

Chapter 5

Why the Tuareg have been demonised

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Fifteen years ago, a foreign tourist, or anyone else for that matter, could travel across the western Sahara–Sahel region of Africa, from the Atlantic shores of Mauritania, through Mali and Niger to the Lake Chad region in almost complete safety. The biggest danger might have been falling down a well, treading on a scorpion, too much sun, or not carrying enough water. Today, few places in the world are more dangerous.

Few parts of Africa have a more complex ethnographic make-up than the Sahel. If the traveller had passed through the northern parts of the Sahel – Timbuktu, Kidal, Ménaka, Tahoua and Agades – the majority of the people they would have met would have been Tuareg, whose lands traditionally extended over northern Mali and northern Niger, southern Algeria and south-west Libya, with small communities in most neighbouring states. The traveller would most likely have also made the acquaintance of some of the Arab tribes of the northern Sahel, such as the Kunta, Berabiche, Lamar and Tasara.

If the traveller's latitude had been a few degrees further south, passing through the southern Sahel, most of the peoples whom they would have met would have been members of the 'black African' Peul (Fulani), Bambara and the many other ethno-linguistic groups that inhabit the Sahel.

Today, such a journey would be extremely difficult. In recent years, the security situation in the region has deteriorated to the point where Western powers, notably France and the United States, aided by military contingents from Germany, Holland, Sweden, and soon possibly Canada, not to mention other European Union (EU) trainers and the United Nations (UN), are militarising the region in what their intelligence agencies are now referring to as the 'long war' against 'international jihadism'.

The region's first introduction to post-9/11 'terrorism' was in early 2003 when 32 European tourists were kidnapped in the Algerian Sahara and taken hostage to Mali.¹ At that time, local Tuareg tribesmen were quick to see the writing on the wall. They knew that the moment terrorism reared its head in the Sahara, Western tourism would collapse and with it the main cash base of their economy. For both ideological and economic reasons, Tuareg in Algeria,

Libya, Mali and Niger all sought to take up arms against the ‘terrorists’ and rid the region of this new enemy.

At the start of this saga in 2003, when the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) was being introduced into the region, the Tuareg were still revered by most Westerners, or at least by those who knew much about them. Journalists and other writers invariably spoke of them in almost heroic terms as the true nomads and the fabled blue-veiled warriors of the Sahara. They had been immortalised, often romantically, in European colonial and post-colonial literature. There is no recent demographic survey of the Tuareg, but they are estimated to number around three million, with the biggest concentrations in Mali and Niger.² They had opposed French colonial forces in the 19th and 20th centuries, succumbed to the independence of their various countries in the 1960s, before standing opposed to Islamist extremism and terrorism during the first years of this century.

Today, their traditional reputation, albeit slightly exaggerated and romanticised, has virtually gone. Instead, Tuareg are now being demonised in much of the Western and regional media as terrorists and jihadists. One reason for this is because the leader of the most prominent jihadist groups in the Sahel is a Malian Tuareg – Iyad ag Ghali.

How is this possible? How can a whole people be rebranded, albeit largely in the popular media, so easily and in such a short space of time? More importantly, is the Tuaregs’ current reputation – as terrorists and jihadists – true or merely propaganda or hyperbole, or based on the activities of only a few individuals? And, if it does bear any truth, how has it happened?

This chapter traces the situation of the Tuareg populations in Mali, Niger, Algeria and Libya since the start of this millennium, and explains how and why they have become demonised in much of the media, first as terrorists and more recently as jihadists, and whether such labels have any justification.

This chapter is divided into nine sections. Ideally, it should cover the entire pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial histories of the Tuareg people – but that would entail several volumes. Instead, it starts at the turn of this millennium with one brief, crucial but little-known period of contemporary Tuareg history, which lasted barely four years.

The Tuaregs’ Prague Spring

Czechoslovakia’s Prague Spring was a period of political liberalisation during the Soviet Union’s domination of the country. It began on 5 January 1968 when the reformist, Alexander Dubček, was elected First Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. Dubček introduced partial decentralisation of the economy, democratisation and freedoms that loosened restrictions on the

media, speech and travel. It lasted seven and a half months, until 21 August, when the Soviet Union and other members of the Warsaw Pact invaded the country to halt the reforms.³

Although the Tuaregs' Prague Spring was felt in all Tuareg countries, it was most pronounced in Algeria, where it lasted about four years, from the election of Abdelaziz Bouteflika as president and the effective ending of the country's 'dirty war' in 1999, to the launch of the GWOT in Algeria in 2003.

For the prior seven to eight years, Ahaggar, the huge massif of southern Algeria (capital Tamanrasset), had been closed to the outside world. This was not simply because of Algeria's civil war (or 'dirty war' as it was commonly referred to), which prohibited foreign tourists from entering, but because the region was effectively cut off from access, at least to foreigners, on all other sides. Libya was closed to tourists because of the post-Lockerbie (1988) sanctions, while Tuareg rebellions in Niger, and especially Mali, during the 1990s effectively prohibited access through the Sahel.⁴ The closure of the Algerian–Morocco border, along with the western Sahara dispute, cut off access from the west and northwest.

Ahaggar had been further isolated from the world by the antiquated nature of the Sahara's communications system. During the 1990s, there was no internet or satellite communications system in the region – only a dilapidated phone service, which, at best, might reach Algiers, and an equally decrepit postal service. The same was true for the Tuareg regions of Libya, Niger and Mali.

