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Uranium Goes Critical in Niger: Tuareg RebellionsThreaten Sahelian Conflagration

Jeremy Keenan

The article analyses the causes and implications of the ongoing Tuareg rebellions in Niger and Mali. While the larger and more widespread rebellion in Niger is generally attributed to the Niger Tuareg's demands for a greater and more equitable share of the country's uranium revenues, the article reveals that both rebellions, while centering on grievances associated with marginalisation, indigenous land rights and the exploitation of mineral resources, are far more complex. Other key elements are the continuing impact on the region of the global war on terror; competing imperialisms and sub-imperialisms; the associated interests of multinational mining companies; environmental threats and the interests of international drug-traffickers. The article also details the human rights abuses inflicted on the civilian populations in both Niger and Mali by the recently US-trained militaries.

Introduction

On 14 February 2008, the US State Department issued a travel alert, warning US citizens of armed conflict, kidnappings, armed robberies and the presence of land mines in Northern Mali, especially the Mali-Niger and Mali-Algeria border areas, the Kidal region, areas north of Timbuktu and the city (town) of Tin Zaouatene. It advised them to avoid travel in the area and emphasized that the US-designated terrorist organisation Al-Qaeda in the Land of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the recently re-named Algerian Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat (GSPC), and other armed groups presented dangers to travelers. Americans planning to travel in these regions were advised to register with the Department of State or US Embassy. The Americans clearly wanted no prying eyes, for in the same week I received three separate communications from inhabitants of Tin Zaouatene. Their messages were that the Malian army, accompanied by US forces, had ransacked and looted the town, which was now empty and abandoned having driven its inhabitants into the surrounding desert. The incident was given a total media blackout, which is unusual in that this part of the Sahara has, since 2003, been the focal point of the Bush administration's 'second front' in its war on terror in Africa.

Four days later, General William (Kip) Ward, Commander, US Africa Command (AFRICOM) and Theresa Whelan, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for African Affairs, desperate to sell AFRICOM to those prepared to listen, addressed a packed conference on AFRICOM and US-Africa Security at the Royal United Services Institute

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(RUSI) in London. The General and Ms Whelan denied the presence of US forces in northern Mali. The following week, General Ward was in Bamako reassuring the Malian government and the international media that the US was committed to helping Mali maintain the security of its northern regions.

Two days later, a month or so after the Malian-US sweep through Tin Zaouatene, a rebel force of Malian Tuaregs, led by Ibrahim ag Bahanga, undertook a devastating attack on a Mali military convoy 11 miles south of Tin Zaouatene. That was followed by almost a week of continuous rebel action against Mali's military, including an attack on the desert town of Aguelhok. The rebels seized eight army vehicles, killed at least three Malian soldiers, wounded many others and took a further 33 captive. Representatives of the rebels confirmed that their action was to revenge the Malian-US assault on Tin Zaouatene.

On 25 March, Bahanga's rebels were reported by a Western military source to have moved their 33 captured soldiers across the border into Niger where they were being guarded by members of the *Mouvement des Nigériens pour la Justice* (MNJ), a movement of Nigerien Tuareg who had also rebelled against their government. A leader in an Algerian newspaper noted that, 'What all the countries in the region had been dreading, namely a linking up of the various Tuareg rebellions has happened' (Abdelkamel, 2008). The Sahelian-wide conflagration that I have predicted in *ROAPE* and other publications over the last four years is now a reality (Keenan, 2004; 2007; 2008 forthcoming). The Atlantic and Indian Oceans are now linked by a geographical zone of conflict from Mauritania in the west, across Mali, Niger, Chad, Sudan and Ethiopia to Somalia in the east. The conflagration of which Mali and Niger are now the foci has direct political, and perhaps also military, ramifications for Algeria, Libya, Chad, Mauritania and Nigeria, not to mention the hegemonic interests of France, China and the USA.

The Tuareg rebellions in Niger and Mali have escalated since the spring and summer of 2007. They have taken on the appearance of a pan-Tuareg rebellion. However, while both rebellions share a number of common grievances and features, any attempt at analysis is complicated by the fact that both rebellions are being driven at the local level by a range of not just complex but often quite different political and social issues.

While Bahanga's rebellion in Mali has latterly (March-June 2008) been receiving more media coverage as a result of a number of high profile military engagements, the situation in Niger, where Niger's US-trained army now stands accused of genocide,¹ has and remains likely to be far more serious in terms of humanitarian consequences. Since the beginning of the Tuareg rebellion in Niger on 8 February 2007, Niger's armed forces (Forces Armées Nigériennes – FAN) have been unable to match the rebels in open combat. They have therefore wreaked their frustration and vengeance on the civilian population. As far back as August 2007, a report commissioned by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) (Keenan, 2007) warned that Niger's President, Mamadou Tandja, was likely to unleash his armed forces on the civilian population. By December, two International Human Rights Organisations, the UK-based Amnesty International (2007) and the US-based Human Rights Watch (2007) had denounced Niger's armed forces for committing war crimes, including summary executions of the civilian population.

While Mali's army was suffering at the hands of Bahanga's rebels, Niger's army was concentrating its fire-power on the inhabitants of the villages along the old road that

runs north of the regional capital of Agades through the south-west foothills of the Aïr Mountains. On 20 March, as Bahanga attacked the Malian military convoy resupplying the Tin Zaouatene garrison, MNJ forces were engaging the FAN in the Tamazélak valley, 100 km north of Agades. Four army vehicles were destroyed with their occupants almost certainly killed or wounded. The army called for reinforcements from Agades. However, rather than engage the MNJ, the FAN reinforcements directed their wrath on the inhabitants of Tamazélak. Having set fire to the hamlets, destroying seven homes completely and the vehicle of a local trader, they cold-bloodedly assassinated two children: Liman Houdane and Toukane Assale. From there the soldiers headed back south, stopping first at the settlements at Sakafat, which they looted before burning down ten huts, executing two villagers and 'disappearing' another, and then at Tidene where they proceeded to execute two more villagers and 'disappear' four others. One gardener had his legs broken as a form of torture while watching his garden being fired. Before leaving, the soldiers burnt down seven more huts and scattered land mines.

