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NIGER: Will There Be a Third Tuareg Rebellion?

Dorina A. Bekoe

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Summary

- Tuaregs in Niger launched rebellions in 1990 and 2007 charging that the state did not recognize their rights; did not adequately invest in Agadez, Niger's Tuareg homeland; and did not include Tuareg representation in political institutions. Each of the rebellions ended with peace agreements promising more inclusive political, security, and economic policies.
- Yet, grievances among the Tuareg persist: civil society and political leaders have loudly criticized the government for failing to use the revenues from the uranium mines to develop Agadez; the uranium mining companies are accused of taking insufficient precautions to prevent damage to the environment and health of its workers; and government development programs have been criticized for their lack of effectiveness.
- An assessment concludes that a third Tuareg rebellion in Niger is possible, though not imminent or likely to succeed. It is possible because there are real frustrations with the failure of the uranium companies to protect the environment and workers' health; the government, including the Tuareg politicians, seems out of touch with these complaints; and there is a large financial gain to capturing the state.
- A new Tuareg rebellion, which would probably encounter a Nigerien army assisted by the French government, the leading foreign investor in Niger's uranium mines, is not likely for the time being. An intervention force in Mali to free the northern regions from the Tuaregs, however, could change that calculation – though such a rebellion is still likely to be militarily defeated.



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MARGINALIZED GROUPS IN THE SAHEL

NIGER: WILL THERE BE A THIRD TUAREG REBELLION?

DORINA A. BEKOE

SEPTEMBER 17, 2012

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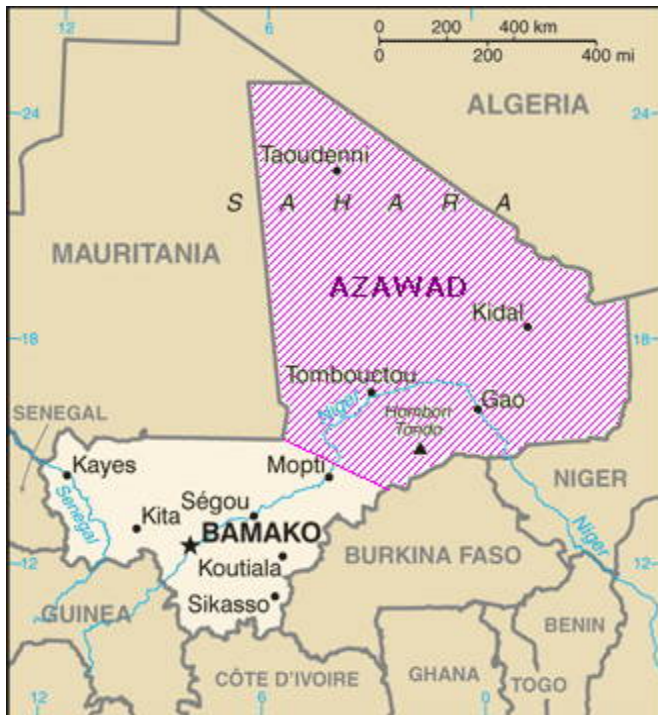
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Niger: Will There Be a Third Tuareg Rebellion?

Introduction

There have been a total of seven Tuareg rebellions in the Sahel, five in Mali and two in Niger. In Mali, Tuaregs launched rebellions in 1962, 1990, 1994, 2006, and 2012.¹ In Niger, Tuaregs launched rebellions in 1990 and 2007. Broadly, Tuareg rebellions have focused on three issues: cultural and political marginalization and discrimination, lack of development and investment, and obtaining greater political autonomy.²

Mali's fourth Tuareg rebellion sparked fears of possible spillover to Niger. As in



Source: <http://my.opera.com/nielsol/blog/2012/04/06/mali-azawad-taoudenni-and-oil>

