From approximately 1990 to 2009, rebellions in Mali and Niger, led by members of the Tuareg ethnic group, moved roughly in parallel. Based in northern, Saharan regions, the Tuareg rebels denounced southern-based governments for past grievances and present inequalities.\(^1\) In the 1990s, rebels called for autonomy and sometimes for outright separatism. In the late 2000s, rebels demanded more thorough implementation of past peace accords, as well as greater political representation for the Tuareg and greater development efforts in northern regions.

After 2009, the paths of Tuareg rebels in the two countries diverged. In 2012, Mali became a crisis hotspot, wracked by separatism, jihadism, and instability. In Niger, the Tuareg did not rebel. Although still fragile, Niger came to be seen as an “oasis of stability” in the Sahel.\(^2\) What explains the difference, and what is the state of secessionist movements in each country today?

To answer these questions, this article focuses on politics – the trajectories of the Malian and Nigerien governments, and internal politics among rebels. Compared with Mali, Niger’s politics since 2009 have been more conducive to deal-making between the Niamey government and northern communities. Niger continues to fare better than Mali, but some of the political arrangements in Niger are increasingly tenuous. This article also notes religious and economic changes, including the rise of jihadism in northern Mali and the changing patterns of livelihoods for the Tuareg in both countries.

Charting Different Paths: Mali and Niger Since 2009

In 2009, both Mali and Niger had democratically elected heads of state who were midway through their second terms. Both presidents were, unknowingly, at the beginning of downward slopes that would lead to military coups.

The descent came faster in Niger. President Mamadou Tandja spent 2009 fighting his two-term limit. He rammed through a referendum that allowed him to head a three-year interim government and rewrite the constitution. With the country in crisis, military officers overthrew Tandja in February 2010. The military handed power to civilians after two-round elections in January/March 2011.

In Mali, President Amadou Toumani Touré (popularly referred to as ATT) did not attempt to outstay his two-term limit, but by 2010 he faced severe problems. For one thing, jihadists were making northern Mali infamous as the epicentre of Saharan kidnapping. Rumours swirled that members of the government and the military were colluding with Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).\(^3\) The Tuareg, meanwhile, were increasingly discontented.

Touré’s style of rule was ill-suited to managing and preventing rebellions in the north. He behaved autocratically toward critics while seeking to placate the powerful through compromises and consensus-building. This style “was just too delicate not to implode in the long term.”\(^4\) When it came to the north, Touré was caught between Tuareg rebels and southern politicians. In the rebels’ eyes, Touré had failed to properly implement the 1992 National Pact and the 2006 Algiers Accords, which offered the north tremendous autonomy (including a kind of
demilitarisation) along with promises that ex-rebels would be integrated into the military and other public sector employments. These integration exercises sometimes went unrealised, and sometimes became part of the conflict itself. Some rebel commanders repeatedly joined the military only to desert from it, fight for a time on the rebel side, and then rejoin. Divisive questions arose among the rebels over whether and how to join the military, and over power issues within the military. Meanwhile, in the eyes of many southern Malian elites, the terms of these accords were too generous to the Tuareg.

Late in his term, Touré attempted to both placate the rebels and reassert military control through the Special Program for Peace, Security, and Development in Northern Mali, but this effort further alienated the rebels without improving the security situation. When the Tuareg-led National Movement for the Liberation of Mali (MNLA) rose up in January 2012, the state’s weakness allowed the rebels to seize several northern towns. Humiliated, junior officers outwitted Touré two months later.

In Niger, the turbulence of the 2009-2011 period helped prepare state authorities to respond more constructively to Tuareg demands afterwards. Compared with Mali’s Touré, a widely mistrusted incumbent, Niger’s interim military authorities and their civilian successors had a cleaner slate on which to work. The new civilian administration heeded advice that the Tandja administration had not fully implemented: in the words of one northern mayor, “appointing more northerners to positions of responsibility in the north would…address northern grievances.” Nigerien authorities had periodically used this strategy before, from the early 1960s to the late 1990s, and to a significant extent it worked after 2011.

Amid the civilian transition in 2011, four prominent leaders from the former rebel group Movement of Nigeriens for Justice (MNJ) – Rhissa Ag Boula, Rhissa Feltou, Aklou Sidi Sidi, and Aghali Alambo – took positions in local and national politics. Rebels from the 1990s were also elevated. Tuareg representation was not confined to the north, nor just to former rebels: after Niger’s new president Mahamadou Issoufou took office in April 2011, Brigi Raffini – mayor of Iféraoune, a town in the heartland of the rebellion – was appointed prime minister.