Two days later, an MNJ contingent caught up with the FAN militia south of Tidene killing at least 15 of them and destroying two of their vehicles. The FAN survivors, although harassed by the pursuing MNJ, nevertheless found time to exact vengeance on the village of Dabaga before retreating to the safety of their base at Agades. The toll was devastating: two villagers were executed and two more 'disappeared'; 43 houses were looted and destroyed by fire; one vehicle and twelve motorcycles belonging to gardeners were burnt; the village produce store was destroyed by fire, as was the women's cooperative; six gardens were completely destroyed and 60 animals slaughtered.

The above exactions are verifiable and eye-witness reports suggest the atrocities committed by the FAN on the civilian population have been considerably greater. But what is less clear is what has led to the latest Tuareg rebellions² and their escalation into what has effectively become a Saharan-Sahelian conflagration?

The Onset & Escalation of Rebellion

The incident that precipitated the latest Tuareg rebellion in Niger was an attack on the village of Iferouane in northern Aïr on 8 February 2007 by three heavily armed Tuareg and a handful of followers. Over the next three months, the emergence of a new rebel movement, the MNJ, followed by a number of small military engagements, including an attack by the MNJ on a base of the French uranium company, AREVA, led the Niger parliament to approve more than \$60 million in extra budget funds to confront the attacks.

By the end of June 2007 the rebellion had escalated. The most serious military engagement was an MNJ attack on the FAN at Tazerzait (N. Aïr) resulting in at least 15 soldiers killed, 43 wounded and 72 taken hostage. Despite the deployment of 4,000 government troops, MNJ attacks continued with further significant actions on the coal mine at Tchighozerine, which provides power for the uranium mines at Arlit, strategic installations in and around the regional capital of Agades, including the airport, as well as more attacks on FAN convoys and emplacements. The government was further embarrassed by the MNJ's hostage-taking (and subsequent release) of an executive of the Chinese uranium company, Chino-U, and the defection to the MNJ of a significant number of men from both the FAN and the Force National d'Intervention et de la Sécurité (FNIS). By the end of July, Tuareg in north-east

Mali had also taken up arms, with several attacks against military personnel and positions in the Tin Zaouatene region.³

On 24 August, Niger's government declared a State of Alert, effectively placing the region under martial law and sealing it off from the outside world. An Agades resident described the hitherto bustling regional capital as a 'ghost-town'. In spite of these draconian measures, government forces have not fared well: by the autumn, at least 45 and possibly as many as 60 soldiers had been killed, dozens wounded and many more taken hostage. Since then FAN casualties have mounted. Indeed, the MNI's fighting ability, their knowledge of the region and their strategic use of land mines have effectively confined government forces to the immediate vicinities of their barracks and a number of temporary base camps around the region. Pinned down and unable to deal any telling blows against the rebels, government forces have used the cover of the 'state of alert' to wreak their vengeance and frustration on the civilian population. In fact, the FAN's harassment of the civilian population has been the cause of widespread grievance and complaints since before the outbreak of the rebellion. However, as the rebellion has escalated there have been an increasing number of authoritative and mostly verifiable reports of civilian harassment and abuse by government forces. International bodies, such as Amnesty International, have accused Niger's security forces of using the State of Alert to arbitrarily arrest and torture civilians. For example, on 2 June 2007, FAN soldiers killed three civilians, one of whom was a cripple and the other two aged over 80. A further nine pilgrims were subsequently reported murdered by FAN soldiers. By the end of the year, the MNJ claimed that at least 250 people had 'disappeared'. Amnesty International claim that the government was detaining and torturing civilians. Two further massacres of Tuareg civilians by government forces in the first week of October led the local population to fear that President Tandja was about to embark on a policy of genocide. The first took place in the Toussasset area near the Algerian border east of Assamakka. According to eye-witnesses, five vehicles were stopped by the FAN, with the 12 Tuareg being separated from the other travellers and shot. The second took place on the following day when soldiers rampaged through nomadic camps near the road between Arlit and Assamakka killing 20 Tuareg in their tents (Society for Threatened Peoples, 2007).

The Causes of the Rebellion(s)

As the rebellions have developed so they have taken on a new agenda and explanations for their origins have varied. While the MNJ states that the main cause of the Niger rebellion is the exploitation of Tuareg lands by uranium mining companies, a more nuanced analysis shows that both rebellions have been 'overdetermined': although there has been more than enough 'sufficient' cause to determine the outcome - the rebellions are 'multilayered'. Yet when we look at each 'cause' or 'layer' we are left with a perturbing question. Although each single 'cause' was the basis of justifiable grievance and at AREVA's uranium mines, even resistance, were any of them on their own actually sufficient to precipitate a rebellion? The answer to this question is no, especially when we consider it in the context of two further facts. First, with the memories of the 1990s rebellion and the way it was crushed still fresh in their minds, the vast majority of the local population had no desire for another rebellion. Second, none of the three Tuareg responsible for the Iferouane attack had any credibility as either a popular or legitimate rebel or political leader. All three had known criminal records. The ringleader Aboubacar ag Alembo, was regarded by many who knew him as a psychopath who had already brought shame on his people. Indeed, it was because of his dastardly and shameful behaviour that senior Tuareg, with the blessing of the government, had unsuccessfully arranged his 'elimination' four years earlier. In other words, while the Tuareg of Niger had many legitimate grievances, we have to face up to the possibility that the rebellion, like those of 2004 in Aïr and 2006 in Mali, may have been initiated and orchestrated by external forces.

But first, before we consider either what those external forces might have been, or analyse how and why the rebellion came to take on a momentum and dynamic of its own, we need to understand the grievances that have built up amongst Niger's Tuareg over the last few years. At least three major issues can be identified.

1) Anger at the Fabrication of a Sahara-Sahel Front in the US global 'War on Terror'

The latest Tuareg rebellions are the product of the increasing destabilisation of the southern Sahara-Sahel region since 2003. The underlying cause of this has been the Bush administration's fabrication of a Saharan-Sahelian front in its global 'war on terror'. The epicentre of this has been the Tuareg regions of northern Niger and northern Mali. The primary purpose of this deception was to create the ideological conditions for America's militarisation of Africa (Keenan, 2005; 2007). While Washington's main ally in this strategy has been Algeria, Niger has played a significant role.

