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FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
Institute of Political Studies
Department of Security Studies

Master's Thesis

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Zoé Gadeyne

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Is Françafrique History?
Exploring Diverse Narratives Around French-led Military
Operations and Development Assistance in Niger

Master's Thesis

Author of the Thesis: Zoé Gadeyne

Study programme: International Security Studies

Supervisor: Oldřich Bureš

Year of the defence: 2024

Declaration

1. I hereby declare that I have compiled this thesis using the listed literature and resources only.
2. I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.
3. I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

In Prague on the 30th of July 2024

Zoé Gadeyne

References

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Abstract

This study examines media narratives surrounding French official development assistance (ODA) and military interventions in Niger from early 2022 to late 2023. By analyzing both public and private media sources, the research uncovers a complex interplay of historical grievances, geopolitical tensions, and local aspirations for sovereignty. Findings reveal a significant narrative shift in public media post-coup, transitioning from appreciating French involvement to celebrating the departure of French forces as a victory for Nigerien resistance. In contrast, private media maintained a consistently critical stance. Interviews with Nigerien journalists highlight that while the exit of French forces is significant, it does not fully dismantle entrenched power dynamics, as local authorities may become new narrative gatekeepers, limiting diverse voices and perpetuating dominance. Employing decolonial and subaltern theoretical frameworks, the study underscores the enduring impacts of colonialism and the necessity for inclusive and locally responsive foreign policy strategies.

Abstrakt

Tato studie zkoumá mediální narativy týkající se francouzské oficiální rozvojové pomoci (ODA) a vojenských intervencí v Nigeru od začátku roku 2022 do konce roku 2023. Analýzou veřejných a soukromých mediálních zdrojů výzkum odhaluje složitou interakci historických křivd, geopolitických napětí a místních aspirací na suverenitu. Zjištění ukazují významný posun v narativech veřejných médií po převratu, kdy se narativ změnil od oceňování francouzského zapojení k oslavování odchodu francouzských sil jako vítězství nigerského odporu. Naopak soukromá média si udržovala konzistentně kritický postoj. Rozhovory s nigerskými novináři zdůrazňují, že ačkoli je odchod francouzských sil významný, plně neodstraňuje zakořeněné mocenské dynamiky, protože místní úřady se mohou stát novými strážci narativů, omezujícími různé hlasy a udržujícími dominanci. Použitím dekoloniálních a subalterních teoretických rámců studie zdůrazňuje trvající dopady kolonialismu a nutnost inkluzivních a místně reagujících zahraničněpolitických strategií.

Keywords

Niger, Media narratives, Local perceptions, Official Development Aid, French military interventions, Decolonial frameworks, Subaltern Studies, Regional Security, Development

Klíčová slova

Niger, Mediální narativy, Místní vnímání, Oficiální rozvojová pomoc, Francouzské vojenské intervence, Dekolonizační rámce, Studia Subaltern, Regionální bezpečnost, Rozvoj

Title

Is Françafrique History? Exploring Diverse Narratives Around French-led Military Operations and Aid Initiatives in Niger

Název práce

Je Françafrique historií? Zkoumání různých narativů o vojenských operacích pod francouzským vedením a iniciativách pomoci v Nigeru

Content

Abbreviations	8
Introduction	9
1. Research Topic	9
1.1 Research problem.....	9
1.2 Research question.....	12
1.3 Study Relevance and Contributions.....	14
1.4 Limitations of the research.....	16
1.5 Research Outline.....	18
2. Literature Review	19
2.1 Critiques of French Military Interventions.....	19
2.1.1 France as the Gendarme of Africa.....	19
2.1.2 Multilateral rhetoric and operational unilateralism.....	20
2.1.3 (Re)new(ed) challenges emerging with ad hoc coalitions.....	22
2.1.4 Continued Contradictions.....	23
2.2 Critiques of French Official Development Assistance.....	26
2.2.1 Furthering French Francophonie.....	26
2.2.2 Fostering Bilateral Aid.....	27
2.2.3 Introduction of Conditionality.....	28
2.2.4 Integration of Humanitarian and Development Aid in French Strategy.....	29
3. Theoretical and conceptual frameworks	32
3.1 Decolonial Theory.....	32
3.2 Subaltern Theory.....	35
3.3 Conceptual framework.....	37
3.3.1 Decolonizing humanitarian aid and ODA in practice.....	38
3.3.2 Decolonizing military interventions in practice.....	40
4. Methodology	43
4.1 Preliminary remarks.....	43
4.2 Narrative analysis.....	44
4.2 Media Selection.....	45
4.4 Data Collection and Management.....	46
5. Narrative Analysis	48
5.1 Narratives after the Barkhane re-articulation announcement (02-07.22).....	48
5.1.1 Narratives in the Public Outlet ANP.....	49
5.1.2 Private Media Narratives.....	53
5.2 Narrative responses to increased French presence (08.22-06.23).....	57
5.2.1 Narratives in the Public Outlet ANP.....	58
5.2.2 Private Media Narratives.....	61
5.3 Narratives after the coup (07.23-12.23).....	65
5.3.1 Narratives in the public outlet ANP.....	65
5.3.2 Private Media Narratives.....	70
6. Discussion	74
Conclusion	80
7. References	81

Abbreviations

APSA - African Peace and Security Architecture

AU - African Union

CEN-SAD - Community of Sahel-Saharan States

CNSP - National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland

CSDP - Common Security and Defense Policy

ECOMOG - ECOWAS Monitoring Group

ECOWAS - Economic Community of West African States

ECCAS - Economic Community of Central African States

EU - European Union

EUCAP - EU Capacity Building Mission

EUMPM Niger - EU Military Partnership Mission in Niger

G5 Sahel - Group of Five for the Sahel

ISGS - Islamic State in the Greater Sahara

JNIM - Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin

MINUSMA - Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission

MNJ - Niger Movement for Justice

MNJTF - Multinational Joint Task Force

RECAMP - Reinforcement of African Peacekeeping Capacity

RECs - Regional Economic Communities

RFI - Radio France Internationale

USA - United States of America

Introduction

The relationship between France and Niger is complex and deeply rooted in its colonial past, with Niger being under French authority from 1922 to 1958. French military interventions and official development assistance in Niger following the coup against President Mohamed Bazoum in July 2023 have sparked a profound change in narratives and perceptions within the country. These narratives reveal a deep-seated ambivalence towards France's role in Niger. This study aims to explore both private and public Nigerien media narratives surrounding French interventionism in Niger pre- and post-coup. By analysing media articles, this research seeks to uncover the multifaceted views of France's presence in Niger. It examines the tension between narratives that recognise France's contributions to security and development versus those that frame French actions as neo-colonial and self-serving. The study contextualises these narratives within decolonial and subaltern theoretical frameworks to better understand the enduring impact of colonialism on contemporary attitudes and the expression of the local agency. Additionally, the results of this thesis are being completed based on the findings of three interviews conducted with Nigerien journalists.

1. Research Topic

1.1 Research problem

The military coup of July 26, 2023, which brought Abdourahamane Tchiani to the head of government, marked a significant turning point in Niger's foreign relations and security strategy. This change in leadership calls for a critical examination of the effectiveness and ethical considerations of French military and humanitarian interventions in the Sahel region, and more specifically in Niger (Tull, 2023; Gouvy, 2023). This reevaluation is crucial in understanding Niger's both current and future direction.

After the 2023 coup, Niger also found itself reexamining its security partnerships (Tasamba, 2023). It first terminated its security and defence partnerships with the EU in November 2023. After the withdrawal of Operation Barkhane from Mali in 2022, the EU had redirected its foreign military activities to Niger, launching a new military initiative in the country. This initiative named the EU Military Partnership Mission in Niger (EUMPM Niger), aimed to bolster the EU's presence in the Sahel region amid deteriorating conditions in Mali. The

mission supplemented the existing civilian security mission, the EU Capacity Building Mission (EUCAP), to establish a training centre and a new Nigerien support battalion (Charbonneau et al., 2023). Likewise, Niger chose to end its security and defence partnerships with France. After withdrawing from Mali in 2022, France also designated Niger as the new main base for its presence in the Sahel (Abba, 2023). However, the Nigerien coup led to the evacuation of 1,500 French troops from Niger by the end of 2023 (Kayali, 2024).¹ In early January 2024, France officially closed its embassy in Niger. This decision came after Niger's military administration accused France of insincerity and delays in troop withdrawal (Tasamba, 2023). After the expulsion of French troops last year, the German army announced that it would end operations at its air base in Niger by August 31 (AFP, 2024). The USA also announced that American troops would leave the Nigerien country by 15 September (Kupemba, 2024).

Last but not least, Niger also withdrew from organisations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the G5 Sahel force, opting to establish its defence pact instead, the so-called Alliance of Sahel States, a confederation formed between Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. Originating as a mutual defence pact created by the three countries on 16 September 2023, the confederation was officially established on 6 July 2024 (Kupemba, 2024). Alongside, Niger has strengthened ties with Russia, as evidenced by the arrival of military instructors and personnel from Russia's defence ministry, the deployment of military cargo planes unloading gear, and an agreement to install an anti-aircraft system following a recent accord between Niger's junta and Vladimir Putin in April 2024 (Balima, 2024).

These geopolitical shifts come amidst significant security challenges Niger has been facing for several years. Along its southeastern border, the country contends with threats from Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad, also called Boko Haram in the Diffa region, adjacent to the Lake Chad basin. The Lake Chad region, spanning Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria, has been a primary area of operation for Boko Haram since 2002. Boko Haram's campaign of terror then expanded to Chad, Cameroon, and Niger following a significant uprising in July 2009. Notably, Boko Haram has formed alliances with groups like the Al-Mua'qi'oon Biddam Brigade in Niger (Oyewole, 2015).

¹ The French Sabre force had already departed Burkina Faso in February 2023 and Timbuktu after nearly nine years in August 2022 (Risemberg, 2022).

Additionally, Niger faces cross-border crime originating from Nigeria's Zamfara state, particularly affecting the Maradi region (Abba, 2023). On Niger's northwestern border with Burkina Faso and Mali, the country faces armed terrorist groups operating from northern Mali, including the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM). Furthermore, Niger must monitor its northern border with Libya, where the absence of a central government has allowed criminal gangs to expand, posing threats that can easily spill over the border. This situation has led to the emergence of a lucrative weapons trade in Niger's Agadez region. In total, three of Niger's eight regions—Diffa, Tahoua, and Tillabéry—have been designated as being in a state of emergency since 2015 (Abba, 2023).

Before the military coup, Abba contended that despite its greater vulnerability and larger geographical size compared to Burkina Faso and Mali, Niger faced a relatively less severe security situation than its neighbouring countries (Abba, 2023). Both political factors and the strong social cohesion among Niger's nine ethnolinguistic groups can explain this: Arab, Buduma, Gourmantche, Hausa, Kanuri, Peul, Tuareg, Tubu, and Zarma. Following the 1991-1995 rebellion and the 2007 rebellion led by the Niger Movement for Justice (MNJ), efforts were made to integrate the Tuareg community into the government structure successfully. The conduct of the presidential election in December 2020 and ongoing efforts to reconcile political factions proved Niger's resilience as well as a specific stability of Niger's governance. These factors had earned Niger recognition as the "last bastion of democracy in the Sahel" and the "last bulwark against jihadis and Russian influence" in the region (Demuyne & Böhm, 2023).

However, the military coup in July 2023 has tipped the balance and has raised significant concerns about the future of the Sahel. After President Mohamed Bazoum's detention on July 26, 2023, the coup was announced by Abdourahamane Tshiani, resulting in the dissolution of his regime, the suspension of all governmental institutions, and the imposition of a curfew and border closures by the newly formed National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland (CNSP). General Tiani then assumed leadership as the new head of state, supported by the Nigerien army and national guard. Public demonstrations followed, marked by anti-French sentiments and the display of Russian flags (Demuyne & Böhm, 2023). In response, European Union (EU) Foreign Policy chief Josep Borrell announced an immediate cessation of budget support and the suspension of all security cooperation actions. The African Union issued a

15-day ultimatum to the junta to reinstate the democratically elected government (Mednick & Asadu, 2023).

Moreover, the French Foreign Ministry and the USA also suspended development, budget support, and security cooperation with Nigerien forces. Before these suspensions, France's development aid policy in 2021 had identified 19 priority countries, allocating approximately €1 billion in total. Niger received €92.4 million, making it the fourth-largest beneficiary after Senegal (€177 million), Mali (€107 million), and Burkina Faso (€100 million). In 2022, France's official development aid to Niger increased to €119.2 million (MEAE, 2024).

Niger's decision to end its security and defence collaborations with France, therefore, marks a significant juncture in Franco-African relations. Besides the unstable political climate, concerns were raised about the potential resurgence of terrorist activity in the absence of French forces and the suspension of military cooperation, especially in the tri-border area of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger (Abba, 2023).

1.2 Research question

In light of these developments, the research problem identified herein seeks to critically analyse and contextualise the criticisms of French interventionism, whether its military intervention or its official development assistance in the Sahel region. This study aims to analyse the narratives that emerged in Niger regarding France's military intervention and official development assistance (ODA) from the beginning of 2022 to the end of 2023.

First, it is essential to define the following terms: official development assistance (ODA), military intervention, and narratives. According to the French ODA website, ODA refers to financial support from affluent countries to improve living conditions in less advantaged nations. This aid includes grants or concessional loans for programmes that enhance access to water, healthcare, electricity, education, housing, and environmental preservation. Assistance can be bilateral, directly from the donor to the beneficiary country, or multilateral, through international organisations (AFD, n.d.). This thesis will primarily focus on bilateral aid, specifically Franco-Nigerien programmes. International military intervention typically involves deploying military forces from one country into another country's territory or territorial waters (Pearson & Baumann, 1988). Between 2022 and 2023, France maintained its military presence in Niger as

part of its broader counterterrorism efforts in the Sahel region, especially after the end of Operation Barkhane in Mali. Following the withdrawal from Mali, French troops were redeployed to Niger and other neighbouring countries to continue the fight against jihadist groups. This ongoing presence will be examined in this thesis.

Narratives are crucial in shaping political contexts and public perception and are often used to justify policies, actions, and interventions. Understanding how ODA and military interventions are framed within these narratives will provide deeper insights into the complexities and criticisms of French involvement in the Sahel. Historically, anti-colonial sentiment in French intellectual circles was notable, particularly among the Surrealists, who critiqued the colonial myths of French imperialism and the so-called civilising mission of France. They dismantled the notion of "colonial humanism" and challenged the romanticised images of colonised peoples. The Surrealists' efforts to reveal the constructed nature of these myths can be seen as a precursor to the critical analysis of modern interventionist narratives (Leclercq, 2008). Narratives, as defined by Rowland (2009), are "stories, and stories function differently than descriptive or argumentative rhetoric" (p. 126). Fisher (1987) further describes them as "symbolic actions—words and/or deeds that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them." Building on this, the research will investigate whether the local Nigerien narratives evolved between 2022 and 2023, particularly during President Bazoum's tenure, and assess the growing anti-French sentiment among the population, if present. Subsequently, it will investigate the perceptions of France's increasing military influence and development assistance in Niger, especially in the context of France's withdrawal from Mali and the subsequent shift in its regional strategy.

Ultimately, this thesis aims to address the following question: *What narratives have emerged in Niger in response to France's military intervention and official development assistance between 2022 and 2023?*

This research seeks to provide valuable insights into Nigerien perspectives on French intervention by exploring the continuities and changes in these narratives and how they have shaped local perceptions and criticisms. Understanding these narratives is crucial for identifying pathways for constructive engagement with France to address the complex security challenges in the Sahel. Despite the evident rise in anti-French sentiment, accurately gauging its extent

remains challenging (Guiffard, 2023). Guiffard (2023) notes that events like protests or attacks on French-owned businesses, often amplified by local media and social networks, can exaggerate the perception of sentiment. These events are part of a broader authoritarian movement influenced by Russia. Evaluating these narratives is essential for assessing the effectiveness and sustainability of France's intervention strategies, whether acting independently or through the EU, in Niger and Sahel.

1.3 Study Relevance and Contributions

This research delves into the complex Franco-African relations and the evolving security landscape in Niger to enhance understanding of contemporary security dynamics in the Sahel and inform future policy frameworks. It is important to note how although this country's West African country is situated between major terrorist hotspots, it still plays a crucial role in preventing the spread of terrorist groups (Demuyneck & Böhm, 2023). The Sahel accounted for 43% of global terrorism deaths in 2022, highlighting the dramatic rise in terrorist violence that international interventions have struggled to contain (Demuyneck & Böhm, 2023). In response, the 16 member states of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) adopted a sub-regional counterterrorism strategy in 2013, and the African Union (AU) agreed to deploy 7,500 regional soldiers to combat Boko Haram (Oyewole, 2015). The international community, including nations such as Israel, Italy, Britain, France, and the United States, has significantly contributed to counterterrorism efforts in the Lake Chad region, bolstering the capabilities of local security forces (Oyewole, 2015). It is imperative to grasp how French interventions are perceived within Nigerien society, as this understanding is essential for refining potential future strategies to align with local needs and gain community support. This becomes even more crucial considering the potential escalation of instability that terrorists could exploit in the event of further political and security deterioration in Niger (Demuyneck & Böhm, 2023).

It is imperative to conduct a comprehensive analysis considering both military and humanitarian aspects concurrently. Existing literature often tends to compartmentalise these dimensions, overlooking their interconnectedness. As highlighted by Erforth (2019), there's a consensus among major global powers regarding the inseparable link between security and development as both being regarded as the cause and solution to Africa's challenges. In recent

years, the notable surge in migration from Africa to Europe has heightened the European Union and its member states' focus on their southern neighbours (Erforth, 2019, p.4). This underscores the urgent need for a thorough reevaluation of French security policies alongside humanitarian initiatives in Africa. Furthermore, Hahounou argued in 2016 that the predominant emphasis on short-term military and humanitarian responses has distracted the attention from long-term developmental perspectives in Niger. While Western actors have prioritised stability - including maintaining the national budget balance, ensuring security, and supporting the political continuity of the ruling party - human rights abuses persist; particularly evident in the Diffa region. Here, state legitimacy has been eroded in an historically marginalised area where the central government has wielded limited influence (Hahonou, 2016). Given this, assessing the situation between 2022 and 2023 is crucial to ascertain whether Hahonou's observations remain valid. More importantly, exploring these issues from a local perspective is essential to comprehend the perceptions within Nigerien society. Amidst shifting geopolitical dynamics, especially concerning Russia's growing influence and the EU and France's recent expulsions from Niger, it is imperative to analyse how French interventions are perceived within Nigerien society. This understanding is crucial for refining potential future intervention strategies to ensure they resonate with local needs and garner community support. Local perceptions profoundly influence the success and sustainability of intervention efforts, underscoring the necessity of aligning interventions with the preferences of the local population.

