

The Causes of the Uprising in Northern Mali (engl)

The Tuareg rebels' recent attacks represent a fourth roll of the Kel Tamasheq dice

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“Long live Azawad!” “May Allah bless Mali!”

Through December and early January, the tone of the exchanges on various Tuareg chat forums was expectant, frustrated, even desultory at times. Everybody knew something big was about to happen. They had known for some time already. But when exactly? The wait was excruciating. Then, on the morning of Tuesday, January 17, 2012, a new Tuareg rebel group, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) attacked the town of Menaka in the north east of Mali.

Messages of support and relief poured in from Mali, Niger, Libya, France, Saudi Arabia and the entire Tuareg diaspora. “The hour has come. We urge all Azawadians to lend their hand in the fight to liberate our Azawad,” wrote a blogger called Targui Rebel Boy. “Aguel’hoc is free and now we’re going to liberate Tessalit. Vive Azawad!” wrote another surfer. “The flag of Azawad is floating everywhere, even over some towns that have not yet been conquered,” and “Long live Azawad, long live Freedom!” went the patriotic outpouring. One online sympathiser, with an almost Churchillian grasp of the magnitude of the moment, urged everyone to make a note of the date, “for 17th January 2012 will live for ever in history.”

There was also internet traffic bearing different perspectives and different emotions of course. As the MNLA quickly moved on from Menaka to attack the towns of Tessalit and Aguel’hoc further north, and casualties began to be reported on both sides, some Tuareg bloggers questioned the wisdom of taking up arms once more against the central powers in Bamako, the capital of Mali. “War is always ugly,” they claimed. “Dialogue is always better.”

The Malian press meanwhile sharpened its fangs and unleashed a torrent of invective against the Tuareg rebels, calling them “armed bandits”, “drug traffickers”, “AQIM collaborators” and “Gaddafi mercenaries.” The news agency, Agence France Press, picked up and relayed these same catchphrases throughout the world, in reports that seemed to rely almost entirely on Malian army sources for their version of what was actually happening 1,200 km away in the far north east of the country. Southern Malian bloggers were even cruder and more violent in their attacks. “A warning to those little wankers from the North...Fun time is over!” read the text accompanying a video of elite Malian army units parading in front of President Amadou Toumani Touré. “Those rebels don’t know about dialogue. They must be killed, killed, killed!” and “May God save Mali from this useless war!” or “Long live the Malian army...may Allah bless Mali!”

The international press led with the angles of the story that are currently of greatest concern to the international community; The fallout from Gaddafi’s overthrow and Islamic terrorism in the shape of Al Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). The general assumption was that this new uprising was a direct result of the Libyan civil war and of the weaponry and demobbed Gaddafi mercenaries that flooded back down into the Sahel to the lands of their origin in the wake of the dictator’s demise. Another generally accepted viewpoint was that the north east of Mali had become a cauldron of crime, Islamic terrorism and insecurity, and that the MNLA were but a symptom of the furies that plague this deeply dysfunctional corner of the southern Sahara.

Neither Gaddafi’s fall nor AQIM are the prime movers

In truth, neither Gaddafi’s fall nor AQIM nor drugs and insecurity are the prime movers behind

this latest revolt. They are just fresh opportunities and circumstances in a very old struggle. The first rebellion of the nomadic Tuareg, (or Kel Tamasheq – ‘the Tamasheq speaking people’ – as they prefer to be known) against the central government of Mali broke out in 1963 when a young renegade called Alladi Ag Alla attacked two camel-mounted policemen or goumiers in a remote region north of the town of Kidal. Mali had only just won its independence from France, and the Kel Tamasheq, detached from world events in their far flung desert home, simply could not understand why their cherished independence and age old nomadic culture had been subsumed into a new state ruled by black Africans living hundreds of miles away who had never proved their right nor their fitness to become the Tuareg’s new masters. It was to be six years before Gaddafi grabbed power in Libya in a military coup and 44 years before the Algerian terrorist group, the GSPC, rebranded itself as AQIM and became the north African franchise of a successful global Islamic terror movement.

That first Tuareg uprising in 1963 lasted barely a year before it was crushed with unforgettable brutality by the Malian army under the command of the infamous Captain Diby Sillas Diarra, the ‘butcher’ of Kidal. The northeast of Mali then became a no-go area ruled by martial law. The 1970s and 1980s were decades of extreme drought and suffering in the region that saw many thousands of Kel Tamasheq flee their homelands and take refuge in the neighbouring countries of Algeria, Libya, Niger, Mauritania and Burkina Faso. It is said that the word ‘Tuareg’ means something like ‘abandoned by God’ in Arabic, and in those years of drought and exile, this foreign name seemed cruelly apt.

In June 1990, the second great Tuareg rebellion broke out when Iyad Ag Ghali, the leader of the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MPLA), attacked a police post in Menaka with a small group of soldiers recently returned from army camps in Libya. The parallels with the outbreak of these latest hostilities are stark. The 1990 uprising ended in an Algerian brokered peace treaty and the National Pact of 1992. The Tuareg movement then dissolved into a bitter soup of acrimony and acronyms as the MPLA split along ethnic and tribal fault lines into four different factions. The northeast was given a certain measure of self-determination by the government in Bamako. Rebel leaders and soldiers were ‘reinserted’ into the Malian army and administration. But the main clauses of the National Pact were never honoured, and Kel Tamasheq resentment simmered away for the next fourteen years. On May 23, 2006, a new rebel group, the Democratic Alliance of May 23 for Change (ADC) attacked Malian army installations in Kidal and Menaka before retreating to a well stocked base in the Tegharghar hills north of Kidal. Algeria once again stepped in to broker a new peace deal and a new treaty, known as the Algiers Accords, which basically restated many of the demands made in the National Pact. These included greater autonomy for the Kidal region, greater recognition of the Tamasheq language and culture in the national media and in education, the formation of special security units staffed by local Tuareg, economic development in the region, a functional airport for Kidal and a special tax regime for the north to encourage investment. For the next six years north eastern Mali grumbled and groaned under an uneasy peace, while the refusenik Tuareg war lord Ibrahim Ag Bahanga kept the flame of revolt alive by attacking the army and taking hostages. The implementation of the Algiers Accords stalled, then ground to a halt amid bitter accusations and recriminations on both sides. On January 17 of this year, it all kicked off again. For the Kel Tamasheq, this is the fourth roll of the dice in a very long struggle for autonomy.