The most widely publicised incident in this deception was the abduction of 32 European tourists in the Algerian Sahara in 2003 by Algeria's Islamist ('terrorist') Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat (GSPC), renamed in 2006 as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), under the leadership of Saifi Amari, known as El Para. The hostages were released in NE Mali after six months, following the reported payment of a 5 million euro ransom. El Para and his 60 or more accomplices were then allegedly chased by a combined military operation of US Special Forces, Malian, Algerian and Nigerien forces across Mali and Niger to Chad, where 43 of them were reportedly killed in an engagement with Chad regular forces in March 2004. Subsequent research has revealed that El Para was almost certainly an agent of Algeria's secret military intelligence services, the *Direction des Renseignements et de la* Sécurité (DRS), and that the alleged pursuit across the Sahel simply did not happen. The result of this fabrication is that the US has been able to label the northern parts of Mali and Niger as a 'Terrorist Zone', the domain of Al Qaeda training bases lurking deep in the Sahara and threatening both Europe and the oil-rich regions of Africa. Indeed, the main ideological prop of the US's subsequent imperialist counterterrorism strategies and militarisation of the rest of the continent has been the threat presented by this false, over-hyped, US-constructed narrative of 'terrorism in the Sahel'.

The fabrication of the El Para incident and the US's subsequent labelling of their region as a 'Terror Zone' have not only done immense damage to the local tourism industry and associated livelihoods, but angered the Tuareg populations of southern Algeria, northern Mali and northern Niger who resent their region being labelled as a 'Terror Zone' and manipulated to fit the US-authored global picture of terrorism. Their anger, however, has been directed as much at the US as at their own governments, which have used the 'War on Terror' as a source of rent and for branding legitimate opposition, minorities and other recalcitrant elements of their populations as 'terrorists' or, to use Washington-speak, 'putative' terrorists.

Niger's government has been no exception. In 2004, President Tandja attempted to provoke the Tuareg into actions which could be portrayed to the Americans as 'former rebels turning to terrorism'. He arrested and gaoled Rhissa ag Boula, the former leader of the rebel *Front de Libération de l'Azawak et de l'Aïr (FLAA)* and its signatory to the 1995 Peace Accord and subsequently a government minister, on a trumped up murder charge. He was released without charge after 13 months, but not until a number of Tuareg had been provoked into taking up arms. That enabled the government to send some 150 of its newly US-trained troops into the Tuareg stronghold of the Aïr Mountains, where they were easily ambushed by the Tuareg. At least one soldier was killed, four wounded and four taken hostage. Rhissa's brother Mohamed ag Boula claimed responsibility for the ambush. He said that he was leading a 200-strong group that was fighting to defend the rights of the Tuareg, Tubu and Semori nomadic populations of northern Niger.

2) The Exploitative Practices of Foreign (uranium) Mining & Oil Companies

The MNJ's major area of grievance and demands, relates to the current huge expansion of both uranium mining and oil exploration in the Tuareg regions of northern Niger. The MNJ's concerns relate to three main issues: the exploitative nature of these enterprises, the threat of an impending ecological disaster and the abuse by both the government and foreign companies of the Tuareg's indigenous rights. To take each of these in turn:

(a) Uranium Mining & Oil Exploration: Niger has long been a major source of uranium and is currently the world's third-ranking exporter after Australia and Canada. Annual production of some 3,300 metric tonnes accounts for around 72% of Niger's export revenue and approximately 10% of global uranium mine supply.

Uranium was first discovered in 1957 by the *Bureau de Recherches Géologiques et Minières* near the current mining town of Arlit in northern Niger. Further discoveries were made at numerous sites in the adjoining Tamesna region during the late-1950s and 1960s, with the *Société des Mines de l'Air* (Somair) beginning open caste mining near Arlit in 1971. The *Compagnie Minière d'Akouta* (Cominak) began underground mining at the nearby Akouta deposit in 1974. Today, the two mines, at Arlit and Akokan, are controlled by a consortium led by the giant French corporation, AREVA. The uranium concentrates, known as yellow-cake, are transported overland to Cotonou and then taken by ship for conversion, mostly to Comurhex /Tricastin nuclear site in France.

With the world energy crisis giving nuclear energy a new lease of life, the price of uranium has risen from scarcely \$10 a pound (543 grammes) at the beginning of 2003 to \$45 by mid-June 2006 and to a record \$136 in June 2007. The average weekly price in 2007 was \$98.55 a pound. With rising supplies, mainly from Kazakhstan, but also from Canada and Namibia, the average mid-range spot price for 2008 is expected to be around \$107 and \$92 in 2009. Not surprisingly, there has been a scramble by foreign corporations to acquire exploration rights and to expand uranium production in Niger.

The first to get in on the act was AREVA (then called Cogema Niger) who signed an agreement with the government in 2004 to expand its exploration. This was followed in 2006 by an agreement to develop the large Immouraren deposit about 60 km south of Arlit.

France no longer has a monopoly on Niger's uranium. In 2006 Niger awarded licenses to a group of Chinese companies led by the China International Uranium Corporation (SinoUranium), a unit of China National Nuclear Corporation, to explore for uranium at a number of sites in the Agades-Tamesna region. With the Niger government now targeting a three-fold increase of uranium production to 10,500 tU/yr (tonnes Uranium per year) 'in the next few years', the Niger government had granted by October 2007 around 90 mining exploration permits for the northern desert region with a further 90 or so under consideration.

Northern Niger has become the focus of a global scramble for uranium as companies from France, China, Canada, Australia, South Africa, UK, India and elsewhere hope to strike it rich. But this scramble comes against a background of increasingly widespread and organised opposition and resistance to both foreign political interventions, notably that of the US, and the practices of foreign mining and oil corporations. Prior to the current rebellion, resistance to foreign corporate exploitation had been directed almost exclusively at AREVA, with the Chinese National Petroleum Company (CNPC) also becoming the object of opprobrium since it began oil exploration in the Tenere region some four years ago.