In 2011, former rebels waxed optimistic. Ag Boula commented, “For me, it’s a proud moment because in 1995, when we signed the peace accords, the first chapter of the peace accords was decentralisation. And so today, it is the actual manifestation [of that], even if it took time.” Unlike Mali’s rebels, Niger’s rebels felt that past accords were finally making a difference.

Changing Contours of Rebel Movements

During the 2009-2012 period, another difference between Mali and Niger concerned internal politics and changes within rebel movements. While Nigerien rebels largely agreed that entering politics was the right course of action, Malian rebels waged fierce power struggles. When the hardline rebel leader Ibrahim Ag Bahanga died in a car accident in northern Mali in August 2011, many observers suspected that he had been assassinated by rivals. In the absence of Ag Bahanga, a unifying figure among former rebels, Mali’s Tuareg rebels soon became divided: secessionists rallied to the MNLA, while others – out of a mixture of ideological, pragmatic, and
personal motivations – gravitated toward Ansar al-Din (Arabic for “Defenders of the Faith”), an ally of AQIM.

The religious landscape of northern Mali was changing in ways that gave jihadism a greater foothold there, both in comparison with northern Niger and compared with northern Mali’s own recent past. During the 1990s rebellion and its sequel in the mid-2000s, Islamic identification was a marginal theme for most Tuareg rebels, who instead emphasised ethnic identity and demands for “liberation” and “justice.” But starting in the late 1990s, some Malian Tuareg elites were influenced by the proselytising activities of Tabligh Jamaat, a global Muslim missionary organisation often locally known simply as da’wa (proselytisation) in Mauritania and Mali. Although Tabligh is a largely non-extremist movement, the group’s preaching set some Tuareg on a path toward embracing jihadism. Then, starting in the early 2000s, the hardline Algerian jihadists in AQIM began to forge strong local ties in northern Mali (in comparison, AQIM used Niger primarily as a transit corridor and kidnapping site). In northern Mali, AQIM’s foremost local partner was the Tuareg leader Iyad Ag Ghali, whose career took him from separatist rebel in the 1990s, through a stint with Tabligh, all the way to AQIM-linked jihadist by the 2010s (and possibly even earlier). Northern Niger had no equivalent figure to Ag Ghali, and no equivalent movement to Ansar al-Din.

The impact of religious changes came to the fore during the 2012 rebellion in Mali. After the MNLA antagonised civilians, overreached militarily, and mismanaged northern politics in early 2012, Ansar al-Din and AQIM were well positioned to step in and control the north’s major cities. For Mali’s jihadists, the 2012 war became an opportunity not to create a Tuareg ethno-state, but to impose a stark jihadist religious vision on northern Mali, involving the application of a jihadist version of shari’a and the systematic destruction of shrines, tombs, and documents that the jihadists considered anathema. In the context of the Sahara’s post-independence rebellions, these priorities were new.

A final difference between Malian and Nigerien rebels and their motivations concerns their livelihoods. In both countries, the Tuareg have long faced strain due to droughts and the growing effects of climate change – problems that, it should be said, affect other Malian and Nigerien ethnic groups as well. Droughts have often immediately preceded or contributed to Tuareg rebellions. The advent of colonialism, and especially the creation of independent states after approximately 1960, also disrupted established livelihoods in pastoralism and trans-Saharan trade. In recent decades, some Tuareg have become involved in trade and smuggling of illicit goods, including contraband food and tobacco, cannabis and cocaine, or weapons. Some Tuareg developed linkages with organised crime, including the kidnapping economy driven by AQIM.

For all these similarities, however, the economic positions of Malian and Nigerien Tuareg are somewhat different. Northern Mali, despite rumours that lucrative resources are yet to be found there, remains a resource-poor land. Northern Niger, in contrast, is the fourth-largest uranium-producing region in the world. Niger’s Tuareg rebels had an economic incentive to remain part of the Nigerien national project, an incentive that their Malian counterparts lacked; the idea of managing uranium revenues through an independent Tuareg state would have been farfetched. In 2009, rebels, former rebels, and potential rebels in Niger may have been swayed by the promise that a third major uranium mine – the Imouraren project – would soon come online.
In Mali, meanwhile, some Tuareg nationalists felt that the time had come to create a Saharan, Tuareg-dominated state called Azawad. Such a state would have been economically fragile and politically isolated, but its Malian proponents saw little economic advantage to remaining part of Mali. That dream has not completely died, even after jihadists commandeered the rebellion and even after France intervened to restore Mali’s territorial integrity.

Secessionism in Mali Since Operation Serval

In January 2013, France launched a military intervention, Operation Serval, that broke the jihadists’ control over northern Mali. In a strictly formal sense, Serval restored Mali’s territorial integrity. But the state’s actual reach remains limited in the north.

