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Articles

AFRO EURASIAN STUDIES

A PROBLEM AS COLONIAL LEGACY: NORTHERN MALI AND AZAWAD

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Bir Sömürge Mirası Olarak Bir Sorun: Kuzey Mali ve Azawad
Öz

Mali, bölgedeki terör faaliyetleri, iç savaşlar ve darbeler nedeniyle güvenlik bağlamında uzun bir istikrarsızlık dönemi yaşamaktadır. Libya krizinin ardından yaşanan karışıklık, Mali'deki askeri darbe ve ardından Batı Afrika'daki diğer darbeler, farklı amaçlar için silahlanmış grupların çoğalması ve saldırılar için uygun koşulların oluşmasına neden olmuştur. Bu durum, 2012'de Tuareg liderliğinde başkaldıran ve ülkenin kuzey bölgelerinde bağımsızlığını ilan eden Azawad Ulusal Kurtuluş Hareketi'nin (MNLA) mevcut konumunu akıllara getirmektedir. Yaygın inanışın aksine, kuzey bölgelerindeki Tuareg liderliğindeki silahlı isyan, sömürge sonrası Mali devletinin varlığından bu yana devam eden bir olgudur. Sahel bölgesindeki son kriz, Soğuk Savaş'ın sona ermesinden bu yana bölgenin güvenliği açısından en ciddi tehditlerden biri olarak değerlendirilmektedir ve uzun vadeli sonuçlarıyla ilgili ciddi endişelere yol açmaktadır. Bu makale, Bamako'ya karşı Tuareglerin süregelen isyanını dikkate alan tarihsel bir düzlemde çeşitli parametreleri inceleyerek krizin geçmişini ve bugününü daha net bir şekilde anlamayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu nedenle, öncelikle sömürge sonrası ve bağımsız Mali'deki siyasi konjonktürü inceleyecek ve ardından Azawad çatışmasının köklerini ve bugünün politik ortamında ortaya çıkan potansiyel tehditleri tartışacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Azawad, Mali, Tuareg, MNLA.

A Problem as Colonial Legacy: Northern Mali and Azawad
Abstract

Mali has been experiencing a long period of instability in the security context due to terrorist activities, civil wars, and coups in the region. The turmoil following the Libyan crisis, the military coup in Mali, and the subsequent coups in West Africa have created favorable conditions for the proliferation and attacks of groups armed for different purposes. This brings to mind the current position of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), which rebelled in 2012 under the leadership of the Tuaregs, emerged as an armed movement in the northern regions of the country and declared its independence from Mali. Contrary to popular belief, the Tuareg-led armed insurgency in the northern regions is as old as the post-colonial Malian state. The recent crisis in the Sahel region is one of the most serious since the end of the Cold War, with dire long-term implications for the region's security. This article aims to provide a clearer understanding of the past and present of the crisis by examining various parameters on a historical plane that considers the Tuareg's persistent rebellion against Bamako. For this reason, it will first examine the political conjuncture in post-colonial and independent Mali, and then discuss the roots of the Azawad conflict and the potential threats it poses in today's political environment.

Keywords: Azawad, Mali, Tuareg, MNLA.

Growing Security Crisis

Mali has been independent since 1960 and a multiparty democracy since 1991. From 1991 to 2012, it was a stable country with a democratic and peaceful transfer of power between parties. In early 2012, it faced a multifaceted crisis with severe consequences. These included a conflict in the north of the country that threatened its territorial integrity; political and institutional instability in the south that resulted in the March 22 coup d'état; and severe food insecurity as a result of droughts in the previous year. Following these events, the Government regained control of key areas in the north. The first peace agreement was signed in June 2013, although it lasted only a few months. The European Union and African Union troops supported the Government of Mali to stabilize the situation. After a short transitional period, democracy was restored, and parliamentary and presidential elections were successfully held in 2013 (Climate Investment Funds, 2015). However, one of the unresolved problems in all these processes is the north-south conflict that dates back to independence and even before. Indeed, the Tuareg uprising in 2012 once again exposed the insurmountable tension between the north and south of Mali. One reason for this tension can be found in the state-building methods that, immediately after decolonization, encouraged aggressive unity and the continued economic and political marginalization of the North. Despite past political unity, relations between northern and southern populations have always been distrustful. The French occupation exacerbated this mistrust. This was due to the attitude of the French during the colonial period when they decided to cultivate a ruling class composed almost exclusively of black Southerners. When these new ruling elites decided to free themselves from colonial rule, they had to find a way to establish political authority over the entire territory of Mali, using strategies ranging from favoritism and patronage to marginalization, divide-and-rule economic strategies, and military control. This was far from strengthening the unity of the country and the people's commitment to nation-building. In fact, by creating an independent centralized state based on the political and economic subordination of the North, post-colonial elites laid the foundations for rebellions in the North and future state failure.

