

TAC NEWS

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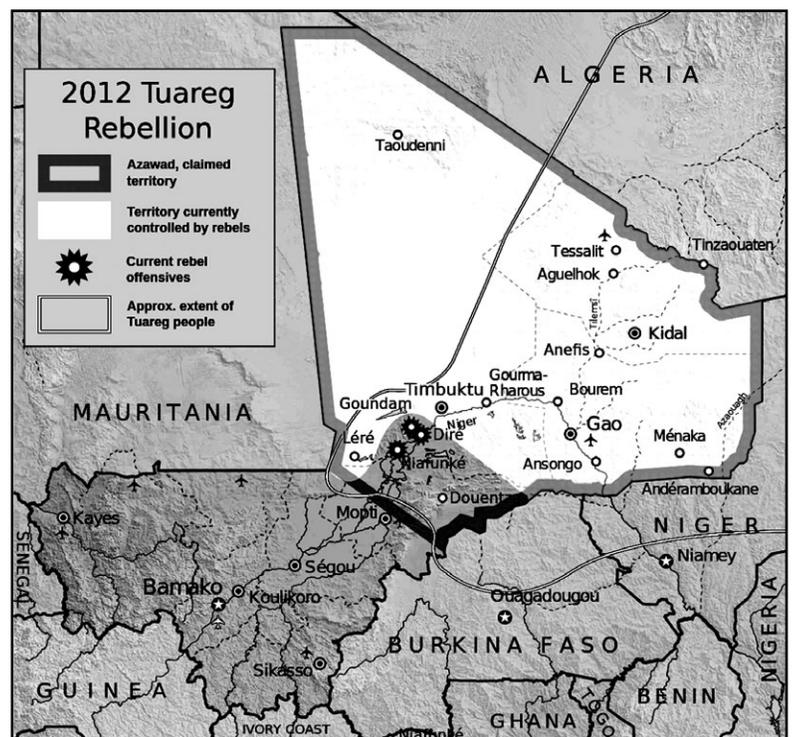
Tuareg Uprising: The War in Northern Mali January 2012 through 2013

Background

Before the coming of the French the region was famous for fabled empires of Ghana, Mali, and the Songhai. Formerly known as the French Sudan or part of French West Africa Mali secured its independence from France in 1960. At that time its army was basically little more than a constabulary force. As with other African states regaining their independence around this time the borders were drawn up based on the planning of the departing country. This left Mali with a population of several tribes, not all of which got along well together.

Ninety percent of the population lives in the south of the country with roughly ten percent of these living in the capital of Bamako. The population in the south predominantly the Mandé group of related tribes and makes up half of the total population. Seventeen percent is from the Fula tribe, twelve percent from the Voltaic tribe, six percent are Songhai with the remaining ten percent being Tuareg and Moor. There are twelve national languages besides French and over 40 languages are spoken at various points in the country.

The vast majority of the population is Muslim with a small Christian minority and a small group clinging to the indigenous beliefs in their areas. Roughly a third to half of the country is literate. There is a thriving musical culture in the country with concerts and



Azawad Tuareg rebellion 2012-2 by Wigiz, 3 April 2012. CC BY-SA 3.0

festivals being major events. In addition, there are numerous cultural sites throughout the country including a famous Mosque in Timbuktu, the tomb of a famous Muslim cleric, and a library from the days when there were empires in the region. Much of this, but not all, has survived the predations of the jihadists that controlled the north for several months.

Previous Uprisings

Following independence the Tuareg tribes of the north staged uprisings in 1962 to 1964, 1990 to 1995, and finally between 2007 and 2009. The first of these was

swiftly put down. This was an effort to achieve a state of their own but they never had sufficient forces to secure this.

The 1990 rebellion was better organized and led to a full blown civil war in Mali. It was related to a similar uprising in Niger that occurred just prior. The Tuareg in the rebellion appear to have been trained and funded by Libya. At that time Qaddafi was funding similar movements all across North Africa. Complaints leading to the uprising were that there were no opportunities for Tuareg to join the Malian Armed Forces and that the government had not dedicated sufficient resources to the North. Part of the peace settlement allowed Tuareg to be integrated into the Malian Armed Forces. What followed was an uneasy period of relative calm.