Amid Serval, the MNLA positioned itself as anti-jihadist and as a partner of sorts for France. By late January 2013, the MNLA partially controlled Kidal, where the MNLA had significant support. The MNLA resisted the Malian government’s efforts to assert its rule in the city. In November 2013, then-Prime Minister Oumar Ly cancelled a visit to Kidal due to security concerns. In May 2014, his successor Moussa Mara ignored warnings and proceeded with a visit, triggering a firefight between the Malian military and various rebels. At the time of writing, Kidal remains partly outside the government’s control, although “interim authorities” are there, as they are elsewhere in the north.

Politically, the MNLA has shifted from secessionism to advocating “power sharing” in the north. In 2014, the MNLA and like-minded rebel movements formed an umbrella organisation, the Coordination of Movements of Azawad (CMA). The CMA became the Malian government’s main negotiating partner in the peace process, which generated the 2015 Algiers Accord. The accord states that signatories “respect [Mali’s] territorial integrity” and are “convinced of the necessity of reconstructing national unity.”

The CMA has strongly criticised what it sees as the Malian government’s slowness and insincerity in implementing the accord, but the CMA remains formally committed – for now – to the accord’s implementation. A July 2016 CMA statement gives some insight into its political posture: the CMA vigorously denied reports that its members were going to enter the cabinet, and added that it had no intention to work with the government “outside of the mechanisms for consultation, management, and power-sharing laid out by the accord.” In 2017, the CMA and the government – as well as pro-Bamako northern militias, another key actor – have haltingly advanced some provisions of the accord, notably joint patrols and interim authorities in northern cities. The CMA draws some benefits from the status quo, however, especially in Kidal. True peace remains elusive, and the Algiers Accord risks going the way of past, poorly implemented deals.

Northern armed groups are proliferating, but “their demands often seem to be based on community or individual interests.” Many groups insist on the need for communal self-defence and represent segments of the Tuareg, Arab, Songhai, and Fulani communities in northern and central Mali. These armed groups sometimes act as spoilers, hoping to obtain greater representation in the peace process and the new political dispensation. For example, the
Congress for Justice in Azawad, an MNLA splinter group, temporarily blocked the installation of interim authorities in Timbuktu in March/April 2017, protesting its own lack of inclusion in the authorities’ structure. The Congress ultimately reached an agreement with other factions in Timbuktu. In the north, there is an intensifying competition over political resources, but little open talk of secessionism.

Even Mali’s jihadists have partly changed their strategies. Rather than declaring a formal Islamic emirate, as they did in 2012, they are working on three tracks: wearing down the resistance of foreign and local security forces; building informal governance structures; and seeking popular support. Some jihadists envision the creation of religious states, hearkening back to nineteenth-century empires in the region; others seem content to bide their time. Iyad Ag Ghali, now head of a jihadist umbrella group called Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wa-l-Muslimin (The Society for Supporting Islam and Muslims, formally a part of AQIM), gave an interview in April 2017. He emphasised that jihadists are pursuing a long-term, military-cum-political strategy. This strategy hinges on “seeking to exhaust the enemy by targeting him in every place in which he is present, and inciting the people in that [effort] and mobilising them for it.”

At their most ambitious, AQIM and its allies now envision that they may one day rule all of Mali, rather than just a piece of it.

Niger’s Fragility

In Niger, despite apparent stability, painful questions are coming to the fore. What benefits has elite representation brought to ordinary Nigerien Tuareg? How does making Niger a hub in the U.S.-French securitisation of the Sahel affect northerners? What ramifications will a growing authoritarianism on the government’s part have for northern communities? And how will crackdowns on migration and smuggling affect northerners?

In 2017, important former rebels continue to participate in mainstream politics. Brigi Raffini remains prime minister in Issoufou’s second administration. But Tuareg politicians’ influence has not transformed life in the north. As early as 2013, some Nigerien Tuareg were questioning Issoufou’s commitment to peace. In an open letter to the president that year, one Tuareg commentator noted that although the Tuareg had greater representation in politics, some 4,000 demobilised fighters still awaited “reintegration.” Promises of “decentralisation” had gone unrealised.

On the security front, initiatives by Issoufou’s government risk either being under-implemented or misunderstood. His administration’s $2.5 billion “Strategy for Development and Security in the Sahelo-Saharan Zones of Niger,” launched in 2012, became something of a “fundraising initiative” for the government, but it has had no high-profile successes. In 2013, major terrorist attacks in the main northern cities Arlit and Agadez embarrassed the government. In recent months, cross-border attacks from Mali have targeted refugees and soldiers. Meanwhile, the “SDS” program is little discussed today.