While northern Mali is now seen by Malian authorities as a problem rather than a valuable part of the country, this has not always been the case. In times of trans-Saharan trade and royal pilgrimages to Mecca, the northern regions were seen as key to Mali's economic prosperity and political power. Northern Mali was an area of exploitation and trade, and a meeting point between the Arab, Saharan, and African worlds. Timbuktu, for example, was a powerful commercial metropolis where gold was exchanged, negotiated, and sold to the Maghreb, Mashreq, Europe, and the countries of the Mediterranean Gulf. Northern Mali also had a monopoly on the extraction of salt, a commodity then considered a princely possession. The end of the great Malian empires and French

colonialism preceded the exclusion of the northern regions from the center of power. In 1963, just five years after its creation, the Malian government faced strong political resistance to the growing influence of the south when it decided to abandon the Joint Organization of the Saharan Regions (OCRS) project so that it would not become an obstacle to its nation-building goals. Until then, OCRS membership had served as a counterweight to the growing political and territorial dominance of southern-dominated Mali. State over the traditional nomadic territories that the Tuaregs consider their own. Mali's exit from the OCRS fed a strong belief among Tuaregs in northern Mali that they had been abandoned by the south.

The decision to marginalize the North after independence, which was manifested in the will of the central state to affirm territorial integrity throughout the country, added to the historical prejudice between Northerners and Southerners. Indeed, the southern population has an extremely negative perception of the north. The Tuaregs are historically associated with distrust due to their long and mythologized experience of 'rezzed', or raiding, against the settled population. Other northerners, especially the Fulani or Songhay people, have been regular victims of these attacks. This partly explains their support for Mali's independence and Bamako's authority. explain the historical and long-standing mistrust between North and South. Since 1960, the Tuareg and Arab population has never managed to adapt to the new Malian state model and has been regularly excluded from positions of power and the central 'national cake'.

The northern population has not directly benefited from development programs, nor (unlike the south) has it been successful in accessing state rent (due to very limited representation in parliament and government). This unequal access to state resources can be seen as a consequence of the divide-and-rule strategy implemented by the Malian government, which reached its peak under the regime of Amadou Toumani Touré.

Tuaregs in Mali History and Claims

To understand the Azawad factor, which has long been a thorny issue for Mali, it is essential to look at the history of the Tuareg. Traditionally known as a nomadic people, the Tuaregs have been romanticized in Western literature as the "blue men of the Sahara" due to the blue veils of the men and the bluish tint of their faces from the paint. Their territory is spread over large areas of the Sahel region (Lecocq and Klute, 2013: 425). There are various theories about the meaning of Tuareg. The most widely accepted is that it comes from the word 'Targa dweller', the Tuareg name for the Fezzan region of Libya (Prasse 2012). The more common name they give themselves is Kel Tamasheq/Tamajaq, or 'Tamasheq/Tamajaq speakers', which is the general name for the Tuareg dialects (there are eight main languages), which belong to the Tamazight