Working conditions at AREVA's two uranium mines were so bad that the mines' employees established a local workers' NGO in 2003. Almoustapha Alhacen of Aghirin'man (aghirinman.org) drew attention to a number of health issues associated with environmental degradation and the company's disregard of health and safety measures. It requested the CRIIRad (Commission de Recherche et d'Information Indépendantes sur la Radioactivité) to undertake overdue scientific investigations. However, CRIIRad's attempts in 2004 to undertake the research were blocked by the Niger authorities on behalf of AREVA and the French government. Aghirin'man did, however, succeed in having samples of Arlit's drinking water analysed by Sherpa and the CRIIRad.⁵ The analysis revealed that the indices of both alpha and beta radioactivity in the water samples were above the limits set by the World Health Organisation, meeting neither EU directive standards nor French regulations. This put in doubt AREVA's press statement in February 2004 that its water analyses 'showed an absence of contamination'. Public demonstrations against AREVA in May and November 2006 so rattled the company that its President, Mme Anne Lauvergeon, visited Niger from 30 November to 1 December 2006 in an attempt to calm the situation and stabilize AREVA's position in the country. AREVA's track record of corporate irresponsibility underpinned contemporary resistance to foreign exploitation of the region (www.dissident-media.org/ infonucleaire/niger2.html; www.sortirdunucleaire.org/acctualites/presse/ affiche.php?aff=1660 and 'Arlit, deuxième Paris' www.newsreel.org/nav/ title.asp?tc=CN0180). Not surprisingly, it fuelled local anger towards both AREVA and the French government. Indeed, shortly after the Iferouane attack, the French ambassador visited the region only to be given an exceptionally strong rebuke by the local community being informed that France had lost all respect and credibility in the region and that he should leave.

In the case of the CNPC, the company's lack of respect for local people and their cultural practices has also caused widespread anger and hostility. Strikes and labour absenteeism are common. It is not surprising that both the CNPC and SinoUranium have received threats from the rebels. There is also a growing awareness amongst local people, especially the rebels, of what they regard as

'corrupt' relations between the Chinese companies and the Niger government in the form of financial contributions to President Tandja's election campaign. More serious from Beijing's perspective is the growing belief amongst the rebels that China is giving military support to President Tandja to help crush the rebellion. The Chinese companies operating in the region have been warned by the rebels that they face severe repercussions if evidence of such support materialises.

(b) Fear of an Impending Ecological Disaster: Aghirin'man sees the current expansion of uranium mining as the continuation and acceleration of what it refers to as 'Niger's economic, social and environmental tragedy'. The particular environmental tragedy to which it is referring is the impending ecological catastrophe facing the Talak and Tamesna regions.

Local people are anxious that the expansion of uranium mining across Talak and Tamesna will lead to an extension of the pollution, disease and ill-health that has characterised uranium mining at Arlit. They see the expansion of the present system of unregulated uranium mining around Immouraren, Sekiret, In Gall, the Ighazer valley and elsewhere as a major and extremely serious threat to the region's unique and complex ecosystem, which plays a pivotal and very complex socio-ecological role in the livelihoods of tens of thousands of pastoralists. The people threatened by this impending ecological disaster are not just the 100,000 or so Tuareg who inhabit the Aïr and adjoining plains of Talak and Tamesna, but Tuareg and other nomadic peoples, such as numerous Fulani nomads to the south, as well as Tuareg from as far north as the Ahaggar and Tassili-n-Ajjer regions in Algeria.

(c) The Abuse of Indigenous Rights: The US intervention in the Sahara-Sahel outlined above has done much to raise the conscientisation and politicisation of local peoples. This increased awareness of the international political scene is nowhere more acute than in the complex international politics of 'indigenous rights' issues. For example, in July 2006, within a matter of days of the United Nations Human Rights Council's adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the Tuareg of Niger lodged a formal complaint about the US presence and its activities in Niger with the UNWGIP (UN Working Group on Indigenous Peoples).

The Tuareg are very aware of their indigenous rights to the Aïr-Talak-Tamesna region and this poses a challenge to uranium mining companies. Few places in the Tuaregs' extensive domain are perceived as being more indigenous, almost 'sacred', than Tamesna. These sentiments are deeply rooted and go beyond the bounds of this paper but suffice it to say that with Niger's independence in 1960, Tamesna became a sort of no man's land, a 'Tuareg reserve', legally part of Niger but effectively beyond the reach of either the Nigerien or Algerian administrations. It became a uniquely Tuareg area in which traditional pastoral rights and practices were largely retained. It was the region to which Tuareg went, both from Algeria and Niger, when they 'wanted to get away from government.'

International mining companies, the Niger government and Tuareg political leaders, are all fully aware of both the attempts to recognise and protect indigenous rights and the current legal status of the UN Declaration of Indigenous Rights. Although the Declaration, which would give some degree of international legal protection to the Tuareg's attempts to protect their domain from international corporations is still awaiting adoption by the UN, its moral weight is indisputable.

3) Government's Failure to Adhere to the 1995 Peace Accord

The extent to which the Niger government has adhered to or fulfilled all the conditions and agreements of the 1995 Peace Accord is debatable. In the government's defense, many of the Tuareg rebels were integrated into the FAN and the FNIS. There has also been some devolution of government, especially at the local and regional levels. It can also be said in the government's defense that it has not had the resources to undertake many of the 1995 development proposals as it might have desired. However, the MNJ's claims that the government has not delivered on what the Tuareg regard as the biggest issue, namely a say in the management of the region's resources, notably uranium, hydrocarbons and other minerals, and an equitable share in their development are quite true. The Niger rebellion is rooted in this growing resentment at the rapacious exploitation of their lands and their exclusion from its benefits. Indeed, the financial terms and operating practices of these companies, sanctioned by the Niger government, are in complete contravention of the 1995 Peace Accord as well as the many global declarations and conventions on the exploitation of indigenous land rights. In short, the way in which the region's mineral and hydrocarbon resources have been, and still are, being exploited is seen by local people as bringing no benefit to themselves or their communities.

The Role of National & External Interests in the Causation & Escalation of the Rebellion

I suggested at the beginning of this article that the present rebellion, like those of 2004 in Aïr and 2006 in Mali may have been initiated and to some extent even orchestrated by external forces. In the early stages of the rebellion, the external parties deemed most likely to be involved were France and AREVA, followed by Algeria, the USA, Libya, international oil and mining companies, Islamists, drug traffickers and, nearer to home, the ruling elites and governments of both Niger and Mali. However, as the rebellion has escalated and dragged on, not only have these interests changed but a more complicated picture has emerged.