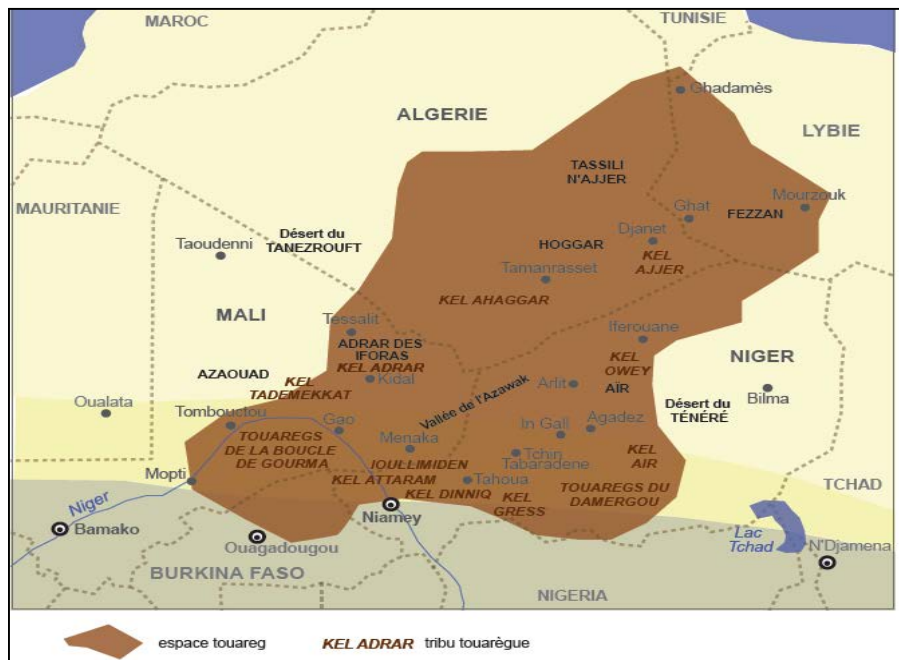
the past, Tuaregs in Mali launched their fifth rebellion in response to grievances about the ethnic group's political, cultural, and economic marginalization. But things progressed much farther and faster than in previous rebellions when disgruntled military officers staged a coup d'état in March 2012: the Tuareg-led *Mouvement Nationale pour la Liberation de l'Azawad* (National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, MNLA), in concert with the Islamist *Ansar Dine* and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa

(MUJAO), took advantage of the resulting political and security vacuum to take Mali's three northern regions, declaring it the sovereign state of Azawad. (See map). The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has announced the intention to deploy a 3,300-strong force to intervene in Azawad, in a bid to dislodge the rebel groups, once the United Nations and the government of Mali approves the operation.

Niger's proximity to Mali, cross-border cooperation of Tuaregs, and past history of rebellions raised fears among analysts that Tuaregs in Niger may also rise up against the state a third time. This issue paper focuses on the conditions that have led to the Tuaregs' past rebellions in Niger and assesses the likelihood that the country will experience another. The paper briefly reviews the root and proximate causes of the first two rebellions, the continuing sources of grievances for the Tuaregs, and the actions taken by the Nigerien government to address those grievances to assess the possibility to a third Tuareg rebellion in Niger.

Niger's Tuareg Rebellions

The Tuaregs are part of the family of Berbers in southern Algeria, northwest Mali, northern Burkina Faso, eastern Niger, southwest Libya, and northern Nigeria (see map below). The bulk of Tuaregs are in Mali and Niger: current estimates place 1.4 million Tuaregs in Niger; whereas in Mali, there are an estimated 1.7 million Tuaregs.³ Although historically nomadic, many Tuaregs now live in urban areas and villages.⁴ Since independence from France, the Tuaregs have organized two rebellions against the state: 1990 – 1995 and 2007 – 2009.



