocked at the port by the French, leaving the Malian military practically defenseless in their fight against separatists and other reactionary forces. Thus the 'natural' conclusion that intervention of the French and G5 Sahel was necessary.

MEANWHILE, MALI AND BURKINA FASO EXPORT A LARGE AMOUNT OF GOLD TO THE WEST. THOUGH MORE IMPORTANTLY, THE FOCUS ON SEPARATISM, ISLAMIC EXTREMISM, AND OTHER SECONDARY OR TERTIARY CONTRADICTIONS WITHIN THE SAHEL HAS BEEN A DISCURSIVE SMOKESCREEN FOR IMPERIALIST DESIGNS IN THE REGION.

In 2013, on the eve of Operation Serval, economist Samir Amin wrote a piece on the local, regional, and international significance of the event.¹³ For Amin, once an economic adviser to Keïta, the deterioration of the Malian army under Keïta's ill begotten successor, Moussa Traoré was linked with the deterioration of the nation itself. The Traoré dictatorship (1968–1991), which overthrew Keïta's government, and was supported to the hilt by the French, abandoned national unity in favour of opulence for the miniscule bourgeois class in line with Françafrique.

Amin, in a rare display of shortsightedness, believed that the reconstruction of the Malian army was feasible. He believed that the French government of François Hollande would seek strategic autonomy from NATO by allowing Sahelian countries to build up their own armed forces and pursue fully sovereign control within their own borders.¹⁴ It would be against the class interests of French imperialism to allow a unified national state with a fully functional military to operate. Thus, when truces and ceasefires were signed due to the French-led forces beating back Salafi and MPLA rebels a short distance, they almost instantly fell apart, and hostilities spread further afield.¹⁵¹⁶

The instability spread to neighbouring Niger and Burkina Faso because French and AFRICOM interventions in the Sahel were never meant to curb banditry and terrorism; instead, the primary aim was and remains access to the mineral wealth in the subsoil of the region. Indeed, one quarter of European uranium-derived energy comes from Niger, which ranks second to only Kazakhstan in production destined for Europe. Meanwhile, Mali and Burkina Faso export a large amount of gold to the West. Though more importantly, the focus on separatism, Islamic extremism, and other secondary or tertiary contradictions within the Sahel has been a discursive smokescreen for imperialist designs in the region.

Thus, when the coup happened two years ago, a significant portion of neighbouring Burkina Faso was under control of JNIM and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). The late Thomas Sankara rose to power in Burkina Faso by a popularly supported coup in 1983, so some natural, though perhaps hasty, comparisons were made during the leadership changes in 2022. Sankara led a project of development which uplifted the destitute masses for a time. His government famously vaccinated millions against yellow fever and dengue, planted millions of trees to combat desertification, appointed women to senior government positions, built roads and railways without foreign aid, and had the military undergo intensive ideological training. For Sankara, 'without patriotic political education, a soldier is only a potential criminal.'¹⁷ Internationally, Burkina Faso built alliances with Cuba, Iran, Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea, and Nicaragua.¹⁸ The National Council of the Revolution, led by Sankara, upset Western leftist notions that historically progressive movements cannot arise from the military.

These relations outside of NATO are being resumed today by the young and charismatic Captain Ibrahim Traoré after years of diplomatic freezing during the Blaise Compaoré dictatorship (1987–2014). Similarly to Mali under Moussa Traoré, Compaoré's regime degraded the military, leading to unsafe civil life where social and economic inequality intensified.¹⁹ When Burkina Faso faltered, Niger, a key node in AFRICOM and other imperialist machinations, did as well. Niger's independence movement in the 1950s contained a split identity which

continues today. The Nigerien Progressive Party (PPN) argued for independence vis-à-vis membership in the Franco-African 'community' while the Movement Socialist Africain (Sawaba) led by Djibo Bakary was against it. Bakary's supporters lost the vote, though French meddling in the election was never ruled out.

The contradiction of Niger as a key base for Western 'anti-terror' operations and the simultaneous spread of terrorist groups is worth examining, because it lays bare Ali Kadri's concept of accumulation by waste.²⁰ In the Sahel, accumulation occurs through the continuation of conflict, the evaporation of sovereignty, and the cutting short of lives and livelihoods.²¹ Thus, low life expectancy in Mali (58 years), Burkina Faso (59 years), and Niger (61 years) is intimately tied with the soaring profits of French multinational corporations.

OF ALL THE COUNTRIES IN AES, NIGER HAD THE LARGEST PRESENCE OF FOREIGN TROOPS ON THEIR SOIL, ROUGHLY 1,500 FRENCH AND 1,200 AMERICANS. THEIR MEMBERSHIP IN THE AES IS CRITICAL AND THEIR RECENT EXPULSION OF BOTH FORCES IS PARAMOUNT FOR THE RECLAMATION OF SOVEREIGNTY REGIONALLY.