In the decade prior to 1992, the number of foreign tourists visiting Ahaggar and the Tassili n'Ajjer regions of southern Algeria, the Tuareg's traditional domain, reached about 10 000 a year. Aside from the Tuaregs' semi-nomadic husbandry, which had been reduced over the years to little more than subsistence level, tourism was their main source of income.

To a lesser extent, the same was true for Niger and Mali, at least prior to the Tuareg rebellions in these countries in the 1990s. Several Algerian Tuaregs became astute businessmen and registered themselves as tourist agencies. Several had European spouses or good contacts in Europe with whom they set up tourism partnerships.

The European business partner recruited tour groups, usually small in number and affluent, from within their local French, German, Swiss, British or other national markets, arranged their air travel, and sometimes even accompanied them to Algiers and then on to Tamanrasset.

The same had been true in Niger and Mali. Such Tuareg tourism agencies in Tamanrasset were invariably linked to Tuareg business partners in Niger and Mali, notably in Agades and Kidal respectively. They employed cameleers, guides, cooks, drivers and others, which saw a regular flow of cash into even the most distant nomadic camps. These Tuareg had usually built and staffed their own gîtes

(lodges) and campsites in and around Tamanrasset and conducted tours – on foot, camel or four-wheel-drive vehicles – across the entire vast region. Similar operations, although on a smaller scale, were found in Agades and Kidal.

In 1992, Algeria's military regime, in an effective coup d'état, annulled the country's democratic elections that would have brought to power the world's first democratically elected Islamist government. The coup led to the start of Algeria's 'dirty war'. Almost overnight, the Algerian Tuareg's lucrative tourism industry came to a halt. The Tuareg were forced to rely once again on their own meagre resources and their wits. For the next seven or eight years, they were left to contemplate what might have been, and what they might do if Algeria's dirty war came to an end and foreigners once again dared venture into their land. In Niger and Mali, Tuareg rebellions against their governments in the 1990s had had a similar effect on the tourist industry.

For the Algerian Tuareg, these years of reflection led them to realise that the type of mass tourism that had developed in the 1980s was unsustainable. It was destructive of their fragile environment and cultural heritage, which were what had attracted tourists to the region in the first place. They, therefore, spent much of their seven years of global isolation planning and even registering local civil society organisations that would foster an eco-friendly, alternative tourism.⁵ They reflected on and planned how the region in future could become a world centre for sustainable 'green' tourism. They had more than enough time to plan even the minutest details of what they foresaw as a new age, and spread the word around all the outlying villages and distant camps, as if they were spreading a new gospel. They also planned to open or reopen business links and partnerships with Tuareg agencies in Niger and Mali.

In Algeria especially, late 1999 was the beginning of a new dawn, a new venture and a new world that would be 'green', sustainable and democratic. This message was not limited to Ahaggar and the Tassili. Algeria's Tuareg had spread it to their Tuareg contacts and former tourism business associates in Niger, Mali and even Libya. The whole of the central Sahara stood on the brink of a planned transformation that was designed to transform the entire region into a global heritage site, based on sustainable, 'alternative tourism', as they called it, which would be managed democratically by and for the benefit and livelihoods of the predominantly Tuareg local communities.⁶

Central to this new world was the internet and the use of satellite phones, which arrived in Tamanrasset at around this time. They not only enabled the Tuareg to remain in immediate contact with their agents in Europe and their business partners in Libya, Niger and Mali, but also with one another when travelling in the desert. More importantly, it gave them control over their own communications and business arrangements, enabling them to jump over and

bypass the repressive and grasping government of Algiers, as well as the not so pro-Tuareg governments in Niamey and Bamako.

Launching the Global War on Terror

The Tuaregs' Prague Spring lasted barely four years. It was cut short in February 2003 by the kidnapping of 32 European tourists in the Algerian Sahara by members of Algeria's Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat (GSPC or Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat) – which would in 2006 change its name to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).⁷

Although this incident brought post-9/11 terrorism to the Sahara and, in part, helped to justify the Bush administration's launch of a second or Sahara–Sahelian front in the GWOT a few months later, Algeria itself was no stranger to terrorism. Indeed, the origins of the Sahara's post-9/11 terrorism were rooted firmly in the events of Algeria's 'black decade' (the 1990s), which effectively began when Algeria's military regime annulled democratic elections in 1992 and thus prohibited the Front Islamique du Salut (FIS) from winning an overwhelming victory.

The outcome was the bloody dirty war of the 1990s, ostensibly between Islamists and the army, which left some 200 000 dead and Algeria indelibly scarred. The essential strategy of the army and the Département du Renseignement et de la Sécurité (DRS), the Algerian state intelligence agency, had been to infiltrate the Armed Islamic Group (GIA). As a result, by the time the war began to wind down in 1999, it was difficult to know who was killing whom. Army units and the DRS, masquerading as Islamists, had committed many of the worst civilian massacres and other atrocities.⁸

The main agency in the emerging counterterrorism and black-ops that came to characterise the post-9/11 Bouteflika era, both in Algeria and most of the surrounding Maghreb and Sahel regions, was the DRS. The DRS became the real power in Algeria, a state-within-a-state, which, under its director, General Mohamed 'Toufik' Mediène, wielded this power through an elaborate patronage system, which co-opted the political and business elite, and provided them access to both political and business rents.⁹

The essence of the relationship between the DRS and Western intelligence agencies was the DRS's unique experience of both infiltrating and fighting Islamists, or terrorists as they became known in the post-9/11 era, and the DRS's ability to provide the West with experience, knowledge of and access to terrorist networks. In return, the West was able to provide the DRS and the Algerian army with the new, high-tech weapon systems that had been denied them during the 1990s because of sanctions against Algeria's military regime.¹⁰