Issoufou has cultivated security partnerships with the United States and France, both of which maintain drone bases in Niger. Yet these countries’ actions may alienate communities in the north. In a 2015 interview, one former Tuareg rebel-turned-politician commented on France’s
Operation Barkhane, the Sahel-wide counterterrorism programme that replaced Operation Serval in 2014:

When you send helicopters and planes into the desert, without having created an information mechanism, you should expect that the populations will see a new form of colonialism in it…The inhabitants don’t understand that Barkhane only takes action against certain armed groups. There are gangs, coming from Chad or Sudan for example, that practice looting…But Barkhane, because that is not its mission, does not take an interest in them…The risk is that the population will create militias to defend itself.\(^\text{16}\)

In other words, by narrowing what counts as “security,” the Nigerien government and its partners neglect the main security problems that ordinary Nigeriens in the north face. Meanwhile, Barkhane could fuel suspicion and non-cooperation among northerners.

Issoufou’s own authoritarian tendencies could also increase tensions in the north. Since 2013, Issoufou has neutralised rivals, most prominently former Speaker of the National Assembly Hama Amadou. Charged – likely spuriously – with complicity in trafficking children from neighbouring Nigeria, Amadou has spent the period since 2014 either self-exiled in France or detained in Niger. Meanwhile, amid the Boko Haram insurgency that affects southeastern Niger, the Issoufou administration has detained and harassed journalists and civil society activists. If the government’s willingness to tolerate criticism in the south is shrinking, what message will northern dissidents take?

Finally, there is the question of livelihoods in the north. Promises that the Imouraren mine will generate new employment are proving empty, as the site’s potential seems to be much less than originally hoped. Other economic activities are also under stress. In recent years, Agadez, long a major node in circuits of smuggling and migration in the Sahara, became even more important to trans-Saharan economic flows: Agadez became the key transit point for West African migrants heading to Europe. But in September 2016, under pressure from the European Union, the Nigerien government began to crack down on smugglers and their networks. Soon, the region’s rebels-turned-politicians were warning that without some new sources of income, the region’s young men might embrace renewed violence and rebellion.\(^\text{17}\)

**Tubu Secessionism in Niger: Faint Rumblings of Discontent**

Niger has also witnessed secessionist violence by sections of the Tubu, an ethnic group concentrated in Saharan regions of Niger, Chad, and Libya. During the 1990s rebellion, and overlapping with the MNJ’s rebellion in the late 2000s, a Tubu-led group called the Revolutionary Armed Forces of the Sahara (French acronym FARS) fought in the name of greater northern autonomy.

The trajectories of the FARS and the MNJ diverged after the Libyan revolution of 2011. Libya’s longtime ruler Muammar al-Qadhafi was a patron of Tuareg rebel movements. When he fell, veteran Malian and Nigerien Tuareg fighters returned home from Libya – some hoping to bid for power in Mali, but others simply to escape persecution and violence in Libya, where the Tuareg were stereotyped as pro-Qadhafi counterrevolutionaries.
The Tubu had a more antagonistic relationship with Qadhafi in his final years, and they became partial beneficiaries of the revolution. A major FARS commander, Barka Wardougou, joined Libya’s revolution in 2011. Afterwards, he lived as a prominent “strong man” in southwest Libya until his death in July 2016.\footnote{Following Wardougou’s death, the torch of Tubu rebel leadership passed to Adam Tcheke Koudigan, an ex-FARS fighter who leads the Movement for Justice and Rehabilitation in Niger (MJRN). Founded in 2008, the MJRN took up arms in September 2016. Its stated grievances are against the Nigerien government and the China National Petroleum Corporation, whose activities in northeastern Niger have led to widespread sicknesses among the local population. Rather than Tubu secession, the MJRN wants direct negotiations with the government in Niamey, which does not yet view the group as a threat.\footnote{The government, however, could ill afford to face a new security problem in addition to the challenges of Boko Haram in the southeast and the spillover of Mali’s violence in northwest.}

Conclusion

At the time of writing, prospects for peace in northern Mali seem dim – jihadist groups are so disruptive, and other armed groups so contentious, that it is hard to see a quick path for the state and its partners to assert greater control. In Mali, the formation of Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal-Muslimin in March 2017 formalised a destabilising trend: a confident, aggressive jihadist movement able to keep peacekeepers off balance in the north and to periodically project violence even into the capital itself. Jihadism also continues to spill over from Mali into Niger and Burkina Faso, making the tri-border zone increasingly dangerous.

In Niger, the second term of President Issoufou (2016-2021) will be a test for old strategies: will northern populations grow impatient with their straitened economic circumstances, and if so will the government be able to prevent renewed outbreaks of armed rebellion? In both countries, pressing questions continue regarding decentralisation, political representation, and guaranteeing livelihoods. In both countries, the ghosts of past rebellions will not be easily banished.

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