In 2007 an uprising among Niger's Tuareg once again spilled over into north Mali. The opening rounds of the conflict took the form of increasing sporadic attacks on government facilities. Later this took the form of attacks on Malian military units. In January, 2009 the Malian Army appears to have launched an offensive across the north. Led by new units trained by U.S. Special Forces and called Echelon Tactique Inter-Arme or ETIA this offensive attacked several suspected rebel positions. This was very effective and led to the rebels splitting into factions with one seeking a peace settlement. The remaining rebels, led by Ibrahim Ag Bahanga, headed across the border into Algeria.

Tuareg Uprising of 2012

The splinter group that had escaped into Algeria after the previous uprising had continued to prepare for the next round. They were aided in this by the Arab Spring movement in Libya. When the Qaddafi government fell Ag Bahanga and a Col. Ag Mohamed Najem of the Libyan Army raided the local arsenals and shipped large convoys of weapons, munitions, and other military supplies across the desert tracks to southern Algeria. In addition, large numbers of Tuareg mercenaries who had served in Qaddafi's forces also moved with the supplies back to southern Algeria to

participate in the rebellion. It should be noted that these convoys met with no obstruction from the Algerian military and arrived safely at their destinations. Ag Bahanga died mysteriously in an automobile crash just before the rebellion began.

The rebels now formed the MNLA. Unlike prior rebel groups the MNLA was heavily armed with an array of heavy weapons not previously available. This included 23mm anti-aircraft guns, mortars, rocket launchers, heavy and light machine guns, AK-47's, and the ubiquitous Toyota pick-up trucks. As in the Libyan militias the Toyotas were armed with an amazing array of weaponry ranging from machine guns up to turrets taken from BRDM's and rocket launching pods scavenged from helicopters. In addition, the MNLA was no longer alone. Al Qaeda was present as a military force. Another group formed as a splinter from the MNLA called Ansar Dine that also joined in the uprising. Finally, MOJWA had also formed and raised an army to participate.

Fighting began with see saw battles in towns along the Algerian and Niger frontiers. An attempt to recapture one of these, Aguelhok, led to the ambush of an army convoy with casualties of roughly 100 soldiers. The MNLA finally took control of the city. Following this some 97 Malian soldiers who had been captured were killed by the rebels. Talks to restore the peace collapsed when the main rebel force rejected the terms and continued their attacks. A military base in the town of Tinzaouaten was captured providing additional arms and munitions to the rebels. The rebels then laid siege to the town of Tessalit. An attempt was made to resupply the city by a U.S. C-130 but the supplies fell into rebel hands. The city fell and the rebels then advanced on Timbuktu.

Following these failures to hold the towns of the north elements of the Malian Army staged a coup. Much of the war had been badly mismanaged as evidence by the fact that many of the battles were lost due to the Army running out of ammunition. The coup was followed by an attempted counter coup and condemnation by the

Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The coup collapsed along with Army morale and the rebels rapidly overran the remaining cities and towns of the north half of the country. The MNLA declared its independence from Mali under the banner of the new state of Azawad.

After the fighting with the government died down MNLA soldiers began to return to Libya to join in the fighting there. The jihadist factions of the rebellion turned on the MNLA and attacked several cities across the new state. Fighting ensued leaving the MNLA with very few of their previous gains. The jihadists then began to apply Sharia Law in the captured cities. This move was not met with favor by the locals who began to provide intelligence to the Malian Army.

At this point the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2085 authorized military intervention in Mali to prevent the country from becoming a safe haven for terrorist organizations in general and Al Qaeda in particular. The Malian government requested assistance from both ECOWAS and from the French government.