In January 2004, the Pan-Sahel Initiative (PSI) was launched, which saw the

deployment of some 1 000 US forces across the Sahelian states of Mauritania, Mali, Niger and Chad. According to the office of counterterrorism in the US state department, the PSI was a ‘a state-led effort to assist Mali, Niger, Chad, and Mauritania in detecting and responding to suspicious movement of people and goods across and within their borders through training, equipment and co-operation. Its goals support two US national security interests in Africa: waging the war on terrorism and enhancing regional peace and security.’¹¹ Eighteen months later, in July 2005, the United States expanded the PSI into the Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Initiative (TSCTI), involving an additional five countries: Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Senegal and Nigeria. Through the TSCTI, Washington succeeded in joining the two hydrocarbon-rich sides of the Sahara together in complex security arrangements, designed by America.¹² The problem for the Tuareg was that they found themselves virtually in the geographical centre of this US creation.

The decimation of Tuareg livelihoods

The region’s residents did not welcome the PSI with open arms. While the US rhetoric at the time was that ‘the Pan-Sahel Initiative [was] to enhance regional peace and security’, many regional experts, as well as local people, notably the Tuareg, believed that the initiative would backfire by creating new problems and fuelling existing tensions in the region. That is precisely what has happened.^{13 14}

As life in the desert became more difficult, especially in the wake of the Sahelian droughts in the 1970s and 1980s, followed by Tuareg rebellions in both Niger and Mali in the 1990s, the region’s nomadic and semi-nomadic Tuareg pastoralists became increasingly dependent on tourism for their livelihood. However, it was tourism, more than any other component of their economy, that was decimated: first by the 2003 kidnapping of 32 European tourists by the GSPC and then by the US launch of its Sahara–Sahel front in its GWOT.

The decimation of tourism impoverished many households and forced many local people, especially the Tuareg (who thanks to their ‘Prague Spring’ had come to effectively control local tourism) to seek their livelihood through various activities such as smuggling enterprises.

In times of impoverishment, people resort to desperate means. As Amadou Bocoum, deputy chairman of Mali’s government commission to combat the proliferation of small arms, told the UN’s regional news network (IRIN) in 2004: ‘cigarette, fuel and weapon smuggling is carried out by the population (especially the desert nomads) and it is difficult to consider them as bandits as it is their only source of income and allows them to survive’.¹⁵

Furthermore, the view of many senior people in the region was that

the impact of the PSI was more likely to attract terrorists than dispel them. Hervé Ludovic de Lys, for instance, head of the UN's West African Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), expressed the fear that terrorists hiding in the desert could exploit local peoples' anger at the crackdown on their livelihoods, stating: '[Terrorist] groups taking refuge in barely controllable areas could easily take advantage of the frustration of the Tubus and Tuaregs.' Similar sentiments were expressed by Aboubacrim ag Hindi, professor of law at Bamako University. He told IRIN that, 'the biggest danger in this region is not Al-Qaeda. It is famine. If the development of these zones is not undertaken, we may see more rebellion.'¹⁶ His fears, as we shall presently see, became horribly true.

Almost all residents in the Sahara–Sahel region seemed to recognise that poverty had increased to the extent that if groups associated with Al-Qaeda emerged, they would quite likely find some measure of local support if they were able to provide people with resources.

Local people's awareness of this possibility made them additionally resentful of the American 'invasion', which they saw as concentrating on little more than what was soon proven to be wholly ineffectual military counterterrorism training, rather than the actual development of the region.

It is particularly pertinent that the PSI coincided with the worst locust plagues to blight the Sahel for at least 15 years. With chronic food shortages imminent, West African leaders tried to impress on Washington that the locust invasion should be treated like a war, because its capacity to destroy human life, as one of them told IRIN, 'was far greater than that of the worst conflicts'. And, as another Sahelian resident remarked, voicing the views of many: 'If the US had spent the same [money] on locust control as on terrorist control, we would not have this imminent loss of life.'¹⁷

Governments' provocation of the Tuareg

Although US 'neo-con' think tanks frequently published strategic papers emphasising the international threat posed by Al-Qaeda-linked terrorism in the Sahara–Sahel, there were few further terrorist incidents in the region throughout much of this period. Following the 2003 kidnappings in Algeria, the two most frequently cited terrorist incidents in the region prior to late 2006 were the gun battle in Chad between GSPC fighters and troops from both Niger and Chad in which 43 GSPC fighters were killed, and the 2005 attack in Lemgheity, Mauritania, led by the GSPC, which left 15 Mauritanian soldiers dead.^{18 19}

Extracting terrorism rents: The Niger and Algerian examples

Most of the TSCTI countries were only too happy to go along with Washington's GWOT strategy, because it provided them with what can be described as 'terrorism rents' in the form of US military and financial largesse. In Mauritania, the autocratic Ould Taya took this to extremes and became an embarrassment to the Americans by labelling almost all his political opponents – who comprised much of the civil population – as terrorists.²⁰

In Niger and Mali, however, where Islamism was marginal and where there was no terrorism in the conventional meaning of the term²¹ prior to the GSPC's arrival in 2003, the governments were a little more ingenious in their attempts to extract terrorism rents.

Their ingenuity took the form of provoking opposition and minority elements of one sort or another into demonstrations of civil unrest or even taking up arms, enabling the region to be branded – in the language of the United States European Command (EUCOM) and Washington officials – as a potential haven for terrorists. Unsurprisingly, the victims of these exercises have been the already marginalised minority populations, notably the Tuareg.

