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TUAREG MILITANCY AND THE SAHELIAN SHOCK WAVES OF THE LIBYA REVOLUTION

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The Sahara is neither a political void, nor an economic no man's land. Its populations actively trade, share views and behavioural norms. The survival of these networks depends on relationships with regional state and nonstate actors, among whom Mu'ammār al-Qadhafī's government in Libya used to feature prominently. His government offered economic support as well as political attention to Saharan communities. Qadhafī was driven by opportunism, yet his interventions provided some predictability to the vulnerable lives of Saharan communities.

Qadhafī's removal changed Saharan transnational political networks profoundly, and affected a system of governance involving heterogeneous actors, including Tuareg, Arab and Tebu but also Songhai, Hausa or Fulani communities, their nonstate armed protectors, as well as al-Qa'ida-affiliated armed groups originating in Algeria. Its echoes reverberated violently from Libya to Mali, then, after the French military intervention there in early 2013, to Algeria—epitomised by the attack on a gas plant at In Amenas in January 2013, and Niger, where

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deadly attacks hit Arlit and Agadez in May 2013. These attacks seem to have been perpetrated by groups relocated in southern Libya after a spell in Mali, indicating the continuing interpenetration of the Sahelian and North African spaces and their unfinished political reconfiguration since the Libyan Revolution.

For the Tuareg communities in particular, the 2011 revolution in Libya created a complex chain of events that drew in their kin in Niger, and Mali.² While many Sub-Saharan African migrants in Libya headed south to flee the combat zones,³ others, notably Tuareg fighters from Niger and Mali, entered Libya to offer support to Colonel Qadhafi's military campaign.⁴ When Qadhafi's government was defeated, the same combatants eventually returned to their home countries along with other Tuareg who had settled in Libya previously, in turn triggering the collapse of northern Mali. A Tuareg separatist movement, the *Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad* (National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad,⁵ MNLA), making extensive use of weapons and fighters from Libya, conducted a blitz offensive against Malian troops stationed in northern garrisons on 17 January 2012, provoking a coup against President Toure in the south-based capital Bamako and the subsequent de facto secession of Mali's north, roughly comprising two thirds of the national territory. But the MNLA ran out of resources soon after it declared the independence of Azawad on 6 April 2012, and was driven out by yet other recipients of Libyan weaponry,⁶ namely Mali-based Islamist groups closely connected to al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).⁷ AQIM, a Jihadist outfit born out of a process of factionalisation among Islamist forces during the Algerian civil war in the nineties, had found shelter in north Mali in 2003 and had enjoyed relative impunity since. Its local influence grew after it made the kidnapping of Westerners a prosperous money-making industry. When MNLA forces swept north Mali and defeated the army, AQIM dismissed its nationalist stance, rallied Tuareg combatants committed to Jihad and capitalised on anti-Tuareg sentiment among Songhai and Fulani northern communities. The Islamist coalition eventually vanquished the MNLA and imposed a nine-month Islamic rule over north Mali before France launched a military intervention to oust them.⁸

The Libyan revolution gave its Malian Tuareg participants and their local nationalist counterparts the firepower they had previously lacked to destroy Bamako's 'hegemony on a shoestring'⁹ in northern Mali.¹⁰ How do the stories of Libya and Mali intertwine?

This chapter firstly describes the long-lasting interconnectedness of the Tuareg Saharan political economy, perpetuated over centuries by long-distance travellers exchanging a wide range of licit and illicit commodities, building networks, accumulating social and financial capital, and, more recently, exploiting the economic and political opportunities afforded by Qadhafi in Libya. Secondly, the chapter details the interference of Qadhafi's regime with Niger and Mali's management of domestic Tuareg insurgencies. It then explains the Tuareg's nuanced support of Qadhafi's defence against the rebels' offensive in this context.