family. Another common self-description is Kel Tagelmust or 'veiled people'. It is possible to say that Tuaregs are spread across West and North African countries such as Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, Algeria and Libya. Tuareg's history is old and important for the region. There are many sources written on the history of these people. However, since the scope of this study is to examine the Tuaregs within the framework of Mali and Azawad, it would be more useful to focus on the colonial period and its aftermath. The north of Mali, with its present-day borders, has always been valued by local kingdoms. Through their historical influence and economic prosperity, the northern regions played a major role in what is today considered Mali. During the great empires of the 11th to 16th centuries, the northern cities of Timbuktu (100,000 inhabitants in the 15th century) and Gao (70,000 in the 14th century) were the most influential places in Mali, wielding political power and economic dominance. After the Moroccan occupation (16th and 17th centuries), the regional fragmentation of Mali (local kingdoms) shifted the political center of gravity towards the southern regions. With French colonial rule (1880/1890-1960), the center of gravity shifted to the south, relegating the north of Mali to a position of secondary importance (Baines, 2017: 51).

By becoming a political periphery, the northern regions lost their influence and were directly subjected to the domination of a 'foreign' south. Excluded from power, they were also often excluded from economic programs and nascent development, before being seen as a hotspot of insecurity and a danger to regional stability. Due to the lack of regional official figures or local northern statistics (especially over long periods), this section focuses mainly on the economic trends and global inequalities that fueled frustration and motivated some of the most violent uprisings. Where statistics are available, they are noted and interpreted to help explain the 2012 crisis and highlight Mali's internal differences. It is well known that the society that fought for its independence after the French occupation tried to develop various methods of struggle, even after the colonial forces took control of the entire region. The French occupation also ushered in a century of profound change that shaped this society in all aspects: social, economic, political, and conceptual. The Tuareg resistance to the French conquerors and the subsequent rebellions against the colonizers and then against the post-colonial states established according to the French-designed territorialization of the region were fundamentally similar. This struggle, the idea of the Tuareg liberating their identity from outsiders, was transformed in the post-colonial period into the idea of Azawad's independence (Claudot-Hawad, 2017). Mali's state-building efforts between 1960 and 2012, and the Azawad Tuareg's responses to them, are analyzed according to three distinct phases: The first was independence and modernization (1960-1968), during which Tuareg dissidents launched their first rebellion (between 1962 and 1964) against the centralizing policies of President Modibo Keita's government. The second was the rise of authoritarianism under the military regime during periods of severe drought

(1968-1992), which led to social, economic, and demographic upheavals in Tuareg lands; the third was the transition towards a neoliberal state (1992-2012), which led to large-scale rebellions in the first half of the 1990s, unresolved agreements and smaller rebellions that led to secession in 2012 (Maddy-Weitzman, 2022: 91). There have been four major rebellions since the 1960s. The first Tuareg revolt took place in 1962-64. During this period, the Tuaregs came under great pressure from the government of 'Modibo Keita', who came to power after the French left the country. At that time, the Tuaregs were heavily discriminated against and lagged behind others in terms of the distribution of state benefits. To exacerbate the situation, the Keita government enacted some land reform policies that threatened Tuareg's access to agricultural products on their land (Mohanty, 2018). Despite various programs aimed at strengthening national unity and the legitimacy of the Bamako government within the northern region, north-south relations have always remained openly distrustful. The military coup by General Moussa Traoré in 1968 and the establishment of a centralized regime in Bamako that lasted 30 years (until the revolution of March 26, 1991) did nothing to remedy this situation.

Bamako's 'military' approach to the northern issue is seen as one of the most important components of the 2012 crisis. The misappropriation of funds allocated to the Special Program for Peace, Security, and Development in Northern Mali to build military barracks in the northern regions is a good example of this military model. The Malian government decided to rebuild and re-equip its military infrastructure in the north using money that should have been spent on local economic and social development. The local population, expecting social and developmental improvements, was deeply disappointed and saw this as another failure of state policy in the north. By deliberately sidelining the economic and social dimensions of the recurrent conflicts in the north and prioritizing mainly repressive actions, the Malian authorities have paved the way for other non-national loyalties and external interventions. The first rebellion in 1963, just three years after independence, demonstrated the difficulties of addressing post-colonial challenges and bringing all Malian communities under one political entity. The post-colonial Malian authorities' preference to suppress the rebellion and their refusal to address the root causes of the crisis (i.e. political recognition of northern features and a special status for the region) helped perpetuate the conflict for years. The authorities' decision to ban tourism and establish martial law and military rule in the northern regions illustrated the approach adopted to address northern issues.

