

Mali: The history behind the world's newest conflict

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Last February, a bitter ground war broke out in the arid wastes of the greatest desert on earth. French, Malian and Chadian troops have been fighting Islamist rebels in mountainous areas of the southern Sahara - and the desert's southern fringes.

At the same time, troops from more than 25 African, European, North American and Asian countries have been supplying logistical support, training and reconnaissance to the French, Malian and other combat forces.

The French initially intervened in January to help the Malians dislodge hard-line Islamist guerrillas who had seized control of northern Mali. The region's towns were quickly liberated from Islamist rule - but by mid February a guerrilla war had broken out in the desert itself.

The war in northern Mali came about as a result of two different political developments with two very different historical backgrounds.

The deep roots of the crisis

Initially, in early 2012, the rebellion in the north of the country was led by conventional local separatists who wanted to set up an independent state for the area's native Saharan Tuareg people.

They were successful in driving the Malian army out of Tuareg territory and even issued a declaration of independence in April. But within eight months, these largely secular Tuareg nationalists had been pushed aside by militant Islamists who proceeded to establish control over northern Mali.

Unwittingly, the nationalists had paved the way for the Islamist takeover. The Islamists hoped to take control of the whole of Mali - not just the Tuareg north - and to turn the country into a strict Islamic state.

The long-term historical background to the present evolving situation therefore has two quite distinct facets - first, the long history of the Tuareg themselves, and, secondly, the history of militant Islam in the region.

Behind last year's Tuareg separatist rebellion lay long-standing tensions between the largely desert-dwelling Tuareg (a Berber people partly originating from North Africa) and southern Mali's black-African agricultural population.

These two peoples have different origins and political aspirations. The only reason they are officially bound together as one nation is because the country's borders were drawn up in the early part of the last century by the French. But the distant origins of the situation go back much earlier than that.

Prior to around 1200 B.C., the North African ancestors of the Tuareg lived on the northern fringes of the Sahara, like most other Berber populations - but the introduction of the horse into North Africa in the mid-second millennium B.C. (and then the camel in the first century B.C.) enabled them to expand southwards across the desert. In medieval and early modern times, they established a succession of powerful desert federations which clashed with each other and with black-African states on the southern fringes of the Sahara.

By the 10th century A.D., the Tuareg had helped introduce Islam to West Africa, while economically they prospered from their control of the trans-Saharan gold, salt and slave trades. Indeed, Tuareg slave-raiding made them widely feared among sub-Saharan Africans.

But, just as the Tuareg had their powerful political structures and identities, so did the black-African population of southern Mali, who established the medieval Songhai and Mali empires - the latter name being resurrected as the name of the modern state.

Tuareg territory covered (and still covers) not only northern Mali, but western Niger, southern Algeria and southwest Libya. And yet - like the Kurds and the Lapps and many other peoples - their land is divided between internationally recognized modern nation states.

The "partition" of the Tuaregs' desert land was carried out by the French in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Their vast territory merely formed the peripheral desert hinterlands of French coastal or riverine colonies in North and West Africa. The French colonial authorities thought that the desert was economically worthless. As a result, two totally different governmental traditions developed in Mali - one in the more agricultural (black-African) south and another in the less valued desert (Tuareg) north.

In the south, the French rolled out their traditional colonial system of direct rule and encouraged the inhabitants to fully embrace French political and cultural norms. But, in the desert, the French deemed it uneconomic to invest in direct rule - so they broke up the larger Tuareg political units and allowed local Tuareg leaders to rule on France's behalf.

The French were also disposed to help preserve Tuareg culture for another reason. They held an almost romantic image of these nomadic desert warriors.

Although the Tuareg initially retained their autonomy, in the long term they fared worse than the black Africans of the south.

Why? With autonomy came the power to reject French educational, administrative and political input. So, while the more dependent black south acquired the modern administrative and economic skills that allowed it to dominate post-independence Mali, the autonomous Tuareg - who had rejected Western education - were unable, at independence, to resist union with the south.

Bizarrely, in the final few years of colonial rule, France came to value the desert above all. For in the mid-1950s, as independence loomed, oil, gas and uranium were discovered in the Sahara (hydrocarbons in Algeria and uranium in Niger) - and France came to believe that the entire desert might be similarly endowed with natural resources. Suddenly France wanted to retain the Sahara as a French-controlled territory, and encouraged the Tuareg to imagine that this would allow the virtual creation of a massive Tuareg-dominated super-state.

But the Algerians and the black-African populations of Mali and the Mauritians were hostile to the concept. In the end, the French and the Tuareg lost the political battle - and the Tuareg desert was partitioned between five newly independent West and North African states.

The Tuareg, however, refused to accept Malian rule and rose in revolt. Armed rebellion had been a Tuareg tradition in the early 20th century - and continued to be so for much of the later 20th and early 21st.

The recent troubled past

But it is not just a long tradition of rebellion that has sustained Tuareg separatism, militancy and revolt. Influences from across the world have also played key roles.

Throughout much of the mid-to-late 20th century, rebellions and droughts generated tens of thousands of Tuareg refugees who flowed over Mali's northern borders to Algeria and Libya.

In Algeria, they were exposed to two different influences. In the 1970s and 1980s, large numbers were politicized at least partly by rebellious youth-oriented Western rock music (especially Jimi Hendrix and Dire Straits). Algeria was also home to the Berber nationalist Kabyle movement, which advocated political independence for Berbers - and the Tuareg are a Berber people.

In Libya, Colonel Gheddafi - an enthusiast for desert cultures - welcomed Tuareg refugees and, in the 1980s and 1990s, enrolled them into his army. As a result, several thousand Tuareg obtained modern military training. With the fall of Gheddafi in 2011, many of them returned to Mali laden with weapons, some of which had originally been given by NATO to anti-Gheddafi rebels during the NATO-backed Libyan uprising.

The origins of Tuareg's Islamism developed recently.

Modern militant Islam developed in the Tuareg areas of northern Mali as a result of two major influences. First, the Algerian civil war (1991-2002), in which tens of thousands died, produced a tradition of armed Islamist insurrection which influenced some Tuareg - especially after defeated Algerian Islamists (some with links to al-Qaeda) fled to northern Mali when they lost the war.

Secondly, a number of Malian Tuareg also came under the religious influence of very conservative, though non-Islamist, Pakistani Muslim "missionaries" who became active in northern Mali. What's more, some Islamists in the region have also been inspired by the memory of earlier West African jihadis who successfully established Muslim theocratic states in West Africa in the 17th-19th centuries. The largest were the impressive Sokoto Caliphate (northern Nigeria and northern Cameroon) and the Massina Empire (in southern Mali) in the early 19th century - and the Toucouleur Empire (again, mainly Mali) of the mid-19th century.

What used to be Tuareg-run gold, salt and slave caravan routes across the Sahara have, in recent years, become profitable drug-smuggling corridors through which Colombian cocaine is channeled into Europe via the former Portuguese colony of Guinea-Bissau, the Tuareg-controlled Sahara and North Africa.

It was American fears of al Qaeda affiliates - potentially funded by drug money - that led the US to encourage the Malian government in late 2011 to try to re-establish full military control of the Tuareg north of the country. Yet all that succeeded in doing was to provoke the Tuareg nationalist uprising that ultimately led to the current situation.

Even more worrisome, some of the underlying tensions behind the problems in Mali have parallels in, or implications for, various other areas of Sahelian Africa - a region where complex historical forces have, over the centuries, created a 2,000-mile-long interface between a culturally sometimes more Arabized north and a black-African south.

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