Libya and the political economy of the Sahara

Moussa T. is a young Tuareg I interviewed in May 2009 in Djanet,¹¹ in southeastern Algeria: 100km from the Tenere desert, Niger; 50km from Ghat, Libya. From October to April, Moussa is employed as a guide for tourists in the stunning scenery of the Tassili n'Ajjer, driving the 4x4 loaned to him by his boss Issouf H., a Tuareg travel agent from Niger who lives in Djanet. In the hot season, depending on the opportunities that arise, Moussa travels to Libya to buy spare parts for four-wheel drives, which he resells in Djanet, or in nearby Tamanrasset. When short of money, however, he organises convoys of sub-Saharan migrants wishing to enter Libya. Some of these migrants have been dropped at the Algerian border by Tuareg drivers from Niger after a long trip from Agadez. Others arrive in Tamanrasset first, via the mining town Arlit and Tenere, before being driven to Djanet by Moussa or his friends. When numbers of migrants in Djanet are high enough, Moussa assembles large groups of them and guides them on foot on the long rocky trail towards Ghat. The three-day trek is dangerous, sometimes deadly, as 'Africans don't know how to walk in the rocks' and cannot keep pace with their agile guide.

Moussa is relatively young for a *chifor* (driver) and admits he could make much more money by transporting other 'cargoes' (*chargements*) instead of migrants or tourists. In Djanet's economy, young *chifors* transport migrants when they lack the requisite experience and connections to transport arms or illicit drugs, which yield larger profits. Arms and drugs trafficking is controlled by a few politically connected patrons who own cars 'as fast as little planes', which cause amazement among those who see them pass by in the dunes. The two types of convoy—Moussa's slower trucks, and the fast 4x4s of the narco- and arms

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traffickers, indicate the two separate networks and economies that overlap in these same spaces.¹² Entry into the most profitable segment of trade also faces a moral barrier: illicit drugs are forbidden by Islam (*haram*) and transporting them exposes traffickers to social stigma.¹³

The geography dictates that arms and drug traffickers use few routes, the most well known of which is the ‘Salvador pass’, south of Djanet, a narrow corridor between the mountains bridging Libya and Niger. Most of the arms smuggled out of Libya during the 2011 civil war entered Niger there—as well as other goods, including construction material, to be sold in Agadez.¹⁴ The Salvador pass is also the point where Qadhafi’s former chief of intelligence Abdullah al-Sanusi left Libya in October 2011, with the help of former Tuareg rebels from Niger.¹⁵

While not rich, Moussa occasionally manages to save money, which he immediately invests in building a house, brick after brick, as a way to speed up his marital prospects. Moussa is better off than most of the other Tuareg young men that cross his path in Djanet. Every night, a large warehouse in Issouf’s family compound, which normally stores trekking equipment for tourists, hosts young Tuareg travellers heading to Libya to occupy seasonal jobs in gardens or construction sites, or returning to Niger. Issouf hardly knows them; they were recommended to him by common acquaintances.

Djanet is a node of the trans-Saharan trade whose economic success largely depends on the activities in which Moussa and Issouf engage. Djanet is connected to other distant Saharan nodes similarly sustained by this transnational network of trade: Timbuktu, Kidal, Gao or In-Khalil in Mali; Agadez or In-Gall in Niger; Ghat, Awbari or Sabha in Libya. While the people and commodities travelling between these places change, the trading routes as well as the ‘connectivity’ that makes them parts of a coherent political economy are deeply rooted in history. Convoys of people (slaves, caravaners, migrants), animals (camels) and goods (gold, salt, textiles, cowries, tanned leather, dates and other foodstuff; more recently petrol, perfume, electric appliances, cigarettes, drugs, firearms) have been crossing the desert for centuries. Oases towns are inherently fragile ecologically; therefore trade connections are necessary for their survival.

