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INDEPENDENT AZAWAD: Tuaregs, Jihadists, and an Uncertain Future for Mali

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On April 29, 2012, Mali was on the verge of holding the first round of a wide-open presidential election. But the election calendar was suddenly set on its head when, on March 21, just over a month before voting was to take place, a military coup brought down the democratic regime whose leader, Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT), had already announced that he would not stand for a third term. Under the command of Captain Amadou Haya Sanogo, a National Committee for the Restoration of Democracy and State (NCRDS) was constituted, which decreed the immediate dissolution of the institutions of the Republic. Despite the jubilation manifested by crowds of people who filled the streets of the capital with jubilation at the new direction of the army coup, the pressures of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and of the international

community, as well as the hostility of the political class, forced the army to retreat. Constitutional order was reestablished and a transition government was formed with the

On March 21, 2012, just a month before the elections, a military coup d'état brought down the government of Mali, giving rise to a period of political uncertainty. The coup attempt was principally triggered by the armed conflict in which the Mali army had been facing off against the Tuareg National Movement for the Liberation of the Azawad (MNLA). The MNLA ended up proclaiming the independence of Azawad on 6 April 2012.

Nine months before, in July 2011, the various sectors of the Tuareg family in the north of Mali had come together in a renovated political-military organization, giving rise to the MNLA. Together with 2,500 armed rebels, they fought against 200 Jihadists, with some talk of a supposed alliance between the MNLA and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. Nevertheless, the alliance is said to be circumstantial, as important divergences exist between the Tuareg and the Islamist extremists.

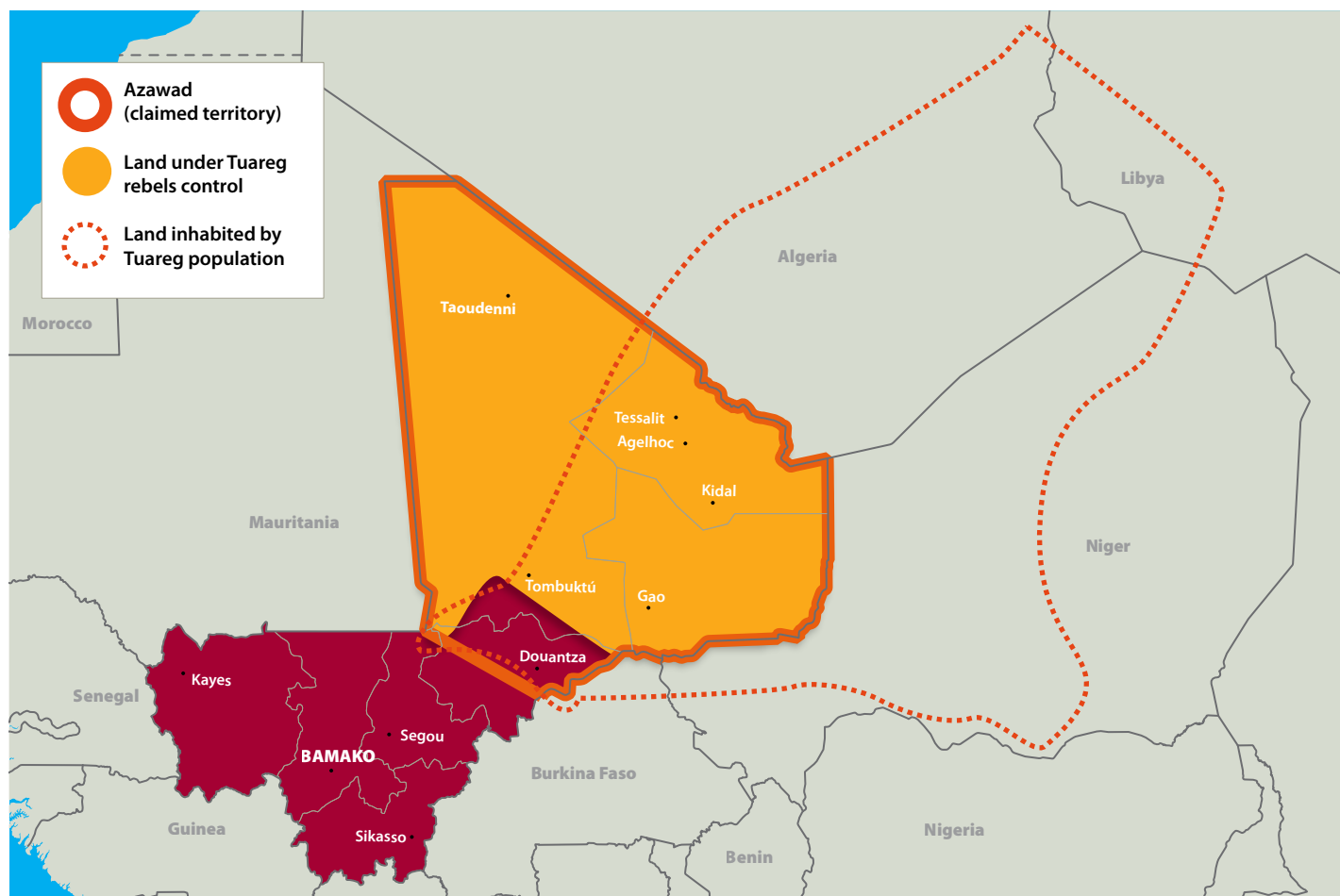
The objective of the Islamists is to apply Islamic law in the states of the region. The Tuareg represent a movement that clings to a national, not religious, identity, strongly impregnated with the values of democracy and secularization, consistent with a matriarchal society that practices a moderate Islam.