The best examples of such Tuareg provocation at that time came from Algeria and Niger. With the launch of the PSI and TSCTI, all governments in the region became more repressive in the knowledge that they had the United States behind them.

In Algeria, for example, corruption, especially the embezzlement of local-authority funds, became more brazen. Repression became more widespread, especially crack-downs on elements of civil society that expressed concern for human rights and democratic organisation, as well as the harassment of individuals who could be seen as potential opposition spokesmen. The secret police became more pervasive, more visible and more openly confident in their abuse of power.²²

Since 2003, almost every town in the Algerian Sahara has experienced outbreaks of civil unrest and rioting. The most serious incident, however, was the civil rioting that overwhelmed Tamanrasset in July 2005. One reason why the town did not erupt earlier was because the Tuareg, who had long suspected that government authorities were trying to provoke such a response from them, had been urging restraint.

On 10 July, a seemingly peaceful demonstration over high unemployment turned, within a matter of minutes, into a rampaging mob. The rioting, which continued for two days, was unparalleled by any other Saharan riots for its violence against state and public property. Numerous government offices and other symbols of the state, as well as some 40 properties in the commercial centre, including the main market, were attacked, with many looted and then

set alight. The town literally went up in smoke.²³

An estimated 150 youths, nearly all Tuareg, were immediately jailed. The townspeople, especially the Tuareg, were furious, demanding the youths be freed on the grounds that the police had provoked them into rioting. The court responded by sitting in closed session under heavy security. The surrounding streets were cleared and no one was allowed to attend the hearings at which 64 youths were given prison sentences, while the rest were given fines of around €60 each.

However, Tuareg elders claimed that *agents provocateurs* had incited the youths to riot and sought advice from lawyers based in Algiers. Evidence was eventually brought before the court proving that the riots, as the Tuareg had claimed, had indeed been whipped up and directed by police *agents provocateurs*. The court had no choice but to immediately free the 64 imprisoned youths.²⁴

Tuareg provocation has been even more pronounced in Niger, one of the world's poorest countries and, therefore, especially appreciative of American largesse. By the end of 2007, Niger, the country in the region least able to excite the Americans with any significant Islamist activity, was engulfed in a Tuareg rebellion. However, long before then, the governments in the region had earmarked their marginalised Tuareg populations as the means to acquire terrorism rents.

Four weeks after the official launch of the PSI, the Nigerien government accused a prominent Tuareg, Rhissa ag Boula, of complicity in the killing of Adam Amangué, a young member of the ruling National Movement for the Development of Society – Nassara (MNSD-Nassara).²⁵

During the 1990s Tuareg rebellion in Niger, Ag Boula took over the leadership of the Front de Libération de l'Air et de l'Azawak (FLAA) after the death of Mano Dayak in 1995. Ag Boula was, therefore, the FLAA's signatory to the 1995 peace accord, which formally marked the end of the Tuareg rebellion in Niger. As part of the post-rebellion reintegration process, Ag Boula was appointed minister of tourism and crafts.

Local people regarded Amangué's murder as most uncharacteristic, describing the three bullets in his head and two in his stomach as a 'mafia-style' killing. Ag Boula, who denied any involvement in the murder, was dismissed as minister on 12 February 2004. Three days later, he was arrested in a move many people believed was designed to provoke the Tuareg into taking up arms so that the government could secure more US military aid.

If that were so, Ag Boula's arrest and detention had the desired effect, increasing political tension among the Tuareg, especially in their traditional stronghold, the Air Massif. During the course of the summer, the region experienced an escalation in banditry, for which Ag Boula's brother, Mohamed

ag Boula, reportedly claimed responsibility.

That was enough for the Nigerien government to send some 150 troops into the Air Massif in September, in a move that many thought would ignite a new Tuareg rebellion.²⁶ However, the troops, who were recently trained by the United States as part of its PSI, were ambushed by the Tuareg and at least one soldier was killed, four wounded and four taken hostage.

Radio France Internationale (RFI) subsequently carried an interview with Ag Boula's brother in which he said that he was leading a 200-strong group that was fighting to defend the rights of the Tuareg, Tubu and Semori nomadic populations of northern Niger, and that he was personally responsible for the ambush.²⁷

Northern Air remained tense and effectively cordoned off from the outside world throughout the winter months of 2004 and into 2005. However, there were no further serious incidents, largely due to Tuareg restraint and the good offices of the Libyan leader, Muammar Gaddafi, who secured the Niger soldiers' release on 8 February.

On 4 March, Ag Boula was released after 13 months in prison without any charges being brought against him. In 2011, under the new presidency of Mahamadou Issoufou, Ag Boula was rehabilitated. In 2016, he was appointed as a minister and given charge of development programmes in the Agades region.

A new wave of Tuareg rebellions

A new Tuareg rebellion began in Niger in February 2007 and spread to Mali a few months later.²⁸ There were multiple possible causes of the Niger rebellion. In addition to a sense of political marginalisation, the Tuareg were aggrieved by the conditions and expansion of uranium mining in northern Niger. In particular, they were angered and concerned by the exploitative nature of these enterprises, the threat of an impending ecological disaster, and abuse of Tuareg indigenous rights by the government and foreign companies. Other grievances included the government's failure to adhere to the 1995 peace agreement, as well as the impact of the US's GWOT.

Although all of these grievances were legitimate and serious, none warranted a rebellion. Indeed, the circumstances that led to the first shots being fired in the village of Iferouane on 8 February, are still unexplained. Contemporaneous research in the region revealed that almost all Niger's Tuareg feared another rebellion and had no desire to take up arms again; government atrocities in the 1990s rebellion were still fresh in their minds.