These trade connections have been sustained over the centuries by Islamic law and carefully maintained social capital. Trans-Saharan trade began well before the spread of Islam. But Islam, entering Africa in the seventh century, homogenised and strengthened the legal regu-

lations governing long-distance commerce.¹⁶ Social capital, notably via marital strategies, and cosmopolitanism—that is, aptitude for navigation across diverse linguistic and institutional settings¹⁷—combined to ensure the cohesion of trading networks. Success was made sustainable through constantly negotiated alliances, and involved subtle social hierarchies. As a consequence, trans-Saharan trading networks tend to form a vast dynamic moral economy requiring careful maintenance.¹⁸

Crucially, state actors—local customs officers as well as politicians—play a role in this economy. An oft-observed truth of the Saharan political economy was that for governments, controlling men is far more important than controlling territory. State officials' activities thus ranged in scope from collecting bribes to running entire trafficking networks. The booming cigarettes trafficking between Niger and Libya in the 1990s was controlled by Libyans from the Qadhadhfa tribe, raising the strategic value of the connection between Libya and Niger¹⁹—demonstrated later by Qadhafi's officials' choice to head to Niger at the end of the war.²⁰ These examples, from Moussa to the Qadhafa, demonstrate that the Sahara is anything but the 'ungoverned space' classically conveyed by the Western media.²¹ How resilient this economy is to shocks such as the rise of narco-trafficking, the collapse of Qadhafi's government in Libya and the subsequent Islamist takeover in Mali is explored further below.

Libya's importance in the Saharan economic space had mounted gradually since the 1960s. Pastoralism and long-distance caravanning, the traditional economic specialisations of the Tuareg, faltered under French colonial rule.²² After Mali and Niger became independent in 1960, recurrent rebellions, the ensuing waves of state repression, the opening of new trading routes by air or sea, as well as droughts, accelerated the economic decline of their northern provinces.²³ Tuareg rebellions hit Mali in 1963, the 1990s, 2006 and then again early 2012. Niger witnessed two periods of rebellion, in the 1990s, then again between 2007 and 2009. These insurgencies took place in the backdrop of Tuaregs' social and economic marginalisation in the post-colonial power systems privileging southern elites in Bamako and Niamey, respectively. The response by Niger and Mali's governments (including the use of violence) has varied greatly in the two countries. In 1963, during the first rebellion, Malian authorities used blind repression. The second rebellion in Mali also turned into bloody communal violence perpetrated by proxy militias controlled by the govern-

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ment. Significant killings of Tuareg civilians were also perpetrated by governmental forces in Niger, such as the ‘Tchintabaraden massacre’ in 1990, leaving a durable imprint on collective memories and subsequent nationalist narratives. Successive peace deals were signed in the nineties in Niger and Mali but were poorly implemented, perpetuating resentment.

This resulted in the disenfranchisement of large numbers of young Tuareg men, who, in response, migrated north to Algeria and Libya. Migration created a new trans-Saharan identity, that of the *ishumar* (from the French word *chômeur*, meaning unemployed). The *ishumar* were itinerant young men moving from one economic opportunity to the next. They began to question traditional tribal order, developed an ethos of solidarity and autonomy, and all the while tightened the social and economic connections in the towns between which they travelled. The globally acclaimed blues band Tinariwen sang a refrain ‘*Aujourd’hui je suis là mais demain je ne sais pas*’ (‘Today I’m here, tomorrow I don’t know’), popularly sung among the *ishumar*, which essentially encapsulated their worldview and lifestyle.²⁴

Libya became the Eldorado of the *ishumar* and their remittances were a source of financial assistance for their relatives at home.²⁵ While not offered full citizenship by the Libyan government—with the exception of some that became fighters in Qadhafi’s security forces—they could live and run businesses in Libya unhindered by the authorities.

Ishumar were the forerunners of a larger wave of migration into Libya from sub-Saharan Africa in the 1990s, which they in turn supported as drivers. This wave of migration was largely demand-driven. Libya faced a labour shortage and was cash-rich, triggering demand for unskilled foreign workers.

