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The new scramble for the Sahara Business, underground profits and terror strategy

by H el ene Claudot-Hawad

(Translated from French by Arezki Boudif)

Terrorists, Islamists, drug traffickers, kidnappers, thieves, rapists, murderers, usurping minority, illegitimate separatists, adventurers without political agenda, obscurantists and quasi medieval activists and, to make it worse, potential destroyers of old manuscripts that belong to the world cultural heritage... The classic old colonial scenario of barbaric terror and demonization of Tuareg rebels in Mali lay on the front pages of media outlets while the creation of the Republic of Azawad was declared April 6, 2012 by the MNLA (French acronym for the National Movement of Liberation of Azawad). The desire for independence of a population subjected to all kind of mistreatments for 50 years by a state whose anti-democratic character is notorious in the Sahara-Sahel region was not acceptable. On the caricature presented to the public opinion, the political demands of the Tuareg people, which the mandated experts of the established order choose to ignore, remain taboo. The pretext of the Islamist jihad is again agitated to blur any element of intelligibility of the situation, and comes to legitimize the repression of the movement and perhaps, as in the past, genocidal excesses. Indeed, who remembers the Malian paramilitary militias (Gandakoy) which, just after the peace agreements signed between the rebels and the government of Mali in 1991, were launched against "red-skinned" Tuareg and Moor civilians, tortured, killed, decimated or forced into 'exile'¹ in an outrageous international silence, under the government of Amadou Toumani Tour e (ATT), President of a so-called "democratic" Mali, now deposed by a "non-democratic" military junta?

The jihadist agenda is nothing new. It has been regularly agitated and activated, first with regard to the anti-colonial war fought by the Tuareg until the total defeat of their resistance in 1919, then at every uprising against the authoritarian regimes of post-colonial states, implemented according to the interests of the former colonial empire. The confusion between Tuareg insurgents, Islamists and terrorists, not to mention the other misrepresentations, is a convenient shortcut to eradicate, under the cover of fighting terrorism, any political dissent on the part of the Tuareg and any statement or action that could hamper the interests of political and economic players on the Saharan stage. Opponents to "the establishment" are immediately taken care of by the special services of the states

¹ See H el ene CLAUDOT-HAWAD and HAWAD (ed.), *Touaregs. Voix Solitaires sous l'horizon confisqu e*, Ethnies, Survival International, Paris, 1996.

with the usual features: intimidation, defamation or corruption. One of the classic goodies and gadgets that the French have always spontaneously offered to their "Tuareg friends" is a cell phone, with a global reception system if necessary, directly connected to their call interception centers.²

Ironically, what is at stake in the Sahelo-Saharan issue is not played at the local level. It deals with the global economy and the redistribution of influence between international powers with the emergence of new players (USA, China, Canada, etc.), a fact that challenges the old colonial landscape. The race for access to mineral wealth (oil, gas, uranium, gold, phosphates...), which is abundant in Niger, Libya, Algeria and Mali, according to the latest surveys, is the center of the underground battle, which takes place in the desert. Local populations have so far never represented any interest as such, but only as "switches" that the rivaling states have systematically sought to manipulate. Thus the Tuareg political demands have long been contained within the strict limits of a regional autonomy, in fact never implemented by the states. Subsequently, the other switch represented by Islamists became a Saharan reality. On the other hand, the very close ties that exist between the Islamist groups created in the Sahara and Algeria, in particular, is almost never mentioned. Similarly, a stony silence is observed over the constant interference of the French, Algerian and Libyan secret services seeking to control the Tuareg insurgency to the benefit of their respective countries, dividing it into rival groups intended to neutralize each other.

As a consequence of new domestic and international political contexts and the inherent pressure, the Tuareg Rebel Movements have, in turn, greatly modified, in form and in content, the nature of their claims, and new ways of raising awareness have been developed. They abandoned the old agenda of a political independence for "the entire Tuareg territory and its margins" (Kawsen) in the early 20th century, during a general uprising against the colonial occupation, for smaller claims: in 1963, the Tuareg of Adagh rose up against the installment of the border (between Mali and Algeria) that would deprive them of part of their territory and separate them from the Tuareg of Ahaggar. The repression of this civilian uprising by the Malian army was harsh, leaving permanent scars to this day. It also served as a model of terror against defenseless populations and was used to repress every new Tuareg insurgency in the states of the Sahelo-Saharan zone. In the 1990s, the Tuareg insurrections from Niger and Mali have expressed a claim for a regional autonomy within the post-colonial state's borders. The movements that occurred in 2007 had targeted the bad governance. However, though they then framed their claims inside the state national identity - "Our identity is Niger," said Aghali Alambo, head of the Niger Tuareg Movement for Justice on April 23, 2008 - they were still accused of ethnic hatred and communalism. In February 2012, the MNLA, founded by Tuareg from the Malian side and armed with an unprecedented weaponry following the collapse of Libya, clearly claims "the independence of Azawad" within a republican, secular and multi-community political framework. A new movement called "Ansar Dine", led by Iyad Ag Ghali emerged in March 2012 at the time when MNLA's operations had already started: Ansar Dine's objective is religious with a Salafist orientation, aimed at introducing sharia law throughout Mali and west Africa. Iyad Ag Ghali speaks loudly in the media and provides opportunities for international leaders to wave again the

