

A CASE STUDY OF SEPARATISM – THE TUAREGS OF THE SOUTHERN SAHARA

Some of you may have seen Tinariwen at a festival or music venue, or perhaps on YouTube. With their flowing robes and a guitar sound matched to the rhythm of hand drums and claps, this band from Mali conjures up the romance of the desert. However, their country is in turmoil. The government was ousted in a coup and rebels of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) declared a new, independent nation in the arid north. When this happened members of the band said that, as Tuareg people, they saw this as ‘a dream come true’. Unfortunately, the separatists have, since, been beset by al Qaida-type groups. These have recently been attacked by French forces supported by other Western governments (January 2013).

The founder of Tinariwen, Ibrahim Ag Alhabib, is 50 years old. In the 1980s he was an unemployed migrant living in Algeria and Libya because his family had been forced out of north-eastern Mali in the early 1960s. His father had been arrested in 1964 for helping a Tuareg rebellion against the newly independent government of Mali and executed by firing squad. The band’s music conveys their homesickness, anger and concern about the sufferings of their stateless disenfranchised people.

The purpose of this Geofile unit is to define separatism, say who the Tuaregs are, and locate their homeland. It will examine a range of reasons for Tuareg separatism, consider the evidence for separatist feelings, look at the consequences of separatist pressures, and regard the attitudes of the different groups of people involved (Figure 1).

Background

The European colonial powers in Africa restricted nomadic movements to specific territories, and after independence movement was further constrained. During independence in the 1950s and 1960s, the Tuaregs’ calls for autonomy were ignored. They had ranged over the southern Sahara for centuries and, like the Kurds in the Near East, saw their