Hospitality towards Sub-Saharan Africans also stemmed from diplomatic considerations. Failed attempts at building pan-Arab solidarity, as well as diplomatic and economic isolation following the embargo declared after the Lockerbie attack in 1988, pushed Qadhafi’s government to develop ties with sub-Saharan Africa. The process resulted in massive Libyan investments in diverse productive sectors of sub-Saharan countries, as well as spectacular displays of generosity, such as Bamako’s Libya-funded administrative district, housing all of Mali’s main ministries and inaugurated in September 2010.²⁶ These diplomatic efforts culminated in Qadhafi’s creation of the Community of Saharan and Sahelian States (CEN-SAD) in February 1998.²⁷ CEN-SAD was a

free trade area initially founded by Libya and five Sahelian countries (Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali, Sudan and Chad), subsequently expanding to 28 members. One of its primary goals was to encourage the circulation of people. CEN-SAD's creation coincided with a spectacular increase in the proportion of sub-Saharan migrants working in Libya.

But Qadhafi was careful not to make immigration irreversible. The migrants were closely monitored in the towns in which they registered to work. When domestic political or economic pressures dictated, migration could be curtailed. In 2004, for instance, 5,000 Nigeriens were expelled from Libya.²⁸ Similarly, in the mid-2000s, Qadhafi complied with the European Union's new strategy for controlling immigration by allowing the guards from the EU agency Frontex to patrol its borders.

Qadhafi's Libya did not only enhance its political influence on the African continent through immigration policy and economic investments. Qadhafi also intervened directly in the national affairs of his neighbours, as epitomised by his mediation of the recurrent Tuareg rebellions in Niger and Mali. The political capital accrued in these interventions, would translate into ready Tuareg military support to Qadhafi at the onset of the 2011 uprising.²⁹

Qadhafi's role in shaping Tuareg regional politics

Libyan support for Tuareg rebellion in the Sahel is not new. During World War I, the Tuareg leader Kaocen united several Tuareg tribes from the Air region, north of Agadez in Niger, and challenged the French colonisers militarily with the support of the Cyrenaica-based Sanusi order, which shared control of what is now Libya with the Ottomans.³⁰ Kaocen's alliance with Cyrenaica was the first example of what became a recurrent feature of Tuareg rebellions—their using foreign alliances to gain advantage in local power struggles. In this way, Qadhafi's apparently whimsical agenda simply fitted a preexisting political dynamic.

In the 1970s, Qadhafi recognised a political opportunity in the disenfranchised young Tuaregs fleeing droughts and political repression in Niger and Mali. Posturing as a flag-bearer of a revolutionary, anti-imperial struggle, he created the Islamic Legion in 1979, an auxiliary armed group that enlisted up to 8,000 combatants from Egypt, Sudan, Niger and Mali. This force served in various and generally disastrous

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military campaigns in Chad, Uganda and Lebanon.³¹ It also served domestic purposes, since unlike the regular army, it was exclusively dedicated to Qadhafi's protection and safeguarding him against potential military coups.³²

Testimonies and narratives of Tuareg ex-combatants acknowledge the Islamic Legion played a central role in the rebellions that hit Niger and Mali in the early 1990s. Most veteran rebels of the 1990s I interviewed since 2007 root the immediate causes of the insurgency in the economic and political marginalisation of the Tuareg after independence but insist that its military translation was permitted by the experience of combat acquired under Qadhafi's auspices, as part of the Islamic Legion. In the eyes of the Tuareg who stayed in Niger and Mali at the time, the rebellions were started by 'Libyans'.³³ Most Tuareg leaders of those rebellions had fought in the Islamic Legion in the hope that Qadhafi would support their struggle in turn. This tacit promise was not fulfilled, however, as Qadhafi wanted to avoid a direct confrontation with Libya's neighbours. This created resentment among Tuareg rebels, who, in the 1990s, fought the central authorities of Mali and Niger 'without a single bullet from Qadhafi',³⁴ relying instead on arms raided from Malian and Nigerien military depots. Qadhafi's relationship with the Malian and Nigerien Tuareg therefore was ambiguous: the Tuareg had developed relatively commercial prosperous exchanges thanks to Libya's openness yet these ties enhanced Qadhafi's capacity to manipulate Tuareg political aspirations and militancy.