The current situation in the north of Mali presents a danger for neighboring states. In the midst of an unprecedented humanitarian crisis, that to date has produced some 200,000 displaced persons, the great Tuareg family waits to see the evolution of the Azawad, above all in the north of Niger, in the Air region. With hardly any support and with the international community standing against the self-proclaimed Azawad, all the pieces are in place for the advent of a failed State, which could embargo the future and the security of the entire region.

task of steering the country toward the celebration of new elections. In parallel, the country has seen the amputation of its northern half, following the proclamation of the independence of the Tuareg Azawad on April 6, which introduced even more issues into the equation of a country with a very uncertain future.

There are several dimensions to the tragedy in Mali. To the Tuareg irredentism, whose roots can be traced back to the French colonization of the territory in the late 19th century, and which successive governments have never found a way to manage properly, must be added the behavior of a corrupt political elite that, over the year, has come to constitute a privileged caste. The

Tuareg uprising in Mali (as for Spring 2012)



Source: CIDOB

excesses of the top echelons and the weakness of President ATT, who, though elected democratically, has proven to be weak-willed and ineffective, are compounded by the devastating implications for Mali of the fall of the Libyan *Jamahiriyah* of Colonel Muammar Gadhafi¹, at the source of the reactivation of the Tuareg conflict. To all this must be added the activism of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in the zone and the passivity of the principal regional power, Algeria, from which a considerable segment of the Salafis proceed. Once the offensive of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (NMLA) was under way, the Malian army, lacking resources, proves incapable of containing the revolt. Then the military coup perpetrated by low-ranking officers takes place, the self-proclaimed secession of half the country on April 6, 2012, and the fear of seeing the birth of a terrorist State in the Sahel, in light of which the conflict is manipulated by armed Islamist groups close to the AQIM to strengthen their presence in the region.

The consequences for the rest of the countries in the zone are unforeseeable. The ECOWAS has announced the eventual dispatch of 3,000 armed men to quash the Tuareg re-

volt. But, if indeed ECOWAS has managed to reestablish the constitutional order in Bamako, the African supranational institution does not dispose of sufficient logistics, experience, or preparation to advance beyond Mopti, the southern border of Azawad, a desert territory that covers more than a million square kilometers. Only Algeria would have the necessary resources and troops to venture into the zone. Nevertheless, beyond multiplying the appearances of its leaders in the media to proclaim their opposition to the Azawad secession and warn against the risks of an eventual foreign intervention, the Algerian regime seems to have no interest in taking on a military role in the resolution of the conflict². And while Bamako recovers its democracy and the NMAL prepares to manage the first Berber State in history, there are over 200,000 refugees from the conflict in third countries in a year in which, owing to drought and famine, a humanitarian disaster is brewing in the region.³ Perspectives for the future have never been so dark.

1. On the consequences of the overthrow of the Libyan regime for the countries of the Sahelian Arc, see Laurence Aïda Ammour, "L'après-Gaddafi au Sahara-Sahel", international notes CIDOB n. 44, January 2012.