The overthrow of President Modibo Keita in 1968 and the establishment of the military regime of General Moussa Traoré helped to quell popular discontent, at least for a few years and superficially. However, severe droughts in 1972-1973 and 1984-1985 fed new discontent, forcing thousands of members of the northern tribes to leave the region and seek refuge in neighboring countries, especially Niger and, to some extent, Libya. While these exoduses did not directly destabilize the Malian regime, the exodus has led to frustration, insecurity, and discontent among the northern population. It also encouraged new links with other groups, especially in Niger, where Tuareg rebel movements have been active since independence. The Libyan regime welcomed these climate-oriented refugees 'warmly', which Muammar Gaddafi, leader of the Libyan Socialist People's Jamahiriya, saw as a way to increase his political influence in the Sahara. Integrated into the Libyan Legion of Islam (founded in 1972), the Tuaregs were militarily trained and equipped and took part in the Libyan regime's proxy wars in other African countries (Chad, Sudan, Lebanon), especially Chad (Morgan 2011). With this move, the Tuareg problem became regionalized.

Tuareg and Arab exiles were the main participants in the second rebellion of 1990-1991. Like their elders before them, the fighters fought for better living conditions and recognition of a northern political identity, but at the same time demanded that the Tuaregs be allowed to become fighters in the Malian national army. By ignoring the political motivation of the rebels and preferring to call them 'highway bandits', General Moussa Traoré repeated the mistakes of Modibo Keita and once again contributed to the radicalization of the movement. Abuses by the Malian army, especially in Gao, Kidal, and Menaka, exacerbated grievances in the north. In 1990, an attempt by the Mouvement National de l'Azawad to free imprisoned Tuaregs by storming a police station in Menaka put the central government on high alert. After this attack, the insurgency continued and made relatively successful progress (Kristensen, 2012). Algeria was chosen by the Malian regime to mediate the crisis because of its knowledge of the region and suspected links between the rebels and the Libyan regime. However, the Tamanrasset peace accords, signed on January 6, 1991, were called into question when General Moussa Traoré was overthrown on March 26 following a coup led by Lieutenant Colonel Amadou Toumani Toure. The new regime did not recognize the Tamanrasset Agreement as legitimate and took few steps to implement it (Lode, 20021: 59). Between January 22 and March 25, 1992, Algeria mediated three rounds of negotiations between government representatives and the United Fronts and Movements of Azawad (Mouvements et Fronts Unifids de l'Azaouad- MFUA), culminating in the signing of the National Pact on April 11, 1992, in Bamako, Mali (Keita, 2018: 15). The FPLA initially refused to recognize the National Pact. Government troops killed twelve Tuaregs in Gossi on May 14, 1992, and 48 Tuaregs near Foita on May 17, 1992. Tuareg militants killed four bus passengers in the city of Gao on June 27, 1992. The Algerian government brokered an agreement between government representatives and MFUA representatives on February 11, 1993. The agreement provided for the integration of Tuareg militants into the Malian national army, but mutual attacks continued until the end of 1994. The Front Islamique Arabe de l'Azawad (FIAA), which

was involved in the war, continued its attacks on government forces until mid-1995. FIAA militants killed two people in Timbuktu on January 25, 1995. On the same day, government troops captured FIAA headquarters in the town of Tin-Adema. The FIAA agreed to a cessation of military hostilities in June 1995. The end of the Tuareg rebellion was marked by the ceremonial destruction of some 3,000 weapons in Timbuktu on March 26, 1996. Around 2,500 civilians were killed during the conflict and around 150,000 Tuaregs were forced to flee to neighboring countries as refugees during the unrest (UCA, 2023). The decade after 1996 can be characterized as a period of peaceful assistance to bring back Tuaregs who had fled to neighboring countries. The peaceful period lasted for about 10 years, but it must be said that this period did not bring about any solution that would radically solve the problem.

