

## Sahara : Who are the Tuareg ?

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FOR COSMOPOLITAN music lovers, the Tuareg people burst onto the scene in 2001 when their most prominent musical group, Tinariwen, kicked off an internationally acclaimed music festival outside of Timbuktu in the Malian desert. Ten years later, after playing over 700 shows in the U.S. and Europe, Tinariwen won a Grammy for « Best Foreign Language Album. »

But Tinariwen has an important history that dates back before 2001. Its members were part of the Tuareg resistance to the Malian government up until the 1990s. Most grew up in refugee camps after the ishumar generation was forced out of the traditional Tuareg lifestyle by government action.

They became critical of their ancestors' strict social hierarchies. But as Tinariwen became an international sensation, its members donned traditional Tuareg dress and helped to recreate images of a romanticized past.

With the crisis in northern Mali and the French government's military intervention in its former colony, the Tuareg have become a focus of attention in the West in a new way. In both the mainstream press and in United Nations resolutions, they have been wrongly conflated with Islamic jihadists, while their legitimate grievances against the Malian government have been ignored.

A court in the Malian capital of Bamako issued arrest warrants last week for Tuareg leaders from both the Mouvement National de Liberation de L'Azawad (MNLA), the most prominent political Tuareg group, and Ansar Dine, an Islamist group, imported into northern Mali from Southeast Asia, with a particularly evangelical and sectarian Salafist history. These two groups are completely different in aim, origin and strategy, but the Malian state paints them with one brush.

Who are the Tuareg and what are their demands ? Are they asking for a separate state ? On the left-wing website Counterpunch, Patrick Cockburn argued in January, « The latest crisis has its origin in a nationalist uprising by the Tuareg in 2012. » [\[1\]](#)

This is partially right, but the nature of Tuareg nationalism—and the demands of the uprising—have to be explored more concretely, or the Tuareg's calls for economic relief and an end to state repression will be overlooked.

The UN has already ducked the pressing economic and political questions facing residents of northern Mali by denouncing the right of the Tuareg to independence. In practice, though, the uprising didn't begin with a demand for a separate state. And France can't be allowed to claim that military intervention is the solution to the « problem » in Mali—while it ignores the dire economic conditions at the roots of the discontent among the Tuareg.

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THE TUAREG speak Tamasheq, part of the Berber language group. They are a majority Muslim group of a million-and-a-half people living in Niger, Mali, Algeria, Libya and Burkina Faso. Historically nomadic and pastoralist, the Tuareg dominated the vast desert areas of these countries.

Now, because of a series of droughts in the Sahara, forced sedentarization, restrictive land policies of

the Malian state and state repression, they have become a migrant workforce in northern Africa. Some still practice pastoralism, but many more rely on urban jobs, remittances and state aid. Before the fall of the Muammar al-Qaddafi and his regime in Libya last year, some found employment in the Libyan state machine, including its military and security services.

The Tuareg have always had a strange relationship with French colonialism. During the consolidation of French Sudan—which became the Republic of Mali after independence—the colonialists met fierce resistance from the Tuareg, including a major anti-colonial uprising in 1919. Though the French won, they remained wary of the Tuareg, whose knowledge of the desert region made them formidable enemies.

The colonialists developed a romantic fascination with these desert-dwellers. As one governor of the Gao region of Mali observed in 1962, « The colonial maniacs, in love with exoticism, wanted to preserve the nomads for anthropologists, Berberophile ethnographers and Orientalist scholars exasperated by the 20th century, for whom an island of men untouched by pollution or progress had to be found, so they could inhale the delicious perfume of antiquity from time to time. »

Since military control of the Tuareg was never feasible because of the problems of desert combat, the French granted the Tuareg a great deal of autonomy. They were exempted from mandatory military service and didn't pay taxes. The colonial masters effectively allowed the practice of slavery to continue among the Tuareg.

For this reason, sub-Saharan Malians in the South resented the privileged position that the Tuareg were afforded by the colonial state. According to the historian Baz Lecocq, most of the Tuareg view French colonialism as a better alternative to administration by the central Malian government since independence.

The Tuareg are the dominant ethnic group in the desert and in Kidal, but are a minority even in the two biggest Northern cities of Mali, Timbuktu and Gao. Although they make up less than 10 percent of the Malian population, the nomads have had a disproportionate impact on the fortunes of the Malian state since its founding in 1960. At three key junctures, they were decisive in the fate of the state as a whole.

Mali might not have been founded in the way it was if the Tuareg hadn't entered into a deal with the Union Soudanaise-Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (US-RDA), an African-socialist political party made up mostly of sub-Saharan Malians.

The US-RDA, after securing an alliance with the Tuareg, negotiated the terms of the French withdrawal. Battling a national independence movement in Algeria, the French decided to pursue a different strategy in French Sudan. They peacefully turned over the reins of power to the US-RDA, hoping to co-opt the new leadership, instead of fighting them. And indeed, there has been a very close relationship between France and the Malian government since independence.