There is limited literature on narratives emerging from the local level in such a context, while previous research has primarily focused on French narratives (add citations). Other studies have examined narratives crafted by aid agencies and the media from a Western perspective. It has been found that narratives play a crucial role in shaping policy decisions, public perceptions, and the overall direction of humanitarian interventions (Fundira, 2024). In March 2023, the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) of the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) published a working paper describing how narratives significantly influence policy changes. First, narratives influence donor support and organisational strategies, dictating whether funding goes towards immediate relief or long-term development projects. Second, narratives are crucial in leveraging political will to transform the humanitarian system. While compelling narratives can mobilise support and resources, oversimplifying situations can lead to misguided policies and interventions. Humanitarian organisations, although often reluctant to admit it, wield considerable power in shaping these narratives. The constant need for fundraising has fostered

a master frame of exceptionalism, portraying crises as unique events requiring humanitarian aid as the sole solution. Donors, affected governments, and local aid groups increasingly contest this Western-rooted frame. Dominant narratives delay shifts toward a more people-centred and locally led model, often asserting that the system needs money more than reform (Saez & Bryant, 2023).

Thus, this thesis does not focus on how France advertised its humanitarian and military interventions but rather on the narratives published in both private and public Nigerien media from February 2022 to December 2023. This coincides with Bozoum's presidency, which is known for his pro-France stance, as well as the coup d'état and sudden change of government. Having said that, the study also investigates whether the sentiments observed predominantly reflect French-specific interventions or indicate broader trends of discontent towards Western interventions in the region. This nuanced understanding is crucial for policymakers and stakeholders to formulate effective strategies addressing underlying grievances and fostering sustainable relationships between local populations and international actors. In essence, by addressing the research question, this thesis bridges the gap in existing literature, responding to the call for a more holistic examination of Franco-African relations and the implications of foreign interventions on local dynamics, as highlighted in the social and academic relevance sections. Through its focus on diverse narratives, the research aims to provide valuable insights informing future policy frameworks and intervention strategies, ultimately fostering more effective and sustainable approaches to security and development in the Sahel region.

1.4 Limitations of the research

It is essential to recognize the potential influence of researcher bias on the analysis. As a French student, I bring my perspective and biases to the study, which may inadvertently shape the interpretation of the data. This Eurocentric approach could impact the framing of research questions, the selection of data sources, and the understanding of findings. My French nationality may predispose me to view French-led interventions in a particular light, potentially overlooking or downplaying alternative perspectives. Moreover, my cultural background may influence how I contextualise and interpret the narratives surrounding these interventions, inadvertently privileging Eurocentric viewpoints. To mitigate this limitation, I will strive to maintain reflexivity throughout the research process, critically examining my assumptions and perspectives. Additionally, I will seek to incorporate diverse voices and perspectives, including

those of Nigerien journalists and scholars, to enrich the analysis and provide a more balanced understanding of the subject matter. It's important to note that not all Nigerien individuals may feel comfortable speaking with a French person, which introduces another layer of potential bias.

Furthermore, the narratives analysed in this study do not necessarily reflect the views of the entire Nigerien population. Given the diverse and complex nature of public opinion in Niger, it is crucial to acknowledge that the sources and perspectives examined may only represent a subset of the broader societal views. Recent developments have also highlighted the risks of accessing and interpreting local narratives. For instance, the BBC Hausa correspondent Tchima Illa Issoufou faced threats and accusations of attempting to destabilise Niger due to her reporting on the security situation in the Tillabéri region, an area heavily affected by conflict. This illustrates the precarious environment for journalists in Niger, leading to self-censorship and the potential alteration or deletion of content to avoid reprisal (Amnesty International, 2024).

As such, the analysis must consider the possibility that both private and public media outlets' narratives have been modified or removed, impacting the comprehensiveness and accuracy of the findings. This context of restricted press freedom and heightened surveillance underscores the need to approach the data cautiously and be aware of its limitations. While the 2010 press law, which abolished imprisonment for press offences, was a significant advancement for journalists' rights, this law is frequently ignored, and journalists continue to face arrests and imprisonment, particularly when reporting on corruption (Aboubacar Abdou, 2021). Over the years, Niger's ranking on the World Press Freedom Index has fluctuated. In 2017, Niger was ranked 61st out of 180 countries. This improved slightly to 63rd in 2018, then to 66th in 2019. The ranking improved to 57th in 2020, remaining at 59th in both 2021 and 2022. However, there was a notable decline in 2024, where Niger dropped to 80th place with a score of 59.71, primarily due to a significant worsening of the security indicator, which deteriorated from 36 to 106 (Reporters Without Borders, 2024). Government interference intensified following the military coup in July 2023, leading to greater control over editorial decisions.

In January 2024, the Ministry of the Interior ordered the closure of the Maison de la Presse, an organisation representing Niger's journalists, and informed its president, who had criticised press freedom violations, that his contract would not be renewed (Reporters Without Borders,

2024). The financial stability of private media is fragile, exacerbated by ECOWAS sanctions imposed after the 2023 coup. Many newspapers have shut down due to lost revenue, lack of advertising, low sales, high printing costs, and competition from social media. Private radio stations and TV channels also face financial difficulties, with only a few TV channels profiting from advertising. This financial instability makes journalists vulnerable to corruption. Furthermore, Niger's conservative Muslim and traditional society resists open media discussions on topics such as Islam, sexuality, contraception, and adultery, leading to widespread self-censorship. Access to information on terrorism and migration therefore remains highly restricted (Reporters Without Borders, 2024).

1.5 Research Outline

This research aims to explore the diverse narratives surrounding French-led military operations and aid initiatives in Niger, explicitly focusing on the period from February 2022 to December 2023. The study will provide a comprehensive analysis of how these interventions are perceived locally and how these perceptions have evolved, particularly in light of significant geopolitical shifts such as the 2023 military coup in Niger. The study begins by contextualising the historical and geopolitical background of Franco-Nigerien relations. The introduction outlines the research problem, emphasising the need for a nuanced analysis of French interventions in Niger amidst changing geopolitical dynamics. The primary objective of this research is to analyse the narratives that have emerged in Niger regarding France's military and aid interventions. The key research question guiding this study is: What narratives have emerged in Niger in response to France's military intervention and official development assistance between 2022 and 2023? The study will also explore sub-questions related to the evolution of these narratives, the impact of anti-French sentiment, and the broader implications for Franco-Nigerien relations. The research adopts a qualitative approach, using narrative analysis to examine Nigerien private and public media outlets. The methodology section details the selection criteria for media sources, the data collection and management process, and the analytical framework employed to interpret the findings. The study also considers the limitations of the research and the measures taken to address potential biases. By providing an in-depth examination of the local narratives surrounding French interventions, this research aims to better understand the complex dynamics at play in Franco-Nigerien relations. The findings will be complemented by the results of three interviews discussed in the discussion

section. They will offer insights into the effectiveness of current strategies, suggesting pathways for more constructive engagement that aligns with local needs and perspectives.

2. Literature Review

The subsequent literature review delves into the critiques of French interventions in the Sahel region, tracing historical shifts in French security policies and aid strategies. It highlights France's transition towards multilateralism, critiques of its strategic efficacy, and challenges in balancing short-term security goals with long-term development objectives. Additionally, it explores the impact of Emmanuel Macron's presidency on French Sahel policy.

2.1 Critiques of French Military Interventions

2.1.1 France as the Gendarme of Africa

In the 1950s and 1960s, France engaged in bilateral military agreements with former colonies, a role often referred to as the *gendarme of Africa*, meaning policeman of Africa, as discussed by Chafer et al. (2020, p. 488). According to Charbonneau (2023), the term remains relevant, as each president since Charles de Gaulle has pledged to change French policy in Africa but invariably found themselves drawn into conflicts on the continent (Charbonneau, 2023). He further interprets the term *gendarme de l'Afrique* as a metaphor for "neocolonial structures, relations, and practices," emphasising the significant and frequent involvement of French military forces in African affairs (Charbonneau, 2023, p.58). According to Sıradağ (2014), France's military involvement in Africa has been extensive, surpassing 50 instances since 1960, including 20 interventions between 1963 and 1983 and the signing of 27 military defence treaties with African countries between 1960 and 1994. Post-World War II, France maintained relationships through cooperation agreements, military intervention, and financial assistance policies (Sıradağ, 2014, p.104). Sıradağ further names numerous aims behind those interventions, some of them being - safeguarding regimes with special ties to Paris, expanding its influence over Francophone regions, and enhancing its global leadership through military interventions in world politics (2014, p.107).

After the Cold War, structural changes in the world were brought, and peace operations proliferated throughout Africa. As authoritarian regimes in Africa began to decline, France reconfigured its relationships with the continent, increasingly supporting peacekeeping

operations on the African continent (Širadaž, 2014, p.111). After 1997, France moved away from its traditional sphere of influence, known as the "pré carré," and began implementing a series of reforms under the Socialist government of Lionel Hospein, advocating for a new "partnership" approach. This included a continued military commitment to Africa and the launch of RECAMP (Reinforcement of African Peacekeeping Capacity), aimed at enhancing African countries' military capabilities for peacekeeping operations through training and capacity-building support. RECAMP was later incorporated into an EU programme known as EURORECAMP, following the December 2007 Africa-EU summit, guided by the principle of African ownership. Despite these changes, there was no complete rupture in French-African policy, as evidenced by France's military intervention in Chad to support the regime of Idriss Déby in 2008, under the cover of EU deployment, and unilateral action in Mali in 2013 against Salafist insurgents, without a UN mandate. Charbonneau and Chafer argue that despite significant transformations in the francophone world, the 2013 French military operation in Mali serves as a reminder that French militarism in Africa and its specific mechanisms continue to influence UN deployments on the continent (2014, p.7).

Tobias Koepf, who conducted analyses of peace operations in several African countries, including Côte d'Ivoire, Chad, the Central African Republic, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, contends that these operations pose significant challenges, particularly when combined with bilateral military policies (Koepf, 2012). Koepf argues that French interventions undermine broader international peacekeeping efforts and have negative implications for African actors, enabling them to manipulate policies against each other (Koepf, 2012, p.333). He suggests that full multilateralization of French military engagement would be necessary to enhance the credibility and legitimacy of such peace operations. Koepf notes that the EUFOR RD Congo operation in 2006, led by Germany, performed comparatively better than other peace operations, highlighting the importance of strong leadership from different nations. He argues that in the long term, African regional and/or sub-regional organisations need to take on the responsibility for peacekeeping on the continent. However, this may present challenges to political legitimacy due to hostilities among African states (Koepf, 2012).

2.1.2 Multilateral rhetoric and operational unilateralism

In response to criticisms and the high costs associated with unilateral military operations, France has increasingly adopted a multilateral approach, even amidst the unilateral actions

mentioned hereinabove (Erforth, 2020). Recchia (2020) highlights a significant strategic shift in French policy after the Côte d'Ivoire intervention (2002-2004), which led to the adoption of the legitimate intervention norm. Originating from the 1991 Persian Gulf War and widely accepted by liberal democracies, France initially resisted this norm, which preferred 'bilateral defence treaties concluded after decolonization with allied regimes across Francophone Africa' (Recchia, 2020, p. 509). Despite this shift, military interventions face criticism for their underlying logic and the potentially hypocritical motives behind France's turn to multilateralism.

While there is debate over the extent and timing of France's multilateralism, there is consensus on its increasing role in French military policy. In 2012, French President François Hollande promised an 'African solution to African problems' strategy, a non-interventionist agenda, and the promotion of African and European collective mechanisms to reduce France's military presence in the Sahel. However, this promise was contradicted by the deployment of 4,000 combat troops to Mali in 2013 through Operation Serval, the largest French foreign intervention since the Algerian War, which lacked multilateral participation (Erforth, 2020; Erforth, 2019). This discrepancy highlights the persistence of unilateral elements in French military policy despite claims of multilateralism. Chafer et al. (2020) argue that French military policy remains a hybrid, blending unilateral and multilateral strategies. Drawing from 30 elite interviews across various countries, they suggest that this hybridity results from the interplay of traditional French military doctrines with newer multilateral approaches (Chafer et al., 2020, p. 482). Erforth (2020) concurs, noting that 'French policymakers do not shy away from operational unilateralism if the conditions on the ground seem to require swift and robust military actions, as long as they can count on the political support of key international partners' (Erforth, 2020, p. 560).

In contrast, Recchia (2020) disagrees with Erforth's assessment and suggests that French policymakers have fully embraced multilateral intervention as standard practice. He argues that these norms have yet to become institutionalized to the level of 'second-degree internalisation,' where policymakers comply not out of coercion or genuine identification but because they perceive it as advancing France's interests, notably in maintaining dominance in Africa. After the end of the Cold War, France has increasingly engaged with African regional organisations

and the European Union in proposing multilateral solutions to African security issues (Erforth, 2020). Rafidinarivo (2020) identifies a transition in French African policy from bilateral to more multilateral, regional, interregional, and global approaches, facilitated through conventional intergovernmental security cooperation and multi-stakeholder models. Tull (2022) similarly emphasizes France's efforts to Europeanize crisis management in the Sahel, noting the European Union's involvement in the region post-Operation Serval, including participation in the UN's Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission (MINUSMA) and the deployment of three Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) missions.

Recchia and Tardy (2020) outline three primary reasons for this shift: reinforcing France's status as a leading power through joint military leadership, distributing responsibilities and risks via collective action, and regaining legitimacy for its military presence in Africa through political endorsements from multilateral organisations. Desgrandchamps (2016) links this multilateral approach to the principle of 'grandeur,' asserting France's global significance. Critics remain sceptical of France's commitment to genuinely multilateralizing its security policy towards Africa, viewing the Europeanization of its military actions as a way to perpetuate outdated practices and preferences rooted in colonial history (Rafidinarivo, 2019; Recchia, 2020; Erforth, 2020). Recchia (2020) explains that France values United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and regional approval for its African interventions as a strategy to counter nationalist opposition and accusations of neocolonialism. The Task Force Takuba, established by France for Sahelian issues, bolsters European defence ambitions while preserving French influence (Tull, 2022). Tull further notes that France prefers ad hoc coalitions over the EU framework, allowing it to choose partners and contributions without negotiating compromises. Thus, while multilateralism mitigates accusations of neocolonialism, it is also perceived as a means for France to maintain its influence in Africa under the guise of collective action.

2.1.3 (Re)new(ed) challenges emerging with ad hoc coalitions

France has recognized the emergence of ad hoc coalitions as an opportunity in many aspects. These coalitions enable a shift away from unilateral interventions, like those seen in pre-Rwanda times, by relying on and being supported by local actors. This approach enhances

interaction and influence for third-party actors and attempts to address the long-debated security-development nexus. They operate at an appropriate level, fostering ownership, concrete cooperation, and coordination on complex security issues. However, ad hoc coalitions also present new or renewed challenges. They face issues of equipment and financing, adding to the demands from external actors and the complexity of funding peace initiatives in Africa without inadvertently financing conflict. Moreover, they introduce another institutional, organisational, and operational layer to the already multi-tiered African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), which consists of the African Union (AU), Regional Economic Communities (RECs), and States. This risks creating dynamics of competing political and operational legitimacy and resource allocation strategies in a context of high security threats and scarce resources (Brosig & Nivet, 2023).

Various regional organisations address peace and security issues across the Sahel. For instance, ECOWAS was the first REC to establish a joint intervention force (ECOMOG), deploying missions in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Ivory Coast under Nigeria's regional leadership. Other RECs include the Francophone Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) and the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD) (Brosig & Nivet, 2023, p. 458). Local actors have responded to the escalating intensity, complexity, and global reach of threats by innovating new institutional and operational methods. Notably, initiatives like the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) and the G5 Sahel have emerged. The MNJTF, for instance, has been actively combating Boko Haram and has received substantial external support, including 124.4 million euros from the EU between 2016 and 2022. Another significant example is the G5 Sahel, an intergovernmental organisation founded in Mauritania in 2014 by Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad. This organisation prioritises peace, security, and sustainable development in the Sahel region, focusing on defence and security, alongside governance, infrastructure, human resilience, and development (Brosig & Nivet, 2023, p. 463). One of the challenges in securing financial sustainability and visibility for the G5 Sahel Joint Forces is its complex financing structure, which includes bilateral aid (from countries like France) and multilateral aid (from the EU), while combating a fragmented ecosystem of threats involving around 20 different groups (Brosig & Nivet, 2023, p. 465).

2.1.4 Continued Contradictions

More recently, a growing discourse critiques Paris for perceived strategic inefficacy and

suggests underlying neo-colonial motivations (Carbone & Casola, 2022). Residents of the Sahel view Paris as displaying double standards concerning democracy, interventionism, and security partnerships, evoking echoes of colonial practices and fostering scepticism about France's true intentions. When looking at the relationship between France and Niger, Komlavi Hahonou also asserts that France's primary goal is to safeguard their strategic, economic, and political interests by empowering the Nigerien authorities through direct intervention and initiatives aimed at enhancing their capabilities (Hahonou, 2016). Seidik Abba examines French military interventions in Mali. He mentions that the initial optimism surrounding the launch of Operation "Serval" in January 2014 (later followed by "Barkhane" nine years later) in Mali gave way to disillusionment. Despite nearly 8 billion euros spent, terrorism has not been reduced in the region. He compares the French operation to the American one in Iraq, noting that significant resources were invested but failed to curb terrorist activity within Mali, instead leading to its expansion into other countries such as Niger and Burkina Faso. This did not prevent the reorganisation of support groups for Islamism and Muslim movements, nor the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara. By the end of 2019, terrorist groups, originally targeting only local defence and security forces, began to target civilians, particularly in the so-called "three borders" area shared by Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali. The failure of Barkhane is also political, as the security situation deteriorated, culminating in a double military coup in Mali in August 2020 and May 2021, and a coup in Burkina Faso in January 2022. The author describes international aid as exacerbating political setbacks (Abba, 2022, p.12). Operation Serval, initially seen as a political success for François Hollande, faced increasing opposition, with French troops being greeted with stone-throwing in Burkina Faso and Niger in November 2021, and protests organised against the French military presence.

The criticisms voiced include the heavy human toll on national allies in the anti-terrorism fight (Burkinabé, Nigerien, and Malian) and the incomprehension of the inefficacy of foreign military means, which were insufficient to bring more security to the populations. Finally, national armies demand more support from the regime, which allows for more autonomy and less reliance on foreign aid. According to Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, these criticisms are fueled by the unresolved issues surrounding colonial memory and conspiracy theories (Abba, 2022, p.27).