Indeed, a third rebellion broke out in May 2006. Fighters led by Iyad Ag Ghali took advantage of the withdrawal of the Malian army in the north after the last peace agreement to take control of the cities of Kidal and Menaka. This move by Iyad ag Ghali prompted Algeria to once again bring its mediation offer to the negotiating table. At this point, it should be noted that there was a difference of opinion among the Touregs. Indeed, while some Tuaregs saw Iyad's Ifoghas community as the sole beneficiaries of the deal, opposition parties in Bamako rejected Amadou Toumani Touré's concessions to the rebellion and argued that the problem should be dealt with militarily. According to them, by negotiating with armed groups without even trying to stop the insurgency, the ATT ignored what they saw as the main source of the problems (Baines, 2017: 76). When the current process in the region entered the political climate characterized as the Arab Spring and the power of the anti-government demonstrations that spread across North African countries reached Libya (2010), the possibility that northern Mali might be affected might not have been one of the first scenarios that came to mind. However, Gaddafi's fall would also usher in heated times for this region. The return of Malian Tuareg diaspora members to Mali in the summer of 2011, fleeing the civil war in Libya, seemed to offer the perfect opportunity to renew a Tuareg-led separatist project. In mid-October 2011, a major conference was held in the mountains of Kel Adagh, and a visible effort was made to move the audience of the meeting beyond identification with the ethnic Tuareg cause. Participants reportedly agreed that the time had come for northerners to break away from Bamako and establish an independent Azawad state, which led to the creation of the Movement for the National Liberation of Azawad (MNLA, Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad). The MNLA accused the Bamako government of deliberately obstructing Azawad by encouraging mismanagement, informality, and nepotism. More importantly, the MNLA contributed significantly to the "liberation" effort by further emphasizing the secessionist tendency. It immediately adopted the classic "liberation front" rhetoric and declared its "intention to use 'all necessary means' to end Mali's 'illegal occupation' of 'Azawad'"

(McGregor, 2011). Developments in 2012 exacerbated the turmoil in the north. The declaration of independence published on the website of the Movement for National Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) also stated that "the borders of other countries will be respected". The movement is one of two rebel groups that have increased their control in the region following the overthrow of the Malian government. The organizers of the coup in Mali cited the failure to stop the uprisings in the country as the reason. Meanwhile, Amnesty International noted that Mali was facing a major humanitarian crisis at the start of the uprising (Amnesty International, 2012). Amnesty called for immediate access for aid agencies to the northern cities of Gao, Kidal, and the historic city of Timbuktu, where looting, kidnapping and unrest have been taking place for days. After the UN Security Council called for an end to fighting in Mali, MNLA rebels announced yesterday that they had taken control of territory in the region and declared a "unilateral ceasefire". MNLA said it would adhere to the UN charter, in addition to declaring independence and respect for the borders of neighboring states. The MNLA also called on the international community to recognize the declared independent administration (BBC, 2012). The declaration of independence in 2012 was also one of the factors that exposed the conflict within the Tuareg community. While many Tuaregs were forced to flee the region, Azawad, which wanted a secular and independent state, was far from united among other regional powers, especially Islamist groups (Spiegel, 2012). In this process, the emergence of Ansar Dine (or Ansaraddin, an "Islamist" organization with ties to al-Qaeda in the Maghreb, amid the instability caused by the clashes between the MNLA and the government, and the capture of northern cities, especially Timbuktu, and the threat to the capital Bamako, created an opportunity for France to intervene directly. In 2013, the parties once again came to the table under the mediation of Algeria, which once again brought a temporary solution to the problems in the region. The Malian government and the Coordination of Azawad Movements, also known as the CMA, signed a peace agreement mediated by Algeria. The group includes the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, the Arab Movement of Azawad, and the High Council for the Unity of Azawad. According to the agreement, the CMA will respect "the unity and territorial integrity of Mali". The Malian government agreed to implement a more decentralized system of government with regional assemblies elected by universal suffrage (Mohanty, 2018).