The evidence from Niger and Mali suggests that both rebellions may well have been triggered by external parties. This was especially true of Niger, where there are allegations that President Mamadou Tandja and his interior minister,

Albadé Abouba, were determined to draw the Tuareg into a bloody conflict.

After a spate of atrocities committed by Niger's Armed Forces (FAN) during the spring and summer of 2007, in which they attacked villages and encampments, killing the disabled and old men, women and children, the Niger Tuareg – now organised in the *Mouvement des Nigériens pour la Justice* (MNJ) – feared a genocide.²⁹ Genocide fears were reinforced on 27 September, during Ramadan itself, when a FAN patrol stopped a small convoy of five vehicles in the extreme north of Air. The soldiers forced the passengers out of the vehicles, divided them into light-skinned and dark-skinned groups, and presuming them to be Tuareg, executed the 12 light-skinned ones in cold blood.

The following day, these troops came across a series of Tuareg encampments in the same region. The soldiers rampaged through the tents, killing 22 innocent men, women and children and slaughtering an unknown number of livestock.³⁰

At the end of Ramadan, a government television station twice broadcast comments from a Nigerien civil society leader who said that ethnic Tuareg rebels could be exterminated in 48 hours.³¹ Indeed, a report on the conflict in Niger, commissioned by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in August, had already warned that President Tandja was likely to unleash his armed forces on the Tuareg civilian population.³² That is precisely what he did. In the week before Christmas 2007, the UK-based Amnesty International and the US-based Human Rights Watch, denounced Niger's armed forces for committing war crimes.³³

Worse was to come, with the UN being notified in writing on 29 March 2008 that the policy and actions of President Tandja towards the Tuareg constituted genocide.³⁴ The letter, written on behalf of the Tuareg people of northern Niger, urged the UN 'to intervene as a matter of urgency and to protect them from such genocidal actions'.

In Mali, the rebellion was also triggered by government armed forces committing atrocities against Tuareg civilians, although of considerable less severity than in Niger.

In both countries, the governments refused to dignify the Tuareg by calling them rebels. Rather, they referred to them as insurgents, criminals and increasingly as terrorists, and tried to link them to AQIM and drug traffickers. Indeed, the Tuareg, except for Iyad ag Ghali and his small group of followers (who will be discussed shortly), were violently opposed to AQIM.

The number of people killed in the two rebellions has not been confirmed, but runs into the hundreds, not thousands. Nor did either rebellion come to an end in any sort of official peace and reconciliation process. Rather, they fizzled out in a state of exhaustion and bitterness.

In Niger, the key MNJ leader was deposed by his people and moved to Libya, while Tandja was overthrown in a coup d'état in 2010. While Issoufou's new government went to considerable ends to rehabilitate the Tuareg rebels, there were no such reconciliatory moves by Mali's government. This left the rebellion to flare up again on a much larger scale at the end of 2011.

The marginalisation and criminalisation of the Tuareg

With the rebellions petering out in a state of exhaustion, and with no peace agreements or attempts at reconciliation, the Tuareg populations in both countries found themselves even more marginalised and impoverished. The rebellions, along with the renewal of hostage taking in 2008, destroyed what was left of the tourism industry. Most international NGOs also left the region, taking with them the often lucrative cash flows attached to the international development sector.

As in the 1970s and 1980s, when drought devastated the Sahel, many Tuareg took the well-trodden path to Libya in search of employment: sometimes in the oil fields, but more often in Gaddafi's foreign legion and security forces. Others drifted into a life of banditry and lawlessness, with a growing number seeking money and excitement as guides, drivers and armed guards in the trans-Saharan cocaine-trafficking business. From around 2005/06 onwards, South American cocaine was, on an increasing scale, shipped or flown into West Africa and its Malian hub.³⁵

Although mostly in the hands of the Berabiche, Lamhar and Tilemsi Arabs – and protected by the highest levels of the state and security services, especially in Mali, Mauritania and Algeria – most Tuareg tribes and rebel groups took protection money and 'rent' for safe passage through their territories. Drug trafficking increasingly became the financial mainstay of many Sahelian communities – Arab and Tuareg – and of the rebellions.³⁶

In 2008, hostage taking resumed. The first Westerners taken hostage since 2003 were seized in Tunisia and taken to Mali.³⁷ By the end of 2011, some 70 Westerners, including the 32 in 2003, had been taken hostage in the Sahara-Sahel. Most kidnappings were attributed to AQIM and the Algerian outlaw Mokhtar Belmokhtar.³⁸ Nevertheless, as with drug trafficking, the Tuareg received much more than their fair share of blame.

In the same way that the highest levels of state were protecting drug trafficking, there are widespread allegations that the DRS was involved, to one degree or another, in all of these hostage-taking cases.³⁹

However, one of the primary reasons why the Tuareg became branded as kidnappers was because of a small Tuareg group commanded by Iyad ag Ghali and his cousin, Hamada ag Hama (aliases Abdelkrim Taleb (preacher)

and Abdelkrim al-Targui).⁴⁰ Both were closely associated with the DRS, along with Abdelkrim's nephews, Haïba ag Achérif and Mohamed Ali ag Wadoussène. The group was heavily involved in kidnapping Westerners; Taleb would do the kidnapping, while Ag Ghali negotiated the ransom and release.

With the Americans trying to link drug trafficking to Al-Qaeda and with Ag Ghali and Taleb so heavily involved in hostage taking, it is hardly surprising that the Tuareg as a whole were increasingly being branded as terrorists and linked to AQIM in the media and local governments.