In the 1990s, Qadhafi offered Tuareg rebels sanctuary in Libya to organise and was, a decade later, instrumental in negotiating a cease-fire between the rebels and Mali and Niger. Qadhafi became the mediator of the regional tensions he had fuelled, garnering him international legitimacy in the region. Qadhafi held this position because of Libya's economic regional power. He could negotiate an end to fighting by coopting rebel leaders and promising military integration to their followers; he could also sponsor longer-term post-conflict policies aimed at preventing the resumption of conflicts such as the UNDP-run *Programme de Consolidation de la Paix dans l'Aïr et l'Azawak* (Programme for Peace Consolidation in the Aïr and the Azawak, PCPAA) in Niger in 2005 aimed at turning ex-combatants into small entrepreneurs. By doing so, Qadhafi became a crucial power-broker between the weak governments of Niger and Mali, and the armed actors in the remote periphery of their national territory.³⁵ The differ-

ent ways in which these political processes unfolded had direct consequences for the Tuareg's positions in the 2011 revolution in Libya.

*Libya and the Tuareg rebellion in Niger (2007–9)*³⁶

On 9 February 2007, the military post of Iferouane, located in the north of Agadez, was attacked by armed men claiming affiliation to a new movement: the *Mouvement des Nigériens pour la justice* (Nigerien Movement for Justice, MNJ). This was the start of a two-year rebellion based primarily in the Aïr Mountains, led by Aghaly Alambo, a mid-ranking officer of the *Front de libération de l'Aïr et de l'Azawak* (FLAA), the leading insurgent movement of the 1990s. After his time in the FLAA, Alambo took on the position of *sous-préfet* in Iferouane, north of Agadez, and ran a profitable travel agency—a business often associated with cross-border trafficking. Allegedly, Alambo took the leadership of the MNJ because of the involvement of his brother, an army deserter, in the MNJ's first attack, which made him a wanted man. His reputation as a brave combatant of the late FLAA and the early death in combat of the charismatic Capitaine Acharif ensured he was not initially challenged.

Within a few months, the MNJ amassed over a thousand combatants. The MNJ denounced the unfulfilled promises of the peace agreements signed in the late 1990s, which called for the economic development of Agadez and its region, greater regional autonomy through decentralisation and an ambitious programme of integration of ex-combatants in national security forces and public administration. The MNJ also demanded better redistribution of wealth from uranium mining, Niger's principal source of government revenues, which is extracted in Arlit, north of Agadez.

By late 2009, however, the MNJ had collapsed, due not only to exhaustion of resources but also a Libyan intervention, which consisted in coopting part of the MNJ leadership into a new faction that accepted disarming. We detail below how Libyan authorities were instrumental in the launch as well as the demise of the MNJ.

In 2005, France, the US, and Libya sponsored the PCPAA, an economic package that was negotiated in the 1990s peace agreement between the Nigerien government and the Tuareg rebels. Coordinated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), PCPAA supported 3,000 ex-combatants in starting micro-enterprises.³⁷ Also in

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2005, Libya, as a favour to the Nigerien authorities, arranged residence permits and positions in the Libyan security forces for 500 ex-combatants of the FLAA.³⁸ But the Libyan efforts—along with those of other donors—proved inadequate. The PCPAA started late and offered too little (typically small onion-growing businesses) to its recipients, who rejected the strictly economic scheme. Similarly, the informal integration process of ex-combatants into the Libyan and Nigerien armed forces, and its overreliance on the discretionary power of FLAA leaders, proved unworkable as too many FLAA combatants ended up side-lined. It was eventually ex-FLAA members who triggered the next rebellion in 2007, choosing Alambo to lead them and rebranding their movement MNJ.