² For the Interventions of the DGSE in Tuareg issues, see Claude SILBERZAHN and John GUISEL, *Au coeur du secret. 150 jours aux commandes de la DGSE, 1989-1993*, Fayard, Paris, 1995.

banner of Islamic terror threat as an argument that would legitimize military intervention supported by the international community.

Here again, the card of terrorism threat in the Sahelo-Saharan region is on the table. In fact, the project was already in the drawers of some governments long before the mentioned events. The existence of Al Qaeda in the Maghreb is indeed a scheme that took shape as early as 2001 when the Algerian Department of Intelligence and Security (DRS French acronym for Département du Renseignement et de la Sécurité) announced that the army shot and killed a Yemeni fighter presented as an envoy of Bin Laden seeking to establish a liaison with the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC). Within the framework of the fight against terrorism, the U.S. have pledged some assistance with military equipments to Algeria... that was not coming at the right pace till an event that was going to boost the US-Algerian cooperation occurred: the March 2003 kidnapping of 32 European tourists in southern Algeria by GSPC members. The group was led by Amari Saifi, alias Abderrezak El Para. But the itinerary of the latter who had served in the Algerian armed forces revealed several inconsistencies³, many of which point at a potential role as an "undercover agent of the DRS" (Malti, 2008). On the field, Tuareg observers noticed that the kidnapers became used to replenishing from military barracks of southern Algeria, and some of them, seen on the Saharan trails, obviously did not spend their nights in a dusty camp. Furthermore, the capture of El Para in 2004 by a small group of Chadian rebels who unsuccessfully proposed to Algeria, USA and France to hand over the most wanted Islamist of Africa, shows that this episode did not fit in the scenario of tracking down "terrorists" all across the Sahara. It was finally Libya who extradited El Para to Algeria. The abduction of hostages – including a group that was released against ransom in northern Mali after a bizarre staging of armed confrontation – provided an opportunity for President Bush to postulate the presence of Al Qaeda in the Sahara and to reaffirm the need to extend the hunt for extremists from the Horn of Africa to the Atlantic.

The Pan-Sahel Initiative (a U.S. military assistance program to Mali, Niger, Chad, and Mauritania), which was adopted in 2002, became operational in 2003, and the deployment of U.S. troops on African soil has materialized. In 2005, this military cooperation extended to all the bordering countries to the Sahara (Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Senegal, Nigeria) to become the Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Initiative. The Report on the Global Terrorism released in April 2007 by the U.S. State Department produced a map that explicitly designated as "Terrorist Area" virtually the entire Sahelo-Saharan region, and in particular the territories where the Tuareg and their former economic and political partners operate. Caravan routes and other routes traditionally used by migrant families are included in this perimeter of terrorism. For Algeria, only the border areas with Morocco, Mali, Niger and Libya, were included in the designated area, even though all the Islamist attacks during that specific period occurred north of the country, and especially in its capital. The U.S. report

³ See in this regard Hocine MALTI, "Les guerres de Bush pour le pétrole", *Algeria-Watch*, March 21, 2008; Omar BENDERRA, François GEZE, Salima MELLAH, " 'L'ennemi algérien' de la France: le GSPC ou les services secrets des généraux? ", *Algeria-Watch*, July 23, 2005; François GEZE, Salima MELLAH, "'Al-Qaida au Maghreb' et les attentats du 11 avril 2007 à Alger. Lutttes de clans sur fond de conflits géopolitiques", *Algeria-Watch*, April 21, 2007; Jeremy KEENAN, "The Collapse of the Second Front," Silver City, NM and Washington, DC: *Foreign Policy In Focus*, Sept. 26, 2006.

claims that these desert areas became a sort of withdrawal zone for defeated terrorist organizations in the Middle East. And, according to the State Department, the GSPC allegedly merged in September 2006 with Al Qaeda - taking the name of Al Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) - "continued to be active in the Sahel, crossing the borders between Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Algeria and Chad because of the difficulty to monitor them, to recruit extremists for training and launching operations in the Trans-Sahara and perhaps outside. This newly established alliance with Al Qaeda has perhaps given access to more resources and better training."