In France, domestic political pressure mounts in response to Mali's ongoing instability and the

increasing casualties among French military personnel, as Carbone & Casola argue (2022). President Macron's recent rhetoric reflects attempts to address criticisms of France's historical dominance in African affairs. Indeed, in March 2023, President Emmanuel Macron emphasised the end of the “*Françafrique*” era, a term French economist François-Xavier Verschave coined to describe France's enduring control over supposedly independent African states. During a speech, Macron emphasised France's neutrality in engaging with all stakeholders (Sampson, 2023), echoing sentiments he expressed in his 2017 address in Ouagadougou, where he signalled a desire to move away from Paris's postcolonial African policy (AFP, 2023). However, scholarly critiques highlight persistent contradictions in French policy, particularly regarding its security approaches and diplomatic engagements with autocratic regimes. Powell contends that French interventionist strategies in Africa, apparently aimed at stabilising partner nations, inadvertently bolster violent, reactionary, and authoritarian regimes (2020). This perceived French support grants such governments a cloak of legitimacy, allowing them to perpetuate corrupt, discriminatory, and sometimes genocidal actions (Powell, 2017, p.66). Powell denounces a paradox wherein operations like Barkhane, deemed vital for proactive defence against significant threats to French and European security, rely on cooperation with states contributing to regional instability (Powell, 2017, p.66).

The persistence of these contradictions is also evident in an article written last year by Denis Tull, assessing Macron's Africa policy as "mixed and contradictory" (Tull, 2023, p.5). While Macron has pursued diversified diplomatic ties with African nations and acknowledged France's complex historical relationship with the continent, ongoing military engagements in the Sahel and inconsistent diplomatic strategies with autocratic regimes seem to overshadow his reform agenda (Tull, 2023, p.1). Gouvy further characterises Macron's new Africa Strategy unveiled in 2023 as repackaging last year's same principles (Gouvy, 2023). Guichaoua claims that while France bureaucratic decision-making processes generally do not align with the security priorities and sovereignty concerns of the Sahelian populations (Guichaoua, 2020). Thus, these factors contribute to a prevailing belief in the region that French Sahel policy lacks consistent principles (Gouvy, 2023). Powell further asserts that contemporary Franco-African relations adhere to the outdated “*Françafrique*” model (Powell, 2017, p.47).

Despite the significant role of France in intervention strategies within the Sahel, local narratives around these interventions have often been overlooked. The limited existing literature primarily

focuses either on key figures in the broader Sahel region, not directly on Niger, or on policymakers in Paris. Yvan Guichaoua's research, based on interviews with key Sahelian stakeholders such as state and non-state military actors, diplomats, civil servants, and civil society representatives, highlights the tensions between France's security-driven agenda and the sovereignty concerns of Sahelian populations since the crisis began in 2012. Guichaoua illustrates how France's imposition of "red lines" distorts domestic political landscapes, creating dilemmas for local authorities who must balance the demands of foreign patrons with the need to safeguard national sovereignty (Guichaoua, 2020). This external pressure from France can reinforce authoritarian tendencies among Sahelian leaders, who feel constrained by both internal and external forces (Guichaoua, 2020, p.911).

2.2 Critiques of French Official Development Assistance

2.2.1 Furthering French Francophonie

Although the military presence has been prominently visible and extensively examined in academic literature, French humanitarian and development aid has evolved significantly and less looked at (Gaulme, 2023). Since the 1950s and 1960s independence movements, France has maintained consistent economic and political connections with its former colonies, as noted by Siradağ (2014). Notably, France sustained significant financial influence through mechanisms like the African Financial Community (CFA) and its currency, the French CFA franc. According to Gaulme, the Official Development Assistance (ODA) 's origins can also be traced back to the late colonial period. The Fonds d'investissement pour les développements économiques et sociaux (FIDES), established in 1946, was financed 45% by the French state budget and is described as the 'first public fund instituted in France to support the colonial economy and social services through metropolitan taxpayers' money' (Gaulme, 2023, p. 89). After World War II, these funds were predominantly allocated to transport and infrastructure, with minimal allocation to education or health. In 1959, FIDES was restructured into the Fonds d'aide et de coopération (FAC), designed to support the development policies of the autonomous African territories through official grants. Five decades later, it evolved into the Fonds de solidarité prioritaire (FSP), integrating the Ministry of Cooperation into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Gaulme, 2023, p. 90).

When looking at foreign aid dynamics during the 1980s, Schraeder et al. highlighted the ongoing debate surrounding the role of foreign aid, particularly its instrumental use in foreign policy agendas. Despite extensive scrutiny, the determinants of foreign aid programs remain elusive, underscoring a lack of scholarly consensus. Various questions persist regarding the divergence of foreign aid policies among nations like the USA, Japan, France, and Sweden. Notably, research predominantly focuses on the recipient side of the aid equation, particularly exploring the interplay between economic reliance and political compliance within developing nations. Scholars commonly assert that self-interest heavily influences the aid strategies of industrialised states (Schraeder et al., 1998, p.295).

The literature emphasizes two primary factors regarding France's approach to foreign aid. Firstly, French policymakers consistently prioritise promoting French culture, often termed as French "cultural nationalism" or support for the francophonie—a global French-speaking community. This cultural agenda directs a significant portion of foreign aid toward former French colonies and other French-speaking nations, such as those in Central Africa (Schraeder et al., 1998, p.300).

Statistical analyses confirm a positive correlation between aid allocation and former French colonies. At the same time, negative associations are observed with countries influenced by British colonialism and those with no prior colonial ties (Schraeder et al., 1998, p.317). Furthermore, French policymakers view economic interests as intertwined with cultural promotion, resulting in a coordinated approach that leverages foreign aid alongside trade relationships to reinforce cultural ties within the francophone world (Schraeder et al., 1998, p.301).

2.2.2 Fostering Bilateral Aid

Sıradağ highlights the significant impact of the end of the Cold War on the evolution of France's African aid policy. Post-Cold War, France began utilising its aid policy to counteract the United States' sphere of influence over Francophone Africa (Sıradağ, 2014, p.113; Simon, 2010). Additionally, this shift aimed at reshaping the political systems of African countries. While France's pre-1989 aid agenda fostered dependency between Paris and Africa, the new agenda was economically driven (p.113). Simon points out that 18 African countries have been integrated into a new area of cooperation, including former British colonies in 1995. As a

result, French bilateral cooperation seems to be moving away from neo-colonial confrontation by including not only countries formerly colonised by France, but also Portuguese-, Spanish- and English-speaking countries. Therefore, South Africa, Nigeria and Sudan also found themselves included (Simon, 2010, p6). Simon states that sub-Saharan Africa remains the main destination of French financial support, with "more than 90% in the sixties, 80% in the seventies, 63% in 1995, 58% in 2005, 57% in 2009" (Simon, 2010, p4). In his analysis of development assistance from France and the United Kingdom between 1960 and 2009, Pacquement notes minimal evolution. France's aid agenda has remained largely consistent in terms of volume, composition, and geographical focus, with a significant portion consistently allocated to sub-Saharan Africa (Cumming, 1995).

Bossuat and Cumming argue that France has also progressively changed its development aid, by embracing European ideals and signing the European Consensus for Development in 2005, for instance, aligning common goals and principles for both the Union and its Member States in shaping development policy. Despite aligning with European development policy in some aspects, France maintains its distinctive approach to development cooperation. While it acknowledges EU frameworks like the European Consensus for Development, France emphasises its unique role in advocating for Africa and cultural diversity, areas it feels are underrepresented in EU aid. Additionally, there's a push to increase the proportion of bilateral aid over multilateral channels, from 60% to 65% by 2013, as announced by Henri de Raincourt in September 2011 (Bossuat & Cumming, 2013).

2.2.3 Introduction of Conditionality

After the Cold War, France reformed its aid policies. President Chirac and Prime Minister Alain Juppé addressed administrative inefficiencies by merging the Ministry of Cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. They established the Comité interministériel de l'aide au développement (CIAD) to improve aid coordination by focusing on geographical priorities and recipient country policies (Pacquement, 2010). This change marked a shift from France's previous focus on technical and military assistance to a more coordinated and strategic approach, aimed at enhancing cooperation and effectiveness in aid delivery (Cumming, 1995). A major turning point occurred in 1990 at the Franco-African summit in La Baule, where President François Mitterrand informed African leaders that France would no longer provide unconditional support. This speech marked a significant shift in Franco-African relations, as

French aid began to emphasise political reform and democratisation (Charbonneau & Chafer, 2014, p. 4; Cumming, 1995). This new approach not only included democratic conditionality but also involved persuasive diplomacy. Kamirou notes that this shift became a guiding principle for Northern countries, including France, and was crucial in their cooperation policy with Niger (Karimou, 2021, p. 304).

The impact of this shift was evident in France's response to political changes in Niger. On January 27, 1996, a military coup led by General Ibrahim Baré Maïnassara ousted President Mahamane Ousmane. Despite the upheaval, France quickly resumed cooperation with Niger. However, after another coup on April 9, 1999, which resulted in the death of General Maïnassara and the rise of Daouda Malam Wanké, France's reaction was more subdued. Cooperation was reduced, and there was no official statement or condemnation. The civil cooperation programs were diminished, and demands for new elections were made to restore democratic legality (Karimou, 2021, p. 306). This response contrasted sharply with France's quick resumption of cooperation after the 1996 coup, highlighting a double standard in how political situations in Niger were assessed (Karimou, 2021, p. 304). Today, this stance of conditionality remains relevant. The French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs recently announced that France would end its official development assistance to Mali in response to the "political and security situation." This decision mirrors the earlier approach, as development cooperation with Niger has also been interrupted and largely withheld.

2.2.4 Integration of Humanitarian and Development Aid in French Strategy

The relationship between humanitarian assistance and development aid has been a topic of significant debate, highlighting both convergence and divergence in a changing global landscape (Ramirez, 2006). This ongoing debate highlights the need for realignment in response to shifts in the international agenda. Singer asserts that the distinction between emergency aid and development collapsed in Africa by the mid-1980s (Ramirez, 2006, p. 13). Scholars like Singer, Linner, Anderson, and Woodrow advocate for dissolving this distinction, emphasising the importance of humanitarian aid in empowering local socio-political, economic, and cultural structures (Ramirez, 2006).

From 1990 to 2010, France's humanitarian budget for the Humanitarian Emergency Fund (FUH) averaged 10 to 15 million euros annually, reacting to specific emergencies without a

comprehensive strategy. While France gained some visibility in crises and natural disasters, it did not significantly support NGOs or enhance their capacity beyond immediate relief efforts. French NGOs mainly relied on ECHO, the European Commission's humanitarian aid department, while maintaining their independence and accepting French government funds only if they adhered to humanitarian principles (Boinet & Mirabel, 2018). The shift towards a structured approach began around 2008, leading to the French Humanitarian Strategy (2012-2017). This strategy aimed to establish a coherent framework, increase the humanitarian budget, and foster partnerships but lacked substantial financial backing. The second French Humanitarian Strategy (2018-2022) marked significant progress, aligning with Macron's administration. It committed to enhancing humanitarian law diplomacy, protecting humanitarian personnel, and ensuring aid access, with a goal of 500 million euros by 2022. The development of the Peace and Resilience Fund (Minka) and coordination between the Agence Française de Développement and the Crisis and Support Centre were crucial in transitioning from emergency response to development. This evolution underscores the importance of dialogue and mobilisation in implementing the new humanitarian strategy and addressing global humanitarian needs (Boinet & Mirabel, 2018).

However, criticism persists concerning the integration of humanitarian and development aid. Public aid for development is frequently viewed as ineffective, with several authors, including Monga, Moyo, Nwokeabia, and Tandon, analysing its negative impacts and considering it a barrier to the progress of recipient countries (Carbonnier, 2010). This criticism, however, is not new: as early as the 1960s, development aid was being questioned, yet it remains a preferred instrument by default. According to neo-Marxists, PAD is simply a tool of domination by industrialised countries over poor countries, serving the interests of Western countries and transnational corporations, thus creating a relationship of dependency. Neoliberal criticism highlights the negative effects that hinder entrepreneurship and promote rent-seeking situations for the beneficiaries (Carbonnier, 2010). Lejeal also questions the effectiveness of development aid and asserts that this aid is inseparable from the idea of "maintaining a diplomacy of influence under the guise of supporting recipient states and societies" (Lejeal, 2022, p.335). The author compares this to how aid is always used for foreign policy purposes.

Regarding development aid, the author laments a lack of transparency in budgetary architecture and the absence of clear decision-making regarding the annual allocation of aid resources,

especially concerning the distribution between bilateral and multilateral channels. Criticised for these shortcomings, development aid has undergone several modifications. The volume of aid has yet never reached the imperative norm of 0.7% of gross national income (a benchmark defined by the UN in the 1970s), amounting to only 0.38% of GNI in 2016. While the law on solidarity development and the fight against global inequality sets this target for 2025, it remains to be seen if it will be achieved (Lejal, 2022).

France's humanitarian aid had undergone a lot of changes from an organisational point of view. The French development agency has reorganised its network around seventeen regional directorates between 2017 and 2019. Niger is now part of the Grand Sahel Regional Directorate, which also covers Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Mali, Mauritania, Senegal and Chad. The institutional document Regional Strategy 2020-2024 relates the intentions of President Emmanuel Macron, previously expressed in the Ouagadougou speech in 2017 (AFD, n.d.). And yet again, despite substantial commitments, such as the Alliance for the Sahel's promise of 12 billion euros for over 800 projects, there is significant difficulty in tracing where funds go. Issues include discrepancies in reported aid amounts, with local administrations often lacking the capacity to accurately monitor these funds. Transparency problems, coupled with the complexities of international aid mechanisms, contribute to a perception that promised aid does not materialise on the ground (Caramel, 2020).

In conclusion, the literature on French military interventions in the Sahel reveals a complex interplay of historical roles, strategic shifts, and ongoing challenges. Initially acting as the "gendarme of Africa" with extensive bilateral engagements, France has gradually adopted a multilateral approach, supporting peacekeeping and African military capacities through initiatives like RECAMP. However, critiques highlight contradictions as France continues unilateral actions in Mali and Chad, which, despite addressing urgent security needs, often undermine broader peacekeeping efforts. This hybrid strategy combines rapid response with international legitimacy, exemplified by ad hoc coalitions and regional initiatives like the G5 Sahel. President Macron's attempts to distance from colonial legacies and emphasize neutrality have not fully mitigated criticisms of neo-colonial motives and strategic inefficacy. Overall, the literature advocates for a more consistent and genuinely multilateral approach to balance immediate security needs with long-term development goals within the historical and geopolitical context of French-African relations.

3. Theoretical and conceptual frameworks

Erforth (2019, p. 6) contends that the prevailing framework for analysing French military engagement in Africa is one of neocolonial domination. However, this perspective fails to address certain ambiguities evident in discourse and practice. For instance, criticisms highlight France's material interests, notably its uranium interests in Niger. Neocolonialism, referring to the exertion of external influence in economic, political, and cultural domains on former colonies by nation-states or private entities, as noted by Duvisac (2023), does not consider the concept of epistemic restructuring. An alternative approach considers France's actions along a continuum of continuity and change. Yet, this long-term view fails to capture the complexity of individual decisions and implies that French military interventions in sub-Saharan Africa no longer adhere to historical patterns (Erforth, 2019). Decolonial and subaltern theories offer alternative approaches to address the constraints of neo-colonial dominance and the change-continuity continuum frameworks, previously mentioned. These frameworks are applicable for examining military intervention and ODA, as discussed in the following subsections.

First, it is essential to define key terms. Colonialism, decolonialism, and postcoloniality represent distinct yet interconnected phases in the historical and cultural narratives of societies affected by imperial rule. Colonialism denotes the period when a powerful nation establishes control over a foreign territory, exploiting its resources and imposing its culture and governance. Decolonialism, in contrast, is the process through which colonised nations strive to reclaim their autonomy, identity, and cultural heritage, often involving resistance against colonial powers and the dismantling of colonial structures. Postcoloniality examines the ongoing effects and legacies of colonialism in contemporary societies, focusing on how formerly colonised nations navigate their identities, histories, and cultural expressions in a world still influenced by colonial dynamics. In other words, while colonialism concerns domination, decolonialism seeks liberation, and postcoloniality reflects on the complexities of identity and power in the aftermath of colonial rule (Boehmer, 2005; Mignolo, 2011, p. 46).

3.1 Decolonial Theory

Decolonial thinking is the first theoretical framework that will be used. It delves deeper by

critiquing the underlying systems of power and knowledge that perpetuate what's referred to as "coloniality" today. While it acknowledges instances of non-Western colonisation, decolonial theory mainly centres on the expansion and dominance of European and Western powers (Duvisac, 2023). This subsection introduces decolonial thought, highlighting significant scholars such as Anibal Quijano and Walter Mignolo. While both scholars address themes related to postcolonial theory, their primary contributions are more aligned with decolonial thought, emphasizing the need to de-link from colonial matrices of power and knowledge. This section examines Quijano's concept of the coloniality of power and the modernity/rationality matrix, alongside Mignolo's idea of epistemic disobedience, all crucial for understanding decolonial thinking.

Decolonial theory makes a clear distinction between coloniality and colonialism. Colonialism refers to the historical process during which European and Western powers asserted their control over non-Western territories, politics, societies, and cultures from around the 15th to the middle of the 20th century. Anibal Quijano (2007) argues that while political colonialism might not be prevalent anymore, the West continues to exert colonial dominance over the "others", with Latin America and Africa being highlighted (Quijano, 2007, p.168). This reminds the concept of "orientalism", coined by Edward Said, refers to the Western conception and representation of the East, particularly the Middle East and Asia, as a cultural and social construct that reinforces Western superiority and imperialist ideologies. This term critiques how Western literature, art, and academic disciplines have portrayed Eastern societies as exotic, backward, and fundamentally different from the West. Such portrayals justified colonial domination and shaped Western perceptions of the East, creating a binary opposition where the West is seen as civilised and the East as the Other (Boehmer, 2005).

Similarly, Anibal Quijano's concept of the "coloniality of power" explores the enduring impact of colonialism beyond formal colonial rule. Defined as "the invisible matrices that involve control of subjectivity and epistemology, gender and sexuality; authority and power; labour and economy; religion and rituals, as well as other social aspects of humans in favour of the Western world and the needs of white people" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2012, p. 73), coloniality of power highlights the pervasive and persistent influence of colonial structures. Both concepts critique the systemic mechanisms by which Western dominance is maintained: orientalism through cultural and ideological constructs and coloniality of power through socio-economic

and epistemological control. Together, they underscore how colonial legacies continue to shape global power dynamics and perceptions.