Niger used to house many Western military personnel as part of the entire military-industrial complex in the Sahel, which further produces blood-soaked profits for international arms manufacturers. Of all the countries in AES, Niger had the largest presence of foreign troops on their soil, roughly 1,500 French and 1,200 Americans. Their membership in the AES is critical and their recent expulsion of both forces is paramount for the reclamation of sovereignty regionally.²²

Moving on to a brief analysis of the military coups in the AES states, the degradation of sovereignty has led to a situation where communist forces have been dormant. Due to the hegemony of imperialism, and its mythmaking about pacifism and civic peace in its own societies, military coups are generally condemned by all entities on the political spectrum. Yet Abdel-Malek reminds us:

...it will be obvious that there will be nothing in common between a compradors' army, policing the joint interests of imperialism and its native allies and agents, on the one hand, and on the other a corps arising out of a tradition objectively marked by the will to independence of the national state.²³

Phillippe Noudjenoume of the Communist Party of Benin regards the coups as part of 'an anti-colonial patriotic revolution':

This revolution led by patriotic officers – and not by organised revolutionary forces – therefore should neither be overestimated nor underestimated... The essential question lies in determining the main contradiction, which is currently the opposition between French imperialism exerting colonial-type domination and the various peoples of these countries.²⁴

Thus, we can see clearly that this anti-colonial patriotic revolution took the form of a coup due to repression and momentary weakness of revolutionary forces on the ground in these three countries. Noudjenoume and Abdel-Malek's analyses of the role of the army in social change, echo each other. When segments of the military initiate the revolutionary offensive, they find themselves in a delicate spot:

Quite naturally, the army will therefore find itself at the nub of this difficult conjuncture, both as the army of the national state, guarantor in the final analysis of the stability of its institutions and the autonomy of its power of decision, and as the army of a people struggling for its liberation and its revolution.²⁵

The position put forward by West African People's Organisation (WAPO) and the Revolutionary Communist Party of Cote D'Ivoire (PCRCI) is one of cautious optimism. The former released a statement in September 2023 which calls on the leaders to 'devolve power to the masses through defense committees, for instance, and task them with the responsibility for democratising specific areas of societal life...'²⁶ In a *People's Dispatch* interview, Achy Ekissi of the PCRCI commented on the trajectory of coup governments:

At first, it is not a priori to resolve the problems or aspirations of the popular masses. But it is an opening, and this breach can be used by revolutionaries, by revolutionary parties, to advance towards liberation...²⁷

In this section, the nature of imperialist military ventures in the Sahel was placed within the context of neocolonialism, and the accumulation of value on a global scale. The next section, then, will analyse what steps the AES have taken to reclaim sovereignty and rebuke imperialism.

Pan-Africanism and the Future

The coups in Burkina Faso (two in 2022), Mali (2021), and Niger (2023) have retained popular support from organisations such as Groupes de Patriotes du Mali, Walkers for African Unity, Volontaires pour la Défense de la Patrie ('Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland' or VDP), and the National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland. VDP is especially important to understand, given that it is a citizen militia, trained by the army to defend their towns. These groups also enjoy support from regional organisations such as WAPO, Socialist Movement of Ghana (SMG), the Communist Party of Benin, the Voltaic Revolutionary Communist Party, and the PCRCI.

BURKINA FASO CERTAINLY SEEMS TO BE THE ECONOMIC VANGUARD OF THE AES WHEN IT COMES TO ANTI-SYSTEMIC DEVELOPMENT AND DELINKING. DELINKING, A CONCEPT PROPOSED BY SAMIR AMIN, MEANS FORGING INDEPENDENCE FROM EXPLOITATIVE SYSTEMS OF GLOBAL TRADE.

On 6 July 2024, the AES confederation was born at the inaugural summit in Niamey. Malian Colonel Assimi Goïta was named president for one year. This new confederation comes with a joint stabilisation fund, and investment bank, and will potentially include a new currency called 'the Sahel'.²⁸ General Abdulrahman Tiani stated that this confederation will be 'an alternative to any sham regional organisation by creating a sovereign community of peoples not under the domination of foreign powers.'²⁹ Here is an obvious jab at ECOWAS which put draconian sanctions on Niger after their coup. Collectively, all three states made up 30% of the West African Economic and Monetary Union GDP.³⁰ An examination of the deci-

sion-making and undertaking of projects by the current AES governments leading up to the formation of said confederation gestures towards the direction they will take towards sovereign development.

Burkina Faso certainly seems to be the economic vanguard of the AES when it comes to anti-systemic development and delinking. Delinking, a concept proposed by Samir Amin, means forging independence from exploitative systems of global trade. Mali's economy has historically been dependent on the same commodities, and this has been a point of unity between the two governments who contend that in a federation scenario along with Niger, they could become an economic powerhouse regionally.