The fall of Gaddafi brings crisis to the Sahel

The Libyan rebellion and the overthrow of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi in September 2011 had profound ramifications for the Tuareg and the Sahel. During the course of the rebellion, several hundred Tuareg had signed up as mercenaries to help Gaddafi. However, many of the thousands of Tuareg who migrated to Libya during the 1970s and 1980s, and who often lived as second-class citizens under his regime, were tarnished with the same brush as the mercenaries and forced to return to the Sahel.

The Niger government was aware of the potential problems posed by these returnees and went to considerable lengths to reincorporate them into civil society. The Mali government made no such effort. The result was that several hundred well-armed Tuareg fighters returning to Mali met up with Ibrahim ag Bahanga's remaining rebels in northeast Mali and formed the Mouvement National de Libération de L'Azawad (MNLA). This secessionist force was bent on creating the independent state of Azawad – the Tuareg name for northern Mali.

The MNLA posed a serious threat to Algeria as well, which realised that the well-armed secessionist force could easily defeat Mali's ill-led and ill-equipped armed forces and potentially ignite simmering Tuareg unrest in Algeria's south.

The first shots in the new rebellion were fired in January 2017, with the MNLA rebels and their Islamist allies quickly putting the Malian army to flight, which, in turn, triggered a coup d'état in Bamako and the collapse of the government.

On 6 April, the MNLA declared the independent state of Azawad. However, within days, the MNLA was effectively sidelined by the Islamists, led by Iyad ag Ghali, Abou Zaïd and the Mokhtar Belmokhtar. The Tuareg MNLA rebels were politically and militarily discredited and marginalised as the Islamists took control of northern Mali.

Western military intervention, and a fragile peace and divisions among the Tuareg

By January 2012, with the Islamists threatening to break out of Azawad and

threaten the capital Bamako itself, the French intervened militarily. Within a week, France's Operation Serval had halted the Islamists' advance and began driving them back into the Tigharghar Mountains in the Adrar des Ifoghas. The number of Islamists killed has never been adequately accounted for but probably numbered at least 200, possibly more, with many escaping northwards into Algeria, Tunisia and Libya, while others melted back into civil society.⁴¹

The cities of Timbuktu and Gao were soon relieved from the ruthless, supposedly sharia rule that had been imposed on them through much of 2012, while Kidal remained in the hands of the MNLA.

Two and a half years later, in June 2015, an alliance of predominantly Tuareg rebels and the Malian government signed a peace agreement in Algiers. The French military intervention failed to oust the Islamists, now labelled jihadists, from Mali. Furthermore, the main jihadist threat in Mali, led primarily by Iyad ag Ghali, is once again expanding across the country and neighbouring states, notably Niger and Burkina Faso, and possibly threatening others, such as Mauritania, Senegal and Ivory Coast.

Moreover, the French military intervention has been expanded under Operation Barkhane, with some 4 000 to 5 000 French troops now deployed across Mali, Niger and Chad in an attempt to arrest the increasing jihadist threat. It is supported by some 13 000 UN peacekeepers in Mali, and an increasing number of other Western powers. The United States and Germany are building military bases in Niger, with smaller contingents from Holland and Sweden, and with Canada likely to join them.

The Malian Tuareg, like those in Niger, Algeria and Libya, have always been characterised by tribal and class divisions. Today, in addition to these traditional divisions, they are divided into at least six post-2012 political groupings, aligned across at least two broad and fast-changing alliances, which reflect the ethnic complexity of Azawad (northern Mali).

The two broad alliances are the Coordination des Mouvements de l'Azawad (CMA) and the Platform. The CMA consists of the core MNLA and the Haut Conseil pour l'Unité de l'Azawad (HCUA), which comprises mostly Tuareg of the 'noble' Ifoghas lineage and is suspected by many to have close links with Iyad ag Ghali's jihadist Ansar al-Din. It also consists of dissident Arabs who broke from the original Mouvement Arabe de l'Azawad (MAA); the Tuareg Coalition du Peuple pour l'Azawad (CPA), which split from the MNLA in 2014 but rejoined in late 2016; the Coordination des Mouvements et Forces Patriotiques de Résistance (CMFPR II), which split from CMFPR I and is comprised mostly of Peul (Fulani), Songhai and other militia, such as the Ganda Iso; and, since October 2016, the Congrès pour la Justice dans l'Azawad (CJA), comprising mostly Kel Intessar Tuareg.

The Platform consists of predominantly ‘pro-government’ groups, notably the Groupe Autodéfense Touareg Imghad et Alliés (GATIA), consisting of the Imghad (vassal) Tuareg and their allies, led by the former Tuareg Malian army colonel (now General) El Hadj ag Gamou; the original Mouvement Arabe de l’Azawad (MAA); the remains of CMFPR I; the Peul Mouvement pour la Défense de la Patrie (MDP), which switched from the CMA to the Platform in June 2016; and the Mouvement pour le Salut de l’Azawad (MSA), led by two Tuareg of the Chamanamas and Daoussak tribes, which split from the MNLA in September 2016.

The key parties in the CMA are the predominantly Tuareg MNLA and HCUA and the increasingly influential CMFPR II, led by Ibrahim Abba Kantao, a native of Gao (Cité des Askia) and also the leader of the Forces de Libération du Nord du Mali (FLN) and Ganda Iso. The key person in the Platform, although invariably operating more behind the scene, is El Hadj ag Gamou. In this complex and very dynamic post-2012 political landscape, the MNLA is now a relatively weaker entity than at the start of the 2012 rebellion, although it still effectively holds de facto power over Kidal.