This uprising is different

The mild cynicism of some veteran observers of Saharan politics as they contemplate yet another uprising in the north of Mali can be forgiven. Previous revolts have adhered to a certain pattern of failure that has repeated itself in varying degrees: a group of well connected and disgruntled Kel Tamasheq community leaders, usually all veterans of the great 1990 uprising, form a new rebel group with a freshly minted acronym. They attack a Malian army base in

Menaka, Kidal or Tinzawaten, kill a few soldiers, then retreat to the hills as soon as reinforcements loom on the horizon and wait there while politicians in Bamako, Tripoli or Algiers work out a way of getting everyone around the negotiating table. Then a deal is thrashed out which comprises the enticing lure of financial incentives for the rebel foot soldiers and 'jobs for the boys' in the administration or the army for the rebel leaders. A pact or accord is signed, the rebels go back home and the Malian government proceeds to ignore most of its promises. The frustration mounts again over a number of years, and, when the requisite level of tension and dissatisfaction is reached, the whole process repeats itself. Meanwhile, the average Tuareg man, woman and child slips deeper into despondency, unemployment, poverty and general despair.

However, there are a number of key reasons why this latest uprising is different from all the others. First and foremost the level of preparation and forethought on the rebel side is unique in Tuareg rebel history. In 1990, Iyad Ag Ghali and his small troupe reportedly went into battle armed with two old hunting carbines and a length of rope. In 1963 the Tuareg arsenal comprised a few old Mauser rifles alongside traditional takouba swords. In 2006 the rebels were better armed, allegedly by Algeria, but the rebel movement wasn't primed for a long battle. In 2012, the MNLA have assembled one of the most impressive arsenals ever seen in the north of Mali.

Some of the MNLA's weaponry has come from Libya. Some was already housed in Mali. Some of it has been stolen from weapons stores by Tuareg and Arab officers and soldiers who have deserted the Malian army. What is now becoming clear, however, is that the process of assembling this impressive stockpile of weaponry, and bringing together the soldiers and officers that would eventually use it, was part of a carefully preconceived plan that had been several years in the execution. The main man behind that plan was Ibrahim Ag Bahanga, Mali's public enemy number one and the recalcitrant hero of hawkish Tuareg everywhere.

Ibrahim Ag Bahanga – the man who had a plan

A veteran of the 1990 rebellion, Ag Bahanga was one of the leaders of the 2006 uprising, alongside Iyad Ag Ghali, Hassan Ag Fagaga and Ahmed Ag Bibi. However, he soon grew disgruntled with the compromises that his fellow rebels in the ADC seemed prepared to make in their negotiations with Mali, and their willingness to hand in their arms before any of the promises made by the Malian government had been delivered. In September 2007, Ag Bahanga formed a new splinter group called the Northern Malian Tuareg Alliance for Change (ATNMC). For the next year and half, until he was finally driven off Malian soil by Malian army-backed militias, Ag Bahanga led a campaign of harassment and terror against the Malian army and security apparatus. It included kidnapping upwards of 80 Malian soldiers and holding them hostage for months, as well as a number of ambushes and daring raids against army posts, especially the one in Tinzawaten, a village right up against Mali's border with Algeria, which was Ag Bahanga's ancestral home and fiefdom.

After his defeat in February 2009 and the disbanding of the ATNMC rebel camps, Ag Bahanga was given refuge in Libya. He then dipped off the media radar screen for almost two years, until his return to Mali in January 2011. It now appears that far from idly luxuriating in some grace and favour Libyan villa on Gaddafi's pay roll, Ag Bahanga used his time in Libya to conceive and execute a master plan designed to give the Tuareg movement a military capacity that would offer it at least some hope of fighting a successful war against Mali. He began to talk to a group of 1990 rebel veterans who had left Mali in disgust after the signing of the 1992 National Pact and become senior officers in the Libyan army, commanding special elite units set up by Gaddafi to fight his desert wars. Most prominent among them was Colonel Mohammed Ag Najm.

When the first cracks began to appear in the foundations of the Gaddafi dictatorship, shortly after protests began in Benghazi in February 2011, Ag Bahanga and a few close allies set about putting their plan into action. They got to work persuading Ag Najm and his fellow Tuareg officers in the Libyan army to abandon their posts and return to Mali with as much weaponry as possible. By early summer, as the Gaddafi regime started to disintegrate, Ag Bahanga's plan was already well on the road. Tuareg army defectors travelled south west in convoys with large stocks of arms and ammunition, including BM21 and BTR60 ground-to-ground and ground-to-air missiles. The Libyan returnees set up camps in Zakak, Tin Assalak and Takalote, all locations in the remote Tegharghar hills north of Kidal. More arms and more defectors kept arriving and both Mali and the international community started to become increasingly worried.

On the afternoon of August 26, Ibrahim Ag Bahanga was killed in a car crash not far from his base at Tin Assalak. He had many enemies: the Malian army, the Malian people, other Tuareg leaders who resented his uncompromising belligerence, Arab drug traffickers whom he had confronted and robbed on numerous occasions and the secret services of both Algeria and Libya for whom Ag Bahanga was often an intolerable liability. Nonetheless, many who knew Ag Bahanga well and were close to him deny any dark dimension to his death, claiming that he perished when his vehicle somersaulted at speed on one of the desert's dirt tracks. Others say that his vehicle was shot to pieces by arms smugglers, or drug traffickers or a branch of Al Qaeda, possibly all three of these in one. Whatever happened, his death left a large hole in the burgeoning revolutionary project, but it wasn't large enough to stop it.

Gaddafi and the Tuareg were never good friends nor faithful allies

Colonel Ag Najm and his fellow Tuareg officers' abandonment of the Gaddafi cause and the general pilfering of Libyan arms by Tuareg from north-eastern Mali goes some way to contradicting those who insist that the Tuareg have always been ardent Gaddafi loyalists and blind allies in his games of power and terror. Since the mid 1970s, the relationship between Gaddafi and the Tuareg has been one of mutual opportunism rather than shared ideals or common destiny. When the Tuareg needed a refuge from poverty, drought and joblessness in the 1970s, oil-rich and under-populated Libya was one of the countries they turned to. When the nascent Tuareg rebel movement needed someone to fund their struggle for self-determination in the 1980s, Gaddafi provided army training, a base, some equipment and financial backing. The fact that he then went on to use 'his' Tuareg fighters in his wars against Chad and Israel whilst never demonstrating any real desire to make the Tuareg revolt actually happen, reveals the Libyan dictator's true intentions.