2. V. the interview with the Algerian Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia published in *Le Monde* on April 2, 2012.

3. In late 2011, according to a United Nations estimate, 1.7 million persons were directly threatened by the food crisis caused by the insufficient rainfall in the region.

Tuareg Irredentism in Northern Mali

The first great Tuareg rebellion in the north of Mali broke out in 1963, and was crushed by the regime in Bamako in less than a year. Amid extreme conditions, particularly in the 1970's and 80's, in which a severe drought obliged tens of thousands of Tuaregs from the Azawad to take refuge in neighboring countries, it was not until June 1990 that the second great Tuareg rebellion broke out, triggered by the attack on a police post in Menaka ordered by Iyad Ag Ghali, then head of the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (PMLA). The incursion was carried out by a small group of Tuareg soldiers that came from the camps of the Libyan Army. Under the auspices of Algeria, the revolt came to an end with the signature of the National Pact of 1992.

In keeping with this accord Bamako concedes a certain dose of autonomy to the Azawad and the rebels are integrated into the army and into the heart of the Mali administration, but the main clauses of the pact are never carried out. The Tuareg movement falls apart and from the PMLA movement a whole gamut of organizations and movements based on ethnic and tribal cleavages emerges, channeling the discontentment of the Tuareg population of the Azawad in the succeeding years. On May 23, 2006, a new rebel group, the May 23 Democratic Alliance for Change (DAC), bursts on to the scene with an attack on several garrisons of the Malian Army in Kidal and Menaka. Algeria once again intervenes in the negotiations for a new pact, the Algiers Accord, which picks up most of the demands set down in the National Pact, and never satisfied.

In September 2007 Ibrahim Ag Bahanga, a veteran of the 1990 insurrection and one of the ringleaders of the 2006 revolt, together with Ahmada Ag Bibi, Hassan Ag Fagaga, and Iyad Ag Ghali, formed the Tuareg Alliance of Northern Mali for Change (TANMC). For a year and a half, until it is impelled to abandon the territory by the harassment of armed militias operating with the support of Bamako, Ag Bahanga led a terror campaign against the Mali Army. In February 2009, defeated, his bases destroyed, Ag Bahanga, took refuge in Libya, where he stayed until his return to Mali, in January 2011. Under Gadhafi's protection, Ag Bahanga came in contact with other veterans of the 1990 insurrection who left the territory after the signing of the National Pact in order to lead or take part in special elite units of the Libyan Army, and among whom was included Colonel Mohamed Ag Najim. A plan was being hatched to give the Tuareg movement greater power than the Mali army.

When the first fissures in the political-military framework of the Jamahiriya regime became patent, shortly after the start of the Benghazi response, from February 2011 one, Ag Bahanta and some of his closest collaborators accelerate the implementation of their plan of action. Neither Gadhafi nor the Tuareg were friends or allies. Their relationship was self-serving and opportunistic, and not based on ideological devotion. This is why when the hordes of the Libyan National Council on Transition began to move forward, Ag Najim and other Tuareg officials deserted from the Libyan Army and reached Northern Mali bearing arms and munitions. The convoys traveled through southwest Libya, through Niger, through the so-called Passage of the Savior and the north of the region of Air, before entering Mali. Ibrahim Ag Bahanga died in a car accident on August 26, 2011, not far from his center of operation in Tin Assalak. By then it was clear that the process of arms collection and storage was part of a pre-conceived plan. Most of the arsenal came from Libya, but also from robberies perpetrated by Tuareg officers and soldiers who abandoned the Mali Army.

In July 2011 the diverse factions of the Tuareg movement in the north of Mali come together in the framework of a renewed political-military organization: the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (NMLA). The ultimate demand brandished by the new group was the self-determination of the people of Azawad, as "an inalienable right and the only means for the Tuareg people to achieve their sovereignty and recover their rights to dispose of their territory and its riches, within the framework of the right to regional autonomy".

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4. V. declaration of the NMLA to the Amazigh World Congress in Rabat on March 10, 2012.