France & AREVA

France jealously guards her economic and political ties with *la francophonie*, especially Niger, whose substantial uranium deposits have supplied France, via AREVA, with a secured source of energy and a guarantee of nuclear independence. Not only does France need Niger's uranium to run her own reactors, but AREVA is currently the world's leading builder of nuclear reactors, a position which is helped in no small measure by being a leading marketer of uranium. She is thus able to deliver turnkey systems: the nuclear reactor package as well as the fuel to run them. This position was assured until Niger decided to place its own self-interest ahead of that of France/AREVA by opening its mineral rich north to international competition. France was then faced with the reality of international companies from China, South Africa, Canada, Australia, India, Nigeria, Algeria, the UK and elsewhere helping themselves to what she had hitherto taken for granted as her own national energy supply.

It is therefore not surprising that there have been rumours and suspicion from the outset that France/AREVA instigated and financed the rebellion in order to frighten off foreign, especially Chinese, competition. The Niger government went so far as to accuse AREVA of financing the rebels. Although denied, and without any solid

evidence being provided. Niger expelled AREVA's head of operations in July 2007 in a move that provoked the direct intervention of President Sarkozy and high level Franco-Nigerien talks in Niamey between Jean-Marie Bockel, France's cooperation minister, and President Tandja.⁶

France certainly has the means to initiate Tuareg unrest in Niger. Its own security agents, for instance, have long maintained close surveillance of the region, while AREVA management has close ties to both the MNJ leadership and other parties in the region. The president of the MNJ, for example, Aghaly ag Alembo was formerly the *sous-préfet* at Arlit where his business was as much to meet the needs of the uranium producer as to administer the mining town and its environs. However, if France/AREVA was behind the rebellion two points should be made. The first is that if France intended to create a bush-fire in the region, it appears to have got dangerously out of control. The second is that if this was France's intent, she would be more likely to operate through the more covert channels of her own foreign intelligence service, the *Direction Générale de la Sécurité Extérieure* (DGSE), which has especially close ties with Algeria's *Direction des Renseignements et de la Sécurité* (DRS) which, more than anyone, has the means to trigger such a chain of events.

Algeria

Evidence suggests that through its counter-intelligence service, the DRS, Algeria may well have been involved in the instigation of the rebellion. The evidence for this is as follows:

- (a) The three Tuareg who carried out the initial attack on Iferouane, Aboubacar ag Alambo, Kalakoua and Al Charif (Acheriff Mohamed), were known to the DRS. Aboubacar (reported dead, killed 22 June) and Kalakoua both have criminal records, while Al Charif was a former rebel who had subsequently deserted the Niger army. The leader of the attack, Aboubacar, came on the political scene in 2002 after deserting from the Niger army and killing two policemen. Since then he has been responsible for numerous acts of banditry, being described by his former comrades in the 1990s rebellion as 'psychopathic', enjoying 'violence' and always being entrusted to do the 'dirty work'. More significantly, he was well connected through a complex network of kinship ties to influential members of the regional governments on both sides of the Niger-Algeria border. For example, his brother Aghaly ag Alambo was formerly the sous-préfet at Arlit, while a cousin is the Commandant of Niger's Force National d'Intervention et de la Sécurité (FNIS), which, amongst other things, is responsible for the protection of foreign companies, such as AREVA and the Chinese oil and uranium companies, in the region. Another cousin is reputedly the director of security for Algeria's Tamanrasset wilaya. Since 2002 he has been protected and used by the DRS. There is also evidence that the vehicles and arms used in the Iferouane attack came from northern Mali and may have been provided by connections with the DRS. This is particularly significant as the DRS was instrumental in promoting the short-lived Tuareg rebellion at Kidal on 23 May 2006. This clandestine operation was supported by 100 US Special Forces who flew from to Tamanrasset (Algeria) from Stuttgart on 15-16 February 2006 and progressed overland into northern Mali.
- (b) Algeria has been the main agent in assisting the US in its policy of creating a 'Zone of Terror' across the Sahel since 2003. This has involved the fabrication of numerous 'terrorist' incidents in the region; countless media disinformation reports;

the provocation of unrest in the region and exaggerated (or fabricated) reports of armed engagements between Tuareg, DRS-supported rebels and GSPC elements in northern Mali in the period September-November 2006.

(c) Algeria has political and economic hegemonic designs on the Sahel, most notably in NE Mali (the Kidal region) and northern Niger. Precisely how the MNJ rebellion might further these interests is not at all clear. However, some local people believe that Algeria sees the ongoing destabilisation of the Sahel (Mali and Niger) as playing into its own long-term interests, perhaps by making the region less attractive to foreign exploitation, or by enabling it to play the role of 'peace-maker' and thus strengthen its political influence in the region. This relates especially to the challenge posed to Algeria by similar Libyan interests in the Sahel. For instance, Algeria's orchestration of the Kidal (Mali) revolt on 23 May 2006 was designed to discredit Libya's presence in the region (Keenan, 2006). Libya's involvement in northern Niger, especially the Agades region, has been far more invasive than in northern Mali. Therefore, at the outset of the rebellion, it was possible to think that there was a replay of Algeria's Malian strategy: to engineer a Tuareg 'rebellion' and blame it on the Libyans. This, however, now seems less likely. That is because Algeria has become increasingly anxious that the Niger and Mali rebellions will spread into Algeria where the bulk of the country's population, not least the Tuareg, are increasingly discontented with Algeria's domestic economic conditions for which they blame their corrupt and repressive government. For instance, when a group of discontented Tuareg youths carried out a high profile but ineffective attack on Djanet airport of 11 November 2007, the government could not move fast enough to attribute it to al-Qaeda.

The Niger Government

As the rebellion has developed, the role of President Tandja and his government has become the major cause of its prolongation and escalation. Since the US launched its global war on terror in the Sahara-Sahel in 2003, every country in the region, without exception, has provoked unrest amongst sections of their populations (usually minority, marginal groups) to exact 'rent' from the US in the form of further military and financial largesse. Niger, the world's poorest country, has punched far above its weight in this regard.

Following the Iferouane attack of 8 February 2007, local Tuareg believe that the government used what they call 'The List' to deliberately provoke armed unrest. This was a list of several dozens, perhaps hundreds, of former rebels whom the government was allegedly planning to detain. Irrespective of whether this was an act of retribution or provocation by the Niger government, it was enough to persuade many of the former rebels, several of whom had since become responsible local community and political leaders, to take to the mountains with their arms. It is estimated that as many as 200 former rebel fighters, having sent their wives and families into hiding, converged on Tamgak, a near-impregnable massif approximately 150 km in perimeter and over 2,000 metres high a few miles east by north-east of Iferouane. The number of fighters has now increased to at least 1,000 and possibly as many as 2,000.