During the 1990s and 2000s, Gaddafi uttered many fine words about being a nomad and a spiritual brother of the Tuareg. He spoke of how the Sahara should be a borderless region, free to all his native sons and daughters. In truth he played double games with aplomb, funding Tuareg dissent with small occasional gifts whilst investing enormous sums of money in the energy and water industries and tourism infrastructure of Mali as a whole. "Gaddafi never helped us," a veteran of the 1990 rebellion once said to me. "He never did anything for the north. All the money he spent went to the south. We helped him, not the other way around." When Gaddafi finally starting losing the Libyan civil war, the greatest demonstrations of support for his regime did not occur in the northern parts of Mali, among the Tuareg, as some might have expected. They occurred in the heart of the capital Bamako, where tens of thousands of southern Malians took to the streets to voice their approval of the Libyan dictator and their hatred of the USA, Britain, France and the United Nations.

Gaddafi and the Tuareg were never really good friends or faithful allies. They were never more than partners in a game of coincidental self-interest. True, there were many Tuareg fighting on the Gaddafi side in last year's Libyan civil war. But they were often obliged or paid to do so. It

was a matter of expediency rather than belief. Through times of drought and marginalisation in the 1980s and 1990s, and even right up until last year, anything has often seemed preferable to a life of poverty and starvation back in the Malian desert, including a stint the Libyan army. And it must also be remembered that a sizeable number of Tuareg also fought for the National Transitional Council (NTC) against Gaddafi. So did many Imazighen or Berbers, a fact that is often forgotten by both Western powers and die-hard Arab supremacists in Libya.

In an extraordinarily frank and revealing interview given to the Algerian newspaper El Watan just a few days before his death, Ag Bahanga didn't mince his words about Gaddafi: "[his fall] is good news for all the Tuareg of the region," he said. "The aims of the colonel [Gaddafi] have always been opposed to our aspirations. All he ever did was try to use the Tuareg for his own ends and to the detriment of the community. His departure from Libya opens a new path to a better future and allows us to progress in our political demands... Gaddafi was a barrier to every solution of the Tuareg question."

Brainstorming at the Zakak base – the eternal problem of disunity

With Bahanga gone, the build up of arms and soldiers in the north east of Mali continued. In early October, all the various leaders of a burgeoning new Tuareg rebel movement gathered together in the Zakak base for what can only be described as ten days of soul-searching and brainstorming. "We discussed the past errors of certain leaders of the movement," says Hama Ag Sid'Ahmed, who was Ibrahim Ag Bahanga's father-in-law and spokesperson of his ATNMC rebel group. "We talked about where things had gone wrong and tried to agree on a plan and on some common objectives. We created a ruling council, a military *état majeur*, commanded and coordinated by Mohammed Ag Najm and other senior officers. There are about 40 of them. And we also created a political bureau, which set about analysing and considering all the political aspects including how to raise awareness among the international community, especially the regional powers."

Past errors boiled down essentially to three areas: weakness of military strategy and material, lack of a strong intellectual and political branch and disunity. Of those three, disunity has always been the biggest problem in previous uprisings. The French conquered the Sahara by fomenting internal divisions within the old Tuareg confederations, turning tribal leaders against each other and vassal clans against the nobility. The government of Mali adopted precisely the same strategy after independence in 1960. The first rebellion of 1963 was weakened by the disagreement between Intallah Ag Attaher, the current aged hereditary leader of the Kel Adagh Tuareg and his brother Zeid Ag Attaher. Intallah favoured cooperation and cohabitation with Mali. Zeid favoured revolt and was eventually captured and imprisoned by Mali in their infamous jail near the remote salt mines of Taodenni.

In 1990, the MPLA splintered after the signing of the Tamanrasset accords. Iyad Ag Ghali, who belongs to the ruling Ifoghas clan of the Kel Adagh, remained as the head of the MPA, having dropped the word 'Liberation' from the name of his movement in order to make it more appealing to moderate Tuareg and to the Malians. Many other Ifoghas leaders remained loyal to Iyad and the MPA. The 'lower class' Tamasheq clans in the region, especially the Imghad, a subordinate 'vassal' clan to the Ifoghas, split from Iyad's group and formed the Revolutionary Army for the Liberation of Azawad (ARLA), which was led by nobles from the Taghat Mellet and Idran clans. ARLA also represented some Iklan, or former slaves. The Popular Liberation Front of Azawad (FPLA) were hardliners, opposed to the idea of making peace with Mali before the rebellion's primary aims were realised. They were made up mainly of Kel Antessar Tuareg from the Timbuktu region and Chamanamas from Menaka. Then there was the Armed Islamic Front of Azawad (FIAA) which was composed mainly of northern Arabs and Moors. It had a more religious character than the other rebel movements and was closely allied to Mauritania and

Algeria. All these four movements were represented at one time or another by a kind of umbrella rebel organisation called the Movement of United Fronts of Azawad (MFUA).

Needless to say, all this division and splintering did nothing for the strength of the rebel movement as a whole and it quickly allowed Mali to regain control of events. Things weren't that much better in 2006, when the ADC eventually split between a faction dominated by Ifoghas Tuareg on the one hand and different factions led by Taghat Mellet, Idnan, Imghad and Chamanamas on the other, all of whom accused the Ifoghas of hogging the limelight in the negotiations and seeking their benefit above all. Ag Bahanga's schism and his creation of the ATNMC was an outward sign of these internal splits.

These bewildering divisions within the Tuareg community pale in terms of the strife and damage caused when compared to the ethnic wars that have been unleashed by Malian policies of divide and rule. The darkest ethnic conflict in the modern history of northern Mali began in 1992 with the formation of the Patriotic Malian Movement Ganda Koy (MPMGK) or Ganda Koy for short, a Songhoi militia that was backed and funded by the Malian army, and whose main aim seems to have been to foist terror on innocent Tuareg and Arab civilians. The Ganda Koy perpetrated several massacres in the Gao and Timbuktu areas in the mid 1990s, the most famous of which was a massacre of around 60 Tuareg marabout or holy men from the Kel Essouk clan in a camp near Gao in October 1994.