MNJ's low-intensity guerrilla war ensued, logistically supported from Algerian and Libyan territory. Unable to handle the situation, Nigerien authorities appealed again to Qadhafi, who, in 2009, summoned the MNJ leaders to Tripoli. The negotiation degenerated into bargaining, in which the end of hostilities was simply bought for cash.

This buyoff factionalised the Nigerien Tuareg militants into three main groups. Two new groups split off from the MNJ: the *Front des Forces de Redressement* (FFR) and the *Front Patriotique Nigérien* (FPN). The cause of the breakdown was not ideological but stemmed, instead, from personal rivalries among the leaders driven by Libya's intervention. Parochial, self-interested considerations replaced the original nationalist claims and killed the insurgency.

The FPN tried to claim priority access to the funds offered by Qadhafi. Meanwhile Alambo, the MNJ president, negotiated with Libyan authorities on behalf of the MNJ. The prospects of the MNJ at the time are summarised by a MNJ fighter: 'our resources were exhausted and we were tired. The best thing to do was to sell our rebellion at a good price. Alambo obtained a good price and the great bulk of the combatants supported his option.'³⁹ According to the same combatant, the negotiated payment only covered disarmament. A second phase, consisting of employment for ex-combatants, was expected, but never transpired as Qadhafi was toppled in 2011.

Even the disarmament process did not run smoothly, as low-level fighters accused their leaders of deceit. According to ex-combatants interviewed in March 2012, they only received payment of \$1,000 in Sabha, southern Libya just prior to returning to Niger, instead of the \$6,000 payment per combatant it was rumoured the leaders received

from Qadhafi. With no documentation of the agreement there was no way of verifying the claims. Rumour became fact and Alambo was disavowed by many MNJ members and his house in Agadez ransacked. Alambo stayed in Tripoli, under Qadhafi's protection, until the revolution kicked off.

In 2011, Alambo became a recruiter for Tuareg fighters for Qadhafi's security brigades. In an interview given in Niamey in September 2011, Alambo narrates how, in June of the same year, he was asked by Qadhafi to help him fight the rebels.⁴⁰ Endowed with Qadhafi's resources, Alambo activated some of his loyal MNJ ties to recruit some of his past followers as fighters to Libya. This recruitment drive lasted approximately two months and was supplemented by spontaneous volunteers from disenfranchised MNJ ex-combatants. Some of those former MNJ combatants interviewed in Niamey in March 2012 described both routes: 'The first option consisted in riding to Djanet from Arlit with smugglers. Then from Djanet I would go to Ghat, Awbari or Sabha and find a welcoming brigade there; there were plenty of them and it was easy to find a relative with whom to travel at no expense.' Alambo's system, by contrast, was far more organised. 'The second option consists in joining one of the periodical convoys leaving the Air Mountains. What you need to know is when it leaves; then you just show up and everything is taken care of: food and transport.'

No more than a few hundreds⁴¹ of fighters from Niger—some of whom had remained in Libya as *ishumar* for years—fought for Qadhafi, partly out of sympathy for the man who made Libya an eldorado for the young Tuaregs, partly for the money, but also for the guns and other items they expected to bring (and sell) when returning home. Testimonies of their experience as mercenaries are scarce because interviewees were reticent to be associated with the fallen leader. Those that did talk were bitter. An elderly veteran of the Tuareg rebellions in Niger told the magazine *Jeune Afrique* that he and around 200 other men left Agadez in 2011, after a call from Aghaly Alambo, in the hope of making 5,000 Euros. They, and those others who survived, came back with nothing.⁴²