Having used AREVA's alleged involvement in the rebellion to help break its monopoly on uranium production in Niger and thus gain a greater revenue stream by creating an expanded, internationally diversified and competitive market, there is no obvious strategic benefit to Niger in prolonging the conflict. Indeed, the country is already on the brink of deterring rather than attracting foreign investment. Further rents from US counter-terrorism are also limited.

Almost from the outset, the rebels have argued that President Tandja is hell-bent on an 'ivoirianisation' policy of exclusion against the Tuareg.' They believe that he has longstanding personal grievances against the Tuareg, stemming from the time when, as Minister of the Interior, he was responsible for the Tchin Tabaradene massacres that precipitated the 1990s rebellion. There are now an increasing number of Tuareg, rebels and civilians, who believe that the successful pursuit of this policy, manifesting itself through what they regard as genocide, will enable him to avoid recompensing the Tuareg for the exploitation of their indigenous lands, as agreed in the 1995 Peace Accord.

Now that Niger as a member of the TSCTI falls under the US security umbrella, and with the EU, France, China and Niger's more powerful neighbours having little immediate incentive to see the restoration of zonal stability, President Tandja can rest reasonably assured that his 'low-key' genocide policy will invoke little external intervention.

The USA

The USA, with its overarching 'security' interests in the region, is the one party with sufficient clout to point President Tandja in the direction of peace talks and a negotiated settlement. The fact that it has not done so suggests that in terms of Washington's perceptions of its national strategic interests in Africa, the 'pros' of Sahelian instability outweigh the 'cons'. In fact, this is probably becoming an increasingly marginal call. On the 'pro' side, the USA (along with other western powers) is still getting mileage from its al-Qaeda game in the Sahara-Sahel. This is a game to persuade the international community that putative terrorists are active in the region. Claims that al-Qaeda affiliates are active and that 'ungoverned spaces' are havens for terrorists provide the ideological legitimacy to pursue Washington's militarised 'development-security' discourse and the need for AFRICOM.

On the downside, the Tuareg rebellions are taking the Bush Administration towards two major pitfalls. The first is not so much that these rebellions are a product of Washington's post-9/11 intervention in the region, but that they are absolutely nothing to do with the threat of 'Islamism', 'Islamic extremism' or 'Islamist terrorism' that the US claims has mushroomed in the region over the last five or so years. With Algeria accusing Washington of exaggerating the terrorist threat (L'Expression, 18 November 2006 and 4 December 2006; L'Express, 17 November 2006; Liberté, 18 November 2006) and detailed field research revealing that nearly every supposed 'terrorist' incident in the region over this period has been fabricated (Keenan, 2006), the current Tuareg rebellions are simply exposing the US enterprise in the region as a grand deception. Second, the major prop used by the US to sell AFRICOM to an unconvinced world is its claimed success of its Pan-Sahel and Trans-Saharan Counter-Terrorism Initiatives, notably the training the US has given to the security forces in these countries in combating terrorism. That success is declared in the training the US has given to the security forces in the countries combating terrorism and securing their borders. And yet, what we are now witnessing in Mali and Niger is how these US-trained militaries, far from bringing security to their citizens or their borders, are accomplished in little more than the criminality of harassing innocent citizens (Mali) and conducting genocide (Niger). As the truth of what the PSI and TSCTI have brought to the peoples of the Sahel permeates across Africa, AFRICOM will become an even harder sell.

Other External Interests

China

Chinese companies in Niger are now at the centre of the rebellion. However, they will argue that they have been sucked into the conflagration and had no part, at least wittingly, in what was happening in its early stages. However, the MNJ believes China is giving military support to President Tandja and has consequently warned Chinese companies that they face severe repercussions if evidence of such support materialises.

Recent actions by the Chinese uranium company Sino-U have now severely prejudiced China's interests in the region. Around the beginning of March 2008, Sino-U, accompanied and protected by Niger's security forces, began denying local pastoralists access to their wells. Sino-U explained incorrectly to the local pastoralists that as it had paid for the land (through its uranium concession) it also had acquired the right of sole usage of the wells. The pastoralists most affected are those in the Talak region, the rich pastoral zone between Aïr and Tamesna. After several days of armed stand-off, the Chinese found a temporary solution by agreeing to build a concrete drinking trough by the wells. However the FAN have regularly slaughtered Tuareg livestock as part of their 'genocide' policy, and with reports (as yet unverified) that Chinese have been accompanying the FAN on these missions, armed confrontation with both the Chinese mining companies and the FAN over the pastoralists' rights of access to their wells cannot be ruled out.

Libya

Libya's recent designs on the Sahel have been reflected in Mouamar Ghadafi's many pronouncements on some sort of 'Tuareg political entity' or 'Saharan state', which at one point he envisaged as stretching 'from Mauritania to Iraq'. Such pronouncements may be seen as part of Libya's attempt to compete with Algeria, the other regional sub-hegemon, for influence in the Sahel. There has been widespread speculation about Ghadafi's involvement in the rebellions although this appears to have been ill-founded. Libya's primary role so far has been as a potential peacemaker. However, this role should be seen as part of the regional competition for influence in the Sahel being played out between Algeria and Libya.

Mali

Although the Tuareg of Mali are not yet suffering the same sort of invasive exploitation of their lands by mining companies as is happening in Niger, the Mali rebellion has certain key similarities with that in Niger. These are the perceived failure of the Malian government to fulfil the agreements reached at the end of the 1990s rebellion and the abuse and harassment of the Tuareg civilian population by the Malian army. The first act of rebellion by Bahanga, namely his attack on a police post near Tin Zaouatene and the killing of two policemen in May 2007, was provoked by the violation of Tuareg women by Malian soldiers. At the same time, there were disturbing indications that the Mali government was moving in the same

direction as that of Niger by encouraging the resuscitation of the Ganda Koy, a Songhai-based militia that was responsible for many of the attacks on Tuareg civilian populations in the 1990s Tuareg rebellion. Although denied by both Malian rebels and the MNJ, they met on 20-22 July to discuss a common strategy and formed what they called the *Alliance Touareg Niger-Mali* (ATNM). After a series of attacks on the Malian army at the end of August and through September and the mining of many of the routes around Tin Zaouatene, a tenuous peace held through the month of Ramadan. It was broken in March as a result of the atrocities committed by the Malian and US forces at Tin Zaouatene. In other words, both the initial act of rebellion and its subsequent escalation, as in Niger, were in response to the commitment of atrocities by the security forces against the Tuareg civilian populations.

