

# The Tuareg

## Principal protagonists



Governments of Niger and Mali.



Tuareg people. *Mouvement des Nigériens pour la justice* (MNJ). *Alliance Touareg pour le Changement* (Nord Mali) (ATNMC). (Flag shown is that used by *Front Populaire de Libération de l'Azawad* in Mali.)

## Nature of conflict

Autonomy issues exacerbated by pressures on land use and, more recently, by Islamic insurgents from Algeria.

☒ Several thousand, 1990-5.

🏠 Niger: Significant uranium reserves.

## Population/ethnic composition

Niger: 12,525,000. Hausa 53%, Djerma 21.2%, Tuareg 10.4%.

Mali: 11,716,800. Bambara 30%, Senufo 10.5%, Fula 9.6%, Soninke 7.4%, Malinke 6.6%, Tuareg 7%, Dogon 4.3%. Other Tuareg communities exist in Algeria, Libya and Burkina Faso.

## Territorial extent

Primarily northern Niger and Mali. Total area of Tuareg inhabitation c2.4m km<sup>2</sup>.

## Timeline

c1000 AD: Tuareg credited with founding of Timbuktu.

1917-22: Tuareg fight a war of resistance against French colonialism.

20 Jun 1960: Mali becomes independent from France.

3 Aug 1960: Niger becomes independent from France.

1990-1995: Tuareg in armed revolt against Mali (until 1992) and Niger.

1995 onwards: Periodic outbreaks of violence continue.

2006: Tuaregs clash with Islamist groups, primarily from Algeria.

2007 onwards: rising levels of insurgency.

## Current status

Unstable. Tuareg aspirations generally unresolved.



The Tuaregs, an ancient desert people distantly related to the Egyptian and Semitic peoples, and who speak a language related to ancient Egyptian, have long had a hostile relationship with the peoples to their immediate south.

Historically, the Tuareg, also known as the 'blue men' from their blue veils (in contrast to other Islamic societies, men wear veils, women do not) were centred on the famous city of Timbuktu, which they are credited with founding in around 1000 AD. From this base, their caravans dominated the vitally important trans-Saharan salt trade. An essentially nomadic people, their struggle for survival in an extremely harsh environment has led to an isolationism and a self-reliance that has not endeared them either to colonial administrators or to post-independence governments.

In Niger, where the majority of Tuareg live, the Tuareg are concentrated in the northern Adagez region of the country, where their settlement predates the arrival of the Arabs in the 8th century. During the colonial period, the Tuareg region was divided between the various elements of the French empire. The Tuareg vigorously resisted the French, fought a war against them in 1917, and were not entirely subdued until 1922, when Niger became a French colony.

Divided by colonial borders, the Tuareg, populations of which exist in Mali, Niger, Algeria and, in limited numbers, elsewhere in western Africa, have never in modern times had a state of their own. National governments tend to be suspicious of nomadic peoples in general and post-independence governments, especially that of Niger, have sought on occasion to mobilize racial antagonism towards the 'white' Tuareg. The Tuareg, for their part, have a history of raiding settled communities for cattle and, on occasion, slaves.

Socially, geographically, and politically isolated from the national governments' centres of power to the south, the Tuareg have found themselves increasingly marginalized. In Niger, this process was exacerbated by deliberate government discrimination including the banning of the use of Tamasheq, the Tuareg language, from public use. The Niger army is officered by Hausas, with the majority of troops being drawn from the Djerma and Songhai peoples. All these groups have traditionally been hostile to the Tuareg.

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In 1990 the Tuareg rose in full scale rebellion against the Nigerien and Malian governments. Their grievances included under-representation in government, discrimination, and a lack of government interest in their concerns, which included drought and other land use pressures arising from desertification. The Tuareg of Niger have a relatively strong tradition of political organization (albeit highly factionalized) but those in Mali have generally been characterized as being less well organized. The immediate trigger for the 1990 revolt was the return of a number of Tuareg émigrés from Libya, where they had been recruited by Colonel Gaddafi into his 'Islamic Legion' for service in Libya's ongoing conflict against Chad. Periodically in the 1980s, Libyan radio broadcasts sought to incite the Tuareg in both Mali and Niger into revolt. With the resolution (in Chad's favour) of this conflict at the end of the 1980s, the Tuareg, many of whom had military training and experience, returned home.