The report always uses the simplistic and well-known dichotomy between a civilized world regulated by the state authority on which the West would have a monopoly and a lawless "tribal" space, leading to intervention orders to insure global security. The American press went further and closed the gap between assumptions and reality and decided, in 2008, to just drop the "perhaps" of the U.S. State Department Report. Thus, the hunt for "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)" by U.S. forces in the Sahel is an indisputable evidence, in the same fashion as the insidiously suggested idea that the Islamist group would be helped by « nomadic tribes known as the Tuareg, a Berber ethnic group that is in combat with the government of Mali » and further more, that its financial resources would be provided by drug trafficking (Daniel Williams, in Bloomberg.com, April 23, 2008).

The easy and convenient parallel, which is established between "Islamists / terrorists / Tuaregs / Nomads/ traffickers," draws the picture of a "lawless zone" given over to some "tribes", that is to say to anarchy, chaos, and delinquency. We find here the semantics and pattern applied among other examples to Afghanistan by U.S. authorities, with the success that we know.

Meanwhile, the former GSPC became AQIM and was thriving in Northern Mali. The successor of El Para as the Head of AQIM is another northern Algerian, Mokhtar Belmokhtar. With the money provided by the ransom obtained in exchange for hostages, he paid for local complicities among the Arab speakers of Azawad, and he is said to have even established an alliance through a marriage with a woman from the Moors of Timbuktu. He managed to get involved in the "juicy" smuggling of cocaine, a business that seems to be tolerated by some governments, or at least some of their powerful inner circles, between Mali, Mauritania, Western Sahara, Algeria, Niger, and Libya. As a matter of fact, several brigades of AQIM have been identified, roaming the region in heavily armed vehicles, without any cover. These groups, which have established a direct relationship with AlQaeda, seem to have lately avoided the control of Algeria. It is alleged that in 2007, the Algerian secret services even attempted to have members of the Tuareg rebellion assassinate Belmokhtar by.⁴

Iyad Ag Ghali is a former leader of the 1990s Tuareg insurrection, who later worked for the Malian government. In 2004 he served as the chief mediator in relation to the abduction of hostages committed by AQIM. Following those events, the Algerian and Malian secret services were eager to extend "his mission" and are said to have instructed him to "infiltrate the groups of Abu Zeid and

⁴ See Issane ANSAR, "Métastases du Salafisme Algérien à l'épreuve des soubresauts sahariens et des rébellions azawadiennes", *Temoust blog*, 2012.

Belmokhtar via Katibat Ansar Essuna" (Ansar 2012). Taking advantage of his position as a diplomat in Saudi Arabia for the Malian government, he approached the Salafist group and their main financial supporters. In March 18, 2012, after the first significant successes of the MNLA in Azawad, he miraculously showed up as the head of a new organization called "Ansar Dine" and intentionally created to divide the front for the independence of Azawad and "deplete its troop numbers" (Ansar 2012). In fact, what we are dealing with in this instance is the usual processing of insurgency dynamics by secret services, trying to work on all the possible fault lines. However, the tribal scheme aiming at weakening the MNLA, which is the goal of these strategies, does not work exactly as expected by the masterminds of the division.

Already, alarming information has been broadcast on the Islamists who have allegedly swept away the MNLA and are about to impose Sharia law as far as Bamako (the capital of Mali, located in the southern part of the country). This scenario of terror is obviously manipulated by some states that are eager to obtain the support of the international public opinion, justifying thereby a strong military crackdown to eradicate the "danger" which, for their own interests, lies more on an independent North than on an Islamist one.

In fact, behind the Saharan explosive situation of which I have mentioned only a very small aspect, looms the bitter failure of the so-called independent post-colonial states and their elites, specially shaped to protect the huge interests of old and rising international powers, the complete neglect of their people, suffering, repressed, broken, manipulated, deprived of their freedom of speech, of hope, of future and whose desire for life is gradually transformed into a desire for death, for more and more desperate uprisings.

Hélène Claudot-Hawad, April 6, 2012 (first published in French on Temoust.org, April 7, 2012)