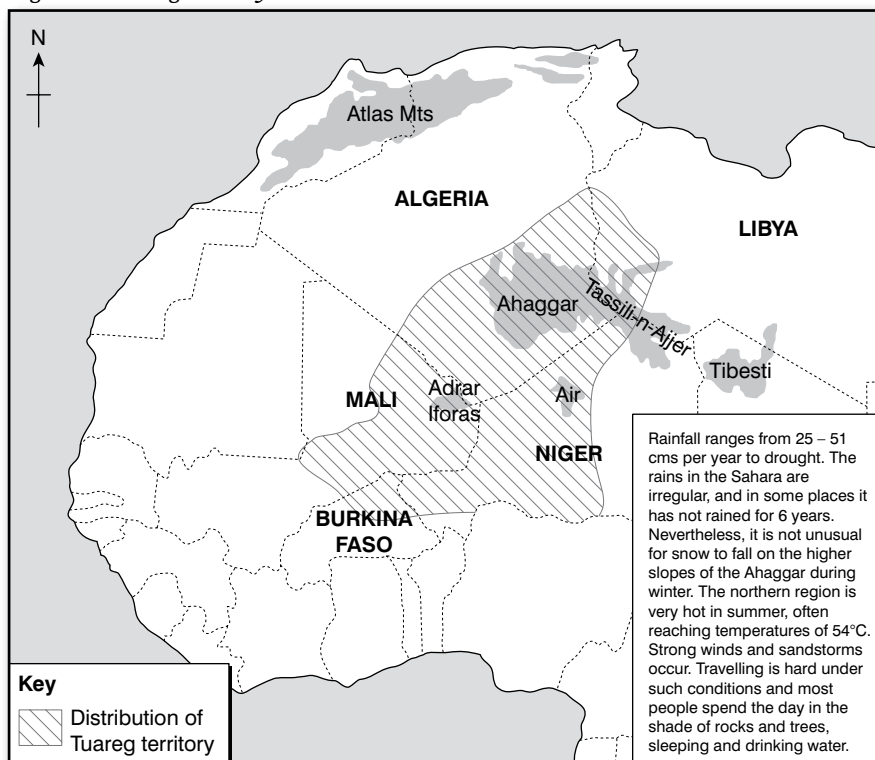
Figure 1: Key word box

Tuaregs	Tuaregs are a group of nomadic stock breeders (considered part of the Berber people), who live in an extensive area of West Africa from Western Sahara to the northern parts of Western Sudan. They appear to have moved southwards in a series of migrations as early as the 7th century AD. By the end of the 14th century Tuareg groups had established themselves as far south as the Nigerian border. Their society involves strong tribal organisation. Without a national state and government, tribes serve as the highest indigenous source of authority in which people place their allegiance.
Berbers	The Berbers are the indigenous people of North Africa west of the Nile Valley, continuously distributed from the Atlantic to the Siwa oasis, in Egypt, and from the Mediterranean to the Niger River. Historically they spoke the Berber language and local versions of it. Today, most Berber-speaking people live in Morocco and Algeria. Smaller Berber-speaking populations are scattered throughout Tunisia, Libya, Mauritania, Mali and Niger, as well as large migrant communities living in Europe. Many call themselves some variant of the word <i>amazighen</i> (singular: <i>amazigh</i>), meaning ‘free people’
Berberism	This is a movement for nationalism based on ethnicity, culture and geography, started in Algeria and Morocco, later spreading to the rest of Berber countries in North Africa. A Berber group, the Tuaregs, is in rebellion against the West African country of Mali and has established an independent state called Azawad which identifies itself as ‘Berber’. The Berberist movement in Algeria and Morocco is in opposition to the growing cultural and political influence of Arabic-speaking countries, while in Azawad, it is in opposition to perceived discrimination against Berbers on the part of black African majority groups.
Separatist pressure	Separatist pressure is an attempt by a group of people within one or more countries to have greater autonomy, and ideally independence, from a central government from which they feel alienated. Such people often have a different language, culture, or religion from the rest of the nation, and are geographically isolated within that area. Examples include the Basques (in France and Spain), the Catalans (in Spain), the Quebecois (Canada), the Chechens (Russia), the Scots (UK), and the Kurds (Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey).
Autonomy	This is the right of self-government and self-determination. For centuries the Tuaregs had a physical and cultural homeland.
Nation	The political unit to which people show their allegiance. They see the nation as a large number of people of mainly common descent, language, history and usually territory bounded by defined limits in which there is a society with one government.
Sovereignty	This refers to the supreme power held by the government of nations

ancestral homelands carved up between a number of new nations: Mali, Niger, Algeria, Libya and Upper Volta (since renamed Burkina Faso), whose leaders were not sympathetic to nomadic ways and tribal hierarchies. Figure 2 shows a map of Tuareg territory.

Catastrophic droughts in the mid-1970s and 1980s all but destroyed the animal herds on which the nomads depended for their existence. The Tuareg’s desert lifestyle was broken, forcing thousands of their young men to leave home in search of work. Many, like Ibrahim, walked across the

Figure 2: Tuareg territory



arid vastness to the oil-rich states of Libya and Algeria.

Tinariwen, a collective, was formed in refugee camps, and its members are veterans of at least two insurrections. Their homeland's complicated state is as much a part of their ethos as the guitar. They represent jobless travellers – 'ishumar', as they're called in their native language, Tamesheq – a distortion of 'chomeur' the French word for 'unemployed'. Their music communicates the acoustic sound and poetry of ishumar adventurers sitting around a campfire, sharing cigarettes, stories, songs and an instrument.

The band members took part in the rebellion of 1990 to 1995, when Tuareg groups in Niger and Mali fought to achieve sovereignty. So the band's history reflects that of the Tuareg in general. The nomadic confederations have clashed with the sedentary communities of the region ever since they migrated from the Maghreb between the 7th and 14th centuries. In more recent times insurgencies have happened after regional famines, when the ensuing refugee crisis coincided with political repression. For over 100 years the Tuareg people have suffered prejudice, exclusion and massacres – violations of human rights that have never been investigated or recognised by the international community. The French had difficulties subduing them because of their fierce

resistance. Since independence, the Tuaregs have rebelled against the state, for instance in Mali in 1962–64, 1990–96, 2006–09 and 2012, in attempts to gain self-rule from what they have experienced as oppressive government

