

Timbuktu's Arabs flee as Mali faces challenge to create lasting peace

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In the heart of Timbuktu's once bustling market, shop after shop stands empty and abandoned. Since French troops expelled al-Qaeda from this ancient city in northern Mali, almost every business owned by an Arab has been stormed and looted.

Just as Europe's liberation from the Nazis was followed by the persecution of collaborators, so Timbuktu's deliverance from al-Qaeda has a sordid and vengeful underside.

Almost every Arab has been expelled from the city, fleeing mainly to refugee camps in neighbouring Algeria and Mauritania. Mali's bitter ethnic divisions have been inflamed by Timbuktu's 10-month occupation at the hands of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its extremist allies.

Even if France's intervention can defeat AQIM, piecing together a country torn apart by ethnic rivalry between the Tuaregs and Arabs of the north, and the largely black African south, will be the task of a generation.

Unless Mali can be rebuilt, any victory over the terrorist group is likely to create not a lasting peace, but a temporary reprieve. The scale of the challenge faced was highlighted on Friday when a suicide bomber struck an army checkpoint in Gao – the first such attack of the conflict.

Timbuktu's Arabs were once the city's commercial class, owning and running the biggest shops and businesses. Yet all are assumed to have supported the al-Qaeda occupation. Mobs have duly taken their revenge by pillaging Arab businesses and, in some cases, family homes.

Perhaps 3,000 Arabs lived in Timbuktu before the terrorist organisation and its allies captured this trading centre last March. A community with a history as long as the city itself has now been efficiently cleansed in the space of a few days, all under the noses of French troops and the Malian authorities.

Mohammed Ami, 23, believes that he and his family are the last Arabs still living in Timbuktu. In the days after French forces arrived a fortnight ago, all of his friends and relations fled.

"My mother called from Algeria to ask if I am alive or not," he said. "But I was born here. I'm not going anywhere. If I'm going to be killed, I will be killed here. This is the place I know. I will stay here."

Mr Ami still lives in his flat-roofed home made of sun-baked mud with his wife, Maya, 16, and their two daughters, Amira, two, and Mosoud, four months. Every last member of his wife's family has left. All of his Arab neighbours have also gone.

So far as Mr Ami knows, no Arab has been killed or physically injured. Instead, they have been forced out by the wholesale destruction of their livelihoods.

Mr Ami's own shop in the market, where he once sold food and clothes, has been stripped bare. The looters were so thorough that they physically removed the doors and windows before making off with the stock. Jagged holes show where they tore the wooden shelves from the shop's blue walls.

"Some of my neighbours saw what was coming and they took their stock away. But I was too confident and I did not," said Mr Ami. The nearby shops, all of them owned by fellow Arabs, have suffered the same treatment.

Mr Ami's business was pillaged on the same day that French troops entered Timbuktu. When he arrived for work the following morning only to find his shop reduced to an empty shell, he knelt on the floor and carefully picked up what remained. The looters had missed a few packets of spaghetti and bags of sweets.

From a business that had taken years to build, he salvaged enough to fill two small cardboard boxes. "They broke into all the shops owned by the Arabs, whether they were part of the occupation or they were not. They didn't care," said Mr Ami.

In this way, the Songhai-speaking black Africans who form the majority of Timbuktu's 60,000 inhabitants - and who suffered most during AQIM's occupation - took their revenge.

Arabs have not been the only targets of their anger: most of the city's Tuaregs have also fled, leaving the black Africans the masters of Timbuktu.

By hounding and expelling the Arab and Tuaregs, however, they could be sowing the seeds of future conflict. For decades, the Tuaregs have been fighting a guerrilla war to seize independence for northern Mali - which they call "Azawad" - and create a state of their own.

Behind this lies the deep division between north and south. When Mali achieved independence from France in 1960, the largely Tuareg and Arab north found itself sharing a country with the black African south. Every government in the capital, Bamako, was dominated by black Africans, who were accused of monopolising power and draining wealth from the north.

In 2011, the Tuaregs formed a new guerrilla army - the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, known by its French initials MNLA - with the goal of winning independence.

But the north itself is bitterly divided between Tuaregs and Arabs. The arrival of AQIM and radical Islamists has poisoned this conflict still further.

At first, the MNLA and AQIM formed an alliance of convenience to jointly seize control of the north last March. But AQIM, led by Arabs from Algeria, soon gained the upper hand over their supposed Tuareg allies and thrust the MNLA aside.

In the aftermath of the French intervention against AQIM, experts fear another war, this time waged by Tuaregs against the Arabs and the black Africans. At stake will be control of the north and the fate of lucrative trans-Saharan smuggling routes, used to run cocaine to Europe.

"The most serious risk in the north is war between Tuaregs and Arabs," said Adam Thiam, a commentator with *Le Republicain*, a Malian newspaper. "It is a war for control of the drug routes. It is a battle for revenge and it is also a battle for controlling the governance of the region."

During the last year of conflict, some Tuaregs fled the north for the supposed safety of Bamako. Today, however, they are far more likely to leave Mali altogether and head for the refugee camps in Mauritania or Niger. "Some of them came to Bamako, but they have discovered they are not

welcome in the capital,” said Mr Thiam.

Having grown up in Timbuktu, Mr Ami believes that Arabs can still live alongside their black and Tuareg neighbours.

He hopes that the hatreds stirred up by occupation and civil war will eventually fade, allowing the Arabs to return. “I have a small stock left over. I will wait for peace and then start again and make another shop,” he said.

Unless that moment arrives, he and his family will live penniless, fearful and alone in the only town they have ever called home.

David Blair in Timbuktu

P.S.

* The Telegraph. 7:00AM GMT 10 Feb 2013:

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/mali/9859300/Timbuktus-Arabs-fl ee-as-Mali-faces-challenge-to-create-lasting-peace.html>