Beyond its anchoring in history and in the sociocultural reality of the area in dispute, and the perception of a persistent framework of grievances to the meeting of the Tuareg populations of the Azawad and their recently-acquired military superiority the NMLA considers that the international geopolitical context is ripe for independence. The self-determination in Southern Sudan and Eritrea are seen as examples of errors of the West during decolonization that have been corrected.⁵ Achieving an independent Azawad is no longer seen as an unreachable dream. This is how, in an uncharted context, on January 17, 2012, with the Maghreb branch of Al Qaeda well-established in the Sahel, the NMLA unleashed its offensive against the Mali Army with the sole objective of “liberating” something more than half of Mali territory, a geographic extension of almost one million square kilometers, a “no man’s land” equivalent to double the surface of the Spanish State.

On April 6, 2012, the NMLA announced the end of military operation and proclaimed the Independent Republic of Azawad. The NMLA recognizes the standing borders with neighboring states and their inviolability, as well as its intention not to advance toward the south of Mali, placing the most southern border of Azawad in Douantza, to the northeast of Mopti. The ultimate contradiction between the NMLA and the Islamists arises here, as the latter do not recognize this border agreement.

NMLA-Ansar Dine-AQIM: An Alliance of Circumstances

On December 7, 2011, in Zakake, north of Kidal, a meeting took place that was attended by Abdelkrim Targui, the only Tuareg Emir of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Iyad Ag Ghali, a historic figure in the Tuareg Mali struggle who turned to jihadism and became a leader of Ansar Dine; Mohamed Ag Najim, a military chief and the principal strategist of the NMLA, Intalla Ag Attaher, the tribal chief of Kidal, and as many as four traditional chiefs from four other tribes of the Azawad. The imminent offensive is being planned, despite the fact that there is disaccord among those in attendance, Ag Ghali rejected a leadership role in the NMLA, arguing that it is not favorable to the secession of that region from the rest of Mali, where they intend to establish *sharia* or Islamic Law. In contrast, Ag Najim, holds tight to the principal

of a lay society, one of the axes of NMLA doctrine. Despite the evident divergences, this alliance of circumstances comes to an end, and on January 17, 2012, the revolt takes off.

In less than two months of struggle the Tuareg rebels, some 2,500 armed men, with the support of a contingent of 200 and 200 Islamists the majority of whom belonged to Ansar Dine, are able to bring down the army of Mali. With Iyad Ag Ghali, a historic Tuareg leader of previous uprisings, heading up the campaign, Ansar Dine was created with the blessing of the NMLA, in September 2011, for the purpose of retrieving dozens of Tuaregs who had joined the files of the AQIM. Well-armed and enjoying great mobility, the Ansar Dine militias played such a role in the taking of Aghelhoc, Gao and Kidal, so much so that the military leadership of the NMLA came into question, particularly in Bamako. Since the intention was to achieve greater support from the international community,

the French media made a great contribution to offering an image of weakness of the Tuareg rebels in the face of the Islamist factions. Even if the anti-Tuareg propaganda is discounted, against the predictions of the NMLA, little by little Ansar Dine was so overwhelmed by the AQIM that, in a reverse process, far from countering the influence of Al Qaeda, the Tuaregs were attracted toward the Maghreb branch of the international terrorist group. In contrast with the NMLA, well-armed but lacking in funds, the AQIM has access to important economic resources that it uses to purchase new recruits.

As the conflict broadens, the NMLA, in charge of the struggle on the ground, inform the High Command of the Liberation Army that Iyad Ag Ghali is out of control. Communication between him and Ag Najim has ceased. Adding complication to an already complex situation, a new group emerges, the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA), to which is attributed the kidnapping of two Spanish and one Italian citizens in October 2011 in the camps of the Polisario Front in Tinduf, in southwest Algeria. The followers of the MUJWA are the first to enter victoriously into Gao, on March 31. On April 2, the Jihadist black flag bearing the legend *Allah Akbar* (Allah is great) is flying over Timbuktu, which had been taken just a few hours before by the NMLA. Several witnesses claim to have seen the principal Emir of AQIM, the

5. On the perception of this “favorable geopolitical climate” in the heart of the NMLA, see the article published by Ahmeyede Ag Ilkamassene on December 23, 2011, before the start of the armed uprising, Azawad: c’est maintenant ou jamais (<http://tougastpress.com/opinions/analyse/196-azawad-maintenant-ou-jamais.html>).