Ceasefires, brokered by France and Algeria, led to peace agreements in 1992 and 1995 with the Malian and Nigerien governments respectively. Both agreements recognized the principal of 'cultural autonomy' for the Tuareg as well as proposing practical measures for the integration of the Tuareg into the security forces and civil service. However, the Tuareg have periodically claimed that government discrimination and indifference have continued and that the peace agreements have not been implemented. Periodic outbreaks of violence occurred throughout 1996 and a further full-scale conflict with the Nigerien government broke out in September 1997. As a result of this violence, a new timetable for the implementation of the peace accords was agreed, and the remainder of 1997 and 1998 passed relatively peacefully. In April 1999 Nigerien President Mainassara was assassinated in a coup d'état and replaced with Major Daouda Wanke, who attempted a more conciliatory attitude towards the Tuareg.

In 2002 and 2003 fighting over the use of scarce water and grazing rights broke out between the Tuareg and Toubou in Niger and in April 2006 further clashes were reported between the Tuareg and the Malian government. In August 2006 a Tuareg group calling itself the Revolutionary Armed Forces of the Sahara kidnapped two Italian tourists in Niger. A further outbreak of fighting in the northern region of Agadez was reported in July 2007 with attacks by supporters of a new organization, the Tuareg *Mouvement des Nigériens pour la Justice* (MNJ). The Movement claims to control a large area of Agadez and to have two thousand fighters, including US-trained counter-insurgency forces who have defected from the Nigerien Army. Around 50 government soldiers were killed in clashes during 2007. In January 2008, the MNJ launched an attack on the town on Tanout, kidnapping the mayor, and in June they kidnapped (and later released) four French uranium workers during fighting that led to 17 fatalities. High-profile abductions have emerged as a conscious strategy on the part of Tuareg organizations as a means of forcing dialogue with the authorities. Meanwhile, in Mali, Tuareg guerrillas loot-

ed an army weapons store barely 150 miles from Bamako, the nearest to the capital they have operated. (The attack was allegedly facilitated by the base's Tamasheq-speaking commander, who deserted a few days earlier.)

The 2002 defeat of Islamic fundamentalist forces in Algeria forced a number of Islamic militants south into Mali and Niger where they have sought to re-group. There have also been related allegations that Al Qaeda recruits from Algeria and West Africa are being trained at mobile bases in the Sahara. (*See Algeria, 2.06.*) These developments have brought Islamic extremists into collision with the Tuareg, who fear both unwanted Governmental attention in their activities and direct competition with the Islamists over opportunities for smuggling and general banditry. On the other hand, Tuareg antipathy to the Islamists has brought them into rare common cause both with the governments of Mali and Niger and with the United States, which has provided training support to the Malian armed forces. Tacit support has been given to the Mali-based Tuareg Democratic Alliance for Change in their attempts to dislodge Islamist fighters of the Algerian-based 'Al Qaeda in the Islamic Mahgreb'. In October 2006 fierce fighting broke out between the Democratic Alliance for Change and the Islamists near the northern town of Kidai, which had been, in May 2006, the scene of renewed Tuareg agitation against the Malian government.

The risk for the Tuareg is that the governments of Mali and Niger may use this confused situation as a pretext for a general security clamp-down, ostensibly aimed at combating Islamist activities (and thereby gaining tacit or active support from Washington) but in reality aimed at suppressing Tuareg dissent as well. On the other hand, Algeria has in the past supported the Tuareg cause, and their shared interest in suppressing the Islamists may provide the opportunity for an Algerian-brokered agreement with the Niger and Malian governments.