Quijano further argues that the colonality of power is rooted in the racial categorisation of the global population under Eurocentric dominance. However, this colonality extends beyond racial social dynamics; it permeates and influences the fundamental aspects of Eurocentric capitalist colonial/modern world power (Quijano, 2007, p.171). According to Duvisac (2023), this colonality has been internalised by individuals, including, in some cases, those who were formerly colonised. Thus, colonality continues to exist at both the societal and individual level. Quijano argues that this colonality of power significantly contributed to the development of the European paradigm of modernity and rationality (Quijano, 2007, p.172). According to Quijano, modernity refers to the socio-political and economic structures that emerged in Europe during the colonial period, characterised by industrialisation, capitalism, and urbanisation. Rationality, on the other hand, encompasses the Eurocentric perspectives and epistemologies that justified and perpetuated colonial domination and exploitation. Together, modernity and rationality form a framework that shaped European societies and influenced global power dynamics through colonialism.

Quijano further emphasises the necessity of epistemic decolonisation to break free from dominating powers, advocating for a detachment from colonial notions of modernity and rationality, and a rejection of oppressive power structures hindering freedom. Building upon Quijano's insights, the concept of decoloniality emerges as a transformative framework that challenges the entrenched legacies of colonialism and the Eurocentric foundations of modernity and rationality. This perspective views decolonisation not merely as a political endeavour but as a comprehensive reimagining of knowledge production, cultural narratives, and power dynamics, thereby offering alternative perspectives that challenge the status quo (Masiero, 2022). Furthermore, decoloniality is regarded as a long-term process that entails bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic, and psychological divestment (Mignolo, 2011, p. 52). By loosening knowledge production from Western hegemony, decoloniality seeks to cultivate alternative epistemologies that empower marginalised voices and communities (Mignolo, 2011, p. 52) and advocate for building a world where multiple realities coexist (Mignolo, 2011, p.54). In doing so, it offers a pathway towards liberation from the enduring grip of colonial ideologies and structures. Movements like the Bandung Conference and nonaligned countries sought to

unravel the entrenched power dynamics that perpetuate colonial legacies and forge new pathways toward liberation and self-determination.

The act of counteracting Western paradigms in order to mitigate the effect of colonisation is coined as epistemic disobedience (Mignolo, 2011, p.54). Frantz Fanon asserts that embracing epistemic disobedience is necessary to challenge dominant narratives and ultimately foster a "new humanity." Fanon argues that this new humanity must embrace diverse perspectives rather than adhering to one absolute truth (Mignolo, 2011, p.52). Both Fanon and Quijano advocate for the recognition and elevation of marginalised voices and knowledge systems. However, this is challenging when faced with epistemic violence which operates through the systemic silencing of marginalised voices (Masiero, 2022, p.305). The definition of epistemic violence can be further understood as the suppression or marginalisation of certain knowledge systems, perspectives, or voices, often perpetuated by dominant groups or institutions to maintain their power and authority. Various academic disciplines, including anthropology and organisation studies, have grappled with the concept of epistemic violence and its implications.

3.2 Subaltern Theory

The Subaltern theory, as explored by Masiero (2022) through the lens of the Subaltern Studies group, provides a distinctive framework for examining power dynamics and resistance within marginalised communities globally (Masiero, 2022, p.306). Initially rooted in "anti-colonial" discourse, the foundation of subaltern studies also diverges from the "postcolonial" paradigm. Unlike the postcolonial approach, the anticolonial approach resists colonial structures but does not necessarily strive to create wholly new structures (Duvisac, 2023). However, the incorporation of Gayatri Spivak's scholarship and her active participation in the group introduced "postcolonial" perspectives, thereby intertwining the two approaches. Consequently, this fusion has resulted in a significant convergence between subaltern studies and postcolonial studies, sharing common objectives and pursuits. Originally conceived as a counter to mainstream narratives of India's history, the Subaltern theory aims to rewrite history from the perspective of the marginalised (Wong & Chakrabarty, 2001). Coined by Gramsci, the term "subaltern" signifies the systematic exclusion of these groups from dominant societal structures. Guha, a prominent member of this group, characterises "subaltern" as a label encompassing various forms of social subordination prevalent in South Asian society, such as class, caste, age,

gender, and occupation (Masiero, 2022, p.306). To empower marginalised voices and make them active participants in history, it's vital to not just hear what they say, but to deeply respect and acknowledge their lived experiences.

This endeavour challenges the so-called “hegemonic historiography”, which perpetuates the dominance of ruling classes by controlling cultural institutions and silencing the voices of the subaltern. Through deconstructing traditional historical narratives, the Subaltern Studies group destabilises the authority of hegemonic perspectives, exposing their cognitive shortcomings arising from the marginalisation of subaltern voices. This process prompts a reconfiguration of history, placing the experiences and perspectives of the subaltern at the forefront, thereby rectifying historical biases rooted in elitism (Masiero, 2022). A crucial aspect of addressing this issue involves acknowledging the active participation of marginalised groups, considering the various ways they exert influence across different historical periods and social settings. In her essay titled "Can the Subaltern Speak?" from 1985, Spivak examines how these marginalised voices respond to dominant power structures, referencing Guha's work from 1982 to explore peasant uprisings and their impact on challenging the prevailing societal hierarchy. She suggests that the lack of representation of subaltern voices can be addressed and overcome by retrieving information about them. However, it's important to note that Gayatri Spivak supports this information retrieval but sees it as separate from the challenge of theorising why subaltern speech is often considered impossible to hear and articulate (Morris, 2010, p.2).

Given the scope of the research question, which encompasses both official assistance and military intervention, integrating both theories is imperative. As above-mentioned, decoloniality provides a comprehensive critique of the epistemological underpinnings of these interventions, highlighting the necessity for a profound rethinking of how knowledge and power are constructed. Through this approach, colonial ideologies in modern practices can be understood and challenged. Conversely, decolonization addresses the practical aspects of dismantling colonial legacies within humanitarian and military contexts. It involves concrete actions to shift power dynamics, foster local leadership, and ensure that interventions are guided by the needs and voices of those most affected. By combining both decoloniality and decolonization, this research can deliver a thorough analysis that not only critiques the current structures but also suggests actionable steps for more equitable and inclusive practices. This dual approach offers a deeper comprehension of the complexities in decolonizing official

assistance and military interventions, recognizing the importance of both epistemic transformation and practical changes in policies and practices. This ensures that the research remains grounded in both theoretical and applied dimensions.

3.3 Conceptual framework

In this subsection, decolonial theory and subaltern theory are applied to the research question. Decolonial theory involves critically examining and deconstructing concepts, ideas, and frameworks shaped by colonial power dynamics. The discussion is structured as follows: first, the decolonisation of “concepts” is explored. Then, existing literature on decolonising ODA and military intervention as concepts is examined, followed by an analysis of how subaltern studies can further enhance the understanding of these issues.

The term "decolonizing" is often used as a buzzword, with its revolutionary potential sidelined for reformist compromises, as individuals and institutions attach it to various social justice initiatives without undertaking the radical work needed to dismantle and rethink colonial structures (Duvisac, 2023). In "Decolonizing Anthropology," A. Lynn Bolles argues that decolonization is crucial for addressing structural inequalities within the discipline by integrating marginalized perspectives, such as those of feminist activists and local communities. He emphasizes the importance of collaborating with Indigenous scholars and prioritizing community engagement to reshape anthropology. While Bolles agrees that decolonization is necessary to combat power imbalances and structural racism, he acknowledges that its concepts may not resonate universally and suggests the need for alternative frameworks. This aligns with the view that decolonization is essential but must be adapted to effectively challenge Western-dominated perceptions and reduce the Global South's dependence on the North (Bolles, 2023).

Decolonizing a concept involves exposing and addressing the omissions and biases inherent in widely accepted ideas and frameworks. Anghie (2006) highlights that this process is about revealing the biases embedded within concepts that often go unquestioned. Hindawi (2021) extends this notion by suggesting that once these biases are identified, they should be replaced with non-imperial histories or values. This invites a re-evaluation of the European myth as a universal standard, recognizing that such myths often underpin claims that justify interference

under the guise of humanitarian virtues. Decolonizing a concept therefore necessitates a critical engagement with the experiences and political consciousness of those who are often rendered as passive objects of power by Western interventions. This means not only acknowledging their voices but also understanding that subalterns may not simply accept or reject imposed frameworks; they may also misread, reinterpret, and rearticulate them (Hindawi, 2021). For researchers, this means cultivating contrapuntal awareness—a concept introduced by Said to describe the practice of broadening our perspectives to encompass previously excluded voices. By juxtaposing interconnected histories, International Relations (IR) can reduce its Eurocentric bias, allowing alternative or new narratives to emerge that challenge and enrich the traditional, so-called “monophonic”, Eurocentric narratives (Capitain, 2020).

3.3.1 Decolonizing humanitarian aid and ODA in practice

The need to decolonise humanitarian aid has gained increasing recognition, with civil society and numerous reports advocating for a more equitable and inclusive approach. This push for decolonisation is part of a broader movement towards anti-colonial solidarity, aiming to empower local actors and shift decision-making power to those directly affected by crises (Furlas, 2022).

Despite these efforts, transnational activism remains largely dominated by Western NGOs and networks. Mingolo also argues that international organisations often maintain colonial power dynamics, branding people as underdeveloped and lacking knowledge (2009). Consequently, mainstream development discourse seems to remain entrenched in colonialism and orientalism, continuing to advocate for modernisation through free trade, open markets, capitalism, and democracy, following the Western model. Carpi further introduces the term "Southism" as an analytical framework that investigates the structural relationships between humanitarian providers and beneficiaries, particularly in the context of the global South. It reflects a tendency among humanitarian actors to perceive the South as disempowered and incapable, thereby legitimising and solidifying the Northern humanitarian presence and actions. Southism is not merely about providing aid; it encapsulates a complex interplay of power dynamics, where the global South is often viewed through a lens of neediness and dependency. Carpi relates Southism to the concept of orientalism by suggesting that it functions similarly to how Edward Said described Western attitudes towards the East. While orientalism captures the historical and ideological constructs of the West's perception of the East, Southism extends this critique to the

North-South dynamic, where the South is often seen as a site of need and intervention. This relationship reinforces a narrative that positions the North as the empowered provider and the South as the passive recipient, thus perpetuating a form of neo-colonialism in humanitarian practices (Carpi, 2018).

Humanitarian governance also includes elements of domination, as consent from the people is sometimes overlooked in the name of human development or democracy promotion (M. N. Barnett, 2012). This paternalism, defined by Dworkin as “the interference with a person’s liberty of action justified by reasons referring exclusively to the welfare, good, happiness, needs, interests, or values of the person being coerced,” remains a key component of humanitarian governance (M. N. Barnett, 2012, p. 484). While assistance can be welcome, it is often imposed without approval or against the will of the intended beneficiaries. Barnett further emphasises that paternalism did not end with colonialism and is still present in many interventions designed for the betterment of people and humanity. This paternalistic approach dismisses the agency of affected populations and local responders (Roepstorff, 2020). Such 'otherness' in the humanitarian field can hinder effective service delivery (Donini, 2012).

Keeping this in mind, the literature discusses various approaches to decolonizing humanitarian aid: Spivak’s approach can be used in contemporary humanitarianism to demonstrate that aid recipients possess the ability to express their needs, but are often silenced by dominant power structures. Decolonizing humanitarian efforts seeks to enable the *subalterns* to express their needs and alter power dynamics. This necessitates that transnational activism, often led by Western NGOs and networks, embraces diverse perspectives and rejects singular narratives. Empowering local actors to determine advocacy targets, methods, narratives, and measures of success is crucial. Challenges faced by indigenous people should be locally identified and addressed through indigenous epistemologies, with active community involvement in implementation. Pophiwa and Saidi additionally mention that incorporating indigenous languages and knowledge systems into national operations is crucial, as is developing curricula that challenge Western epistemologies and critique their biases. This approach fosters sustainable development by acknowledging the diversity and complexity of African contexts and ensuring that solutions are tailored to local needs (Pophiwa & Saidi, 2022).

Localization, referring to shifting power from international to local actors, can be seen as a means to achieve decolonization (Quijano, 2007). In 2016, the World Humanitarian Summit

underscored the importance of localising humanitarian action wherever feasible and ensuring international involvement only when necessary (Barbelet, 2019). This led to the development of the Grand Bargain, an initiative aimed at enhancing humanitarian assistance through principles such as cash transfers, support for local organisations, and the harmonisation of reporting. Despite progress, challenges persist in areas like funding quality, inclusion of affected populations, and establishing common standards for transparency (Metcalf-Hough et al., 2021). Further initiatives, such as the Coalition for Racial and Ethnic Equality in Development (CREED) and the Pledge for Change, aim to foster equitable partnerships, promote authentic storytelling free from the "white gaze," and address power imbalances (Alexander, 2022). These efforts strive to move beyond previous frameworks like the Charter for Change and the Grand Bargain, which have been criticised for not being radical enough in shifting power dynamics towards actors in the Global South.

To sum up, decolonizing humanitarian action involves including local leadership, increasing funding and decision-making by affected populations, and shifting the centre of humanitarian action away from Western international organisations. A true decolonial humanitarian system is one where people have the right to self-determination, aligning with Quijano's view of liberation from coloniality. This approach aligns with the theoretical perspectives discussed in the literature review, particularly the importance of acknowledging diverse voices and rejecting singular narratives.

3.3.2 Decolonizing military interventions in practice

The concept of decolonizing military intervention is also gaining momentum, advocating for a shift away from historically imperialistic and neo-colonial practices towards more equitable and just approaches.

Traditionally, military interventions have been dominated by Western powers, often justified under the guise of promoting democracy, human rights, or stability, but frequently serving geopolitical interests and perpetuating power imbalances. Scholars such as Gegout have also highlighted the complexities surrounding European military interventions in Africa, citing concerns regarding strategic interests, reluctance to engage in conflicts within former European colonies, and a Eurocentric perspective on African conflicts (Gegout, 2018). To address this and debunk the military-industrial complex in Western countries, including France, there must

be greater transparency and accountability in defence spending and policy making. This calls for a re-examination of the principles and practices underlying military interventions to ensure they respect the sovereignty and agency of affected nations.

Decolonizing military intervention requires acknowledging and rectifying these power imbalances. This involves recognizing the agency of local populations and their right to determine their own futures without external coercion. Indigenous knowledge and local governance structures should be respected and integrated into any intervention strategy. Moreover, interventions should be based on genuine partnerships and collaboration with local actors, ensuring that their voices are central to decision-making processes. Indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) play a crucial role in this context, as they have historically enabled Africans to address their own challenges effectively. For instance, Zulu king Shaka developed innovative military strategies and sustainable weapons like the assegai without Western influence, demonstrating the capability and resourcefulness inherent in IKS (Pophiwa & Saidi, 2022). This can also include the involvement of regional organisations and neighbouring states in conflict resolution and can provide a more balanced and culturally sensitive approach (Eneka & Nwagbo, 2016). This regional leadership is crucial in ensuring that interventions are rooted in local contexts and realities.

Last but not least, international legal frameworks and norms also play a crucial role in decolonizing military intervention. The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine, while well-intentioned in preventing mass atrocities, has been criticised for being selectively applied and serving the interests of powerful states (Evans, 2008). R2P, characterised as a Western product, justifies interventionist discourse by portraying Southern states as dysfunctional. Hindawi (2021) critiques this interpretation for ignoring Southern contributions to the concept, highlighting its extreme West-centric nature. He advocates for decolonizing R2P by acknowledging the mutual contributions of the West and the "rest" and recognizing the deeper struggles over universal values underpinning the concept. R2P was initially presented as a solution to the conflict between primarily Western proponents of the right to use military force for humanitarian purposes and typically Southern states and scholars concerned about the potential for such a right to be misused. Often conflated with humanitarian intervention, the principle lacks consensus on the fundamental issue: when is it justified to use force for humanitarian reasons? Critical literature analysing R2P's colonial biases is crucial. However,

one can further decolonize the concept by identifying and challenging Eurocentric assumptions not only among R2P's proponents but also among its critics (Hindawi, 2021). A decolonized approach would involve rethinking such doctrines to ensure they are applied equitably and genuinely serve the interests of those they aim to protect.

Furthermore, it is essential to incorporate subaltern studies to fully grasp the decolonization of military intervention. In the context of military intervention, the concept of subaltern can be particularly insightful. Looking at the use of protest and violence in postcolonial Nigeria, Fasakin illustrates how subaltern groups articulate their security concerns and challenge state and external interventions. These actions can be seen as a form of resistance against hegemonic powers that often disregard their voices and interests (Fasakin, 2022). Applying this to military intervention, recognizing subaltern perspectives means acknowledging the resistance and demands of local populations and understanding their security needs from their viewpoint. They provide critical perspectives on how such actions are perceived by subaltern groups, often challenging dominant narratives that justify interventions under humanitarian or democratic pretexts. These studies highlight local agency and resistance against interventions, revealing how communities develop their own strategies amidst disruptions caused by external forces. They emphasise the profound impacts of interventions on social, economic, and political structures within local contexts, urging recognition of alternative knowledge systems and governance structures.

In conclusion, decolonizing military intervention involves a fundamental shift in how interventions are conceptualised and executed. It requires moving away from paternalistic, neo-colonial practices and towards approaches that respect the sovereignty, autonomy, and agency of local populations. This involves genuine partnerships, the integration of local knowledge, and equitable international legal frameworks. By prioritising the voices and needs of those directly affected by conflicts, the international community can work towards more just and effective interventions that promote true self-determination and long-term stability.

4. Methodology

4.1 Preliminary remarks

The ideal approach would have involved conducting interviews and on-the-ground research in Niger to capture local perspectives firsthand. However, due to constraints related to time, budget, and foremost security concerns, this was not feasible. It already proved complicated when the BBC tried to assess President Bazoum's support in Niamey due to his contentious relationship with the French government. Jones further explains that many potential interviewees, whether supporters or opponents of the decision to expel France, were unwilling to speak on the record due to fear of repercussions. The pervasive atmosphere of fear was compounded by the junta's surveillance of the BBC team, closely monitoring their movements and interactions. This level of scrutiny significantly hindered the ability to conduct open interviews, making it challenging to capture a full spectrum of narratives and opinions (Jones, 2023). Additionally, the arrest and intimidation of journalists reporting on conflict-related issues further exacerbated the challenges, creating an environment of self-censorship and heightened risk for those willing to share their views (Amnesty International, 2024).