Tuareg identity

The Tuaregs call themselves Kel Tamasheq, 'people who speak Tamasheq'. The alphabet, tifnari, is common to all groups and is related to an early Libyan script. Visual and verbal arts are greatly appreciated. A large body of music, poetry, and song exists, essential to courtship, rites of passage, and secular festivals. A single chord violin, drums and wooden flute are traditional instruments. Both men and women sing. People gather around campfires in the evening. Unlike the Arab custom, men rather than women wear a veil. The indigo (and sometimes black) veil is the most distinctive and striking article of clothing. Self-respecting Tuareg think it indecent for a man to let his mouth be seen by anyone to whom he owes formal respect, nor will he show his face to anyone whose social standing he considers superior to his own.

Although principally tribal, there are seven major confederations that bear geographical place names, so identifying them with the region they call their homeland. Each tribe is made up of several clans, further

divided into groups of families. In most groups there are whole tribes of a religious class led by their own chiefs. A class system provides the basis for political units. During their early history the Tuareg subjugated the Songhay and the Hausa. Raids against sedentary settlements and caravans were a part of life when groups increased their herds of cattle and status.

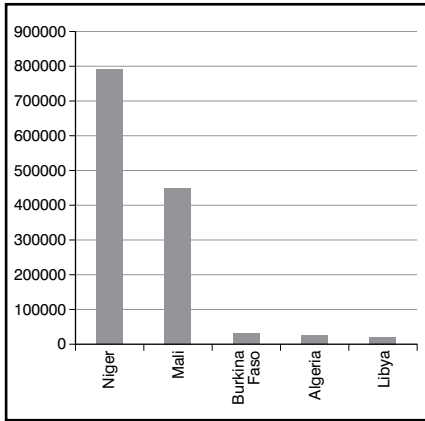
Tuareg people form a clear minority in all the countries they occupy (Figures 3 and 4) and a majority in many Saharan regions. Owing to political tensions and natural disasters it has become difficult to make a living solely from nomadic stockbreeding despite living on the products of their animals. Some do remain nomadic, moving their herds of camels, cattle, sheep and goats between dry and rainy season pastures according to the quality and distribution of rainfall. Most rural Tuareg combine herding, oasis gardening, caravan trading and migrant labour. Over time droughts and desertification killed livestock and forced changes to traditional migration routes. Conflicts arose with the people whose lands they pass through. Thousands of nomads, having lost everything, migrated to the bigger villages and towns.

Often, national governments gave no aid. In both Mali and Niger large numbers of nomads escaped to refugee camps in Algeria and Libya. There, militants who held state governments responsible for not helping communities in need, began to circulate and form rebel groups. In Algeria, the government successfully discouraged nomadism. The oil and gas boom, and the 1968–74 droughts in the southern Sahel persuaded most tribes people to opt for urban life. In Libya, many men were incorporated into the army.

Niger

Niger has seen unrest at various times over the last 30 years. At first rebels demanded the right of children to learn Tamasheq at school, but this intensified into calls for independence. When assistance pledged to Tuareg coming back from Algeria didn't materialise, disapproval turned to violence, which escalated when Niger's military arrested, tortured, and killed hundreds of Tuareg civilians. Peace accords in 1995 ended most fighting and led to the assimilation of former rebels

Figure 3: A graph to show the population of Tuaregs in different countries



into the military, returning others to useful civilian life. Relations in 2007 broke down when Tuareg attacked the government and mining interests in the north. The rebels were concerned that the state had failed to honour promises of a role in democratic institutions and a bigger share in the mineral wealth. It was perceived that foreign mining interests and southern political leaders were given special status. In northern Niger, the uranium-rich land is traditionally Tuareg territory. The government in Niamey is unwilling to give up control of the profitable mining to indigenous groups, while the Tuareg are, equally, determined not to surrender the possibility of economic benefit. The French firm, Areva, exploits massive reserves and damages the environment. The mining process uses large quantities of water, threatening the Tuareg ability to subsist as the water table becomes depleted. The ground water is also being contaminated by radioactive waste. Global warming makes the situation worse, increasing the rate of desertification. Grazing lands become degraded. Consequently, the Tuareg compete with southern farming communities for scarce resources, leading to tensions and conflict. A ceasefire since 2009 enabled discussion about economic, political and environmental reforms, while some Tuareg aim for control of their ancestral lands.

