

Charting The Rise Of Anti-French Sentiment Across Northern Africa



Vijay Prashad - Photo:
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In November 2021, a French military convoy was making its way to Mali while passing through Burkina Faso and Niger. It did not get very far. It was [stopped](#) in Téra, Niger, and before that at several points in Burkina Faso (in Bobo-Dioulasso and Kaya as well as in Ouagadougou, the country's capital). Two civilians were killed as a result of clashes between the French convoy and protestors who [were](#) “angry at the failure of French forces to reign in terrorism in the region.” When the convoy crossed into Mali, it was [attacked](#) near the city of Gao.

Colonel Pascal Ianni, French Chief of Defense Staff spokesperson, [told](#) Julien Fanciulli of France 24 that there was a lot of “false information circulating” about the French convoy. Blame for the attacks was placed on “terrorists,” namely Islamic groups that continue to hold large parts of Mali and Burkina Faso. These groups have been emboldened and hardened by the 2011 war on Libya, prosecuted by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and egged on by France. What Colonel Ianni would not admit is that the protests that followed the convoy revealed the depth of anti-French sentiment across North Africa and the Sahel region.

Coups d'états in the region have been taking place for more than two years—from the [coup](#) in Mali in August 2020 to the [coup](#) in Burkina Faso in September 2022. The coups in the region, including the [coup](#) in Guinea in September 2021 as well and the two other coups in Mali (August 2020 and [May 2021](#)), and another coup in Burkina Faso ([January 2022](#)), were driven in large part due to the anti-French sentiment in the Sahel. In May 2022, the military leaders in Mali [ejected](#) the French military bases set up in 2014, while France's political project—G5 Sahel—[flounders](#) in this atmosphere of animosity. Protests against the French in [Morocco](#) and [Algeria](#) have only added weight to the anti-French sentiment spreading across the African continent, with French President Emmanuel Macron

[showered](#) with insults as he tried to walk the streets of Oran in Algeria in August 2022.

Animosities

“The situation in the former French colonies (Burkina Faso, Chad, Côte d’Ivoire, Niger, and Mali) is different from the situation in northern Africa,” Abdallah El Harif of the Workers’ Democratic Way Party of Morocco told me. “The bad relations between the regime in Morocco and France is due to the fact that the Moroccan regime has developed important economic, political, and security relations with the regimes of West Africa at the expense of the French,” he said. About the former French colonies along the Sahel in particular, El Harif said that “many popular insurrections” had taken place against the continued French colonial presence in these countries. With Morocco distancing itself from France, Paris is angered by its growing ties with the United States, while in the Sahel region people want to eject France from their lives.

Morocco’s monarchy has [reacted](#) quietly to the coups in the Sahel, not willing to associate itself with the kind of anti-French sentiment in the region. Such an association would call attention to Morocco’s close relationship with the United States. This U.S.-Morocco relationship has provided the monarchy with [dividends](#): military equipment from the United States and permission for Morocco to continue with its occupation of Western Sahara, including the mining of the region’s precious phosphates (in exchange for Morocco opening ties with Israel). Each year, since 2004, Morocco has [hosted](#) a U.S. military exercise, the African Lion. In June 2022, 10 African countries [participated](#) in the African Lion 2022, with [observers](#) from Israel (for the first time) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Morocco, El Harif told me, “has enormously developed its military relations with the United States.” France has been sidelined by these maneuvers, which has [annoyed](#) Paris. As he left behind the jeering crowds in Oran, Algeria, President Macron [said](#) that he would visit Morocco in late October.

In the Sahel region, unlike in Morocco, there is a growing popular sentiment against the French colonial interference (called *Françafrique*). Chad’s former President Idriss Déby Itno, who died in 2021, [told](#) Jeune Afrique in 2019 that “*Françafrique* is over. Sovereignty is indisputable, we must stop sticking this label of French backyard to our countries.” “The French control the currency of these states,” El Harif told me. “They have many military bases [in the Sahel region], and their corporations plunder the natural resources of these countries, while

pretending to combat terrorism.” When political challenges arise, the French have colluded in assassinating leaders who challenge their authority (such as Burkina Faso’s [Thomas Sankara](#) in 1987) or have had them arrested and jailed (such as Côte d’Ivoire’s [Laurent Gbagbo](#) in 2011).

Why Is Françafrique Over?

In a recent [interview](#) with Atalayar, France’s former ambassador to Mali Nicolas Normand blamed the rising anti-French sentiment on “the repeated anti-French accusations of Mali’s prime minister and the virulent media campaign carried out by Russia on social media, accusing France of looting Mali and actually supporting the jihadists by pretending to fight them, with fake videos.” Indeed, Mali’s prime minister [before](#) August 22, 2022, Choguel Maïga, made strong statements against French military intervention in his country. In February 2022, Maïga [told](#) France 24 that the French government “have tried to divide his country by fueling autonomy claims in the north.” Malian singer Salif Keïta posted a [video](#) in which he said, “Aren’t you aware that France is financing our enemies against our children?” accusing France of collaborating with the jihadis.

Meanwhile, about the accusation that the Russian Wagner Group was operating in Mali, Maïga responded in his interview with France 24 and [said](#) that “The word Wagner. It’s the French who say that. We don’t know any Wagner.” However, Mali, he said in February, is working “with Russia cooperators.” Following an [investigation](#) by Facebook in 2020, it removed several social media accounts that were traced back to France and Russia and [were](#) “going head to head in the Central African Republic.”

In an important [article](#) in Le Monde in December 2021, senior researcher at Leiden University’s African Studies Center Rahmane Idrissa pointed out three reasons for the rise in anti-French sentiment in the Sahel. First, France, he said, “is paying the bill in the Sahel for half a century of military interventions in sub-Saharan Africa,” including France’s protection of regimes “generally odious to the population.” Second, the failure of the war against the jihadists has disillusioned the public regarding the utility of the French project. Third, and this is key, Idrissa [argued](#) that the inability of the military rulers in the region “to mobilize the population against an enemy (jihadist),” against whom they have no real strategy, has led to this anger being turned toward the French. The departure of the French, welcome as it is, “will certainly not resolve the jihadist crisis, ” Idrissa [noted](#). The people will feel “sovereign,” he wrote, “even if part of the territory

remains in the hands of terrorist gangs.”

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