Drug Traffickers

The governments of both Niger and Mali assert that the rebels are simply criminals and drug traffickers fighting to get more control over the lucrative trans-Saharan drug trafficking business. This claim is nothing more than the Malian and Nigerien governments' attempts to divert international attention from the real political problems associated with the Tuareg in their countries. This is especially true of Niger, where the Tuareg rebellion is directly associated with the exploitative behaviour of international mining companies and increasingly the genocide being perpetrated by its security forces.

This perversion of the truth is assisted by international agencies, notably the UN Secretary General's representative (and other UN officials) in West Africa, Said Djinnit, who has explained the renewed tension in the Sahel as the result of a combination of factors. 'There are the old rebellions,' he said, 'on which have been added the new phenomena of terrorism, which is present in the region, but above all the drug trade and organised crime, which have grown dramatically'. As I have already explained, the terrorism to which Said Djinnit refers was fabricated by the US and Algeria as part of the 'war on terror' and has subsequently become a 'mythologised' element of the region.

This is not to deny that drug trafficking across the Sahara is on a massive scale, or that some Tuareg, especially now that the US war on terror has deprived many of them of their livelihoods, are involved as drivers and low-level operatives. There is also good reason to believe that both rebel forces are cashing in on the drug trafficking to finance their rebellions. Drug trafficking, however, is not the cause of the rebellions in the way that the governments of the region and the UN are speaking. Drugs trafficking across the Sahara may be major business but it is run by international organisations in association with rogue elements within the North and West Africa's political-military elites. It is not run by the Tuareg rebels. In fact, the key element in controlling the trans-Saharan part of the business is largely in the control of what is euphemistically referred to as 'the sons of the generals', that is the families of some of Algeria's powerful generals who comprise the power (le pouvoir) at the core of the Algerian state. These elements want to secure more control over north-east Mali, the 'funnel' through which much of the drugs traffic enters Algeria. It is this desire by elements within the Algerian military to secure more control over north-east Mali that is being challenged by Bahanga's forces.

Conclusions

Although it may be too early to make definitive pronouncements, we can offer some pointers relating to the pressures on the western half of the Sahel and some of the consequences of securitisation in the region.

Uranium Mining

Apart from an attack on AREVA'a Immouraren Base in April 2007 and the abduction of a Sino-U executive for five days in July, the MNJ has refrained from any direct attacks on the uranium mines or the yellow-cake convoys. However, on 31 January 2008, Rhissa ag Boula, speaking from Paris, announced the launch of an offensive against the uranium mines, works and convoys (Le Nouvel Observateur, 31 January 2008). The announcement caused much anger amongst the MNJ rebels in Niger, largely because Rhissa is not a member of the MNJ and was not speaking on their behalf. Nevertheless, on 14 March gunmen attacked a yellow-cake convey south of Arlit, killing one civilian and wounding another. Although the attack is presumed to have been undertaken by the MNJ, the attackers have not yet been identified. Indeed, some Tuareg in the region say the attack was not undertaken by the MNJ but by one of the many groups of 'troublemakers' who have moved into the region. Since March, there have been no further attacks on the uranium industry. Whether the MNI will respond with more attacks against the uranium industry remains to be seen. It seems unlikely that the MNJ under Aghaly ag Alembo will launch such attacks but, if new rebel factions emerge, as discussed below, an offensive against the uranium industry cannot be ruled out.

The uranium industry is Niger's economic jugular. If the conflict escalates and the industry is targeted more directly, it will have serious effects on uranium mining: foreign investment may be deterred if security costs escalate. As it is, the rebellion has already placed the industry in Niger under the spotlight. Irrespective of whether AREVA was involved in the instigation of the rebellion, the reported presence of French military advisers in Agades will make it very difficult for both France and AREVA to distance themselves from the genocidal actions of the FAN. Quite apart from its long history of labour exploitation, not least its appalling health and safety record, it will be extremely difficult in the future for the company to develop good relations with a local workforce. Neither can most other international companies afford to be tarred with the 'genocide' or 'war crimes' brush. Western companies, however, are more susceptible to share-holder concerns. For example, if *Electricité de France* (EDF) should proceed with a bid for the UK government's 35% holding in British Energy (BE), BE's advisor, as part of its defence, might well start asking awkward questions regarding AREVA's guarantees of uranium supplies, while the Labour government, which not so long ago had an ethical foreign policy, might find it awkward selling its stake to a company associated - if only through its government's military assistance to the FAN - with genocide.

It should be noted that the Tuareg are not opposed to mining in their region *per se*. They want a fair share of the revenue and better controls and regulation of the mining process to protect their environmental interests and concerns.

Factional Splits in Niger

On 31 May, a new rebel group, the *Front des forces de redressement* (FFR), announced its split from the MNJ. The FFR is led by Mohamed Awtchiki Kriska, who only joined the MNJ in November 2007. He was a spokesperson for the Tuareg rebel forces in Niger in the 1991-95 rebellion and is believed to be close to Rhissa ag Boula. With little love lost between the present MNJ leadership and Rhissa ag Boula, this split, if it gathers strength, could have serious implications for both the local Tuareg and the course of the rebellion. It is possible that the FFR, because of certain familial and other ties with Libya, might get more support from Tripoli. With Alembo's MNJ forces currently receiving sympathetic support, such as hospitalisation for their wounded in Tamanrasset, from the Algerians, such a development could increase tension between Algeria and Libya.

US/AFRICOM

The US has given a huge amount of publicity to the success of its PSI & TSCTI military initiatives in the Sahel, above all the military training of Niger's and Mali's armed forces. When the rest of Africa digests how the product of this training, in reality, is little more than uniformed gangs of looters, arsonists, torturers and murderers of innocent civilians (aka the FAN), the US should not be surprised to find even less enthusiasm for its AFRICOM. Indeed, these words may be fortuitous: on 1 June 2008 the Pentagon announced, in what may be interpreted as the beginning of the US retreat from Africa, that it was scaling back its ambitions in Africa and that AFRICOM will be based for the foreseeable future in Stuttgart.