Source: www.temoust.org/IMG/pdf/les_touaregs-carto100.pdf

Tuareg Homelands in the Sahara

Niger's First Tuareg Rebellion: 1990-1995

With the adoption of multiparty systems in a growing number of African states and the increased recognition to expand the electorate, Tuareg nationalists began to agitate for an expansion of their rights and livelihoods. Niger dealt with the initial claims for

separation through the creation of a Ministry for Nomadic Affairs.⁵ But, the 1991 National Conference that ushered in the multi-party system in Niger explicitly rejected Tuareg separatist claims. In response, some Tuaregs formed the *Front de Liberation de l'Air et de l'Azawad* (Front for the Liberation of Air and Azawad, FLAA) under the leadership of Rhissa Ag Boula to press for the withdrawal of the Nigerien army from the north and the creation of a federal republic. He was arrested in 2004 on a murder charge, but let go after 13 months without being charged when those charges were dropped.⁶ During his arrest, Tuareg fighters kidnapped three police officers and a soldier. Their release was a condition of the government's dismissal of Boula.⁷

Other armed movements soon followed: *Armée Révolutionnaire de Nord-Niger* (The Revolutionary Army of North Niger); *Front de Libération Tamoust* (Front for the Liberation of Tamoust); *Front Populaire de Libération du Sahara* (Popular Front for the Liberation of the Sahara); *Mouvement Révolutionnaire de Libération du Nord-Niger*. (Revolutionary Movement for the Liberation of North Niger) The rebellion failed to gain traction among the general Tuareg population and was opposed by the tribal chief;⁸ in 1995 the Ouagadougou Agreements between the Tuareg leaders and the Mali government ended the fighting.

The Ouagadougou Agreements called for the decentralization of Tuareg regions; integration of Tuaregs into the national army, police, and gendarmerie; and development projects for the north.⁹ A number of rebel leaders received ministerial appointments and other positions in government. For example, Boula was appointed a minister following the 1995 agreements.¹⁰ In addition, the Nigerien armed forces integrated Tuareg into their ranks.¹¹ Over time, the peace agreement was deemed insufficiently implemented,¹² but on a practical level, the Nigerien government did not have the resources to fulfill the development projects promised in the 1995 accords.¹³ The still-lingering grievances led to a second Tuareg rebellion in 2007.

Niger's Second Tuareg Rebellion: 2007 - 2009

While the first Tuareg rebellion centered broadly on political and economic marginalization from the central government, the second rebellion was more precise about the grievances and the role envisaged by the Tuaregs in a new Nigerien dispensation. The second rebellion was led principally by the *Mouvement des Nigériens pour la Justice* (The Nigerien Justice Movement, MNJ), led by Aboubacar Alambo, Aghaly Alambo, and Amoumane Kalakoua¹⁴ and supported by the *Front des Forces de Rédressement* (Restoration Forces Front, FFR), led by Boula formerly of the FLAA.¹⁵ The MNJ was comprised of Tuareg soldiers that had deserted the army following their integration in 1995, former rebels of the FLAA, and youth.¹⁶

The Internet and diaspora played an important role in the formation of the 2007 rebellions. Both the MNJ and the FFR had websites; even though Internet penetration is

slight in Niger, the population with access is the most politically active and educated. The MNJ website featured information about the right of the Tuareg to their nationhood and decried the exploitation of uranium by Niamey. Notably, both websites were in French only – seemingly reflecting a clear attempt to reach out to the diaspora and other outside sympathizers.¹⁷

Specifically, the MNJ took up arms because it claimed that the government did not adequately include Tuareg leaders in governance, mishandled the 2005 food crisis,¹⁸ and did not redistribute an equitable share of resources gained from the uranium, which is mined in the Tuareg region of Agadez.¹⁹ Producing 7.5 percent of the world’s uranium, Niger is between the 3rd and 5th producer of the mineral.²⁰ The 3,000 annual metric tons of uranium mined annually provide 72 percent of the country’s export revenue. While many countries are involved in northern Niger – including France, China, Canada, the UK, Korea, South Africa, and Australia²¹ – France, is the largest investor. The French company AREVA, present in Niger since the early post-independence days, is the world’s largest builder of nuclear facilities and is also the key to France’s nuclear independence.²²