Coups and the North as Instruments of Instability

Military coups are one of the biggest obstacles to the political stability of countries. Mali has experienced this process of instability with five coups after independence. After the 1968 coup against Modibo Keïta and the 1991 coup against Moussa Traoré, the military ended the government of Amadou Toumani Touré in 2012 after the Tuareg rebels advanced to the capital Bamako. The 2012 coup is important for the country's

political climate, because the northern problem, which had been going on since the early sixties and had been dealt with temporary solutions, was now one of the main reasons for a coup d'état. In addition, the fact that foreign troops were seen as an opportunity to solve the problem in the north would pave the way for bigger problems in the following years.

The removal of Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta by the military in 2020, who had been the head of state since 2013, led to similar processes happening again. Keita and the country's prime minister announced their resignations on state television after being held at gunpoint. In his statement, Keita said he did not want bloodshed for the sake of staying in power and said he was dissolving the government and parliament. After international statements condemning the military coup in Mali, Keita, and Prime Minister Boubou Cissé were taken to a military camp near the capital Bamako. Keïta had won the general elections in 2018 and started his second term in office. But he has not escaped criticism over allegations of corruption, mismanagement of the economy, and controversy over parliamentary elections. The country has been the scene of several major protests in recent months, with clashes with 'jihadists' and disagreements among soldiers over salaries (BBC, 2020).

Transitional president Bah Ndaw stepped down the following year, again following a military intervention, and Assimi Goïta became the country's new leader. In the post-2021 period, the steps taken to remove the French military from the region had a significant meaning in terms of weakening the neocolonial ties. On the other hand, these neocolonial ties are being replaced by some other actors that can create dependencies, and the solution to the problem in northern Mali is only changing actors but not finding a solution. The fact that the Wagner mercenary company is heavily employed in the region and participates in operations with the Malian army, raises concerns about the region's future. The renewed escalation of tensions came to a head in August 2023. Fighting intensified in the town of Ber, only 50 km from Timbuktu. Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA) fought with Malian Army forces to control this area. Since then, tensions in the northern region have continued to rise. The CMA claimed to have shot down a Malian army plane in Gao in the northeast. This claim was denied by the Malian army, which acknowledged that the plane had crashed but said it was due to a technical problem. This latest incident marks an unprecedented escalation at a time when dialogue between Bamako and the northern fighters has completely broken down. The situation is more volatile than ever, leading to fears of a conflagration in the north, where pro-independence groups are calling on the population to contribute to the war effort (Laplace, 2023). On the other hand, the recent intervention by the Malian army in Kidal, which has been controlled by the CMA since 2013, has caused great repercussions. Known as a haven for the separatists, Kidal is strategically important.

Conclusion

The security crisis in northern Mali, like many others, is a legacy of the colonial era. The abandonment of all sociological and cultural criteria when establishing borders has triggered security crises in many African countries that emerged as sovereign states in the process of independence. The Mali crisis is similarly intertwined with security threats both within Mali's borders and in neighboring countries.
In addition, the perpetuation of political instability through coups makes the resolution of crises even more difficult. Steps taken to resolve the conflict through reconciliation have also failed to provide a solution. At this point, a 60-year-old problem affects regional security and is a tool of intervention for Western powers. In particular, France's military operations in the region together with its allies have caused a great deal of anger.

On the other hand, the ideological divergence of the Azawad groups fighting for secession further complicates the equation in the region. Structures such as MNLA, CMA, Ansar Dine, IMA (Islamic Movement of Azawad) fight for similar goals with different ideologies, which hinders stability in the region. The withdrawal of French troops from the region after the last coup in Mali and the Malian army's concentration on the northern region with the Wagner forces have increased the intensity of military operations. The information that Kidal has been taken and the announcement of the continuation of the operations brings with it the possibility of the separatist movements in the region to relocate. The fact that countries such as Burkina Faso and Niger are close to the conflicts in Mali and, like Mali, are ruled by military juntas after the coup d'état makes it necessary to consider the possibility that conflicts may find new areas.

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