Is the rebel movement more united this time? The answer is yes, at least, so far. The talks in the Zakak camp allowed various concerns and age-old gripes to be aired and a basic consensus to be established around a shared set of goals and an agreed division of roles and responsibilities. The political leader of the MNLA is Alghabass Ag Intalla, the son of Intalla Ag Attaher, the Ifoghas chief who favoured cooperation with Mali back in 1963. But while the Ifoghas still hold on to their historical role as the political leaders of the Tuareg in north eastern Mali, a great deal of effort has been made to spread the message and raise awareness of the MNLA and its aims among the entire population of the north, in all its various ethnic groups and across all the strata of its society, and bring people from all the different clans and factions under one umbrella. Talking to various Tuareg friends in the past few months, the general sense of hope united behind the MNLA was palpable.

Having said that, there are many Tuareg, especially Imghad and Kel Antessar, who are staying loyal to Mali. They include numerous Malian army officers and soldiers, as well local mayors, deputies and senior administrators. A whole group of about 300 Tuareg fighters who returned from the war in Libya late last summer, led by Colonel Waki Ag Ossad, an Imghad Tuareg, made great play of their fealty to the Malian state. They were received with great fanfare by President Amadou Toumani Touré at the Koulouba Palace in Bamako. "We didn't come back to create a division between communities, and even less to divide the state," declared Ag Ossad. "The military material that we have brought with us is there to be used by our country, which is Mali. We've come to contribute to and maintain peace and security in the north."

Every rebellion eventually turns into an ethnic war

The MNLA have also made strenuous efforts to present themselves as a revolutionary movement for the liberation of ALL the peoples of Azawad – Tuareg, Songhoi, Arab, Peul – and not just a Tuareg rebel movement. Azawad is the name they give to the independent state they are seeking to create, which they say will comprise the three main provinces of Northern Mali: Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu. If an independent Azawad were to exist, it would relieve Mali of more than 50% of its actual surface area. The MNLA also say they have no designs on parts of the Sahara inhabited by the Tuareg that exist over the border in Niger, Algeria and Libya. They claim that there are large numbers of Arabs and Songhoi already fighting on their side. It's true

that certain important Arab leaders, such as Baba Ould Sidi Elmoctar, the hereditary chief of the influential Arab Kounta tribe, have already thrown in their lot with MNLA. As I write, there are also reports arriving from the desert of northern Arabs in the towns of Leré, Timbuktu and Goundam who are leaving to join MNLA in the field.

Whether or not MNLA can bind together all the different tribal and ethnic groups in Northern Mali until its aims are achieved is still a moot point. Even before open revolt broke out last Tuesday, there were dark mutterings about a resurgence of Ganda Koy vigilante activity. The founder of the movement, Imam Mohammed n'Tissa Maiga, made his intention to rearm and get his militia ready for the growing threat from Tuareg rebels quite plain back in early December. In the past few days, reports from Gao and Timbuktu claim that the Malian army is handing out cash and arms to Songhoi men and urging them to go and attack anyone suspected of sympathy with the MNLA. The spectre of tribal war haunts the north once again. The houses of several prominent Tuaregs in the garrison town of Kati near Timbuktu have been burned by angry mobs wielding machetes and as I write, Tuareg and Arabs in Bamako, easily distinguishable by their lighter skin, are suffering attacks on their person and their property.

The private militias within the Malian army

Even more dangerous to the MNLA than the Ganda Koy are the ethnically based militias that have been fighting the Tuareg alongside the Malian army since 2008. It was during that year that the Malian high command finally realised the futility of sending raw recruits from the southern savannah regions of the country to fight Ibrahim Ag Bahanga and the ATNMC in the arid deserts of the north. The Sahara is completely alien to most southern Malians, and soldiers from the south have never had much luck at defeating hardened Tuareg fighters in their own environment. So the Malian generals changed their strategy and invited two senior army officers from the North to form and train their own militias. The first is a Tuareg called El Hadj Gamou, an Imghad, who seems to harbour a visceral disdain for the Ifoghas Tuareg who are the historical 'nobility' in the Adagh des Ifoghas, the name given to the Kidal region by the French in the late 19th century. The Imghad were a subservient or "vassal" clan in the old days, and many Imghad Tuareg favoured the more egalitarian society that Mali imposed in the north east after independence. The Tuareg rebellion has its own element of internal class warfare.

Gamou is the most senior Malian army officer in the region, a feared and ruthless soldier whom the MNLA have accused of numerous human rights abuses in recent days, including torture. His militia is run like a private army which exacts retribution and submission from both professional and private enemies, by force if necessary. The other main militia fighting with the Malian army is led by Major Colonel Abderahmane Ould Meydou, a trim and square-jawed northern Arab who has also, like Gamou managed to carve out a fearsome reputation as an able and daring desert soldier. The MNLA announced his death in action with great glee a few days after the outbreak of recent hostilities, only to emit a collective groan when Ould Meydou subsequently appeared on national TV to denounce rumours of his demise, looking fit, relaxed and debonair.

The ranks of Ould Meydou's Arab or Berabiche militias were swelled just before the outbreak of hostilities on January 12 thanks to a deal brokered by the Malian government. In return for the recruitment and training of Arab militiamen, a super-rich northern Arab businessman by the name of Mohamed Ould Aiwanatt was released from prison where he was serving a sentence for the role he played in a major drugs-trafficking operation known as "Air Cocaine". This extraordinary episode involved an entire Boeing 727 stuffed full of cocaine that flew into the Sahara from Venezuela and landed in the remote desert north of a village called Tarkint. The cocaine was then unloaded into a convoy of 4x4 vehicles and disappeared eastwards into the desert, probably en route for Egypt, Turkey, the Balkans and finally Europe. The mayor of Tarkint, Baba ould Cheickh, a close advisor to the Malian President, was implicated alongside

Ould Aiwanatt in this and several other major drugs scandals. Aiwanatt's release from gaol and the hypocritical behaviour of the Malian government in their so-called war on drugs and insecurity infuriated Tuareg opinion, and added more than a strand of straw to the load that eventually broke their back and drove them to war.