The second time that the Tuareg affected the fate of Mali was during their second uprising in 1990. It was partly the crisis caused by the Tuareg uprising that created space for a democratic movement in the capital to overthrow the dictatorship of Moussa Traoré, which ruled Mali from 1968 to 1991. From this point forward, Mali was broadly recognized as a democracy, limited though it was.

Then Amadou Toumani Touré, the once-popular leader who replaced Traoré, was overthrown in a military coup in March 2012. Again, it was a Tuareg uprising, begun in January of that year, which triggered the eventual coup. Amadou Haya Sanogo, a low-level officer trained in the U.S., whipped up hatred of Tuareg among other ethnic groups as his justification for the coup.

Sub-Saharan resentment of the Tuareg runs high. They are often scapegoated for problems in the North, among people who cite their history with slavery and preferential treatment under the French. Sanogo justified the coup by arguing that the government in Bamako needed to crack down harder on the rebels.

Within months of the coup, irregular militia units were organized in the North around other ethnic groups to fight against « the Islamists » and Ansar Dine [2]. It is likely that these militias made little distinction between the Tuareg of Ansar Dine, who have aligned themselves with Islamists like al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, and the Tuareg who see themselves as fighting a non-religious political battle against national oppression and for economic aid.

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TO CATEGORIZE a group of nomads as a « nation » may or may not be appropriate. It is an especially complicated question in post-colonial Africa, where colonial meddling in territorial boundaries forever changed power relations between indigenous groups.

Nevertheless, the Tuareg share a language and a history, and see themselves as a coherent group. They are unquestionably oppressed by the Malian state. Between 1964 and 1967, they were subjected to a fierce campaign of forced sedentarization, away from their traditional nomadic lifestyle. In the tradition of the colonial masters, the Malian state continued to appoint Tuareg chiefs and leaders, overturning democratic choices made by Tuareg clans. The use of Tamasheq was forbidden in schools.

During the Tuareg rebellions of 1962-63 and 1990-94, the Malian army meted out brutal collective punishment. It was accused of poisoning wells and mass killings of both civilians and livestock. The Malian state declared certain desert areas « forbidden zones » and threatened to shoot anyone in those areas—a particularly damning policy against a people who depend on grazing livestock.

The Tuareg have always claimed a right to self-determination in the Azawad, the desert region of Mali, Niger, Algeria, Burkina Faso and Libya. If part of this right rests on the claim that they have historically dominated the area, though, then that claim is complicated by the question of slavery.

The Tuareg practiced certain forms of slavery—very different, it should be noted, than chattel slavery in the New World—until Malian independence. Noble Tuareg families kept house slaves (« iklan ») and demanded tribute from « slave » agricultural villages. Historically, they had also been involved in trafficking slaves across North Africa. One element that spurred the Tuareg to rebel in 1962 was their desire to control their social hierarchies (and slaves) without intervention by the state in Bamako—which, unlike the French, undertook a serious effort to end unfree labor.

Inside Mali, one popular explanation for the violence in the North is that the Tuareg fighters had been mercenaries fighting for the Libyan regime and were returning heavily armed after the fall of Qaddafi. The Northern insurgents aren't ideological, goes this argument, but are former clients of Qaddafi who are interested in generating revenue now that they are out of a job.

This claim is denied by the MNLA, which stated in an article on its website :

*« We confirm and underline that the combatants who returned from Libya fought [together] with the NTC (National Transitional Council) forces more than they did with Qaddafi's forces. Our senior military commander Mohammed Ag Najm, was certainly a Libyan officer of Malian origin, serving under the Qaddafi regime like all Libyan officers. Colonel Mohammed Ag Najm expressed his disagreement with the Libyan leader very early on, at the beginning of the insurrection in Libya, and this disagreement was confirmed by his resignation from the Libyan army and his enrollment*

*alongside his own people in this present struggle for the liberation of the Azawad.* » [3]

Undoubtedly, though, some Tuareg did fight for Qaddafi. The members of Tinariwen, for example, met in military training camps in Libya in the early 1980s. Qaddafi did hire Tuareg as mercenaries, and at various points, for his own strategic and political reasons, the Libyan dictator patronized the Tuareg cause.

This fact alone, though, doesn't make the Tuareg claim to self-determination illegitimate. As they were robbed of their traditional way of earning a livelihood by both environmental change and state policies, there were few ways for the Tuareg to survive. Their demands for autonomy are legitimate, and their struggle clearly continues after the death of Qaddafi.

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THERE ARE at least four forces fighting in northern Mali.

Beginning in November 2011, a series of high-profile kidnappings of Westerners took place in northern Mali. These kidnappings were either carried out by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) or by forces affiliated with the Algerian secret service. (Anthropologist and United Nations consultant Jeremy Keenan believes Algerian forces have quite likely participated in high-profile kidnappings in the Sahara since 2003.)

Then in January 2012, probably emboldened by a new flow of arms to the region after Qaddafi's downfall, Tuareg fighters began a series of skirmishes with the Malian military. Their chief aim was seemingly to wrest economic concessions from the state.