Operation Serval

With intervention imminent the jihadist factions decided to attempt to end the war before ECOWAS and French forces could intervene. MOJWA, aided by Boko Haram struck at the city of Konna to threaten then capture both Mopti, a garrison town, and Sévaré, a major air field. Ansar Dine struck at the city of Diabaly deep in the southern half of the country. Fighting at Konna was intense but brief. Again, the Malian Army was forced to retire when they ran out of ammunition. Reinforced with fresh forces from the capital and resupplied the Malian Army struck back. Aided by French Special Forces there retook Konna after several days of fighting.

Operation Serval began as a French reaction to the MNLA and jihadist takeover of northern half of Mali. When MOJWA began its invasion of the south by

striking simultaneously at Diabaly and Konna the French accelerated their movements of troops to Mali. Requesting and receiving aid from other NATO countries they were able to move a brigade of troops over the course of a couple of weeks. Nearly an entire battalion task force was shipped by sea on the new ship Dixmude. Coupled with units transferred in from Chad and the Ivory Coast they assembled several battalion sized formations that then proceeded to reclaim the North.

The first forces to arrive were units from several Special Forces units. These were used to secure then garrison airfields and provided aid to the fighting in Konna. Airstrikes were conducted from bases in Chad and the Ivory Coast. As additional forces arrived they were fed into offensive operations. The French formed a series of battalion sized task forces that each contained an armored company, an artillery battery, and 3 companies of mechanized or motorized infantry. Another task force was organized that included several companies of airmobile companies. Each of these was sent as a flying column down the roads to retake the cities of the north. They were able to do this because surveillance aircraft scouted and observed each route to avoid ambush. The first success was the recapture of Diabaly. The Foreign Legion conducted an airdrop to aid in the recapture of Timbuktu. Contingents from a wide variety of African Nations provided garrisons in the liberated towns. A large contingent from Chad attacked and secured the city of Gao. All of this evokes the romance of a time long past with flying columns racing through the desert and the Foreign Legion doing battle against their ancient enemy the Tuareg tribes.

During all this the European Union provided training contingents to modernize, reorganize, and improve the Malian Army. This eventually led to the establishment of 8 new battalions of combined arms units called Groupement Tactique Inter-Armes or GTIA's that would carry on the fight after the French/ECOWAS units stood down and went home.

While there continued to be fighting in Gao and in the hills above the town of Kidal in the north the French/ECOWAS forces quickly overran the territory lost. At this stage the jihadist forces resorted of insurgency as their main effort and continue raids, bombings, and other attacks to this day.

Tactical Considerations

This was a war of maneuver by motorized forces across an area the size of France. The forces are very small in comparison to the area fought over. With the exception of the Malian Army none of the combatant groups fielded much more than reinforced brigades and most of the fighting was done by no more than one to three battalions on either side. The Malian Army was only slightly larger as it contained the equivalent of several brigades but at no point was more than a heavily reinforced battalion ever used in any of the fighting. In fact, a sizable portion of the Malian Army never saw combat!

There is use of Improvised Explosive Devices (IED's) in the fighting so treat these as minefields. There is no use of Vehicle Borne IED's at all that has been observed. All of the rebel forces, whether MNLA or Jihadist, were well equipped from Libyan Army stockpiles as well as what they took from captured or

abandoned Malian Army depots. The Malian Army is another matter. It lost many of the battles in this conflict due to poorly positioned supplies or the inability to deliver resupply as the battle progressed.

The rebel forces used high speed maneuvers to cut off Malian forces. Often the Malians were able to retreat either to the south or as refugees into neighboring countries. In several instances they found themselves besieged and held out until unable to do so any longer.

For the Jihadi's the initiative ran out with the arrival of ECOWAS and French forces. The largest ECOWAS contingent was from Chad. It was well equipped, well motivated, and participated in a great deal of the fighting. The French Army was highly professional and extremely mobile. Nearly all of their tactical formations (GTIA) consisted of an armored unit, three-infantry units, and an artillery contingent. Reconnaissance was provided by special forces units, drones, and aerial observation. Air strikes were used to soften jihadi positions routinely as well as to make strategic strikes deep in enemy territory. Airborne forces struck behind jihadi positions which frequently so spooked them that they fled without fighting.

In the next Tac News: *Tuareg Uprising Participants*

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