Alambo's last feat of assistance to Qadhafi was to facilitate the escape of senior government figures through Niger in early September 2011 with the support of Nigerien authorities,⁴³ who only required that they disarm on entry. Ali Qana, Qadhafi's Tuareg military com-

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mander of the southern zone was among those Alambo helped smuggle south. The Niger government's support may have been a result of past allegiances but one may conjecture it was also tolerated, if not arranged, by the French government in order to accelerate the fall of the Libyan government. Providing further evidence to this suggestion, Niger issued a diplomatic passport to Bashir Saleh, Qadhafi's former chief of staff and head of the Libya African Investment Portfolio aide in financial matters, who despite being wanted by Interpol resided in France until early 2012, when he was allowed to flee, when opinion and media pressure for his arrest mounted.⁴⁴

Alambo himself became special adviser to Amadou Hama, President of the Niger National Assembly. The agreement granted Alambo state protection and, for Niger authorities, it kept a potentially dangerous troublemaker in check. This (provisionally?) put an end to Alambo's privileged venture with Qadhafi's inner circles.

The 2011 revolution affected the personal trajectories of Nigerien Tuareg *ishumar* and fighters, and temporarily distorted the economy of northern Niger's Agadez region. Yet unlike Mali, the integrity of the Nigerien territory was left relatively unscathed. In Niger, the structural imbalances between northern and southern Niger are less pronounced than in Mali. Secondly, the history of violence between Malian Tuareg rebels, the Malian army and its allies was far more severe than in Niger.⁴⁵ Thirdly, AQIM's presence in northern Mali inflamed political tensions and relations between communities. Fourthly, a high concentration of disputes over the control of narco-trafficking from West Africa through Mali to the Mediterranean coast made northern Mali particularly vulnerable to resumption of violence and state collapse. Finally, the number of Malian Tuaregs enrolled in Qadhafi's security brigades stationed in Sabha or Awbari, which were compelled to leave Libya following Qadhafi's fall, significantly exceeded those of Nigerien Tuaregs.⁴⁶ As a consequence, the aftermath of the Libyan revolution only exacerbated an already deteriorating political situation in northern Mali.

The MNLA's Libyan connection

Between 2006 and 2009—almost concomitantly with the MNJ in Niger—a young Tuareg officer, Ibrahim Ag Bahanga, led a low-intensity guerrilla war in Kidal, Mali's most northern province. Ag Bahanga,

was a mid-ranking Malian army officer, an ex-rebel of the 1990s, who was then integrated into the Malian army. Despite being uneducated and not particularly articulate, his military prowess and charisma made him a potent leader. As in Niger, the poorly implemented peace agreements and integration programmes for Tuareg ex-combatants into the regular army, as well as rivalries between Tuareg groups treated differently by the regime, produced a renewed wave of insurgency. However, Ag Bahanga, unlike Alambo, refused to be bought. Despite signing a peace accord under Algerian auspices, he and his men fled north, becoming ‘social bandits’, righting wrongs by attacking army posts and drug convoys (a trade largely controlled at the time by specific Arab clans in the Gao region). The state armed local militias in response. Composed of fighters belonging to subaltern communities of northern Mali, including Arabs, Tuaregs, Fulanis and Songhaïs, these militias successfully pushed Ag Bahanga into exile into Libya in early 2009. He and his men remained there until the outbreak of fighting in Libya in 2011.

Libya’s 17 February Revolution presented Ag Bahanga with an opportunity to recruit fighters to return to Mali.⁴⁷ Instead of becoming Qadhafi’s recruiter, Ag Bahanga initiated talks between the young activists in Mali that in his absence had formed the separatist *Mouvement National de l’Azawad* (National Movement of Azawad or MNA) and Malian Tuareg soldiers serving in Libyan security brigades in southern Libya. These units were headed by Mohamed Ag Najim. Ag Najim’s father had been killed by the Malian military in the Adagh Mountains (Kidal province) in 1963. He typified the kind of dedicated Saharan combatants that Qadhafi had recruited into the Islamic Legions and later the mostly Tuareg Maghawir brigade.

