

Tuareg

Profile

The Tuareg are semi-nomadic herders and traders living in Northern Mali and across its borders in Niger, Burkina Faso, Algeria and Libya. They are descended from Berbers of North Africa and speak a Berber language: Tamasheq. They practice Sunni Islam, often in syncretic form, incorporating traditional beliefs.

Historical context

Tuareg are believed to have migrated from today's Libya in the 7th century CE, under pressure from Arab invaders. As semi-nomadic herders, traders and agriculturalists, they had some resistance to recurring drought. Due to their prevailing nomadism, the Tuareg never developed centralized leadership, instead operating in *kels*, a kind of loose political confederation.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, Tuareg captured black Africans as slaves. The Tuareg resisted the French military after its arrival in 1880, but succumbed to French rule in 1898. The French taxed their trade, confiscated camels for use by the military, and attempted to end the Tuareg's nomadic lifestyle. The political repression and economic hardship brought on by drought led to a Tuareg revolt in 1917, but the French quelled it. French administrators subsequently confiscated important grazing lands while using Tuaregs as forced conscripts and labour - and fragmented Tuareg societies through the drawing of arbitrary boundaries between Soudan (Mali) and its neighbours. Yet French interest in the Saharan zone was fleeting, leading to false expectations among the Tuareg for an autonomous state, Azawad. This expectation carried into independent Mali.

In the 1960s Malian Tuareg attempted to ally themselves with Algeria but were brutally repressed by the regime of President Modibo Keita. Yet more devastating to the Tuareg was the drought that began in 1968, worsened in 1972 and 1973, and lasted through 1974. From 1972-1974, around 40 per cent of the country's goat, sheep and cattle herds were lost, with the greatest impact on the Tuareg. Many were forced to abandon their nomadic lifestyles and move to cities, refugee camps, or into neighbouring countries. The government of Moussa Traoré squandered much of the international foreign aid sent to relieve the crisis. Throughout the 1980s, including another period of severe drought and famine from 1983-1985, the Traoré regime continued to neglect the Tuareg and treat their communities with hostility. Some Tuareg fled the difficult conditions for Libya, where some young Tuareg trained with the Libyan army or at Libyan guerrilla training camps. Some of these Tuareg returned at the end of the decade, and some of them were armed. In 1990, Tuareg separatists struck at government facilities in the city of Gao, and heavy-handed reprisal attacks by the Malian military fanned the flames of the rebellion. The reprisals also sharpened the ethnic dimension of the conflict, as many of the poorly trained soldiers sent to fight the Tuareg were of the Songhai and related Zarmaci tribes. A January 1991 cease-fire with Tuareg rebel factions, brokered by Algeria, soon fell apart.

The government of Alpha Oumar Konaré, elected in 1992, made coming to terms with Tuareg rebels in the north one of its main priorities. Konaré made numerous concessions to the Tuareg, including 1992 reparations and enhanced regional self-governance. Nevertheless, the rebellion continued with sporadic clashes. Tuareg continued to feel alienated from the rest of the country, as many black Malians considered them Arabs or Libyans, and resentment lingered over historical memory of Tuareg enslavement of blacks. In 1994, Libya, which was also sponsoring rebellions in Sierra Leone and Liberia, backed a faction of Tuareg rebels who again attacked Gao. The Malian army responded, as did a Songhai para-military organization - the Ganda Koy, and Mali appeared to be at the brink of a civil war. The Konaré government, however, responded to Tuareg complaints by improving training of undisciplined and dangerous military units operating in the north and improving the communication between the military and civil society organizations. The government spoke not only with the Tuareg, but also with Songhai and other tribesmen in conflict with the Tuareg, in an effort to convince them to disband their para-militaries. A new peace agreement was reached in 1995, and a disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programme begun in 1996. The Malian military reduced its presence north of Timbuktu and former rebels were integrated into the military. With Belgian backing, the government engaged in an arms-for-development scheme in the north from 2000 to 2003.

Current issues

Following the Tuareg revolt of 1990-96, a decade of uneasy peace has recently seen two major outbreaks of insurgency or less well-defined violence. In early 2006, a former rebel, Ibrahima Ag Bahanga, subsequently integrated into the Malian army, deserted his post and accused the government of neglecting the northern region around Kidal. This led to an Algerian-brokered agreement in July 2006, providing for boosted development initiatives for the region, funded by the European Union, and reintegration of rebels into the Malian military. More recently, in August 2007, there was a further outbreak of violence led by men loyal to Ibrahima Ag Bahanga. They kidnapped at least two dozen army personnel near the north-eastern desert settlement of Tendjeret.

Although this appears to have been a one-off series of events linked to the cross-border smuggling trade in the region, the United States has viewed northern Mali as an area vulnerable to terrorism in recent years and has conducted training exercises with Malian forces and stationed Special Forces in the north. The Americans point to a charismatic Salafist leader named Amari Saifi and his Groupe salafiste pour la prédication et le combat, GSPC, which has its roots in Algeria. Saifi and the GSPC have alleged ties to Al Qaeda and were behind the 2003 abduction of 32 European tourists in the Mali-Algeria border area. They claim that Saifi and other militants are working to integrate themselves into Tuareg society. The government's attempts to alleviate the economic and political exclusion of the Tuareg may encourage the group to resist such outside efforts to harness their grievances.