Algerian, Mokhtar Belmokhtar,⁶ attend the afternoon prayers in the Djinguirayber mosque of this holy city. And they even go so far as to affirm that Belmokhtar had met here with his second-in-command, Oumar Ouids Amaha, with Abou Zeid, another of the great AQIM Emirs, and with Iyad Ag Ghali himself.

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“There are no problems between us and the NMLA, they follow their path and we follow ours,” Iyad Ag Ghali recently declared to the press.⁸ The fact is that while the Islamist band is not in any hurry to put an end to an alliance that has given it such good results, the Tuareg rebellion shows a greater interest in taking distance from the fundamentalists, above all to obtain the support of the international community. “Ansar

Dine is a Malian Islamist group that has enrolled young people from Azawad and from Western Africa in an ideological combat that we could not tolerate in our territory,” can be read in a communiqué signed by Mahmoud Ag Aghaly, president of the political bureau of the NMLA, on March 20, in which a warning is contained about the “manipulations” of the Mali press that eventually find their way into the international media. The NMLA has warned that it will take action against those who try to destabilize their recently achieved independence and contest the organized monopoly on violence of the militias in the region. Moreover, this is perceived to be the only medium available to the NMLA to show its capacity to manage its own affairs in the world’s eyes. Direct confrontation with AQIM and Ansar Dine is inevitable.⁹

It is no easy task to begin a State ex novo, all the more so when there are neither resources nor the most minimal infrastructures. The current emergency situation and the risks it entails could serve to raise the bar on the concessions that Bamako is willing to offer and achieve some kind of entente for the launching of a federal State of Azawad in the heart of Mali. The mediation of ECOWAS or even of Algeria could be of great value to achieve an accord of this kind.

Scenarios and Risks of Azawad

The current power balance is favorable to the NMLA vis-à-vis the Islamist groups, which are less numerous. It is improbable that the AQIM’s dream of building an Islamist terrorist emirate in the Sahel will come about. The leadership of the NMLA could decide to bring about a direct attack on the Islamist groups operating in Azawad, opening up a civil war situation that could last several years and signify a notable erosion of the Tuareg militias, which could be left once again in an inferior situation with regard to the Mali army. As the Tuareg are not currently a direct target of the Islamist groups operating in the zone, and with the enormous task before them of managing the Azawad provinces, only a Western commitment to recognize the independent State could be a sufficient stimulus for the NMLA to carry out an offensive on a grand scale against the terrorist groups installed in the zone. It is not the first time that the idea has arisen of opposing the Tuareg, experienced warriors with easy mobility in the desert, to AQIM. To date, however, there have been no initiatives in this regard and the Tuareg have seen no need to declare war against a group that, to date, had respected them.

6. The former Emir of the Armed Islamic Groups, a former combatant in Afghanistan, and the former chief of Zone 9 (the Sahara) for the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, who hails from the Valley of Mzab, 400 kilometers to the south of Algiers, is one of the main figures behind the important presence of AQIM in the Sahel. His brigade includes some 150 fighters and it is succeeding thanks to its participation in all the different types of trafficking that prevail in the zone. Its area of influence stretches from the Mauritanian border to the frontiers with Niger and Burkina Faso. To shore up its presence in the region, Belmokhtar has married a prominent Berabiche (an Arabic Mali tribe) from the Timbuktu region and with the niece of an *aménokai* (traditional leader) of the Tuaregs.

7. Known as “the assassin” for his particular cruelty, Abdelhamid Abou Zaid inherits the commando of Zone 5 (Eastern Algeria) of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat when Amara Safi, alias Abderrazak “el Paraca”, is brought down. Several kidnapping and the murder of the British and French nationals, Edwin Dyer and Michel Germaneau, are attributed to him. His base is located in Wagadou, north of Timbuktu.

8. V. *Déclaration d’Indépendance de l’Azawad*, in which the adherence of the NMLA to the United Nations Charter and its commitment to peace and democracy is declared.