Digital counterpublics—online spaces akin to Fraser's subaltern counterpublics—allow diverse communities to generate critical discourse and publicise narratives of change, independent of dominant public spheres. These digital arenas enable members of subordinated groups to revise discourses and form new interpretations of identity, as described by Deal (2020). Thus, social media analysis would have been a useful alternative for understanding how these discourses evolve. The consideration of utilising social media analysis was also explored but ultimately dismissed. While social media can offer valuable insights into public sentiment and include informal grassroots sentiments, its use in Niger is limited by factors such as low internet penetration. As of early 2024, only 16.9% of the population has internet access, with an even smaller portion, 2.2%, being active social media users. This low penetration raises concerns about the representativeness of social media discussions, especially regarding gender-related issues, given the significant gender imbalance among users, with only 19.3 percent of Niger's social media users being female. Additionally, while cellular mobile connections are more widespread, reaching 59.4% of the population, social media usage may still be restricted by

factors like smartphone accessibility and data affordability. Consequently, social media views may be skewed towards specific demographics or socio-economic groups, making it difficult to discern who is speaking and potentially affecting the comprehensiveness and accuracy of the analysis (Kemp, 2024).

In light of these considerations, another alternative pursued in this study involved examining media coverage and conducting an analysis of public and private press in Niger. In Niger, the press has been pivotal in political transformations, especially during the 1991 National Sovereign Conference, acting as a counter-power and a symbol of free expression (Aboubacar Abdou, 2021). In the same year, Niger ended the state's media monopoly, leading to a more diverse media landscape. Niamey saw the launch of its first independent weeklies, such as *Haské*, *Le Républicain*, and *Le Démocrate*. The country's first private radio station (R&M) began in 1994, followed by the first private TV channel (RTT) in 2000. By 2022, Niger boasted 67 privately owned radio stations, 198 community or association radio stations, 15 private TV channels, and 16 news websites (Reporters Without Borders, 2024).

4.2 Narrative analysis

Narrative analysis is a valuable method for examining news media coverage. Narrative criticisms part of rhetorical criticism— along neo-Aristotelian criticism, cluster criticism, fantasy-theme criticism, generic criticism, ideological criticism, metaphor criticism, pentadic criticism, feminist criticism, and visual rhetoric criticism that enable the the systematic investigation and explanation of symbolic acts and artefacts (Foss, 1989). Foss discusses the origins of narrative study, noting that the study of narrative discourse has a long history that dates back to classical Greece and Rome (Foss, 1989, p. 321). This approach explores storytelling forms to understand how individuals perceive and make sense of their world. Foss (1989) explains that narratives help people interpret events and actions in their lives.

Richardson, as referenced in Barnett, observes that individuals shape their understanding of life through the stories available to them, with journalists serving as vital media gatekeepers. These journalists use narratives as a "mirror for social truths, although not always an exact record of the truth" (B. Barnett, 2005, p.13). Rowland identifies several components that make up a narrative: characters, setting, plot, and theme. Characters act in relation to other characters,

typically including protagonists (central figures in the story), antagonists (those whose actions create conflict to move the story forward), and stock characters (supporting roles). The setting is the time and place where the story unfolds, varying based on context and situation (Rowland, 1990, p. 127). The plot is the sequence of events in the story, often designed to maintain audience attention and reinforce the story's message (Rowland, 1990, p. 127). The theme pertains to the narrative's underlying message, which can be explicitly stated or open to interpretation, leading to diverse perspectives on its meaning.

Narrative criticism can also be used to identify and make visible the contextual forces that shape a specific narrative. Engaging in this process might lead to questions such as: What has led to the construction of this specific narrative? Why was the narrative told this way, instead of another way? Who else (or what else) might be shaping the narrative besides the obvious "author"? In the context of my research question, this approach is particularly relevant. *What narratives have emerged in Niger in response to France's military intervention and official development assistance between 2022 and 2023?* By examining these narratives, the study aims to uncover how media coverage shapes public perception and understanding of French-led interventions in Niger.

4.2 Media Selection

The data sample for this study consists of several key components aimed at capturing diverse narratives around French-led military operations and aid initiatives in Niger between 2022 and 2023. The sources include both public and private media on different levels of outlets to ensure a nuanced analysis of the media landscape.

Public media sources in Niger include the National Publishing and Press Office (Office National d'Édition et de Presse - ONEP), a key publisher of government newspapers. However, financial difficulties have hampered its operations despite state subsidies. The Niger Radio and Television Broadcasting Office (Office de Radiodiffusion Télévision du Niger - ORTN), now known as Télé Sahel following a military coup, is another state-owned institution. The ORTN network relies financially on the government, funded partly through an addition to electricity bills and partly through direct subsidies. Its website, launched on May 17, 2019, and last updated on November 9, 2021, will not be relevant for this study. Therefore, the Nigerien Press

Agency, known as *Agence Nigérienne de Presse* (ANP), created on 23 July 19871, will be a primary source for this research. The media landscape in Niger also includes a variety of private entities such as newspapers, radio stations, and television channels. The study will yet consider written articles from local and regional newspapers, including *L'Enquêteur*, *L'événement Niger*, *Studio Kalangou*, *La Roue de l'Histoire*, *Air Info Agadez*, *Les Échos du Niger* and *Niger Diaspora*.

It is important to mention that this approach also has its limitations. Media coverage may be influenced by various factors such as government censorship, media bias, and limited access to information. Additionally, the availability and quality of media sources may vary, potentially impacting the comprehensiveness and accuracy of the analysis. Moreover, relying solely on media coverage may overlook nuanced perspectives and voices that are not adequately represented in the media landscape. Given the literacy rate in Niger is 37.4%, this further complicates the reliance on media sources. Despite these limitations, analysing media coverage provides valuable insights into public discourse and can complement other research methods in understanding diverse narratives. Furthermore, it will be beneficial to gain potential insights into the differences between private and public press coverage.

4.4 Data Collection and Management

The research design for this study employs a mixed-methods approach, focusing on qualitative techniques to gain a comprehensive understanding of local perspectives on political and media dynamics in Niger. Data collection will be carried out in several stages: First, articles will be systematically collected from the identified newspapers and news websites. This will involve searching for relevant keywords and topics related to French-led aid and military initiatives in Niger from February 2022 to December 2023.

This period was selected to examine articles that reflect the narrative of increased French troop involvement in Niger following the coup in Mali and the subsequent withdrawal of these troops. The unit of analysis for this study is news stories. A selective sample of articles was taken from various sources as mentioned hereinabove. During this timeframe, these sources

published numerous articles related to France's actions in Niger. After an initial reading, articles that did not have a central focus on this topic were excluded, resulting in a total of 143 news articles included in the analysis. Each article was thoroughly examined multiple times using Foss's (1989) sample questions on narrative structure to grasp the narratives presented. Essential subtopics related to media coverage, including characters, causal relationships, themes, narrator, and audience, were identified. Additionally, the analysis focused on myths, language, and the methods used to introduce and name characters. Detailed notes on these aspects were systematically recorded in a spreadsheet for each article, with different tags assigned to each subtopic to aid in understanding the dominant narrative of the story. Lastly, the unique details of each narrative were analysed and grouped into a broader narrative framework. Each data source has been assigned a unique identifier to facilitate easy retrieval and cross-referencing. Metadata, including publication date, author, and source type, will be recorded for each document. Additionally, official documents from French authorities, including reports from the National Assembly and the Senate, have been reviewed to provide an official perspective on military interventions and aid and their implications.

To provide a deeper understanding and context, three interviews have been conducted with Nigerien journalists. A semi-structured interview guide has been developed to ensure consistency across interviews while allowing flexibility for interviewees to express their views freely. These interviews have been audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. The first interview was with the president of a journalistic association in Niger, conducted via Google Meets on 3 June 2024. The second interview was with the director of publication for a private Nigerien media outlet, conducted via Google Meets on 6 June 2024. The third interview was with the director of a Nigerien women's journalist association, conducted via Zoom on 9 July 2024. While the selection of interviewees includes both male and female perspectives, it is important to acknowledge that the representativeness is limited and does not reflect the diversity of the Nigerien population. It was challenging to both contact potential interviewees and obtain positive responses within the limited timeframe. Additionally, there is an inherent bias in the responses, as my identity as a French national and student may have influenced some individuals' willingness to participate, particularly those who may have been reluctant to discuss anti-French sentiments with a French interviewer. Furthermore, all interviews were conducted in French. The included quotes are therefore translations. These interviews aim to

provide clarification and additional context to the media narratives, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of local perspectives and will be used in the discussion part. This triangulation of sources—public and private media, interviews, and official documents—will help ensure a comprehensive and nuanced analysis.

5. Narrative Analysis

The analysis of narratives is categorized into three distinct periods: the period following the Barkhane re-articulation announcement (February to July 2022), the period after the re-articulation of French troops (August 2022 to June 2023), and the period following the coup (July to December 2023). Each section begins with a preamble that explains these periods, providing additional information from French documents to contextualise French actions in Niger. For each period, the narratives presented by both public and private media will be examined, focusing on military and humanitarian issues, either independently or jointly, wherever possible.

5.1 Narratives after the Barkhane re-articulation announcement (02-07.22)

On 17 February 2022, the President of the French Republic announced the re-articulation of Operation Barkhane outside Malian territory. Initially, in 2013, French armed forces were deployed to Mali at the request of Malian authorities to halt the advance of armed terrorist groups towards Bamako. Niger, historically significant as a logistical hub for French operations since the launch of Operation Serval in January 2013, played a crucial role in this re-articulation. The reorganisation of Operation Barkhane was conducted in coordination with African and European partners and involved several steps: Step 1 was the transfer of three northern Mali bases (Timbuktu, Tessalit, Kidal) between 30 October 2021 and 15 December 2021; Step 2 saw the transfer of the Gossi and Ménaka bases between 19 April 2022 and 13 June 2022; and Step 3 concluded with the transfer of the Gao base on 15 August 2022 (Ministère des Armées, n.d.). The force was then restructured within the Sahel-Saharan region around two main support points: the projected airbase in Niamey, Niger, and the projected airbase in N'Djamena, Chad. Notably, while the Nigerien population was accustomed to a French military presence, the number of soldiers and aviators strongly increased between February 2022 until July 2022. A

French press dossier published in September by the Army Ministry also details eight different training actions and 14 combat partnership actions in Niger for 2022, along with the establishment of a Partnership Command Post (PCP) in Niamey on 1 March 2022 (Ministère des Armées, n.d.). This subsection examines narratives regarding France's aid and military interventions from February 2022 until July 2022, focusing first on the narratives in the public outlet *ANP* and then specifically on the narratives in private outlets surrounding the announcement of the re-articulation of the Barkhane force and the various reactions that followed in private outlets.

5.1.1 Narratives in the Public Outlet *ANP*

Between February 2022 and July 2022, the official development assistance provided by France received minimal media coverage, with only five articles. All *ANP* articles adhere to a consistent editorial line, offering minimal variation in the description of French aid. Instead of discussing the ODA, the focus is on “cooperation” and “partnerships.” A significant emphasis is placed on an “equal relationship.” The French Secretary of State for Development, Francophonie, and International Partnerships, Zacharopoulou, states, “France is by far a leading bilateral partner. Our [France and Niger] relationship is one of respect, listening, and equal partnership, starting here in Niamey and extending through our ongoing exchanges.” Additionally, Zacharopoulou affirmed, “We will continue to work together on these issues” (ANP, 2022c). *ANP* thereby only reports French discourse, which aims to erase the notions of dependency and imbalance, instead promoting a partnership based on equality. In July 2022, France was cited again in the *ANP* as the most significant bilateral partner, both in terms of the volume of French public aid and its involvement in security and counter-terrorism efforts (ANP, 2022e). The *ANP* gives little place to include the Nigerien perspective, limiting President Bazoum's reactions to expressions of “mutual respect.”

From a theoretical perspective, subaltern voices are completely marginalised, with no positive perspectives from the Nigerien population or their reception of aid being presented. The positive narrative is primarily public, except for one instance from a newspaper with a strongly pro-Bazoum stance, echoing the editorial line of the *ANP*. Conversely, the French discourse initiates a decolonisation approach by emphasising cooperation and partnerships based on mutual respect and equality. Statements from French officials, such as Zacharopoulou's assertion

of an "equal partnership," suggest an effort to move away from paternalistic aid models. However, it must be remembered that these articles do not reflect local perspectives, which remain confined to the French approach.

Additionally, the *ANP* predominantly focuses on visits from French ambassadors or representatives. All articles about Franco-Nigerien cooperation are mentioned without reference to military engagement, except in an article published in July 2022 (ANP, 2022e). This article discusses a meeting between two delegations that addressed various issues, including development cooperation and security matters, and reviewed prospects. It stated how the Nigerien Minister of Defence gave an overview of the security situation in the Sahel and the operations conducted by Nigerien forces in the fight against terrorism to the French delegation. However, these discussions remain vague again. Likewise, no local perspectives are provided in this context, nor is there any effort to deconstruct traditional historical narratives.

By June 2022, 75% of the military freight had already been withdrawn from Mali, even if the complete re-articulation operation was only finalised in August (Armée de Terre, 2022). Despite this, the increasing military involvement in Niger does not appear to be documented in the press. On 24 March 2022, President Mohamed Bazoum met with the former French ambassador to Niger, Alexandre Garcia, to discuss bilateral cooperation and mentioned "ways of strengthening our bilateral cooperation and future prospects between our two countries" (ANP, 2022a), with no further details provided. The *ANP* has a "security" section covering all security issues. Most of those articles overlook the growing French commitment in Niger, instead focusing on various other topics. These include President Bazoum's diplomatic visits to different regions of Niger, reports on terrorist attacks, as well as the adoption of a National Internal Security Strategy Document on June 22, 2022. It states that "the resources needed to finance the National Internal Security Strategy are based on: the national budget; support from Technical and Financial Partners (PTF) and all other forms of bilateral and multilateral cooperation." (Gouvernement du Niger, 2022). The document does not yet explicitly mention France and specify which countries and/or organisms are meant by "bilateral and multilateral cooperation."

When looking at the addressed cooperation matters between February 2022 and July 2022, the recurring topics include education, the fight against food insecurity, and the reinforcement of sustainable agricultural production capacities. An article written in May 2022 specifically looks

at education, emphasising young girls, with the French Ambassador referencing the existence of a technical delegation from the French Development Agency (AFD) dedicated to education (ANP, 2022b). Education was mentioned multiple times as Bazoum's priority for his mandate. Beyond education, food security was also addressed in June 2022. "We had very constructive discussions with the President, notably on bilateral relations, the fight against food insecurity, and education, which are priorities for both President Bazoum and President Macron," stated Chrysoula Zacharopoulou during her first African visit since her appointment in May 2022 (ANP, 2022c). The decolonial theory provides a critical lens for understanding the coloniality embedded in France's cooperation efforts. Those education projects can be observed as driven by neoliberal reforms and intertwined with ideas of modernity and development rooted in coloniality. As such, those projects, without including any Nigerien perspectives, can be seen as disrupting diverse post-colonial processes. Indeed, this coloniality of power extends to knowledge production and practices, influencing curriculum, funding, and politics in education. While prioritising education may help promote an educational system that respects and incorporates local knowledge and cultural practices, not enough details are given when it comes to how those projects, as mentioned above, will be led.

In this same article, Zacharopoulou further mentioned that the Russian aggression in Ukraine had exacerbated food insecurity and also discussed the Great Green Wall project meant to build a mosaic of green and productive landscapes that improve people's livelihoods and foster environmental sustainability in eleven countries, including Niger. While the Great Green Wall is an African initiative part of the EU-Africa Global Gateway Investment Package, the articles do not mention other European supporting countries; France appears as the sole contributor in these articles (ANP, 2022c)². From a French perspective, the emphasis on food insecurity and sustainable agricultural production could be viewed through a decolonial lens as an effort to counteract colonial powers' historical exploitation of agricultural resources. This exploitation has left many postcolonial states dependent on foreign aid and vulnerable to global market fluctuations. The cooperation efforts aim to restore local control over food systems, enhance self-sufficiency, and build resilience against external economic pressures by addressing food insecurity and promoting sustainable agriculture. This aligns with the decolonial goal of

²This affirmation is not meant to not rule out the existence of publications regarding European engagement be it militarily or with regards to development efforts. However, in the body of articles considered, France is depicted as the sole partner rather than part of a joint effort.

achieving economic sovereignty and breaking free from neo-colonial dependencies. However, the portrayal of France as the sole contributor to projects like the Great Green Wall, without acknowledging other European partners, suggests a continuity of colonial power structures. This undermines the full realization of decolonial and subaltern principles. Furthermore, there is no critical engagement with the experiences and political consciousness of Niger, which is instead depicted as a passive recipient of aid.

Last but not least, the month before the full deployment of troops coincides with an intensification of discussions and signing agreements. "This represents an unprecedented commitment," noted Moussa (2022b). On 15 July 2022, one month to the day before the arrival of the last troops and equipment from Mali, France and Niger signed two agreements totaling 43 billion CFA francs to support Niger in two key areas: budgetary aid and access to electricity. The first agreement, valued at 10 billion CFA francs, is intended for budgetary aid. Of this amount, 5 billion CFA francs are meant to combat food insecurity, 3.3 billion CFA francs for strengthening public finances, 5.2 billion CFA francs for replenishing national food security stocks intended for free food distributions, and 1.3 billion CFA francs for restoring essential services in conflict zones, through the High Authority for the Consolidation of Peace (HACP). The second agreement involves financing of 33 billion CFA francs via the French Development Agency (AFD) for the Project to Strengthen Distribution Networks and Improve Access to Electricity (PREDAC). This project aims to improve access to electricity for nearly 2 million people across the country by connecting health centres, schools, markets, businesses, and mosques to the electricity grid (ANP, 2022d).

When mentioning those contracts, it is essential to note that the idea of partnership is consistently emphasised. The ANP, for instance, mentions that the primary budgetary aid aims to support Niger's efforts in the prevention and management of food crises and to strengthen the agricultural and pastoral sectors to make them more sustainable and resilient to climatic shocks, in line with the governmental initiative "Nigériens feed Nigériens", known as 3N (ANP, 2022d). This embodies the notion of empowering the Nigerien people, supported by France but organised by Niger itself. The focus on empowering local initiatives, like the governmental initiative "Nigériens feed Nigériens" (3N), reflects a decolonial approach by supporting Niger's efforts in food security and agricultural sustainability. This aligns with the concept of localization, promoting local leadership and decision-making.