Ag Bahanga, his men in Mali and those he managed to convince in Libya, frantically transported military equipment, cars or petrol from Ag Najim’s open stockpiles, into Mali, via Algeria and Niger in July and August 2011. The armaments that crossed the borders included AK47s, grenades, mounted machine-guns, vehicles,⁴⁸ but also anti-tank missiles, rocket launchers and MANPADS (Man Portable Air Defense Systems, equipped with SA-7 or SA-24 missiles).⁴⁹ Strikingly, the constant long-distance travels back and forth of convoys of arms between Libya and Mali were hardly stoppable. Although governmental authorities of Niger made some sporadic arrests, these interdictions were more often provoked by self-interested coincidental denunciation than rigorous and permanent monitoring of the borders.⁵⁰

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The product of Ag Bahanga's hectic networking between the Mali-based youth activists of the MNA and Ag Najim's fighters became the *Mouvement national de liberation de l'Azawad* (MNLA) formed in late 2011, soon after Ag Bahanga's accidental death in a car crash in August 2011. The MNLA first hit the Malian army on 17 January 2012 in Menaka, in the Gao region, with a firepower no Tuareg rebellion in the past had managed to gather. The Malian army did not resist the offensive and AQIM units as well as local government-sponsored proxy militias that had ousted Ag Bahanga in 2009 were forced to reconfigure their complex alliances.

The MNLA's original attack was only the first in a series of events that dramatically changed the Saharan political landscape. Using French-based media and articulate Paris-based propagandists, the MNLA postured as a pro-West, anti-AQIM, secular force, in the hope of receiving support from France and other Western powers. The support did not come; the MNLA's pro-West extraversion tactic failed and its resources shrank. At the same time, AQIM, whose bases were located in northern Mali, managed to capitalise on the anti-MNLA sentiment among northern non-Tuareg communities (Songhai, Fulanis or Arabs). After the rout of the Malian army, the rule of northern Mali was contested by the MNLA and an Islamist coalition whose backbone was formed by AQIM cells. And it is the Islamists who eventually won.

They took control of northern Mali through a formidable reversal of alliances, as influential, formerly state-sponsored non-Tuareg militias and youth groups present in the northern cities of Gao and Timbuktu aligned with what they considered the lesser of two evils. The inclusive discourse of Islam and the harshness of Islamist groups against criminals were preferred to the nationalist stance of the MNLA and its inability to discipline troublesome—when not criminal—followers. AQIM's other master strategic move consisted in coopting Iyad Ag Ghaly, a former prominent Tuareg nationalist rebel. Ag Ghaly had followed a personal trajectory towards Salafism and his leadership was dismissed by younger activists in the consultative process that led to the formation of the MNLA. Ag Ghaly's later alliance with AQIM marked his revenge against those who had sidelined him and incapacitated the MNLA in its opposition to AQIM, as confronting Ag Ghaly would have triggered deadly internecine conflicts and annihilated the chance of actualising the project of an independent Azawad.

The intention of the Islamists to push their territorial control further south in January 2013 triggered an immediate and heavy French mili-

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tary reaction. At time of writing in late 2013, the military operation under way, followed by a large UN-sponsored deployment, are arguably another unexpected and distant side-effect of the collapse of Qadhafis' regime and NATO's military intervention, but perhaps not the last.

Concluding remarks

None of the Sahelian shockwaves of the revolution in Libya have yet produced stable, predictable prospects for communities living in the Sahara. Militarisation of the desert by external forces has been the response offered so far by international powers, fearing the spread of Jihadism. The overwhelming macro-cleavage of the war on terror leaves little chance for the fragile moral economy that once characterised trans-Saharan exchanges to rebuild.