9. V. Abdoussalam Ag Inawelene, *Après l’ff*

Together with the recognition of the independence of Azawad, another of the possible options is the establishment of a direct dialogue between the Tuareg and the Bamako authorities, once the transition Government crystallizes or a new executive materializes through elections. The NMLA regrets the non-application of the National Pact of 1992 and of the Algiers Agreement of 2006, and its confidence in the Mali authorities is running out. Despite the communiqués and declarations of the NMLA in which they assure that they are not willing to accept any solution except the independence of the territory, the alternative of a federal State—or even confederated—could be taken into account. It is no easy task to begin a State *ex novo*, all the more so when there are neither resources nor the most minimal infrastructures. The current emergency situation and the risks it entails could serve to raise the bar on the concessions that Bamako is willing to offer and achieve some kind of entente for the launching of a federal State of Azawad in the heart of Mali. The mediation of ECOWAS or even of Algeria could be of great value to achieve an accord of this kind.

With the international community against the NMLA, all the ingredients are in place for the advent of a new failed state which, besides mortgaging the future of the Sahelian region, would pose serious difficulties for the political evolution of the Maghreb states and the security of Europe itself.

Any attempt to resolve the current situation through direct military intervention is doomed to fail. First of all, the Mali army has shown its incapacity in the face of the Tuareg followers. The current adverse political situation does not hold out much hope of a quick recovery for the armed forces of the country, nor does the current economic situation offer room for optimism with regard to modernization and the adaptation of equipment and arms. In addition, the eventual intervention of the ECOWAS forces, with a projected contingent of no more than 3,000 men over such a vast expanse of arid terrain, and confronting well-trained and well-armed men, with a perfect understanding of the territory, is a foregone fiasco and could come to a dramatic end. Similarly, a western international intervention, even if it included the African states in the zone, would not be able to suppress the rebellion. Following the experiences in Iraq, Afghanistan, or even Libya, with the situation is far from stable even now. Furthermore, western nations, who, as a result of the current context of crisis, no longer have the resources of years past nor a minimal store of confidence in their public opinions, prove to be more and more reticent about reproducing a military incursion in the midst of the hostile geographic and climatic conditions of the Sahel, more so in the face of such a terrible adversary. In such a situation, negotiation and/or mediation would seem to be the only plausible paths to correcting the current path.

Since the Chad wars, from 1979 to 1987, Francophone sub-Saharan Africa has not suffered a conflict like the one that took place in the last few months between the Tuareg and the Mali Army. The situation currently under way in Mali is a clear source of problems for the neighboring states, above all for Mauritania, Algeria and Niger, but also in Nigeria. Until the situation is clarified, in expectation of a likely purge of Islamists in Azawad, the Mauritania of President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz is one of the main objectives of AQIM. Several factors reinforce the attraction of this country for the jihadists. Among them, geographic proximity, the hostile mountain territory, a Muslim population that speaks the Hassaniya dialect, and their role as breeding ground for jihadists. Moreover, there is a great animosity among the emirs of the AQIM to coming face to face with the Mauritanian authorities, who for the past few months have not hesitated to invade the territory of Mali to attach supposed terrorist bases and convoys.

With regard to Algeria, if indeed the Tuareg populations within its borders, in the vicinity of the Tanmarasset regions, have not become contaminated with the rebellion in the north of Mali, the installation of a new State, be it Tuareg or terrorist, in the least likely case, means a direct threat for Algiers. Algeria's reluctance thus far could also call into question its status as a regional power, at what would be an ideal time, with Gadhafi out of the picture, to affirm its leadership in the sahariano-saheliano conflict.

In the last decade, under the mandate of President Mamaou Tandja, Niger was the stage par excellence of the Tuareg armed revolts, spearheaded by the Movement of Nigeriens for Justice. Niger was also the place where the majority of kidnappings of Europeans occurred in the region, which later, in fact, shifted to the north of Mali. Some went so far as to evoke the creation, on the part of the Tuaregs, of a Front for the Liberation of Azawad and Aïr, a Tuareg region with its own specific characteristics, situated in the north of Niger. For the time being, at least, the rebellion is nowhere near spreading and in fact is limited to Northern Mali. The stability of Niger is due to the approach Niamey has been taking with the Tuareg question for the past few months, very different from that of Bamako.

If indeed Mali and Niger share the same realities, their treatment of the problems is very different. At no time did ATT seriously take on the Tuareg demands, whose threat he did not hesitate to exacerbate in order to obtain aid and additional resources for the struggle against terrorism. In Niger it has been different. The "inevitability" of the Tuareg revolts has not been taken for granted. On April 7, 2011, the Tuareg Brigi Rafini, a member of congress and the mayor of Iferouana, 300 kilometers south of Agadez, was appointed prime minister, a milestone in

the history of Niger. Moreover, as an addition cautionary device, the Nigerien authorities, mindful of the evolution of the Libyan situation, took the initiative of disarming the Tuareg combatants on their return from the Libyan front.