Into the fray jumped the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO). These two jihadist groups have been joined by Ansar Dine, which is made up of ethnically Tuareg people, but should not be called a « Tuareg » group—it has its origins in Southeast Asia. After recruiting the prominent Tuareg leader Iyad ag Ghaly following the decline of the political Tuareg movement, Ansar Dine gained a significant Tuareg following. But its aims aren't about overcoming the historic oppression of the Tuareg people, but rather a larger agenda of gaining dominance for Salafist Islam.

The total number of fighters between the three Islamist groups is probably about 2,000 people. The MNLA, the largest political Tuareg group, is now staunchly in opposition to these groups.

The Tuareg, like any other « nation, » is not a uniform group. Since the first uprising in 1962, it has been divided into factions—some want to take the claim of « self-determination » to its logical conclusion of political secession by any means necessary, and others want some type of autonomy, gained through negotiations with Malian state.

The latter forces won out. The MNLA that is dominant today claims the mantle of the Mouvement Fronte Unite de l'Azawad, one of the most important groups that negotiated peace with the Malian government in 1996.

In 1996, the Bourem Pact ended the second Tuareg uprising. The Malian state, with the support of the international community, both states and NGOs, devoted some \$9 million for a Disarm, Demobilize, Reintegrate (DDR) program that provided cash for weapons to the rebels, credits for small businesses and increased funding in infrastructure. Schools and health care centers were built, and an additional \$150 million was pledged for reconstruction. The city of Kidal got electricity for the first time in 1996.

In return for their agreement to lay down arms, Tuareg administrators gained greater powers of self-

governance. In addition to the DDR program and investment in infrastructure, several thousand Tuareg fighters chose to integrate into the Malian army. In exchange for giving up the armed resistance, the Malian army took them in as soldiers and paid them a regular salary.

With this history no doubt in mind, the MNLA today is fighting, in practical terms, for more economic aid and an end to state repression. In an obscure part of its website and in French, there is a demand for « sovereignty » and « self-determination. » But in a document called « The renewal of the Armed Struggle in the Azawad, » intended for an international audience, the MNLA emphasizes more pragmatic and practical demands : dialogue with the Malian state, an end to military killings and the intervention of the « international community. »

It is this « pragmatism » which has led the MNLA to accept French military intervention in northern Mali. According to Canadian socialist Roger Annis [4], the MNLA « entered into talks with the Mali regime in December for autonomy in the northern region. A January 13 statement on the group's website acquiesces to the French intervention, but says it should not allow troops of the Mali army to pass beyond the border demarcation line declared in April of last year. »

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THE TUAREG question is an international one. More Tuareg live in neighboring Niger than in Mali, and there, too, they have organized a movement against state repression—their most recent uprising ended in 2009.

Niger President Mahamadou Issoufou said, « The threats in Mali constitute a domestic security problem for Niger »—and sent 500 soldiers to the international peacekeeping force in Mali [5], imploring the international force to disarm the MNLA. The Niger government signed a deal with the U.S. to host a base for surveillance drones [6].

Niger, like Mali in the period before the latest crisis, had adopted a strategy of trying to assimilate the Tuareg, integrate them into the state (a Tuareg was appointed Prime Minister in 2011) and grant limited economic concessions. Large uranium mines in Niger represent huge potential profits for French companies, as well as geopolitical power. Thus, France and Niger's ruling elite both want stability.

Despite incredible mineral wealth, Niger's gross domestic product per capita is around \$374, according the World Bank. Mali's is around \$669, despite huge gold reserves.

So while it is right in a sense to talk about a « nationalist insurgency, » it is important to note that Tuareg poverty is, more than anything else, the driving impulse for a people who have learned that armed struggle works in wresting economic concessions from the state.

This is important to recognize because Western governments and the UN have spent a lot of time « rejecting » the Tuareg's right to self-determination. In July 2012, UN resolution 2056 stated, « reiterating its categorical rejection of statements made by the National Movement for the Liberation of the Azawad (MNLA) regarding the so-called 'independence' of northern Mali, and further reiterating that it considers such announcements null and void. »

By pretending that the Tuareg are simply focused on the creation of a separate state, Western governments can ignore their more immediate demands. They can ignore the real crisis—that 400,000 northern Malians have been displaced from their homes.

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*Roger Annis contributed to this article.*

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## **Notes**

[1] See on ESSF (article 27766), [The Tuareg Insurgency and the Mali Trap](#).

[2] [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/06/world/africa/mali-militias-poorly-armed-but-zealous-to-oust-islamists.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/06/world/africa/mali-militias-poorly-armed-but-zealous-to-oust-islamists.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)

[3] <http://mnlamov.net/english/101-they-are-not-mercenaries.html>

[4] See on ESSF (article 27606), [France launches bombing of northern Mali, with Canadian support](#).

[5] <http://www.menafn.com/menafn/1093607860/Mali-instability-poses-risk-to-Nigers-internal-security>

[6] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/jan/29/niger-approves-american-surveillance-drones>