Gamou's and Ould Meydou's militias were the weapon that eventually allowed Mali to subdue Ag Bahanga's ATNMC in January 2009. Bamako is no doubt hoping that they can do the same again to the MNLA, even though it presents a challenge of an entirely different order to Ag Bahanga's underfunded and poorly equipped crew.

All in all, unity and disunity will be among the biggest challenges to the success of the MNLA uprising. This has always been the Tuareg movement's greatest challenge. No wonder so many desert songs by Tuareg bands like Tinariwen and Tamikrest lament the lack of unity in Tuareg society, and berate Tuareg leaders and politicians for succumbing to tribalism and Malian games of divide and rule. Bamako plays its hand subtly and expertly when the need arises. One of the current MNLA representatives in Nouakchott, Mauritania, and senior political figure from Mali's north east, Nina Walet Intallou explained how it works: "Mali sends someone, some senior figure in the administration, who is a relative of one of the rebels, to have a discrete word with him and bring him back to the road of peace with promises of money, favours and preferment. Then they send a minister to speak to the leaders of his clan and persuade them to follow the path of peace. That's not negotiation."

The Sahara's Facebook generation

Another novelty in this uprising is the presence of a strong and very active intellectual wing in the Tuareg independence movement. By intellectual, I mean one whose main concern is policy, communication, influence, diplomacy and engagement in geo-political affairs, rather than fighting out in the bush. The lack of such a dimension has been a weakness of Tuareg uprisings since the earliest days. Most rebel leaders have felt more comfortable out in the desert leading their troops than pressing the flesh in the corridors of power. When there have been political men of any worth, their work has often been hampered by a mutual mistrust between them and the military leadership. There's an apocryphal story about Ibrahim Ag Bahanga that illustrates this lack of intellectual capacity in a damning way. During his time as a renegade in the remote Adagh des Ifoghas a few years ago, Ag Bahanga once received an envoy with an important message from the government in Bamako. The envoy handed over the sealed letter and Ag Bahanga proceeded to open it and, holding the missive upside down, pretended to read it thoughtfully. He then told the messenger that he would "think the proposal over" and sent him away.

Ag Bahanga was a man of many talents, but written correspondence and the fine arts of communication weren't among them. He was in his element at the head of a rebel group out in remoteness of the desert bush, not in the fine gilded halls of ministries in Bamako, Tripoli, Algiers or Paris. It was often left to his father in law and spokesperson, Hama Ag Sid'Ahmed to be Ag Bahanga's 'voice' on the international stage. Ag Sid'Ahmed is now the chief spokesperson of MNLA, and one of the more worldly and politically experienced men at the head of the movement. But even he recognises the need for an active and engaged 'intellectual' dimension to the MNLA project, and his co-revolutionaries agreed that this was a great failing in the past.

Cue the National Movement for Azawad or MNA, an organisation that was created by a group of young Tuareg students and graduates in late 2010. These well educated, internet savvy and youthful revolutionaries gathered together in Timbuktu at the end of October of that year and declared their intention to find a political, legal and peaceful route to Azawadi independence.

Their discourse was non-tribal, non-ethnic, inclusive, literate and fluent. In their first declaration, issued as a press release, on November 1 they wrote: “Today, Azawad has become a zone of conflict fought over by countries and extremist groups who care only for their own interests. As for the Azawadis themselves, they are simply caught between the anvil and the hammer of so called terrorist groups. Azawad is now prone to all manner of regional and international interventions...in which the people of Azawad are given no role at all, except that of a useless spectator, forced to look on while the image of their homeland is ruined and its national riches plundered by governments and multi-national companies....Aware of the pain that our people have suffered for decades, as sons of the nation and defenders of a cultural identity threatened with extinction, who are merely perpetuating the struggle of the ancestors, whilst adhering to universal human values...we announce today the birth of a National Movement of Azawad (MNA).”

At the end of this inaugural meeting, two of the MNA's leaders, Moussa Ag Acharatoumane and Boubacar Ag Fadil, were imprisoned for treasonous activities damaging to the territorial integrity of the state. They soon became Facebook heroes, a cause célèbre among the youth of the Tuareg diaspora. After numerous demonstrations and petitions they were freed. Acharatoumane and his fellow revolutionaries had already set about disseminating the message of revolution among the younger demographic of the northern deserts. Their work resulted in several small demonstrations in Kidal, Menaka and Timbuktu, that occurred around the same time as the launch of the MNA. These events marked the emergence of the Sahara's own Facebook generation, one acutely conscious of its role models in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain and elsewhere, and energised by the idea of flexing its own people power. The MNA soon set up a functioning and well maintained website as well as a very active Facebook forum and an online newspaper called Toumast Press, which features well written and well argued, although admittedly partial, articles about the current situation in the desert. Apart from anything else, this new generation is less encumbered by the divisions, the compromises and the defeats of the past. They are free of the cynicism that is born out of defeat. Their horizon is straight, clear and blue and nothing less than victory will satisfy them.

As soon as hostilities commenced on January 17, a continuous flow of communiqués and updates by Ag Acharatoumane, Ag Sid'Ahmed and other MNLA spokespersons started to be posted up on the web and circulated via online social networks. This energetic PR was in stark contrast to the almost complete lack of communication by the ADC in the first few days of the uprisings in May 2006, a void which allowed all kind of crazy assumptions and claims to be made by the Malian army and circulated without hindrance by the international press. The propaganda war is a great deal more involved this time round, and the two sides are more evenly matched.

The MNLA – a better balanced and multi-faceted movement

With the inclusion of the 'internet generation' rebels in the MNA, the MNLA has achieved a better balance than previous rebel movements. “It's important to define who is who in this movement so that there's no blurring of boundaries with other agendas and issues,” says MNLA spokesperson Hama Ag Sid'Ahmed. “Mohammed Ag Najm has come back from Libya with officers and men. There are also those who have deserted from the Malian army, more than six senior army officers. There were fighters who were with Ibrahim Ag Bahanga in the ATNMC. And then there was these new elite from the younger Tuareg generation, who were very present on the ground and who had done some very good work raising awareness among the population of the Azawad.”