The shock wave from the conflict in northern Mali could even reach Nigeria. There are reasons to suspect a strategic alliance between AQIM and the Nigerian radical Islamic sect Boko Haram, which has never ceased to multiply its attacks since 2011. AQIM finds itself behind the formation of the members of Boko Haram, who have claimed responsibility for bombing attacks on churches, police stations, or the offices of the UN in Abuja, the capital. A report from the United Nations, made public in January 2012, reveals how several members of Boko Haram were arrested in Niger on their return from Mali. In their power were manuals for the fabrication of explosives and contact information for several members of the AQIM.

What to do in Azawad?

The situation in the north of Mali poses great challenges not only to the local states, but also to the West, starting with the United States and Europe. The consolidation and advancement of AQIM in the region denotes the failure of the various initiatives that have unfolded to halt the jihadist ascendancy in the zone. Faced with European indecision, in November 2002 Washington started the Pan Sahel initiative, which sought to equip and train the precarious Saharan armies, with the support of the Eurocom Special Forces. The program remained in effect formally, if indeed from 2005 the Trans-Saharan Initiative for the Struggle against Terrorism was activated, whose finishing touch was supposed to be the unfolding of a joint African-United States commando, the Africom. The existence of a terrorist threat was exposed during the last tour of the Maghreb by the then North American Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, in September of 2008. Rice's interlocutors were in agreement on pointing to the existence of a true risk that should be cut off in a joint effort. With the resistance of Algeria and Libya, Africom never quite came together during the mandate of George Bush, and the administration of Barack Obama has, to date, not considered it a priority.

Nor has the isolated struggle of the different states of the zone with AQIM proven to be effective. In the particular case of Mali, the action of the army on the presumed terrorist enclaves has not been successful in undermining its presence and influence. What is more, there numerous accusations have been lodged by the Tuareg community that suggest that Bamako had exaggerated the terrorist threat in order, on the one hand to obtain important economic and military aid from the West, above all from the French, and, on the other, to carry out with utter impunity attacks on the people of Azawad. This has done nothing more than reinforce the grievances of the Azawadis, who have not hesitated to invoke a sort of "ethnic cleansing" carried out by the Mali regime on finding them. For the NMLA, the connivance of France with Mali is absolute, in the light of the interests of the former in the region, particularly

with regard to the exploitation of Mali's Azawadi mines, above all uranium, whose potential is estimated to be similar to those in the north of Niger already being exploited by French multinational companies. One example of this Franco-Malian complicity is seen by the Tuareg in the role played by the French media, particularly the *Agence France Presse*, during the armed conflict, multiplying these unresearched news stories with a tendency to identify the NMLA with AQIM and Ansar Dine.

If the jihadist presence in the self-proclaimed Republic of Azawad were reinforced it would become even more difficult to control a region of 9 million square kilometers in which the national borders are extremely porous. Faced with such a scenario it would be possible to predict a reinforcement of the interactions between terrorist groups and the work of coordination, indoctrination, and confrontation by the AQIM of jihadist activity in the Sahelian strip, where some twenty Europeans are currently being held in captivity.

With the international community against the NMLA, all the ingredients are in place for the advent of a new failed State which, besides mortgaging the future of the Sahelian region, would pose serious difficulties for the political evolution of the Maghreb states and the security of Europe itself. Awaiting the redirection of the Malian political situation, and in the absence of a coherent regional or international military presence in the zone, only the NMLA appears to be capable of countering the jihadist ascendancy in Azawad. For the time being, the existence of ethnic and tribal bonds, in the absence of direct jihadist aggression toward the Tuareg and lacking any other incentives, along the lines of an international recognition of the self-proclaimed Republic of Azawad, there is no reason for the NMLA to carry out an offensive against AQIM.

The future of Mali and of the entire region appears to be very uncertain but, until such time as it clears up, the Tuareg, victorious against the Mali army and closely following the evolutions of the jihadist family on the borders of their territory, advance slowly but inexorably toward the construction of a new State in the region.