Based on the narratives around French ODA in ANP articles between February 2022 and July 2022, it can be argued that French aid efforts exhibit non-decolonizing characteristics. French still retains elements of traditional power dynamics that hinder complete decolonization. The media coverage heavily emphasises France's role as a leading partner, which can perpetuate a sense of dependency. The limited inclusion of Nigerien perspectives and minimal representation of President Bazoum's views indicate a lingering imbalance in narrative control. Additionally, a lack of acknowledgment of France's colonial past is crucial for genuine decolonization.

5.1.2 Private Media Narratives

Between February 2022 and July 2022, most articles focusing on military action were published after President Emmanuel Macron announced the withdrawal of French forces from Mali following the G5 Sahel summit. By the end of April 2022, the Nigerien parliament officially authorised the redeployment of Barkhane and Takuba force - 131 votes were in favour and 21 against, authorising the deployment of 2,400 soldiers from Operation Barkhane and nearly 900 European special forces from Takuba in Niger (Boureima, 2022). Media coverage of this event varied widely, presenting two different narratives on France's military presence in Niger.

Very few media outlets observe this as a favorable decision. In the sample, only the outlet *La Roue de l'Histoire* says that France's presence is legitimate and even more a "necessity". One article seeks to demonstrate France's legitimacy by describing the parliamentary debate and voting (Machalélé, 2022). The journalist voices the government's narrative and argues that the government showed democratic maturity by seeking the opinion of its citizens, even though it was not obliged to do so according to Article 168 of the Constitution. Another article of the same outlet mentions that the vote on the document was preceded by hours of debate, allowing each participant to present their view of the security situation and the necessity of bringing foreign forces onto Nigerien soil (Moussa, 2022a). Additionally, it emphasises on France's being a worthy partner. The journalist Boulkassoum stresses the necessity of having partners: "Facing these challenges, we need partners with advanced equipment that our country lacks and training for using sophisticated equipment." France is mentioned alongside the United States, Canada, Italy, Germany, Belgium, and others, with terms like "collaboration with our army" and "support in logistics, intelligence, and air operations, all in conjunction with our defence and security forces" (2022).

These statements reminisce about France's government discourse which has been described before. It also echoes with Florence Parly's words, the former French Minister of the Armed Forces, emphasising that France intervened in the Sahel at the request of the Sahelian states, highlighting France's role as a partner. Florence Parly further stated back in February 2022 that, "The French army is not meant to be a substitute army, as peace in the Sahel belongs to the Sahelian states," and emphasised a cooperative approach with West African and Sahelian partners. When discussing the redeployment of Operation Barkhane and a possible refocus on Niger, she said, "This country hosts other armed forces with which it cooperates, and it is close to the tri-border area where we have invested so much in recent years. If its authorities wish - they are sovereign - Niger will have an important role to play. The terms are yet to be defined, but France is determined to continue the fight alongside Nigerien forces." Consequently, France expressed its desire to redeploy its troops in the tri-border area yet only "with the agreement of Nigerien authorities." (Assemblée nationale, 2022).

Positive media coverage of France's military presence by outlets like *La Roue de l'Histoire* can indicate lingering neo-colonial influences, as decolonial theory suggests. This perspective implies that particular media, even privately owned, may align with French viewpoints, portraying the presence of French troops as a 'necessity' and legitimizing ongoing external control, thereby reproducing epistemic violence. This alignment could be seen as a perpetuation of colonial power structures, wherein local narratives that support foreign intervention maintain the status quo, thus undermining the true sovereignty and self-determination of Niger. Decolonial theory critiques these narratives for not questioning the broader implications of such military presence and ignoring colonial domination's historical context. This also raises questions about the sources of funding for these outlets, with comments in these articles suggesting that Bazoum's presidency finances them.

On the other hand, various media outlets, including *NigerDiaspora*, *L'Enquêteur*, and *Studio Kalangou* give instead credit and attention to the opposition's opinion and further raise concerns about the legitimacy and transparency of Niger's decision to authorise the redeployment of French and European forces, highlighting criticisms from political figures and constitutional challenges. In early May 2022, the outlet *NigerDiaspora* issued an article titled "Redeployment of Barkhane and Takuba Forces in Niger: National Assembly, a Soulless Majority" (AY, 2022) in which decision-makers in the majority were mentioned as "so-called

deputies" chosen by former President Issoufou Mahamadou, voting on laws contrary to the interests of the Nigerien people even though Prime Minister Ouhoumoudou Mahamadou emphasised that the redeployment was aimed at "forging new partnerships" without undermining national sovereignty, a view supported by majority MP Yacine Ben Mohamed, who also stressed the necessity of partnerships in the fight against terrorism with France as the primary partner (AY, 2022). Additionally, *L'Enquêteur* highlighted that most parliamentary deputies were unaware of the specifics of these military cooperation agreements. The majority of parliamentary deputies were further described as illegitimate, ignorant of security issues, and disconnected from reality, with some claiming that no portion of the national territory was under terrorist control (Harouna, 2022).

While France's official discourse suggests a shift towards a more discreet partnership, offering support in a secondary role and respecting the will of the Nigerien population, journalist Harouna argues otherwise. He asserts, "when Paris decides, Niamey can only comply," implying that decisions are made by France even before they are formally voted on. The media additionally mentioned that the government's approach was a way to "bypass the obligation to communicate defence and security agreements to national deputies" under the regularisation of the redeployment of Barkhane and Takuba forces in Niger that there is a de facto lack of transparency and legal rigor (Harouna, 2022). Legal rigor is also being discussed in the media *Studio Kalangou*, further criticising certain grey areas pointed out by some deputies. Boureima reports that Soumana Sanda, a deputy from the Nigerien Democratic Movement for an African Federation, denounced the agreement as a power grab that did not consider the Nigerien Constitution (Boureima, 2022). On that note, the media *L'Enquêteur* added that the presence of foreign military forces was simply decided by a revision of its general policy statement in its security and social tranquillity axis to authorise the installation of foreign military bases, presenting security defence as issues of national sovereignty. Journalist Mahamadou Harouna pointed out that defence and peace treaties could only be ratified following a law authorising their ratification according to Article 169 of the constitution (Harouna, 2022).

Examining the perception of the redeployment itself, narratives describe France's move as a strategy for France to mitigate the humiliation imposed by Malian transitional authorities and an attempt by Macron to seek retribution against Mali. *Niger Diaspora* wrote that French military operations were seen as ineffective, unable to prevent attacks in the Tillabéry region, citing

attacks in Chinagoder, Inatès, and Tongo-Tongo, bordering Mali. The poor results of the Barkhane and Takuba forces are repeatedly highlighted, with this decision described as "a second or third chance granted to France and its Europeans," with France as the operator and controller of the Europeans (AY, 2022). The media outlet *Air Info Agadez* does not mention the redeployment itself yet republished a text by the Collective of Committees for Security, Peace, and Social Cohesion in February 2022. The text criticises France's perceived impotence in addressing insecurity in Niger, highlighting the suffering and distress experienced by Nigeriens due to the failure of their leaders and Western allies, particularly France, to resolve the longstanding crisis. The tragic events in Téra, where young Nigeriens were killed and injured by French soldiers on November 27, 2021, exemplify the negative perception of France. These incidents, which resulted in the deaths of three young people and serious injuries to seventeen others, are described as having left a lasting impact on the Nigerien populace, described as "heinous and criminal acts". Furthermore, France's policy in Africa is defined as a failure, contradicting the human rights principles it purports to defend. For many Africans, France is perceived as exacerbating security problems rather than resolving them, acting as an "armed hand of terrorism (Air Info, 2022).

Air Info, on the other hand, notably reports on civil society groups, such as the Collective of Committees for Security, Peace, and Social Cohesion in Niger, which question the effectiveness of foreign forces in improving security. They cite incidents like the Téra shooting on 27 November 2021, which fueled resentment against France. The "M62" movement criticises the French military for contributing to the high cost of living and hindering national sovereignty, calling for their departure and expressing solidarity with Mali against perceived French interference. Similarly, *Echos du Niger* highlights significant grassroots opposition to the French military presence, noting demonstrations by women in Niamey who symbolically used kitchen utensils and brooms to demand the departure of French forces, symbolising a strong desire to "cleanse" Niger of colonial remnants.

The fact that the vast majority of media coverage opposes France's military presence yet reflects the local populace's desire for autonomy and resistance against foreign influence. These opposing narratives are crucial in challenging the public discourse that favours external intervention according to the subaltern theory. By framing the withdrawal of French troops as a victory for Nigerien resistance, these media outlets provide a platform for the subaltern voices,

advocating for sovereignty and self-determination. This approach underlines the need to validate and prioritize the experiences and perceptions of the Nigerien people, contrasting sharply with the *La Roue de l'Histoire* media view supporting French forces' continued presence.

To sum up, contrasting narratives emerged in Niger concerning France's military interventions and ODA efforts emerged between February and July 2022. The discourse on ODA, scarcely covered in the media, primarily focused on visits by French diplomats. Conversely, debates surrounding France's military presence sparked extensive media coverage, highlighting divergent opinions on transparency, democratic legitimacy, and the strategic implications of foreign military deployments. On one side, proponents argued for the necessity of French support, emphasising transparency, democratic processes, and the strategic benefits of the partnership. On the other side, significant criticism highlighted France's inability to address insecurity, its role in exacerbating tensions, and the perceived illegitimacy of Nigerien authorities' decisions influenced by France. This narrative painted France as part of the problem rather than the solution.

5.2 Narrative responses to increased French presence (08.22-06.23)

This subsection examines narratives regarding France's ODA and military interventions from August 2022 to June 2023. During this period, a notable shift occurred, highlighted by President Emmanuel Macron's diplomatic tour in the summer of 2022 and his February 2023 speech. This speech, delivered before he visited Gabon, Angola, Congo, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, outlined his strategy for Africa over the next four years. Macron aims to "build a new, responsible, balanced, and reciprocal relationship" with the continent. In the military realm, the president aims to establish "a new partnership model," which involves rethinking the current concept of military bases. To "change their appearance and footprint," some bases will be transformed into "academies," while others will become "joint bases." Macron emphasised that "this Africanization and mutualization" will be achieved through two main avenues: "a visible reduction in French personnel and an increase in the personnel of our African partners," alongside "an increase in the provision of high-level training, support, and equipment." The second major change he discussed concerns humanitarian aid. In February 2023, Macron announced a shift "from a logic of aid to a logic of solidarity and partnership investment."

(Ministère des Armées, 2023). Macron's speech also referenced his 2017 address in Ouagadougou, where he declared, "There is no longer a French African policy." He urged ambassadors to demonstrate that "our partnership is tangible" and to lead "an assertive yet unpretentious communication strategy." This section thereby evaluates reactions to these announcements and the promises of a new approach, examining public media reactions before delving into private media perspectives (Elysee, 2023).

5.2.1 Narratives in the Public Outlet *ANP*

Between August 2022 and July 2023, France's aid received increased media coverage on the public media outlet *ANP*. Despite this heightened attention, the editorial stance remained consistent, with no significant change even after Emmanuel Macron's discourse in February 2023. Even though France's troops were deployed in August, little to no information is to be found on their military actions and actions carried out on the ground. Following the redeployment of troops, France's commitment was reinforced by increased ODA, frequently highlighted through reports of French representatives visiting Nigerien officials. Unlike in previous months, this cooperation became more intertwined, with development aid closely associated with the fight against terrorism. French Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs, Catherine Colonna, emphasised this by stating, "We are here to show France's commitment alongside the Nigerien authorities, in development aid and the fight against terrorism" (Moussa, 2022b). Similarly, the French Ambassador Alexandre Garcia stated, "We have significantly increased our commitments through the French Development Agency (AFD) and also our military partnership to help Niger address security challenges" in September 2022 (ANP, 2022f; ANP, 2022g). The French reputation continues to be highlighted in other articles. Alexandre Garcia is being described as a benevolent observer of the will of the people of Niger to laboriously build strong democratic institutions by Hassoumi Massaoudou, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation. The former minister went on to explain that the cooperation framework, which focuses on the link between security and development, perfectly aligns with the Nigerien government's priorities. Likewise, Alexandre Garcia expressed his deep gratitude to the Minister of State for organising this ceremony.

From a decolonial perspective, the intertwining of development aid and intervention can be perceived as a continuation of colonial dynamics. This perspective suggests that development aid, often presented as humanitarian assistance, may serve as a tool for exerting control and

influence over postcolonial states. By tying aid to certain conditions or interventions, former colonial powers can maintain economic and political leverage, perpetuating dependency and undermining genuine sovereignty. This approach can also reinforce a narrative of Western superiority, where aid recipients are viewed as passive beneficiaries. In the narratives surrounding these initiatives, France is often given a prominent voice, with its representatives frequently speaking on the objectives and benefits of the aid. In contrast, Nigerien officials are typically depicted as merely welcoming or accepting this aid without an active role in the discourse. This dynamic perpetuates the coloniality of power by sustaining unequal relationships and inhibiting the full realisation of decolonial and self-determined development.

Regarding French military efforts, the outlet *ANP* depicts the French military as cooperative and supportive, particularly in matters of security and development in Niger. As mentioned earlier, the French presence is framed within broader discussions about cooperation, development, and security, indicating a supportive role in Niger's efforts to combat terrorism and enhance stability. The *ANP* mentions President Mohamed Bazoum received Sylvain Itté on 27 October 2022, who reported on his three-day visit to the Zinder Region. French military support was further illustrated by France's donation of two Gazelle SA 342 L1 helicopters, worth 2.8 billion CFA francs, to Niger in November 2022. This contribution is further described as aiming to bolster Niger's defence capabilities against terrorism in the framework of bilateral cooperation (ANP, 2022h). The next appointed French Ambassador, Sylvain Itté, continued discussing various topics of cooperation between Niger and France, including financial interventions by the French Development Agency and multiple multilateral financing efforts, mainly through the European Union. New issues were raised despite the focus on recurring themes such as education and food security. For instance, during his meeting with President Bazoum on 17 January 2023, Itté emphasised the importance of "proposing very concrete and rapid projects," including establishing boarding schools for girls and enhancing teacher training capacities (ANP, 2023a). The absence of long-term, sustainable projects further exacerbates the aforementioned idea of France's continual coloniality, as short-term interventions fail to address the root causes of dependency and underdevelopment.

Additionally, the amendment to the AFD's establishment agreement is signed. The media outlet *ANP* highlights the "exemplary" nature of Franco-Nigerien cooperation. The agency "Expertise France," a French public agency for the design and implementation of international technical

cooperation projects, which joined the AFD group on January 1, 2022, is described as supporting Nigerien partner administrations in strengthening human capital, improving health systems, social protection, financial governance, and justice. It also contributes to state actions on climate and security. It is described as an "additional tool that will allow for the implementation of highly concrete projects in various sectors" (article from March 21). Such initiatives can be seen as efforts to polish the image of France, addressing symptoms rather than the root causes of dependency and underdevelopment. Focusing on technical cooperation and short-term projects may not foster genuine long-term, sustainable development or critical engagement with the historical and structural issues underpinning the colonial legacy.

The next months are marked by regular articles on French support given in much more depth and detail. For instance, in March, an article was published on the aid provided by the French Development Agency (AFD) to Niger consisted of financial support amounting to 22 million euros, approximately 16.7 billion CFA francs, aimed at enhancing food security and promoting peace. This assistance is divided between two key projects: the Household Food Security Support Project (PASAM 5) and the Southwest Prevention Project, with PASAM 5 receiving 10 million euros to support the most vulnerable households, with funds channelled to the NGO Karkara and the National Agency for the Financing of Territorial Communities (ANFICT). On the other hand, The Southwest Prevention Project will receive 12 million euros to address multifaceted challenges in the region with sustainable and inclusive solutions. The narrative continuously describes the aid as a substantial investment in Niger's development, emphasising the collaborative efforts to improve living conditions. The overall tone is positive, highlighting the beneficial impact of France's strategic partnership with Niger (ANP, 2023b). Further financial projects followed in May, including €22 million (16.7 billion CFA francs) dedicated to supporting household food security and the South-West Prevention Project (ANP, 2023c).

In these articles, when mentioned, Nigerien leaders consistently underscored their autonomy within the partnership with France, countering perceptions of neocolonialism and highlighting a collaborative relationship rooted in mutual advantage and respect. French actions are depicted as efforts to enhance security and stability while simultaneously providing assistance to bolster Niger's development. These perspectives are also echoed in statements from Nigerien officials who stressed cooperation and the positive effects of French aid on development initiatives and humanitarian relief.

5.2.2 Private Media Narratives

Private media outlets in Niger offer a diverse range of perspectives on Franco-African relations between August 2022 and June 2023, with varying degrees of critique and vehemence. Since the redeployment of French troops from Mali to Niger, public dissatisfaction with perceived foreign interference has significantly grown. Criticisms can be categorised into three primary themes: countering French narratives, criticising French actions, and President Bazoum as a divisive figure.

While *L'Enquêteur* is positively perceiving the change of attitude in the official discourse in March 2023, this remains the sole exception. In this article, the efforts of Sylvain Itté, the French Ambassador to Niger since September 2022, are noted in strengthening ties amidst regional turmoil. His candid acknowledgment of the hostile environment and his efforts to engage diplomatically was perceived as a departure from previous French diplomatic postures, reflecting a more honest and pragmatic approach to Franco-Nigerien relations (Tiégoum, 2023). In *Les Echos du Niger*, President Bazoum countered claims of Niger's submission to France by citing historical disagreements and emphasising Niger's independence in diplomatic relations. He underscored France's role in supporting Niger against terrorism while denying that Niger's uranium reserves significantly influence their relations. Bazoum also highlighted Niger's diverse arms procurement sources, reinforcing its independence in cooperating with France.

Conversely, private media outlets in Niger highlight the inconsistency in France's changing narrative. They scrutinise the stories France disseminates about its military and diplomatic actions in the region. For instance, Maïga argues that Macron's declarations of initiating a new era in Franco-African relations are overshadowed by anti-French propaganda, partly driven by Russian influence (Maïga, 2023a). This starkly contrasts with public media, which emphasize the 'improvement of information dissemination to combat manipulation and misinformation regarding French military and humanitarian interventions' (ANP, 2022h), echoing official French rhetoric. Indeed, as early as November 2022, Emmanuel Macron condemned the propaganda efforts aimed at tarnishing France's image in Africa, and his strategy appears to include a new communication approach (Essoungou, 2023). Macron's condemnation of propaganda against France and the adoption of a new communication strategy can be

interpreted as a neocolonial tactic to maintain influence. By controlling the narrative, France attempts to mitigate anti-French sentiment and preserve its strategic interests in the region. This can be seen as a modern adaptation of colonial strategies, where controlling information and public perception is crucial for maintaining dominance. Controversy, private media represent in this case an attempt to reclaim control over their own narrative and resist neocolonial influence.