Alongside this new composition of the rank and file, there have been changes in the rebel movement's leadership, and with that, a change in its all important relationships and ties to

Algeria and Libya. Iyad Ag Ghali is no longer the boss, and the crust of compromise that has adhered to his name ever since the national pact of 1992, his less than crystal ties with the Malian government and Algerian governments and military intelligence services, with Libya and others, has been chipped away and discarded by the new movement. This is a crucial development. All previous uprisings were successfully manipulated, or “defused”, depending on your point of view, by Algeria and Libya. The fact that both countries have also been accused of being the instigators and supporters of these same uprisings demonstrates the mind boggling complexity of southern Saharan politics.

A different relationship with Libya and Algeria

The prospect of Tuareg autonomy in northern Mali has never been attractive to either Libya or Algeria. In fact, all the nations in the region have always viewed the idea of independent Azawad with absolute horror. Both Algiers and Tripoli have always known that at the first sign of a truly successful Tuareg uprising in Mali, their own Tuareg populations in the south would inevitably begin to harbour up some very uncomfortable notions of their own potential autonomy. But the threat doesn't end there. Ever since the outbreak of hostilities, the various disgruntled Berber populations of Algeria and Libya have been voicing their unbridled support for the MNLA and their delight at the prospect of fellow Berbers (the Kel Tamasheq are a branch of the wider Imazighen family) giving a culturally oppressive regime a bloody nose. The most in depth interview accorded to any MNLA representative yet has been the one that spokesperson Mossa Ag Attaher gave to the Berber website www.tamazgha.fr. The messages of support from Berber secessionist organisations such as the Movement for an Autonomous Kabylia (MAK) or World Amazigh Congress (CMA) have been effusive.

Gaddafi is no longer around to muddy the waters on behalf of Libya, and the NTC have too many problems of their own to take a very active part in what's happening in northern Mali. That leaves Algeria. When the MNLA tried to capture the northern town of Tessalit on January 20, they learned that there were a number of Algerian army trainers and special ops personnel in the nearby Malian army camp at Amachache. The MNLA commander gave them 24 hours to leave, but rather than obeying, the Algerians proceeded to send more soldiers to Amachache and resupply the base. Far from instigating this rebellion, or supporting it, or even manoeuvring into their usual position as peace brokers, it seems that Algeria has thrown its lot in with the Malian government against the rebels. The truth is that Algeria has been excluded from the action this time round and so it has decided to play hard and show its true colours by supporting Mali in an attempt to make sure that an independent Azawad never sees the light of day.

“Since 1963, the attitude of Algeria has always been that if Mali gives autonomy to the Tuareg of Azawad, they'll also have problems with their Tuareg,” agrees Nina Walet Intallou. “In reality, they've always wanted to take over this region. They see it as part of Algeria. When you think that there was the Algerian consulate in Gao that would give Algerian nationality to anyone who asked for it, from Kidal or anywhere, that's proof. But it isn't Algeria or Libya that will intervene this time round. From now on, we will only address our problems to the United Nations and the European Community.”

The fact that Algeria has been excluded from the party is possibly linked to the recent fall from grace of Iyad Ag Ghali. “When we created the MNLA there were many of us who said that Ibrahim Ag Bahanga had been too manipulated by Iyad,” a senior MNLA political figure explained to me. “The condition that people gave before putting their confidence in Ag Bahanga and his people was that he detach himself from Iyad, because of all the mistakes that Iyad made in the past. Iyad was totally in favour of the Tamanrasset accords [of 1991] but once they were signed, he never spoke about them again. He never opened his mouth to denounce what happened afterwards, even though he was supposed to be the leader of the entire Tuareg

movement. In creating the MNLA, we wanted new people in charge, who had serious objectives, and not people who would drag us between Mali and Algeria.”

The sidelining of Iyad Ag Ghali and his Islamist vision

The story goes that Iyad Ag Ghali came to the meetings at the Zakak base in October, and put himself forward as a candidate for the post of Secretary General of the MNLA. However, his candidacy was rejected, due to his past silences and obscure dealings with the governments of Mali and Algeria. Instead, the post was filled by Bilal Ag Acherif, a cousin of Ibrahim Ag Bahanga. There was an overwhelming sense that this time round the movement needed fresh thinking at the top, independent of Algerian, Malian or Libyan meddling and that all the half measures of the past, the broken treaties brokered by one or other of the regional powers, the compromises and the stalling had to stop. This time, it was full independence or nothing.

After being turned down the MNLA leadership at Zakak, Iyad Ag Ghali also presented himself to an important meeting of the leaders of the Ifoghas clan, to which he belongs, in Abeibara north of Kidal. There he proposed that he become the political head of the clan and be allowed to pursue an Islamist vision of an independent Azawad. Once again his candidature was rejected, and instead Alghabass Ag Intallah was chosen as the new political leader of the Ifoghas, in place of his ageing and infirm father.

At the end of the great rebellion of the 1990s, Ag Ghali became increasingly religious and ‘spiritual’ in his outlook, growing a huge and venerable beard in the process. He was attracted to the teachings of Pakistani preachers belonging to the huge worldwide Muslim proselytising organisation, the Tablighi Jama’at, who were present in Kidal in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Tablighi Jama’at is over years eighty old, has over 20 million members worldwide, and does not preach violent jihadism. In fact, if anything, its approach is largely pacifist and spiritual. Ag Ghali and other Tuareg seemed moved by the urgent call of these foreign preachers for a return to the core values of Islam, and Ag Ghali even travelled to Tablighi Jama’at’s headquarters in Raiwind, Pakistan, to learn more. He later spent time studying at the mosque in St Denis, in the northern suburbs of Paris. Many, if not most of Iyad Ag Ghali’s fellow Malian Tuaregs however either steered clear of Tablighi Jama’at or took a vague or merely temporary interest in them before finally deciding that they preferred to stick with the more tolerant and ‘Berber’ form of Islam which Tuareg have long been known to espouse. The Pakistani preachers ended up getting into trouble with the authorities in Kidal and Gao, becoming mixed up with local politics and electioneering, and finally being politely but firmly asked to leave the region.