Within this landscape, the major cleavages, at least potentially, are between the MNLA and GATIA, who spent much of 2015–2016 in a state of conflict, and between both the MNLA and GATIA and Iyad ag Ghali’s Ansar al-Din, which is still outside both alliances (although with unofficial ties to the HCUA) and outlawed as a terrorist/jihadist organisation. The fight between GATIA and Ansar al-Din is based more on personal rivalries and ambitions than on ideology, with one bone of contention being that Iyad married Ag Gamou’s first wife.

Since the start of the Tuareg rebellion and Islamist insurgency in January 2012, Mali’s Tuareg have been subjected to demonisation in both the local and Bamako-based Western media. This is because these media platforms are reliant on information from Mali’s south, the prejudices of the Bamako government against the Tuareg and Arabs of northern Mali, and a lack of understanding of northern Mali’s fundamentals. There is also a complete lack of appreciation of the complex situations and tribulations most Tuareg groups have endured since the rebellions of the 1990s and the subsequent GWOT.

Indeed, the fact that it took two and half years to achieve a peace agreement, which has still not been implemented, is largely due to the Bamako government’s ill will towards its northern populations, especially the Tuareg. As a result, the international and local media have been prone to follow Bamako authorities’ example in demonising the Tuareg in general, not just as rebels, but also as terrorists and now even as jihadists.

The threat of Islamist extremism to Niger's Tuareg

Thanks to the more understanding and accommodating policies of the Issoufou government, Niger averted a Malian-type crisis. Brigi Rafini, a Tuareg from the Agades region, has been prime minister since 2011, while Rhissa ag Boula, a former Tuareg rebel, is now the minister responsible for developing the predominantly Tuareg Agades region.

Since the end of the 2007–2009 rebellion, the biggest difficulty faced by Niger's Tuareg has probably been Algeria's closure of its frontier with Niger in January 2013. Algeria's stated reason was to prevent terrorists, driven out of Mali by France's military intervention there, from entering Algeria. However, there are also allegations that the real reason was to control and divert much of Niger's food supply and other Algerian trade with Niger into the hands of local Algerian Arabs.⁴²

After the rebellion, with the tourism industry decimated, increasing numbers of Tuareg sought alternative livelihoods as seasonal workers in Algeria's southern city of Tamanrasset and running illegal taxis between Agades and Tamanrasset. However, the closure of the Algerian frontier eliminated these opportunities. As a result, more young Tuareg drifted into the criminal margins of banditry and drug trafficking, while a growing number moved into the people-trafficking business, which, until 26 May 2015, was quite legal, and saw an estimated 100 000 or more trans-Saharan migrants passing through Agades annually.⁴³ However, under pressure from the EU, Niger voted for a new law, with immediate effect, that prohibited the transport of migrants. The EU's promise to pump huge funds into alternative sustainable projects has yet to come to fruition.

With people trafficking criminalised, and more and more people trying to seek their fortunes in a proliferation of gold-rush ventures in Djado, Tibarakaten and elsewhere, many Tuareg have established businesses transporting people and goods to the gold fields, or even searching for gold themselves, but with few, if any, reports of fortunes being made.

However, the most serious impact of the Algerian border closure on Niger's Tuareg is that it has led to a dangerous radicalisation of the youth, the one thing that all Sahelian countries are trying to counter.

Many of the seasonal workers who had previously sought work in Tamanrasset went to Libya instead. There, many of the younger men got indoctrinated by extremist Islamist movements and on their return to Niger began trying to impose extremist Islamist rules on their camps and villages. In several villages in Aïr, the Tuareg mountainous stronghold north of Agades, radicalised youths have stopped the people playing traditional 'tamtam' music, forced women to wear the hijab, and prohibited women from shaking hands

with men. This is a particularly dangerous development in the Sahel, where jihadist groups are increasingly making their presence felt.

Conclusion

Life in the desert is always hard. For most Tuareg, it has become even harder during the 21st century, and not by their own making. Washington's launch of a Sahara–Sahel front in the GWOT was a catastrophe for the entire region, especially the Tuareg, as livelihoods were destroyed and both American and local governments tried to brand them as terrorists or, at best, putative terrorists.

The fall of the Gaddafi regime in 2011 compounded the economic problems that GWOT brought to the region and set in motion a further and more serious Tuareg rebellion in Mali, which was possibly undermined by Algerian DRS's promotion of an Islamist insurgency.

Algeria's support for terrorism, and its own policy of relocating jihadism further south into the Sahel, enabled DRS agents such as Iyad ag Ghali, Abou Zaïd and the Mokhtar Belmokhtar to effectively take control of much of this part of the Sahara–Sahel. A small number of Tuareg have joined them, more out of economic necessity and adventure than any ideological reasons.

However, it has been the spread of jihadism following the French military intervention, especially through Iyad ag Ghali, that has given the Tuareg a bad name and led to their further demonisation.

To refer to the Tuareg in general as terrorists or jihadists is absurd: they are the one people who have struggled more than any other to rid the region of terrorists, jihadists and their ideologies. And yet the leading jihadist in the region is a Tuareg – Iyad ag Ghali.

Iyad ag Ghali has his supporters among some of Mali's Tuareg and among other ethnic groups in Mali. However, since early March 2017, his jihadist star shines ever brighter and further afield.