An article in *NigerDiaspora*, published in March 2023, highlights a perceived French media propaganda campaign that is both anti-Malian and anti-Russian. The article criticises the French portrayal of Africans as incapable of self-governance, requiring the perpetual guidance of Western powers. This infantilizing narrative, according to the article, is used to justify continued French military engagement in Niger, describing French representatives as "so-called 'men of straw' from Paris" who uphold an outdated notion of France as a central global power. The piece vehemently calls on the youth to resist these influences, as to be seen in the quote: "Faced with the grave danger now hanging over the Sahel-Saharan strip and the countries of the Gulf of Guinea, these vultures of the West and the East who want to apply Hitler's plan of occupation and extermination of the black peoples by all means". The journalist also invokes the anti-colonial thinker Frantz Fanon to inspire resistance (Abdourahamane, 2023). France is being compared to Hitler with bad intentions and as a force to be rid of at all costs. In May 2023, *L'Enquêteur* accused the French army of trying to prove its usefulness in Niger despite local hostility.

Second, criticisms of French actions have also been prominent in private media. In March 2023, scepticism was expressed regarding the effectiveness of Franco-Nigerien military patrols (Tiégoum, 2023b). The inability of Niger to conduct cross-border operations into Mali, where jihadists might retreat, was highlighted as a significant limitation, raising doubts about the success of joint security efforts. Further criticism was directed towards French military and diplomatic actions. In the media outlet *NigerDiaspora*, it was reported that "jihadism has spread from Kidal in the far north of Mali to Burkina Faso, Niger, northern Benin, and northern Togo," highlighting the resultant displacements and insecurity in Niamey, with France being cited as responsible or at least contributing to the exacerbation of these threats

(Abdourahamane, 2023). Additionally, questions were raised about the timing and motives behind actions such as military donations and the release of hostages, with accusations that these were strategic moves to maintain French influence rather than altruistic efforts. There is a prevailing belief that France, like other Western powers, seeks to secure access to Africa's vast resources under the guise of partnership and neutrality (A.I, 2023). In an interview, Dr. Souley Adjani also articulates concerns that Macron's announcements are more about preserving French interests than genuine change. The late timing of these announcements suggests a reaction to lost influence rather than proactive reform. Dr. Adjani doubts the sincerity of France's promise of neutrality, viewing it as a new form of manipulation to maintain its foothold in Africa. He criticises the promise of co-managing military bases as a continuation of colonial practices, imposing decisions on African nations without their approval (Seini, 2023a). Issa Seini described AFP reports on a French-Nigerien commando mission as an attempt to showcase France's engagement against terrorism rather than objectively reporting events. The coverage suggested that Nigerien forces were treated as inferior and dependent on French troops, reinforcing a dynamic of French superiority. The French officers' condescending tone towards Nigerien soldiers, instructing them on their own climate and environment, was also criticised. Furthermore, the omission of the mission's outcome in AFP reports hinted at possible manipulation or concealment of tangible results (Seini, 2023c).

Third and last, President Mohamed Bazoum has emerged as a contentious figure in the discourse on Franco-Nigerien relations. Private media outlets have portrayed him in various lights, often criticising his perceived alignment with French interests. In *Les Echos du Niger*, Bazoum countered claims of Niger's submission to France by emphasising historical disagreements and Niger's independent diplomatic stance. He defended France's role in supporting Niger against terrorism while denying that uranium reserves significantly influenced bilateral relations. Bazoum has made comments reflecting a submissive stance towards France, stating, "Today, the French only buy our uranium as a favour. We need them more than they need us. Today's global economy is more about digital technologies like retail companies such as Alibaba and Amazon." Such remarks have caused significant discontent among many Nigeriens, who view his attitude as a continuation of colonial subservience. The pervasive sentiment is that France's colonial influence endures, cloaked in modern economic and

diplomatic relations (Maïga & Bilan, 2023). Journalist Soumana Idrissa Maïga additionally observed that Bazoum downplays the significance of anti-French sentiment in Niger, which does not negate its reality. The French presence, through military interventions and a perceived biased African policy, fuels growing resentment. France's involvement in managing political and security crises, and its failure to establish lasting security, exacerbates this sentiment. Bazoum's indifference shows a troubling disconnect from reality, unlike Paris, which is aware of the sentiment and now uses "soft power" strategies to counter the anger in its former colonies (Maïga, 2023e). *L'Enquêteur* highlighted his dismissal of urban anti-French sentiment as a non-issue, reflecting a disconnect with the broader public's concerns (Maïga, 2023e). This perceived indifference has been criticised as showing a lack of understanding of the growing anti-French sentiment fuelled by France's military and political interventions in Niger. The media presents several narratives regarding France's involvement. One narrative criticises France's military operations, suggesting they are ineffective and only serve to maintain French influence rather than genuinely improve security in the region. There are accusations that French actions are more about preserving its strategic interests, including access to resources, rather than addressing the root causes of insecurity. Additionally, the notion of "soft power" is viewed sceptically. Critics argue that it is merely a veneer for continued neo-colonial control, with France using cultural diplomacy and economic ties to maintain its influence. This is seen as hypocritical, especially when juxtaposed against the harsh realities of military actions that often result in civilian casualties and displacement. The sentiment is that France's historical colonial mindset persists, masked by modern diplomatic rhetoric.

In summary, private media outlets in Niger express profound scepticism regarding French intentions and actions, portraying recent diplomatic and military engagements as calculated efforts to maintain influence rather than genuine partnerships. Despite France's efforts in development aid and counter-terrorism, it struggles to be perceived as impartial, a sentiment amplified by historical ties and current perceptions. Critiques in Nigerien media focus on the narrative and actions of French involvement, questioning France's neutrality, effectiveness, and sincerity. Many see recent changes as strategic moves to preserve influence rather than enact substantive reforms. These criticisms are reinforced by narratives assigning blame to France for worsening security in Niger and the broader Sahel region. There is widespread frustration over the perception that Nigerien leadership, particularly President Bazoum, is too closely aligned

with French interests, potentially disregarding Niger's sovereignty and genuine concerns. This fosters pervasive distrust towards both French intentions and local governance, underscoring the urgent need to fundamentally reassess these international relationships to achieve genuine stability and autonomy in the region.

5.3 Narratives after the coup (07.23-12.23)

Post-coup developments have intensified tensions between Niger and France. Notable actions include: the expulsion of the French ambassador, the closure of the French embassy in Niamey, the suspension of signals from RFI and France 24, the ban on French aircraft, including Air France, from Nigerien airspace, the withdrawal from the G5 Sahel and suspension of relations with the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF) as well as the abrogation of migration-related laws and withdrawal of EU military partnership missions (Gaya, 2024). Additionally, the coup against President Mohamed Bazoum led to the immediate suspension of France's development aid, which amounted to €120 million in 2022, slightly higher than the amount planned for 2023, which will not be delivered. Additionally, France suspended its budgetary support (MEAE, 2023). The French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs also announced on 29 July 2023 the withdrawal of French troops, which began in early October, thereby marking the end of ten years of French anti-jihadist efforts in the Sahel. This subsection will first look specifically at the narratives around the suspension of France's development aid and then troop withdrawal and their ensuing reactions.

5.3.1 Narratives in the public outlet *ANP*

From July 2023 to December 2023, the narratives surrounding France's military and aid interventions in Niger underwent significant transformations. These narratives prominently featured themes of sovereignty, anti-colonial sentiment, security, and economic concerns. This period, marked by a coup d'état and subsequent geopolitical manoeuvres, brought these themes to the forefront. Below is a detailed, chronological exploration of these narratives, enriched with direct quotes from relevant articles.

Before the coup, the public media outlet Agence Nigérienne de Presse (ANP), a significant source of information in Niger, depicted the French military presence positively. French troops

were portrayed as cooperative and supportive, particularly in matters of security and development. However, the coup d'état in Niger on July 26, 2023, orchestrated by the National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland (CNSP) under General Abdourahamane Tchiani, marked a significant shift in the narrative. The ousting of President Mohamed Bazoum was quickly framed by the new regime as a move to reclaim sovereignty from French influence. Post-coup, the ANP shifted its tone dramatically, emphasising anti-French sentiments and the need for sovereignty. For instance, on July 27, ANP still mentioned France as a “partner,” noting that a French A401 military aircraft had landed at Niamey International Airport despite the interdiction (ANP, 2023d).

As the CNSP consolidated power in August, the anti-French rhetoric intensified, and the ANP reflected this shift in its reporting. The new regime began to portray France as an obstacle to Niger's self-determination. On August 3, during the 63rd anniversary of independence, defence agreements with France, the former colonial power, were denounced. These agreements, signed between 1977 and 2020, were criticised for France's perceived disregard for Niger's internal affairs. France responded by repatriating its citizens, suspending aid, and threatening reprisals against attacks on its citizens and diplomatic missions. During a pro-government demonstration, protestors targeted the French consulate and burned the French flag. France's military presence in Niger, comprising 1,500 Barkhane troops redeployed after their withdrawal from Mali, was called into question. Several agreements were affected, including the 1977 military cooperation agreement with a three-month notice period, the 2013 agreement on the legal status of French troops in Niger with a one-month notice, and additional agreements related to the French military intervention in the Sahel.

By the end of August, the situation escalated further as the Nigerien government ordered the expulsion of the French ambassador and demanded the withdrawal of French troops. This move was framed as a decisive step towards full sovereignty. On August 25, the Nigerien Foreign Minister gave French Ambassador Sylvain Itte 48 hours to leave Niger. At the centre of concerns was France's threat of possible military intervention, in collaboration with ECOWAS, to restore constitutional order. A notable shift in perspective included interviews with Russian diplomats, who favoured Russian over French officials. For instance, on August 4, former

Russian ambassador to Mali and Niger, Evgueni Korendiassov, remarked that a French military intervention in Niger was geopolitically unfeasible, though France would resist withdrawing completely. He highlighted Niger's dependence on French aid and the strategic importance of Niger's uranium deposits to both Paris and Washington. Korendiassov noted that Russia was seen in Africa as a primary defender of sovereignty and equality in international relations. The *ANP* appears here to be gradually shifting from predominantly adopting French narrative elements to incorporating Russian ones. This shift prompts a reflection on the inclusion of alternative narratives. In discussing decoloniality, it is therefore crucial to recognize the inherent risks and challenges of promoting "alternative truths" within this framework. David Chavalarias's June 2024 analysis of Russian interference in democratic processes, particularly during the 2024 French legislative elections, highlights this issue. The Kremlin's manipulation of information, especially through social media, exemplifies how alternative truths can be weaponized to influence public opinion (Chavalarias, 2024). While Chavalarias's focus is on France, an established democracy, the situation in Niger presents even more complex challenges. In such contexts, the pursuit of a world where multiple realities coexist is further complicated by influences from actors like Russia.

Decoloniality fundamentally aims to foster diverse perspectives, recognizing and validating different epistemologies. However, this article shows that this objective also entails the danger of encouraging propaganda and, potentially, disinformation. This raises a crucial dilemma: how can one support the coexistence of multiple realities while ensuring they are not exploited for malignant purposes? Although this thesis does not provide a solution, it underscores the importance of incorporating measures into decolonial efforts to prevent the empowerment of harmful actors. Practical changes in policies and practices should be accompanied by safeguards against the misuse of alternative truths. This balanced approach is essential for achieving the dual goals of critiquing existing structures and suggesting actionable steps for a more equitable world. For instance, in the realm of official assistance and military interventions, policies should be informed by diverse perspectives to ensure inclusivity, unlike the *ANP*, which consistently echoes the views of the present Nigerien government. However, it is equally important to verify the authenticity of these perspectives and remain vigilant against

their potential manipulation. This involves a continuous process of monitoring and adapting strategies to address emerging threats, ensuring that the pursuit of decolonial goals is not undermined by the very forces it seeks to challenge, whether they be French or Russian.

The expulsion of the French ambassador on September 3 was significant not only for Niger but also for the broader Sahel region, where other countries with similar histories were closely observing. On September 10, *ANP* reported, "Niger's stance against French interference resonates across the Sahel, inspiring other nations grappling with anti-colonial sentiments to consider alternative alliances." Critics of French aid suggested it came with conditions favouring French interests, limiting Niger's developmental potential and necessitating a reevaluation of partnerships. The threat of French military intervention sparked significant reactions within civil society, expanding ANP's narratives beyond official visits and convention signings to on-the-ground realities. On September 2, thousands of people gathered in front of Niamey's air base, demanding the departure of French troops. Protesters held signs reading, "Niger belongs to the Nigeriens," "Long live Niger, down with France," and "France, get out." Early in the morning, some protesters joined others who had camped outside the French military base overnight in response to a call for a three-day sit-in by the M62 movement (a Nigerien civil society group). By afternoon, more demonstrators joined the protest, blocking major roads in Niamey. One protester declared, "I came to say no to the French troops' presence in Niger," while another expressed pride in the nation's unity. On August 3, Niger's new authorities had already denounced defence agreements with France.

Thus, anti-French sentiment was portrayed as reflective of popular opinion. Calls for the French forces' departure began shortly after the military authorities took power on July 26, 2023, echoed by various civil society organisations. Unlike sentiments of gratitude expressed a year earlier, the new Prime Minister, Ali Lamine Zeine, criticised French Ambassador Silvain Itte for inappropriate behaviour in a September 5 article. Days later, on September 9, an article highlighted that 92% of Niamey residents were willing to endure ECOWAS-imposed sanctions (such as border closures and power cuts) to support the ongoing military transition. The survey showed that 77.1% were very satisfied with the current government, 91.7% were proud of the army's ability to combat terrorist attacks, 98% opposed French military bases in Niger, 95.8%

were against continued collaboration with France, 97% opposed ECOWAS military intervention, and 91.5% were ready to support sanctions to back the military transition. The survey also revealed a negative opinion of countries like France, Côte d'Ivoire, Benin, and Nigeria, and certain personalities like former President Issoufou Mahamadou and Mohamed Bazoum. Dr. Nouhou Abdoul-Moumouni noted that this sentiment reflected a broader desire for sovereignty.

When France began withdrawing its troops from Niger on September 24, complying with the new government's demands, this withdrawal was celebrated as a victory for the CNSP and the Nigerien population. Media coverage, particularly by ANP, reflected celebratory tones. On September 26, an article titled "Departure of French Forces and Ambassador, a Victory for Nigerien Resistance" highlighted the withdrawal as the beginning of a broader struggle. The closure of the French embassy in December and the final withdrawal on December 22 were also positively received, reinforcing the narrative of a fight for full sovereignty.

In this context, decolonial theory interprets these events as manifestations of the struggle against neo-colonial influences. The celebratory response to the withdrawal of French forces by the CNSP and the Nigerien population represents a reclaiming of sovereignty and a rejection of external control. The theory posits that the coup and demands for French withdrawal are steps towards dismantling the neo-colonial structures imposed by former colonial powers. The media's portrayal of the withdrawal as a victory for "Nigerien resistance" aligns with the decolonial narrative of striving for true autonomy and liberation from foreign dominance. Additionally, the emphasis on localization and the acknowledgment of Niger's colonial past are crucial elements of this decolonial perspective, underscoring the need for locally-led solutions and historical consciousness. Subaltern theory emphasises the importance of the Nigerien population's perspective in understanding these events. The celebration of the withdrawal by the CNSP and the public is seen as an assertion of the subaltern's agency and voice. By framing the withdrawal as a victory for Nigerien resistance, the media amplifies a narrative that challenges the dominant Western perspective, which often views such coups and withdrawals through a lens of instability and chaos. Subaltern theory highlights the significance of this local narrative in reshaping the discourse around sovereignty and self-determination in former

colonies. This perspective is further reinforced by the inclusion of polls in the public media manifesting the opinion of the entire population in the ANP, demonstrating the broad-based support for the move and emphasising the collective agency of the Nigerien people.

5.3.2 Private Media Narratives

After the coup, *ANP* articles depict a clear strain in relations between Niger and France. *L'événement Niger* addresses the inefficacy of French action, noting that despite a decade of French military presence in the Sahel, terrorism hasn't waned; instead, it has proliferated rapidly across the region. The demand for the swift departure of French military forces and the French ambassador reflects a significant rift between the two countries. The actions taken by the Nigerien authorities, including the expulsion of the French ambassador and the closure of the French embassy in Niamey, indicate a strong stance against perceived interference in Niger's internal affairs. Some journalists refrain from immediate criticism of France following a coup. For example, journalist Mawulolo Ahlijah points out that there is widespread confusion regarding the support for coup leaders in Chad and the hostility towards the existing juntas in Mali and Burkina Faso, as detailed in *Les Echos du Niger* on July 30, 2023. Most of the articles yet depict the departure of French forces and diplomatic personnel is seen as a victory for the Nigerien people, who have been calling for their removal amidst accusations of French intervention and disrespect for Nigerien sovereignty. Outlets like *L'Entretien* express stronger opposition to the French military presence, portraying it as complicit in destabilisation efforts and undermining local sovereignty. They describe the French forces as "les forces du mal" (evil forces) and criticise their protection of neo-colonial politicians. The departure of French forces from Niger is thereby depicted as a victory for the Nigerien people, symbolising a reclaiming of independence from foreign influence. An article from December 2023 mentions the words of the CNSP Prime Minister, justifying the troop withdrawal due to the condescending attitude of French authorities.

The views expressed by *L'enquêteur* regarding the coup d'état in Niger and the future of France's role in the Sahel also align with concerns about potential destabilisation in the region. Following the coup, Niger's transitional government accused France of preparing aggressive military actions in collaboration with certain ECOWAS countries. This was also vastly

mentioned in the press. The outlet *Echos du Niger* reported on a group of hackers threatening France with cyber-attacks if it intervened militarily in Niger, reflecting broader societal discontent and the view of France as a neo-colonial power. This accusation, broadcasted by the CNSP, alleged that France had deployed forces in neighbouring countries to plan an attack on Niger, reflecting a significant escalation in tensions. The government criticised France's insincerity and manoeuvres to undermine Niger's patriotism, highlighting a deep-seated mistrust of French intentions in the Sahel. Additionally, the outlet *L'événement Niger* describes violent clashes between French soldiers and protesters, where French troops opened fire on demonstrators at the French embassy, resulting in injuries.