Widening the Conflagration

During the course of writing this article, events in Mali have changed significantly. Following the rebel attacks on the Malian army in late-March 2008, Mali government delegates and representatives of Bahanga's rebels met for peace talks in Libya. A peace deal, which was to have been entered into at 12.01 a.m. on 3 April, was delayed for 24 hours. In the intervening day, the Malian army had called in air support. For the first time it attacked the rebels using Russian-made Mi-24 helicopters. The initial, unverified reports suggest that as many as 60 rebels could have been killed. While this action might have been seen by the government as a way of putting an end to the rebellion, it has merely led to an intensification of hostilities.

There have been two significant developments in the middle of 2008. One has been sweeping changes in the command of Mali's armed forces. This has led to the army going much more on to the offensive, turning north-east Mali into little less than a 'war zone'. And it then led to the second development, namely the flight of civilians from the region and at least 1,000 refugees were reported in Burkina Faso in June 2008 and 80 families' were reported to have sought refuge across the Algerian border. While this number is small in comparison to the estimated 150,000 who fled Mali in the 1990s rebellion, it could increase rapidly if peace is not achieved soon.

The Mali government is committed in principle to a peaceful resolution of the conflict, but Niger is still insisting on a military solution. It says there will be no peace talks until the Tuareg lay down arms. For their part, the MNJ believes it can maintain the rebellion indefinitely, while at the same time hoping that the UN will intervene and mediate a peaceful settlement. At present, it is President Tandja's refusal to countenance a peaceful settlement that threatens a more prolonged and widened conflagration.

Questioning the Legitimacy of States & State Borders

The rebellions have led many Tuareg, especially the younger generation, to question the legitimacy of their states' borders. They argue that the borders of the states that encompass Tuareg lands are a product of the colonial era. But, as colonialism is now 'dead', so too, they argue, should be its borders. The more the conflict escalates, spreads or just drags on, the more likely younger Tuareg will challenge not merely their state borders but the legitimacy of their states themselves. Indeed, it is perhaps significant that a new website, believed to be run by young Tuareg rebels, emerged on 19 September 2007 proclaiming the founding of the Tuareg 'Republic of Toumoujagha' (http://toumoujagha.blogspot.com/). Toumoujagha comprises most of the northern half of Niger and all north-east Mali, with its northern limit being the border with Algeria. More recent modifications to the website show Toumoujagha incorporating the traditional Tuareg lands of southern Algeria and southwest Libya.

The idea of a Tuareg state has been aired in the past although never very seriously. The first is believed to have been in 1957 within the context of the OCRS (*Organisation Commune des Régions Sahariennes*), which was France's futile last-gasp attempt to control the Sahara's recently discovered oil resources. The most recent has been Gadhafi's advocacy of such an entity on several occasions since April 2005. Indeed, as the rebellions have spread and seemingly linked up, the idea of a Tuareg state has gained ground. That worries Algeria. The DRS is rumoured to have done a deal with the rebels in Niger and, it is believed, in Mali: this is that neither the Algerian military nor its DRS will intervene against the rebels south of the Algerian border, as long as the rebels ensure that their rebellions do not spread north of the borders. The other side of this deal is that Algeria hopes that its sympathetic 'humanitarian' support for the rebels, especially in Niger, will ultimately bear fruit by increasing Algerian influence south of the border.

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Endnotes

- 1. UN formally notified by Tuareg representative on 29 March 2008.
- 2. Tuareg rebellions broke out almost simultaneously in Niger and Mali in 1992 and continued throughout much of the decade, especially in Niger. In 2004, the Niger government attempted to provoke a further Tuareg uprising (see text), while the Algerian counter-terrorism intelligence services played a key role, along with US Special Forces, in orchestrating a rebellion of Tuareg in Mali on 23 May 2006.
- 3. These were under the leadership of Ibrahim ag Bahanga. His first attack was on a police post near Tin Zaouatene on 11 May 2007. In late August he kidnapped some 50 soldiers in a series of attacks on military convoys and positions, before the Malian army, assisted by the US, recaptured the Tin Zaouatene positions in late September. At least 16 civilians were killed by land mines with a handful of soldiers being killed in the skirmishes.
- 4. At the end of 2005 Niger's Reasonably Assured Resources were 173,000 tonnes of uranium oxide at less than \$40/kg, and a further 7,000 tonnes (tU) at up to 80/kg. Inferred resources are 45,000 tU at up to 80/kg.
- 5. See, Commission de Recherche et d'Information Indépendantes sur la Radioactivité, SHERPA, la CRIIRad et Médecins du Monde dénoncent les conditions d'extraction de l'uranium en Afrique par les filiales du groupe AREVA, April 2007, and other documents on the CRIIRad website, http://www.criirad.org/ (accessed August 2007).

- 6. Bisbilles entre Niamey et Areva, *L'Humanité* (Paris), 3 August 2007, http://www.humanite.fr/2007-08-03_International_Bisbilles-entre-Niamey-et-Areva (accessed August 2007). However, other than the announcement of the broad terms of a new contract between Niger and AREVA, with France talking diplomatically of there having merely been certain 'misunderstandings', the talks did nothing to further a peaceful resolution of the conflict. The two parties issued a bland statement regarding Franco-Nigerien cooperation and the offer by France of de-mining aid (Reuters, France Sees Areva Progress, Offers Niger Mine Aid, Niamey, 4 August 2007, http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/L04331253.htm [accessed August 2007]).
- 7. The term 'ivoirité' 'Ivoirian-ness' was coined in 1994 by President Henri Konan Bédié of Côte d'Ivoire in his campaign to exclude and disenfranchise politicians and potential voters from the north of the country, in particular presidential candidate Alassane Oattara and his supporters, on the grounds of parentage in neighbouring countries, especially Burkina Faso. The term and the policy of exclusion has continued under President Laurent Gbagbo.
- 8. His first such proclamation was made at Oubari (Libya) in April 2005; then subsequently in a speech at Timbuktu on the occasion of the festival of the birth of the Prophet in April 2006.

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