While uranium has been unreservedly welcomed by the state, it has a mixed reception among the Tuaregs. In the first place, the uranium mines, principally located in the Agadez region’s towns of Akokan and Arlit,²³ are regarded by many Tuaregs as offensive intrusions on their cultural heritage.²⁴ Indeed, since the first international contract was awarded in 2004, to AREVA, the conditions of the mines have been a source of protest and tension. The grievances were reflected in the MNJ’s charge that the uranium companies exploited the Tuaregs, had little regard for possible environmental damage of their projects, and did not respect Tuareg indigenous rights.²⁵

Moreover, the rebels claimed that then-president Mamadou Tandja wanted to implement the equivalent of “Ivoirité” in Niger – the divisive and discriminatory policy enacted in Côte d’Ivoire that attempted to separate ‘real’ Ivoirians from non-Ivoirians.²⁶ They believed he held a personal grudge against the Tuaregs and called Tandja’s policies genocide. They did not believe that he was committed to fairly compensating the Tuaregs for the uranium in their homeland.²⁷

Resolution

The second rebellion came to an end in April 2009 when the MNJ was weakened by numerous defections and the formation of a splinter group, the *Front Patriotique Nigérien* (The Nigerien Patriotic Front). Other Tuareg groups then conceded to negotiations, and Libya’s Gaddafi pressured Nigerien President Tandja to hold talks. As a condition of the peace agreement, the former Tuareg fighters were granted amnesty in return for disarming.²⁸

In the years since the settlement of the two rebellions, Tuareg leaders have joined the government. Mohamed Anako, a rebel leader in the 1995 rebellion was elected president of the Agadez Council in 2011;²⁹ Boula is special counsel to the president; Aghali Alambo, the former leader of the MNJ, was until his arrest in June 2011 on terrorism charges president of the Nigerien National Assembly (his release on March 20, 2012 could be interpreted as an attempt to defuse any tension in the Tuareg community); and Abta Hamidine, who was arrested and released along with Alambo, was the leader of the Movement of Young Arabs of Niger.³⁰

Continuing Grievances and the Government's Response

Despite the fact that many Tuareg leaders have been incorporated into government and the armed forces include more Tuaregs, complaints about the economic conditions persist. Chief among the complaints by former Tuareg rebels groups and civil society continues to be the unequal distribution of wealth garnered by the uranium industry in Tuareg regions. In the wake of the Libyan conflict, President Mahamadou Issoufou and his administration have tried to forestall the re-grouping of rebel forces by directly appealing for peace, instituting a development program, and deploying the Nigerien armed forces to the region.

Appealing for Peace

Apart from re-igniting a rebellion in Niger, the events in Mali threatened to pull in Niger's Tuaregs by appealing for their support in their fight against the Malian state. Indeed, on April 8, 2012, the FLAA, one of the rebel groups during the 2007-2009 rebellion, announced that it had re-grouped to defend Mali's MNLA, should ECOWAS troops be dispatched to reunite the break-away region with Mali. The new FLAA claimed to have 2,000 fighters ready to deploy.³¹ Little else has been heard from the new FLAA – presumably because ECOWAS has not yet taken any action.

In response to these developments, former Tuareg leaders, now members of government, came out publicly against a revolt. Notably, Boula, erstwhile leader of the FFR and FLAA, and now special counsel to the president, discredited the validity of the Tuareg homeland in Mali. He stated: "How can our Tuareg brothers in northern Mali declare a republic for Tuaregs without the Tuaregs of northern Niger, Algeria, Libya, and Burkina Faso? If we don't agree with them, how can they declare a state of emergency?"³² Boula further stated that "today, in the age of democracy, revolts can no longer achieve anything;"³³ he advised that the situation in Mali should be settled with dialogue. He conceded the continued presence of grievances in Niger, but underscored that none of the past rebellions called for secession.³⁴