Joachim Neyelem de Tambela, the prime minister of Burkina Faso, is quoted as saying, 'I have already said that Burkina Faso cannot be developed outside the line drawn by Thomas Sankara'. Since taking power in 2022, the Traoré-Tambela government inaugurated several national revitalisation projects to combat the poor neo-colonial infrastructure that marks their landscape. Two projects which were stalled under their predecessors: the construction of the Ouagadougou airport and the Ouagadougou-Abidjan high-speed railway have been revitalised, with marked acceleration towards completion. Both projects promote regional and global connectivity which can create sustainable job growth at the same time. China, for instance, has shown the value of high-speed rail connectivity over a large landmass which can serve both commercial and pedestrian uses.³¹

According to the Accra Centre for Applied Research (ACAR), 'currently, the three countries are not interlinked... these bottlenecks tend to disrupt supply chains and movement of peoples.'³² A more meaningfully connected West Africa benefits the entire region, not just the AES. In a new initiative, the Traoré government has been improving existing roads and paving previously unpaved roads to better connect the different regions of the country. A large hospital is being built in Bobo-Dioulasso, the second largest city, which can improve health outcomes for the population outside the capital.

Burkina Faso's government seeks to change its status as merely a gold exporter by partnering with a local gold company to build a gold refinery capable of producing 150 tons annually.³³ Beyond this project, they have increased the state royalties on active gold mining projects headed by foreign companies. Mali has pursued a similar trajectory for royalties on foreign companies, and four months ago, they signed a deal with the Russian government to construct the largest gold refinery in the region, capable of an output of over 200 tons of gold per year.³⁴

Other notable Burkinabe projects are a series of green energy enterprises which aim to increase agricultural self-sufficiency and reduce load-sharing and black-outs due to the lack of mass electrification in the country. ACAR has noted that despite the existence of reserves of uranium and fossil fuels, the Sahel remains one of the world's least connected regions electrically. Solar, hydroelectric, and biomass energy facilities are under construction. Mali has just inked a deal with Russia for the construction of the region's largest solar power plant as well.³⁵ The Sandini Dam project, it is hoped, will serve the dual purpose of clean energy and food self-sufficiency upon its completion.³⁶ The Burkinabe and Russian governments have signed a deal to build a nuclear energy facility, which could significantly reduce energy prices domestically make an industrialisation programme much more viable in the future. The Cupola fertiliser factory will encourage domestic production of fertilisers so that farmers are not beholden to volatile global market prices, which have increased since the Ukraine War.

WITH THE ALLIANCE OF SAHEL STATES, THERE IS A NEW GEOPOLITICAL REALITY. WHETHER YOU LIKE IT OR NOT, IT DOESN'T MATTER... THE FATE OF OUR COUNTRIES WILL NOT BE DECIDED IN BRUSSELS, PARIS, WASHINGTON, OR LONDON; IT WILL BE DECIDED IN BAMAKO, OUAGADOUGOU, NIAMEY.

Economically, Niger would pull its weight in the proposed federation of the three countries as well. The country 'is the seventh largest global producer of uranium' and together the AES are 'collectively producing around 70% of the region's gold in 2022'. Niger's Prime Minister Ali Lamine Zeine just concluded a trip to Tehran where at least two economic agreements and a memorandum of understanding were signed to increase bilateral economic relations.³⁷ Talk of reopening embassies was also on the agenda. These moves multiply the number of the Niger's economic partners outside Europe and the US, while also allowing both countries to bypass draconian sanctions regimes. The Chinese national oil company also signed an agreement worth \$400 million to purchase oil from Niger.³⁸ As of 20 June 2024, the government in Niamey has severed its contract with French uranium giant Orano and asked them to leave the Imouraren mine. All three

countries have recently bought Bayraktar TB2 model drones from Türkiye to aid in mutual defense projects.

All three governments of the AES have ejected French military forces, and recently Niger has shown US forces the door as well.³⁹ This has been a dramatic step towards independence and sovereign development. Without neocolonial forces in their respective countries, room to determine their destiny unhindered increases. Amílcar Cabral argued that the primary phase of a national liberation struggle is 'to regain control of the productive forces from an outside usurper'.⁴⁰ Only after this can the liberated nation engage in the dual struggle of raising the productive forces and engaging in a class struggle to purge enemies 'domestic and abroad, who seek to establish a neocolonial relationship'.⁴¹ As more details of the confederation emerge, we should remain cautiously optimistic about the future of West Africa, especially given Bassirou Faye's electoral victory in Senegal, and his shared desire to shake off French influence, especially in the form of the CFA Franc.⁴²

Malian Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Abdulaye Diop announced the confederation in Switzerland, addressing European government officials, saying:

*With the Alliance of Sahel States, there is a new geopolitical reality. Whether you like it or not, it doesn't matter... The fate of our countries will not be decided in Brussels, Paris, Washington, or London; it will be decided in Bamako, Ouagadougou, Niamey.*⁴³

In conclusion, the Confederation of the Alliance of Sahel States, comprising of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger contains within it the seedlings of a 21st century pan-Africanist movement should this alliance continue to nourish their base of support among the masses. While anti-imperialism and national liberation are prerequisites for a larger project of socialist construction, we must be wary of the limits of a military government should it lose the mandate of its people.⁴⁴ History proceeds in fits and starts. By recognising the chains which bind us and breaking them, we can move towards resolving the principal contradiction of our day.

About the Author

Hanna Eid is a Palestinian-American political analyst, union electrical worker, and a judoka. As a writer and analyst, Hanna contributes pieces at *Al Mayadeen* and *Black Agenda Report*. His writing focuses mainly on imperialism and anti-imperialism in both West Asia and West Africa.

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