Mali

Mali, its borders drawn by French colonialists without reference to geography or the indigenous people, covers two different ecological and cultural zones. The southern part is largely forest, the northern portion savanna and desert. The northern part, an area the size of France, is

Figure 4: A table to show some aspects of the population of selected Southern Saharan countries

Country	Tuareg population (2000 est)	Total population	Tuareg population as % of total	Muslim population as % of total
Niger	790,000	16,345,000	9	80
Mali	450,000	15,494,000	10	90
Burkina Faso	30,000	17,250,000	na	60
Algeria	25,000	37,367,000	*	99
Libya	20,000	5,613,000	na	97
Total	1,315,000			

Table compiled from CIA Factbook 2012

*Although almost all Algerians are Berber in origin (not Arab), only a minority classify themselves as Berber, about 15% of the total; the Berbers are also Muslim but identify with their Berber rather than Arab cultural heritage; Berbers have long campaigned, sometimes violently, for autonomy; the government is not likely to grant this but has offered to start teaching Berber language in schools.

home to a combination of people that includes nomadic Tuaregs, while the southern half is dominated by settled black Africans. Southerners are hostile to the Tuaregs, who say they have been living in fear and exclusion since independence in 1960. The antagonism is based on the perception of skin colour. Southerners characterise themselves as ‘blacks’, and they think of the Tuaregs and Arabs as ‘whites’. There are cultural differences, too, but the focus seems to be on skin colour. Unfortunately, racism can trigger violent feelings amongst frustrated citizens and is a means of excluding sections of population. For decades, the national government in the south has stigmatised and excluded members of the Tuareg population. Tuaregs feel that massacres and executions over the years indicate the state’s genocidal tendencies.

Some Tuareg agitated for an independent nation when French colonialism ended. The authorities responded harshly to end the rebellion in the north in 1963. Resentment fuelled a second uprising in 1990 when the president (facing pressure over poverty, International Monetary Fund restrictions on spending, drought and 20 years of one-party rule) was overthrown. The development of Berberism (Figures 1 and 5) encouraged a Tuareg ethnic revival, too. Interludes of peace with promises to repatriate communities coerced into camps in the south, and of opportunities to join the government in Bamako, were broken

by times of war, for example, when some Tuaregs, complaining about poverty in the Kidal region, increased attacks in 2007.

The Rebellion of 2012

The Rebellion of 2012 was a war of independence. It was led by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA). On 22 March, the President was overthrown in a coup d’état by mutinying soldiers. Another Tuareg-dominated group, the Islamist Ansar al Din (‘Defenders of Faith’), joined and the rebels took over northern Mali very quickly. They owed their success, mainly, to the downfall of the Qaddafi regime in Libya in 2011. Tuareg fighters from previous rebellions had been integrated into its armed forces, and when it fell, they fled back to Mali with large supplies of weapons. Under the leadership of the MNLA, Tuareg rebels conquered the regions that make up northern Mali, taking over the three main cities: Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu. Independence from Mali was proclaimed on April 6. The new country was Azawad - ‘land of wandering herders’ or ‘pasture’ (Figures 5 and 6). The people sought worldwide recognition of their nation. A flag in red, white, and blue is in use, and has been displayed in France, Morocco and the Canaries. The websites below illustrate these points.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/apr/06/mali-tuareg-rebels-declare-independence>