A New Development Program

Sensing the economic frustration, the Nigerien government launched a program meant to address development disparities, “Forum for Peace, Development, and Security.” President Mahamadou Issoufou has personally attended many of the launch events, which started in Arlit (in the Agadez region) on January 23, 2012, marking the first of two Tuareg regions that were included in the program. Other regions that have been added to the forum for peace and development include Diffa,³⁵ the site of oil and gas discoveries in Niger and whose border with Nigeria has been closed to keep out Boko Haram, and Dosso, which has suffered severe food shortages and clashes between farmers and pastoralists.³⁶



Source: <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/niger.html>

As the first site of the forum of peace and development, Arlit is significant not only because it is home to Tuaregs, but because it is the site of one of the largest and most significant uranium mines in the country. President Issoufou specifically noted that the need for the Peace and Development Forum was due to “the appearance of rebel movements, the spread of terrorism in the Sahel and Sahara, and smuggling of arms and drugs that destabilise security.” The president promised to “draw up an ambitious social programme to integrate former Touareg rebels.”³⁷ A second forum geared to Tuareg concerns was launched in Tchintabaraden (in

the Tahoua region) in April, which is considered the Azawad region in Niger and borders Mali’s Azawad region. The Prime Minister Brigi Rafini, himself a Tuareg, stated the main objective of the forum was to find durable peace for the region.³⁸

Military Response

Since the coup d'état in Mali, the Nigerien government has spent \$80 million to strengthen the security sector.³⁹ More recently, the European Union (EU) deployed a mission in July 2012 to train security personnel to combat terrorism and crime in Niger.⁴⁰ The EU mission is part of a \$187 million program to improve security in the Sahel.⁴¹ Similarly, a military response from France cannot be ruled out. It has been the most vocal EU member on supporting an intervention in Mali and has intervened many times when its citizens were kidnapped in Niger. A direct threat to the AREVA uranium mines could well elicit a strong military response.⁴²

Has the Government Done Enough?

While the government has explicitly aimed to address the grievances voiced by the Tuareg community, civil society and other community leaders feel that more remains to be done. They have especially voiced concerns about the continuing under-development, the failure of the community to benefit more substantially from the uranium revenues, and the seeming disregard by the uranium companies to protect the environment and workers' health.

Persistent Under-Development and Revenue Maldistribution

Although civil society in Agadez was appreciative of the government's efforts to engender peace and development in the region, it criticized the government for its lack of performance. Almoustapha Alhacen, president of the Arlit Civil Society Coordinating organization, chided the government and AREVA's lack of progress in fulfilling the promises of bringing development to the region. In a letter to the Nigerien Prime Minister, Mr. Alhacen noted that the 15 percent due to Agadez, which in 2009 amounted to 900 million FCFA (\$1.75 million),⁴³ should have been sufficient to fund development activities and doubted AREVA's sincerity in pledging to develop the region. Furthermore, he questioned the reduction in revenue Agadez received from uranium in 2009 – down from 1.5 billion FCFA (\$2.9 million)⁴⁴ in 2007 – despite an increase in price, and the delay in revenue redistribution for 2010 and 2011. These developments, he warned, contributed to a sense of frustration and distrust of government and industry representatives in the community.⁴⁵

Civil society also lamented the failure of the uranium mining companies to bring economic development to the region.⁴⁶ The Reflection and Action Group on Extractive Industries in Niger (GREN) and the Network of Organizations for Budgetary Transparency and Analysis (ROTAB) – Publish What You Pay-Niger issued a declaration criticizing Imouraren SA's failure to begin work and abide by Niger's Mining Code.⁴⁷ Once mining begins in 2014, Imouraren SA is expected to bring the biggest

return yet to Niger: it is expected to produce 5,000 tons of uranium annually for 35 years, which would more than double Niger's current output.⁴⁸