Ag Ghali however continued on his religiously inspired path, whilst still holding down the jobs of rebel in chief and general high level fixer. He played a central role in the negotiations for the release of 32 Swiss, German and Dutch hostages from the grip of a GSPC katiba led by the shady Algerian emir Aderrazak ‘Le Para’ in 2003. This first close contact with the terrorist group that would eventually become Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, has left a penumbra of doubt and suspicion around Iyad’s name that has spawned all kinds of theories, of varying degrees of implausibility, about enduring connections and even collaboration between Iyad and Islamic terrorists or Iyad and the Algerian secret services, the DRS. None of these theories has ever been proven beyond doubt. However, when Iyad was sent to be a consular advisor at the Malian consul in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, in 2007, following the 2006 uprising which he essentially led, he reportedly got himself into deep water by associating with proscribed extremist figures or groups. He was eventually expelled from the country and flown to Paris, before returning to Kidal.

Iyad’s talk of the benefits of sharia law for the Tuareg nation went down badly at the Abeibara meeting. One female delegate told him that he had a long road to travel before his

fundamentalist dreams of a sharia state became true, as he would first have to climb over the bodies of all the dead women of Azawad, not to mention those of the dead men. His ideas were simply unacceptable. Iyad then declared that if that was the decision of the assembled Ifoghas leaders, then he would go off and form his own movement. This he promptly did, calling his new organisation Ansar Eddine. He declared its main aim would be to install sharia law in the Adagh and rehabilitate the primacy of the ulema, the council of religious elders.

Iyad Ag Ghali, Ansar Eddine and Mali-AQIM collusion theory

Iyad's creation of Ansar Eddine and his reported ties with a certain Abou Abdelkarim aka Le Targui, one of the minor AQIM leaders operating in the southern desert, have opened the flood gates to national and international speculation about the possible links between the Tuareg rebel movement and Islamic terrorists, a link that the Malian government is all too keen to stoke and publicise in order to discredit the movement. As his name indicates, Abdelkarim le Targui is supposedly a Tuareg, a native of the Tinzawaten region and the erstwhile preacher at the mosque in In Khalil, a remote and fairly lawless border town in the far north east of Mali. He is reportedly a subordinate of the thuggish emir Abou Zeid, and leader of his own small katiba called Al Ansar which was responsible for kidnapping the septuagenarian French humanitarian worker Michel Germaneau in 2010. According to an announcement by Abdelmalik Droukdel, until recently the supreme leader of AQIM, which was posted up on the AQIM website, Abdelkarim Le Targui was also responsible for murdering Germaneau in cold blood as well as negotiation major drug deals on behalf of AQIM with the representatives of a Colombian drugs cartel in Guinea-Bissau. Not the kind of person you should be associating with if you want to present yourself as a legitimate political organisation.

Iyad's association with Abdelkarim Le Targui is vague and conjectural. Some Tuareg even argue that far from being a true targui, Abdelkarim is an Algerian Arab, like all the other AQIM leaders in the southern desert. Nonetheless this link, together with the perceived religious extremism of Iyad and his Ansar Eddine movement, has spawned a smear campaign in Bamako which aims to convince the world that the MNLA are in cahoots with AQIM. The AFP reporter in Bamako even claimed that Abou Zeid took part in a recent MNLA attack on the army in the village of Aguel'hoc north of Kidal. Nothing is more poisonous to the international image of the Tuareg cause than this taint of fundamentalism and AQIM, not even the Gaddafi links.

There are several reasons why that taint is wholly unjustified. The first is that since the inception of the MNA and MNLA movements, one of their loudest, most cherished and oft repeated aims is to rid their homeland of AQIM, an organisation which they consider to be one of Mali's most effective weapons in its fight against their cause. "AQIM was parachuted in and installed in our territory by the Malian government," declares Hama Ag Sid'Ahmed, with total conviction. "It was the initiative of certain drugs barons, who are advisors to the President, in the shadows of the Koulouba Palace [The Presidential palace in Bamako]. They brought them into the Timbuktu region and then to Kidal. In return for the release of the 32 hostages in 2003, a pact of non-aggression was signed between Bamako and Al Qaeda, who then progressively occupied this territory. Those contacts became permanent and it's clear that since then all the operations led by the terrorist groups have originated in Mali, and the terrorist have always fallen back to Mali. It's their safe haven. Everyone knows that the terrorists are in communication with military leaders, and that politicians from Bamako meet the terrorist emirs quite regularly."

Far fetched? Maybe. Like Professor Jeremy Keenan's controversial theory that AQIM are a creation of the Algerian DRS, the Mali-AQIM collusion theory remains conjectural. But the circumstantial evidence that links a cabal of Malian army and secret service operatives, usually Arabs from the north of the country close to the upper echelons of Mali's political and military hierarchy, to the huge drug smuggling operations that have blighted the stability of the northern

deserts in recent years and to AQIM is very strong. It's hardly a secret anymore that a consensus exists among US, French and Algerian diplomats in the region that Mali has been long on words but short on action in its dealings with AQIM since 2006. The frustration with Mali's lack of firm resolve and decisive action in this regard, despite the millions of dollars in aid that it has received from the US and France specifically for the purpose of fighting terrorists on its soil, has been growing exponentially in the embassies and foreign ministries of the world powers. Apart from one clash with AQIM in the desert north of Timbuktu back in 2006, there have hardly been any confirmed reports of the Malian army doing any damage to AQIM at all. In fact, the most determined opposition that AQIM has encountered during its five year campaign of terror in Mali has been at the hands of the ADC, the Tuareg rebel movement launched in 2006, who skirmished with the terrorists several times between 2006 and 2009, with lives lost on both sides. And now that the entire might of the Malian army has been thrown against the Tuareg uprising with such devastating force, including fighter jets, tanks, armoured vehicles, missiles of every stamp and thousands of troops, it's little wonder that Tuaregs, diplomats, analysts and commentators are feeling a tad cynical about Mali's repeated assertions in recent years that they've never had the military wherewithal to deal with the AQIM threat.