Figure 5: Armoured car covered in Toureg and Berber graffiti



Source: Reproduced with permission

<http://tuaregcultureandnews.blogspot.co.uk/>

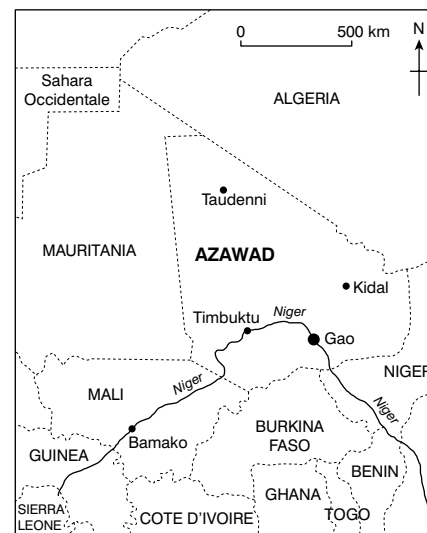
<http://www.tumblr.com/tagged/imazighen?before=1335365819>

Tuareg nationalists and Islamists struggled to settle their different visions for the new state. The National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad is a secular organisation, but much of the fighting was done by the extremist Muslim Ansar al Din and Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Their soldiers rejected the Declaration of Independence and forced MNLA out of the major cities by July 2012. Jihadists controlled more than half of the country and applied strict Sharia law to regulate everyday problems, with results similar to those of the Taliban in Afghanistan – banning music, ordering women to cover themselves, and destroying UNESCO-listed World Heritage sites in Timbuktu, on the grounds that the tombs of local saints amounted to idolatry. They declared their intention to spread Sharia throughout the nation, even threatening to take jihad to the USA, thus drawing Azawad into the ‘war on global terror’. By applying Sharia law these groups tried to control the population in order to monopolise the political and economic networks. This form of Islamism has been rejected by Tuaregs, because of the restrictions and changes it would inflict on their culture. They practise a moderate form of Islam combined with animistic spiritual beliefs and worship of saints. They believe in God and in saying their prayers. Their moral code is ‘respect’ for others – so their values honour women and promote tolerant practices. From the Tuareg point of view, the MNLA revolution is about nationalism, it is multi-ethnic, and the goal is a secular, democratic nation.

Can Azawad survive?

Unfortunately, at the same time as seeking international recognition for the new state the people wanted aid to alleviate widespread hunger. In addition, other ethnic groups, the Arabs, the Fulani, and Songhay, weren’t as enthusiastic about a separate nation, meaning the new nationalists could easily be outvoted or overthrown. In October 2012 it was reasonable to ask whether the Islamists or the nationalists would dominate. Clashes between the secular and religious factions have threatened to destroy Azawad. The Economic Community of West African States called for international efforts to resolve the crisis either through political process or by force. It was difficult to see who could respond, and if AQIM was removed, could Mali hang on to the territory? Large numbers of jihadists entered from neighbouring countries, overwhelming the Tuareg. In January 2013 French forces were sent to Mali, quickly forcing the AQIM fighters out of the three cities (but not before some ancient manuscripts in the historical library of Timbuktu had been destroyed) and into the remote areas of the north. The killing of hostages by jihadists in adjoining Algeria prompted David Cameron to say that the region will be a terrorist threat to Western Europe for decades to come. Recent accounts from the region have very little to say about the Tuareg but plenty about al Qaida. Time will tell if the French army can withdraw, if the Islamists can be kept out, if the Tuareg MNLA has survived in sufficient strength or if the unelected Malian government will recognise the independent republic.

Figure 6: Azawad and its neighbouring territories



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FOCUS QUESTIONS

1. What are the geographical, historical, economic, social and cultural reasons for Tuareg separatism?
2. What is the evidence for separatist feeling amongst the Tuareg people?
3. What actions have Tuareg groups carried out in support of separatism?
4. What are the consequences of Tuareg separatist pressures, politically and economically?
5. Make a list of the different groups of people involved, from the obvious e.g. Mali Army Officer, NMLA member and AQIM leader, to less obvious e.g. Republican voter in the USA. What are their attitudes likely to be?
6. In the light of Mali’s recent history, discuss the statement that ‘One person’s terrorist is another’s freedom fighter.’