The withdrawal of French military forces from Niger, initiated on October 10, 2023, marked a pivotal development. This process involved disagreements over the withdrawal route, with France preferring Benin and Niger insisting on Chad, reflecting the complex dynamics of the withdrawal. General Abdourahamane Tiani, who assumed power four months prior, claimed significant reorganisation of Niger's defence system, yielding tangible results in counterterrorism efforts. The military council in Niger further accused France of aiding terrorists and orchestrating actions to destabilise the country. They allege that French forces, in a deliberate effort to sow chaos, released terrorist prisoners and carried out provocative acts, including the unauthorised entry of a military aircraft into Niger's airspace on August 9, 2023. The aircraft deliberately cut off communication with air traffic control upon entering Niger's airspace, maintaining radio silence for 39 minutes. These actions, as reported by *L'événement Niger*, are seen by the Nigerien military council as part of a broader scheme by France to undermine their authority and create widespread insecurity in the country.

Following the coup in Niger, there has also been a significant shift in relations with France. Criticisms have extended to the Organization Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF), perceived as a tool for advancing French interests in Africa. Outlets like Air Info accused the OIF of "serving French dictates" and imposing candidates for the Secretary-General position, reflecting broader resentment towards French influence in Niger. Post-coup developments include heightened tensions between Niger and France. In August 2023, Nigerian Senator Shehu Sani criticised ECOWAS and France for imposing sanctions, such as cutting electricity supplies, which he argued punished the Nigerien population rather than the military junta. This, he claimed, inadvertently bolstered the junta's influence by pushing Niger towards self-reliance.

In September 2023, France suspended all cooperation with Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso, halting financial aid and visa issuance. This decision came amid escalating diplomatic strains following Niger's demand for the departure of the French ambassador and military forces. The French foreign ministry's directive to suspend all cooperation projects underscored the deteriorating relations between France and the Sahelian countries, marking a significant shift from previous collaborative efforts. Additionally, international NGOs have expressed profound disappointment over the absence of humanitarian exemptions in ECOWAS sanctions against Niger. They warned that these sanctions severely impact humanitarian actions, exacerbating food insecurity and limiting access to essential services. Mohammed Chikhaoui, a representative of international NGOs, emphasised the dire consequences, stating, "The decision of ECOWAS to maintain sanctions without considering crucial humanitarian imperatives has direct consequences for the Nigerien population, such as cash shortages and food supply difficulties".

Alternatively, contrasting narratives critically evaluate France's commitment, suggesting an abuse of power over national sovereignty. *Le Courrier* employs several rhetorical strategies to critique France's interventions, frequently invoking themes of national sovereignty and pride to frame France's actions as undermining Niger's autonomy and exploiting local political dynamics. Moreover, the publication uses ethos and accusations of hypocrisy, highlighting France's support for specific political figures for strategic benefits and questioning the integrity and genuine intentions behind French interventions as illustrated there "In its stubbornness to undo the CNSP at all costs, France sins by its incomprehensible extremism when it can forget that it can impose nothing on an independent people, even if, in its cynical memories, it can recall having colonised such a people." *Le Courrier* additionally criticises France for supporting figures like Mohamed Bazoum and manipulating local political turmoil to its advantage. The publication further contends, "If Niger means nothing to France, if it is only a poor country, and perhaps the poorest on the planet, it should no longer complain about losing it. On the contrary, it should be happy to have shed a burden. Niger, on the other hand, is happy to walk without France." Lastly, "Le Courrier" also highlights the gradual dismantling of colonial-era ties: "One after another, all the knots of our submission and domination are being undone, courageously denouncing, here and there, the leonine agreements that bind us to France's FrancAfrique". The ties are thereby being described as fully outdated.

In the months following the coup, there has been a noticeable uniformization of narratives in the private media in Niger. By November 2023, the media began to draw specific lessons from the country's unique situation, particularly regarding the supply chain. An emphasis was placed on securing a substantial stockpile of essential goods, highlighting the need for self-reliance. The sentiment expressed was that Nigeriens should no longer trust the purported friendships with certain ECOWAS countries or Western nations like France, which has repeatedly shown that it acts solely in its own interests (Yahaya, 2023).

In an October 2023 op-ed, NigerDiaspora criticised not only France as a country but also the French population's lack of awareness about Niger, pointing out that many people in France confuse Nigeriens with Nigerians (Maiga & Bilan, 2023). The diaspora expressed strong support for the coup, viewing it as a long-overdue step towards genuine independence, which has been elusive since France officially left in 1960. They condemned the sanctions imposed by France, the EU, and ECOWAS as "inhumane" and "illegal," arguing that these measures further harm an already struggling population (Maiga & Bilan, 2023). The article stressed that true democracy could only be achieved by eliminating the deep-rooted political interference by France in Niger's affairs (Maiga & Bilan, 2023). And yet, the media also highlighted France's persistent denial of its colonial past and the failure to apologise for the severe violence and discrimination during its rule, which included crimes against humanity (Maiga & Bilan, 2023). There is a call for France to acknowledge and apologise for its colonial conquests and occupation. Nigeriens are demanding significant reparations and a transparent sharing of colonial archives, alongside a transformation in trade terms and migration policies. The discourse reflects a profound discontent with the unequal relationship, where France benefits significantly from Niger's resources, particularly uranium, for its energy security while giving little in return. Prime Minister Ali Mahamane Lamine Zeine, in an August interview with the New York Times, emphasised that while Niger does not reject the French people or France itself, there is a strong demand for respect and recognition. The words of the renowned Nigerien poet and trade unionist Abdoulaye Mamani encapsulate this sentiment: "Let's break the resignation!" The private media's narratives suggest that Niger is at a critical juncture, striving for a future where its sovereignty is respected, and its relationship with France is redefined. The call for reparations and genuine independence underscores a desire to move away from the shadows of colonialism and build a more equitable and self-reliant nation (Maiga & Bilan, 2023).

6. Discussion

The depiction of the French military and Official Development Assistance (ODA) in Niger has significantly evolved between 2022 and 2023, with a notable shift following the coup d'état in July 2023. Both positive and negative narratives are present and coexist in articles written between January 2022 and July 2023, with negative ones being far more prevalent before the coup. After the coup, both public and private media appear to be extremely critical and accusatory of French actions.

The positive narratives, almost exclusively found in the public outlet ANP, are twofold. First, they highlight French contributions to Niger's defence capabilities. In these articles, French military interventions in combating terrorism in the Sahel region are emphasised, arguing that France's presence has helped and can help stabilise the region. Second, and most frequently, the ANP outlet positively reports on French development initiatives aimed to improve living conditions and support vulnerable populations. This positive viewpoint is also reflected in Nigerien government statements transcribed in those articles, in which the collaborative and partnership aspects, as well as the long-term reach of the Franco-Nigerien relationship is being highlighted. These narratives consistently emphasise shared interests in promoting peace and development in the region. In these articles, no mention of power imbalances is made and few details are being given, especially on the military aspect. Niger is further described as being rather passive, merely welcoming aid, while France is portrayed as being a deeply committed country.

When looking at positive narratives, decolonial theory offers a critical lens to interpret these narratives, highlighting how they align with colonial legacies that cast France in a benevolent, paternalistic role. This portrayal perpetuates a colonial rhetoric, glossing over the complexities of dependency and sovereignty, and omitting discussions of power imbalances inherent in such relationships. The absence of positive narratives in private outlets, apart from one, can be interpreted through the subaltern theory lens as a reflection of the voices of marginalised groups who resist and challenge dominant colonial discourses. In this context, the scarcity of positive narratives in private media suggests a deliberate resistance against the imposed narratives of benevolence and paternalism. It indicates an active effort by these outlets to assert a counter-narrative that highlights the ongoing struggles for autonomy and the realities of neo-colonial influence, rather than conforming to the sanitised version of history promoted by

the former colonial power.

In contrast, most narratives in private outlets question the motives behind France's interventionism, portraying them as self-serving rather than altruistic. The narratives vary significantly in their levels of criticism towards France; some acknowledge France's ambivalent and double-edged role, while others invariably depict France as an invasive enemy. Critiques of French interventionism are particularly visible in articles discussing the vote authorising the redeployment of Barkhane and Takuba force, the suspension of RFI and France 24 signals, and the expulsion of the French ambassador. The recurring argument in these articles is that France's actions are driven by its own strategic interests, often at the expense of Nigerien sovereignty and autonomy. It is also further fuelled by the perception that France supports certain political figures, such as Mohamed Bazoum, repeatedly described as a French ally in Nigerien media, to manipulate local political dynamics for its own benefit. Thus, the criticisms are double, concerning both France's interventions, particularly military ones, and the pre-coup government supported by France. After the coup, the criticism directed against the new government of Niger suddenly disappears and is solely directed against the French Republic or any French entity. In short, the prevalent narratives in private outlets suggest that France's current military and humanitarian actions are continuations of its colonial policies, aimed at maintaining control and influence over Niger's resources and political affairs.

The theoretical frameworks utilised in this study are essential for explaining the findings. The increased criticism of France post-coup can be generally interpreted as a growing awareness and rejection of neo-colonial influences, where the former coloniser's actions are scrutinised and challenged more rigorously. Decolonial theory emphasises how the coup and subsequent changes in governance have heightened the focus on sovereignty and autonomy, encouraging the media to adopt a more critical stance against perceived external control. These narratives align with subaltern critiques of how dominant powers exploit and control postcolonial states, highlighting the ongoing struggle for genuine autonomy and sovereignty amidst lingering colonial influences. This theoretical perspective is particularly relevant for understanding the narratives surrounding the pre-coup vote authorising the redeployment of Barkhane and Takuba forces. Subaltern theory sheds light on how marginalised groups within Niger might view these military presences as extensions of colonial dominance, thus fueling critical media portrayals. However, it is worth considering that subaltern theory may not fully account for contemporary

power dynamics, especially post-coup, including the role of new elites and the newly formed government in perpetuating oppression. It is important to highlight that in post-colonial contexts, new forms of dominance and exploitation can emerge, with local elites sometimes replicating or even exacerbating colonial structures. While the replication or exacerbation of these structures is not under discussion in this thesis, it is important to keep this possibility in mind.

Additionally, the influence of media control is significant and should not be underestimated, also raising questions about the limitations and relevance of subaltern theory, especially in the post-coup context. Media control can suppress dissenting voices and shape public discourse, potentially overshadowing efforts at decolonization. All interviewees unanimously mentioned that media in Niger are heavily influenced by state-imposed guidelines since last summer 2023 and that self-censorship has become common among journalists. The fear of reprisals, not only from the authorities but especially from coup supporters, pushes journalists to weigh their words carefully. There is a perception that the public can dictate actions to the government, contributing to a dual fear—fear of government retaliation and fear of negative public reaction if the media reports unfavourably about the current regime .

The director of a well-known Nigerien outlet emphasised that the situation for the media in Niger has radically changed since the coup d'état on July 26, 2023, which brought the military to power³. The suspension of the *Maison de la Presse*, an organisation that defends freedom of information in Niger and promotes the exchange of ideas and debate among media professionals, by the Ministry of the Interior at the beginning of 2024 marked a deterioration in conditions for journalists. This suspension signalled that the media environment was becoming increasingly restrictive and dangerous. Additionally, the incarceration of several journalists highlights a repressive climate against press freedom. Journalists feel vulnerable to attempts to curtail their freedoms and face continuous pressure from authorities.⁴

A member of the Nigerien section of the Association of African Communication Professionals provided a telling example of a sister association that had to withdraw from a budget analysis activity due to fears of governmental repercussions. This activity involved sensitive details about the state budget, potentially provoking negative government reactions. Members of the

³ Interview conducted via Google Meets on 6 June 2024

⁴ Interview conducted via Google Meets on 3 June 2024

interviewee's association, particularly those in public press sectors, expressed concerns about their job security should they proceed with the activity. Consequently, the group decided to withdraw to avoid potential retaliation. Even international media broadcasting in local languages, such as BBC Hausa and RFI Hausa, face similar pressures and must balance their information with caution. Journalism in Niger is thus severely threatened and in decline. One interviewee summarised the situation starkly: “There is no right to say something positive about France.”⁵ When asked about their personal perceptions of France, three interviewees initially hesitated to express their views. One person openly disapproved of French actions, while only one interviewee provided a nuanced perspective, stating, "My perception of France is marked by realism and scepticism. I recognize France's historical importance in Niger, but I am also aware of the current complexities and challenges." This interviewee, a journalist, further noted the difficulty of maintaining an objective balance, saying, "It is important to find a balance between necessary criticism of French policies and recognition of positive contributions, while keeping in mind the sentiments of the Nigerien population.”⁶

The interview responses reveal that while subaltern theory offers valuable insights into resistance against external influences, it must be supplemented by an understanding of how internal power dynamics and media manipulation impact the broader struggle for autonomy and sovereignty in Niger. This broader perspective helps explain the uniformity of media criticisms directed at French actions after July 2023, as both public and private media began to level accusations against France.

As I delved deeper into my thesis, I questioned whether the prevailing narratives truly capture the frustrations and aspirations of the Nigerien people, including those who might not criticize the new government and may oppose any French interventions. I suspect that marginalized groups in Niger may not have had the opportunity to fully express their views, even in private media, particularly under the current conditions. This raises concerns about whether the existing narratives represent the entire spectrum of public perspectives.

During the interviews, when discussing the narratives presented by other media outlets not included in this analysis—whether in French or local languages such as Hausa, Songhay-Zarma,

⁵ Interview conducted via Zoom on 9 July 2024

⁶ Interview conducted via Google Meets on 3 June 2024

Fula (Peul), Tamasheq (Tuareg), Kanuri, Dialectal Arabic, Boudouma, Goulmancema, Tassawaq, and Toubou—interviewees indicated that while the narratives are generally similar to those analysed, they often become more pronounced when translated into local languages. These translations tend to amplify the negative perceptions of France-Niger relations. Therefore, while the responses gathered in the interviews do not contradict our overall findings, it is essential to remain cautious and mindful of the limitations and scope of the results we have obtained so far.⁷

This study contributes to the literature by offering a focused examination of Niger, illustrating how local political and social contexts influence perceptions of foreign intervention. While much existing research considers French interventions in the broader Sahel region, this study's emphasis on Niger provides a deeper understanding of the specific national dynamics at play. This nuanced perspective reveals that negative perceptions of French actions are not uniform but are shaped by specific historical, political, and social conditions in Niger.

Previous studies have largely emphasised the continuity of France's neo-colonial influence and persistent scepticism towards its interventions. In contrast, this study highlights a significant shift in the media landscape following the coup, where even previously pro-France public outlets have become critical of French actions. This indicates a broader change in public sentiment, suggesting that the coup may have acted as a catalyst for a widespread reevaluation of Niger's relationship with France.

Additionally, this study underscores the role of media control in shaping narratives, an area less explored in the literature. While subaltern theory has highlighted the voices of marginalised groups resisting neo-colonial practices, this research reveals how state influence over media can suppress or amplify certain narratives, complicating the picture of local resistance and acceptance. The findings suggest that post-coup media criticism of France reflects both genuine public sentiment and the new regime's control over media narratives.

This shift challenges the notion of a static neo-colonial relationship. It opens new avenues for research on the evolving nature of postcolonial sovereignty and media influence in shaping public discourse. The findings have significant implications for both policy and theory. They

⁷ As already mentioned, it is also important to note that the interviewees were individuals who knew me as a French woman, which introduces potential bias. I am aware that this interview does not represent the opinion of all Nigerien journalists but serves as an example of how narratives are being silenced.

underscore the importance of understanding local narratives and perceptions when designing and implementing foreign policy and intervention strategies. For France, the prevalent anti-French sentiment suggests a need to reevaluate its approach in Niger, potentially shifting towards more inclusive and transparent strategies that address local concerns and aspirations, including historical grievances.

Further research is essential to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the narratives surrounding French interventions by examining the perspectives of a range of stakeholders in Niger, including local communities, government officials, and civil society organisations. Such research would offer a broader view of the varied opinions and experiences related to these interventions. Another research opportunity would be comparative studies of similar interventions in other former French colonies, such as Mali and Burkina Faso, could provide valuable insights into the broader dynamics of post-colonial international relations. Finally, future research should explore how new elites and external powers, such as Russia, might obstruct decolonization efforts. Both the tendency to shift blame to France and use it as a scapegoat for every single contemporary issues under the regime of Abdourahamane Tiani and the sanitization of positive narratives under the regime of Mohamed Bazoum, suggest that constructive criticism of France might be suppressed in the media. Investigating these dynamics could reveal how media narratives are constructed and whether they aid or hinder a nuanced understanding of the post-colonial context. It is indeed crucial to further investigate the impact of media control on decolonization efforts and analyse how media may either reinforce or challenge existing power structures.

Conclusion

This thesis aimed to investigate the shifting dynamics of France's military and humanitarian presence in Niger and the evolving narratives around this presence in the media. The research question sought to understand how these narratives potentially reflect broader decolonial and geopolitical shifts and their implications for Niger's sovereignty and external influences.

The findings indicate a narrative transition in the ANP's portrayal of French involvement, particularly after the coup. However, this radical shift is not observed in private media outlets. Both public and private outlets celebrated the departure of French forces as a victory for Nigerien resistance, aligning with decolonial theory's emphasis on reclaiming sovereignty from neo-colonial influences. This response manifests the struggle against lingering colonial power dynamics, with the coup and subsequent demands for French withdrawal representing steps toward dismantling these structures. Decolonial theory helps explain this shift as part of a broader effort to achieve genuine autonomy and liberation from foreign dominance. Subaltern theory further elucidates the importance of the Nigerien population's perspective in these events. The celebration of the withdrawal by both the CNSP and the public underscores the agency and voice of the subaltern, challenging dominant Western narratives that often frame such coups and withdrawals as signs of instability and chaos.

However, applying these theories also reveals limitations and complexities. The divergence in narratives between public and private media outlets should be interpreted through the lens of media control. Public media, under state influence, typically reflect the official stance of the government—pro-France under Bazoum's presidency, followed by a radical shift after the junta took power. In contrast, private media, with greater editorial freedom, were more likely to critique foreign interventions and highlight local grievances, at least before the coup.

The interviews highlighted that the departure of French forces, while significant, did not automatically resolve deeper structural issues. The interviewees pointed out that merely exiting a former coloniser does not dismantle entrenched power dynamics or guarantee genuine autonomy. They emphasised that local authorities could become the new narrative gatekeepers,

limiting the multiplicity of voices and perpetuating a different form of dominance. This underscores the need to go beyond simplistic dichotomies of colonial versus postcolonial and recognize the nuanced power struggles within postcolonial states themselves.

In addressing the question, "Is Françafrique History?", this thesis concludes that while the departure of French forces marks a significant shift, it does not necessarily herald the end of Françafrique. The complex interplay of local and international power dynamics continues to shape Niger's path towards true sovereignty and autonomy. Future research should continue to explore these dynamics, incorporating a broader range of voices and perspectives to understand the intricate realities of postcolonial sovereignty and resistance fully.

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