Environmental and Health Concerns

Civil society organizations and Tuareg leaders continue to criticize the uranium companies. Among the major concerns are the environmental and health impacts of the uranium mining. In a communiqué issued on August 10, 2012, the Arlit Civil Society Coordinating organization deplored the environmental management record of the mining companies in Agadez. The organization cited AREVA affiliates – Imouraren SA, SOMAIR and COMINAK – and Chinese owned SOMINA with destroying fauna, forests, and grazing lands. It charged that the radioactivity from the mines was increasing the risk of cancer among the population. The situation is further aggravated, civil society argued, because SOMAIR and COMINAK do not provide medical benefits and the much-touted Agadez Health Monitoring program set up by AREVA in December was not working.

Civil Society's Demands

Civil society demanded more robust attention from the government and the uranium companies. In particular, they called for the intervention of the government's Bureau of Environmental Evaluation and Research to ensure that the studies it ordered are conducted transparently and in consultation with the community and nongovernmental organizations. The group specifically singled out the need for a study at the Imouraren mine on heap leaching⁴⁹ – a process of extracting uranium that some fear adversely impacts the environment and health. It also called for AREVA to ease the effects of radiation, compensate those affected by the environmental degradation, improve working conditions, create a “future generations fund,” address health issues uncovered by the AREVA health monitoring commission and effectively implement the program, and include local groups in research and development plans.⁵⁰

Assessing the Conditions for Rebellion

The grievances of the Tuaregs and civil society organizations lay the foundation for a future rebellion: the state is seen as unresponsive, the capacity for rebel groups remains, and there are considerable financial gains to capturing the state. But the cost of rebellion will be high, as the Nigerien government and the EU have clearly signaled their intent to engage militarily: the government has dramatically diverted funds to shore up its security sector and the EU has begun to deploy military and civilian officers on the ground in Niger. By this simple calculation, a rebellion will not be likely for the time being.

However, there also exist critical conflict-mitigating processes that will likely further forestall a rebellion. Importantly, the Nigerien government has begun a dialogue

with civil society organizations within the framework of its peace and security development program and the health and environmental programs with AREVA.⁵¹ These forums keep open the door to negotiations. Moreover, Tuareg leaders have been at the forefront of calling for dialogue over confrontation. At the same time, the diaspora has so far not been engaged by the new FLAA to supporting disgruntled elements in the Tuareg community, as was the case in 2007-2009.

Thus, for the time being, it seems that the government's conflict mitigating initiatives, along with credible threats of retaliation by the army and the EU will guard against a third Tuareg rebellion in Niger. However, should an ECOWAS intervention result in severe destruction, refugees, and damage, the ex-rebels and other disaffected groups in Niger might well re-calculate the cost of continued engagement with the government.

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14. ABSTRACT Tuaregs in Niger launched rebellions in 1990 and 2007 charging that the state did not recognize their rights; did not adequately invest in Agadez, Niger's Tuareg homeland; and did not include Tuareg representation in political institutions. Each of the rebellions ended with peace agreements promising more inclusive political, security, and economic policies. Yet, grievances among the Tuareg persist: civil society and political leaders have loudly criticized the government for failing to use the revenues from the uranium mines to develop Agadez; the uranium mining companies are accused of taking insufficient precautions to prevent damage to the environment and health of its workers; and government development programs have been criticized for their lack of effectiveness. An assessment concludes that a third Tuareg rebellion in Niger is possible, though not imminent or likely to succeed. It is possible because there are real frustrations with the failure of the uranium companies to protect the environment and workers' health; the government, including the Tuareg politicians, seems out of touch with these complaints; and there is a large financial gain to capturing the state. A new Tuareg rebellion, which would probably encounter a Nigerien army assisted by the French government, the leading foreign investor in Niger's uranium mines, is not likely for the time being. An intervention force in Mali to free the northern regions from the Tuaregs, however, could change that calculation – though such a rebellion is still likely to be militarily defeated.						
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