On 2 March, he announced that he was in command of a new jihadist entity called Nusrat al-Islam Wal Muslimin, meaning The Support Group for Islam and Muslims, which, at this stage, comprises Ansar al-Din, AQIM in the Sahara, the Mokhtar Belmokhtar's Al-Mourabitoun (including MUJAO), Mali's Macina Liberation Front, and possibly a few other small jihadist groups in Mali and Burkina Faso.⁴⁴

There are several people in Mali who believe that there will never be a proper peace until Iyad ag Ghali is brought into the negotiations. That may be his aim. But, he also has many enemies among the Tuareg population, as well as other ethnic and political groups.

Many believe that the only reason why he is still alive is because he is protected by the Algerians, and, according to many sources, also by the French,

in addition to Malian government interests and connections in the gulf. He has been described as both a triple and a quadruple agent. However, the fact that he remains a war criminal (yet to be convicted), an internationally wanted terrorist, and the region's leading jihadist does not mean that all other Tuaregs should be tarred with the same brush.

If it is legitimate to talk of an ethnic group in such general terms, it is true to say that few, if any, other people have suffered more from the GWOT and its consequences than the Tuaregs – and for reasons that are still little known or understood, except by themselves.

Endnotes

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- 3 Williams, K (1997) *The Prague Spring and its Aftermath: Czechoslovak politics, 1968–1970*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
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- 5 The two most prominent were the Union Nationale des Associations des Agences de Tourisme Alternatif (UNATA) and the Association des Agences de Tourisme Wilaya de Tamanrasset (ATAWT).
- 6 Much of the Central Sahara is already protected by UNESCO as a designated World Heritage Site. World Heritage Sites in the Sahara include: the Tassili-n-Ajjer (Algeria), the Rock Art sites of Tadrart Acacus (Libya), Ghadames (Libya), Timbuktu (Mali), the Air and Ténéré Natural Reserves (Niger), the Historic Centre of Agades (Niger), the Ancient Ksour of Ouadane, Chinguetti, Tichitt and Oualata (Mauritania).
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- 9 The DRS command began to be dismantled in September 2013, after the In Amenas 'terrorist' attack of that year. General Mediène was 'retired' in late 2015. See, Keenan, J (2016) *The In Amenas Report*. International State Crime Initiative (ISCI). Published November 2016. Available at: <http://statecrime.org/data/2016/11/KEENAN-IN-AMENAS-REPORT-FINAL-November-2016.pdf>
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- 12 See, Keenan, J (2013) *The Dying Sahara: US imperialism and terror in Africa*, Chapter 2. London: Pluto Press, pp. 1–13.
- 13 IRIN (2004) Famine not fanaticism poses greatest threat in Sahel. Published 14 October 2004. Available at: <http://www.irinnews.org/feature/2004/10/14>
- 14 A particularly good example of EUCOM's view of its role in the Sahara-Sahel can be gleaned from reading the evidence given to the US House of Representatives: Pope, WP (2005) Eliminating Terrorist Sanctuaries: The role of security assistance. Hearing before the

- Subcommittee on International Terrorism and Non-proliferation of the Committee on International Relations, House of Representatives. One Hundred and Ninth Congress, First Session, 10 March 2005. Available at: <https://2001-2009.state.gov/s/ct/rls/rm/43702.htm>
- 15 IRIN (2004) Famine not fanaticism poses greatest threat in Sahel. Published 14 October 2004. Available at: <http://www.irinnews.org/feature/2004/10/14>
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- 17 Ibid.
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- 21 There are many definitions of terrorism. By 'conventional', I mean that terrorism is the threatened or employed use of violence against civilian targets for political objectives. 'Terrorism' does not include such fairly normal Saharan pursuits as smuggling, acts of political rebellion or the many forms of resistance of civil society to the corrupt and authoritarian regimes that hold sway over most of this part of Africa.
- 22 Amnesty International (2006) Algeria: Unrestrained powers: Torture by Algeria's military security. Published 10 July 2006. Available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/44c614174.html>
- 23 Keenan (2013) pp. 34–37.
- 24 For details of the riots, see Keenan (2013) pp. 34–37. Many of the imprisoned youths and their parents were interviewed by the author, as were the two lawyers who defended them and won their case. Algeria does not maintain accessible court records. However, the two lawyers were able to provide detailed accounts of what happened in the court.
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- 28 See, Keenan (2013) pp. 74–91; 92–108.
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- 30 Eyewitness reports were collected and published less than two weeks later by the Society for Threatened Peoples. See: ReliefWeb (2007) Eye-witnesses report massacre of 32 Tuareg – independent investigation demanded. Published 9 October 2007. Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/mali/eye-witnesses-report-massacre-32-tuareg-independent-investigation-demanded>
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- 33 Amnesty International (2007) Niger: Extrajudicial executions and population displacement

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- 34 As defined in Resolution 260 (III) A of the United Nations General Assembly on 9 December 1948, namely the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Article 1 states that ‘The Contracting Parties confirm that genocide, whether committed in time of peace or in time of war, is a crime under international law which they undertake to prevent and to punish.’
- 35 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2011) *The Transatlantic Cocaine Market*. Published April 2011. Available at: <http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4e809c692.pdf>
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 BBC (2008) Tricky dealings in hostage case. Published 28 March 2008. Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7317495.stm>
- 38 For details of all these kidnappings, see Keenan (2009). This number excludes 20 Italians taken hostage in Chad in 2006.
- 39 This was because Mokhtar Belmokhtar and AQIM leaders such as Abdelhamid Abou Zaid were closely associated with Algeria’s DRS. See: Archer and Popovic (2007) p. 11.
- 40 Wing, SD (2008) Mali: Politics of crisis, *African Affairs*, **112** (448), pp. 476–485. Available at: <https://academic.oup.com/afaf/article-abstract/112/448/476/124663>
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