A senior Malian politician once had the temerity to declare in a private meeting at the US Embassy in Bamako that the presence of AQIM in the north east of the country was a good thing, as long as it meant that the Tuareg rebel movement wasted its resources and time trying to combat it. At another meeting, the new Algerian ambassador informed his US counterpart that he suspected collusion between Mali and the terrorists. He cited the then recent case of a joint Algerian-Malian operation to attack an AQIM base that had failed because the AQIM katiba in question had been tipped off in advance. All these frankly startling revelations are contained in the US Embassy cables leaked by Bradley Manning and Wikileaks. In fact, there is no better way to understand what really went on in the northern deserts of Mali between 2006 and early 2010 than to read those US Embassy cables. The level of intelligence, analysis and research contained in them is often of the highest order. And yes, they do reveal that the US Embassy has also suspected Mali of at best tolerating and at worst colluding with AQIM at one time or another.

If the implantation of AQIM on Tuareg soil was part of a deliberate Malian strategy, then it has been extraordinarily effective. The main campaign of AQIM kidnapping and extortion began in March 2008 (interestingly there had been a five year hiatus since the 2003 hostage incident), just when relations between Mali, the ADC and Ag Bahanga were reaching their nadir. Since that time AQIM has knocked the Tuareg rebellion squarely off the front page, both national and internationally. Until January 17 of this year that is. The presence of AQIM in Mali put the country in the front line of the USA's global war on terror, giving it kudos and a receptive ear in Washington whilst justifying the huge amounts of money, training and equipment that America lavished on Mali in the context of its Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Programme (TSCTP) and Pan Sahel Initiative (PSI). It has also emptied the north of foreign journalists, foreign observers, foreign NGO workers, foreign tourists and foreigners in general, whose presence could have been inconvenient for certain shady army or secret service (DGSE) operations, especially those linked with the drug trade. Most of all, AQIM have simply throttled the region and deprived its Tuareg population of any hope of building a viable future and developing a strong economy. In short, AQIM has crippled Tuareg society in Mali's north east. No wonder MNLA have vowed to rid their land of Al Qaeda.

And yet Iyad Ag Ghali's Ansar Eddine movement continues to sow the seeds of doubt and Mali's propaganda machine continues to milk any possible connection between the MNLA, Iyad and AQIM for all its worth. Apparently Iyad tried to sell his plan for an Islamic inspired movement to the Ifoghas meeting in Abeibara by promising that his political approach would be no different

to that of the moderate Islamic parties that have come to power following the Arab uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. There also happens to be another Islamic organisation in Mali with the name Ansar Dine. It has a vast following amongst southern Malians, who flock to football stadiums in their thousands to hear the preachings of the movement's leader, Cherif Ousmane Madani Haidara. Ansar Dine preaches tolerance, democracy and social morality inspired by faith in the teachings of The Prophet. It is also an ardent critic of government corruption and incompetence. Perhaps Iyad sees his movement as a Tamasheq offshoot of the bigger Ansar Dine. Who knows? "What's very important is that all the religious leaders of the Adagh des Iforas have categorically rejected this foreign Salafist culture that has been planted in their midst," Hama Ag Sid'Ahmed declares with emphasis. "I know that Iyad is an important person in the region and I know that he's involved in religious matters. But I cannot believe that he would completely abandon the tolerance that is part of our Tuareg culture. Not for one second. Maybe Iyad and others realise that AQIM has a hold on some of our young people, and they're trying to present a different message about Islam that might possibly win back all those that the Salafists have co-opted into their ranks."

Why rebel?

Two questions remain to be answered. Why rebel now? And why rebel at all? The latter question often perplexes curious outsiders. What, they wonder, do the Tuareg people have against Mali, a country which, on the face of it, seems relatively friendly, peaceful and tolerant. It is after all one of the better functioning and more stable democracies in Africa. It is renowned for its culture, its ancient sites of religious devotion and learning, and for its musicians, who are better known outside Africa than any of its political leaders. Mali has many fans throughout the world, justifiably so. What makes the Tuareg so determined to tear this country apart and wreak havoc on its population?

"Our inclusion in the country was a mistake," is Nina Walet Intallou's blunt answer to that question. "In the beginning, just before the end of colonisation, a letter was written by some desert leaders to General De Gaulle pleading with him to let the Tuareg and other ethnicities create their own state in the middle of the Sahara. Only four tribal chiefs signed it, but there was never really any proper explanation given by the French to the Tuareg, telling them "Listen, we're going to leave you and your homeland will just be sliced up into four or five parts and given to different countries [Mali, Niger, Algeria, Libya, Burkina Faso]. You will be given to Mali." We had never been colonised by Mali before. It was something quite brutal and at the time there weren't any intellectuals who could measure the consequences of it all. The leaders didn't realise that the south of Mali would come and occupy their territory. They thought that they would remain masters of their own country in an independent Africa. When they saw the people of the south who came and said, "Now, you're under our authority," they were completely perplexed."

That's the original sin, that duplicitous betrayal of the Tuareg and their "colonisation" by Mali at independence. It has been entrenched and deepened by war, oppression, drought, corruption, exile, marginalisation and a painful chain of cause and effect, tit for tat, hurt and vengeance, ever since. But in the end, it all boils down to that original "mistake". All attempts to convince the Tuareg as a whole that they are and should remain proud citizens of Mali have, by and large, failed. Not for all, but for most. Apart from religion, the cultural and social bonds that tie the Tuareg to Malians from the south are just too weak to make the idea of belonging to the nation called Mali acceptable in the northern deserts. And it's the same vice versa. To most southern Malians, the Sahara is another place and a generally fearful one at that. For a southern soldier from Sikasso or Kati, being sent up north to patrol the open desert is akin to a Muscovite being sent to Siberia in the 19th century. It's another world.

Nonetheless there are Tuaregs, a large number in fact, and even more Arabs and Songhoi, who do see their future within the current borders of the Malian state. Those people have in a sense made their peace with the idea that Mali is one nation that can include all its diverse peoples. They argue that development is more important than nationalism or ethnic separatism. Mali has always emphasized the idea of inclusivity, of a state that would treat all its citizens, black, white, Muslim, animist, northern, southern, with equanimity. It sees the Tuareg propensity to rebel as an act of downright ingratitude, emphasising the special treatment the north east has received in terms of investment and political freedom, compared to other parts of the country, ever since 1992. The north may be poor, but Mali as a whole is poor, so what are the Tuareg complaining about?

Most Malians in the south resent the idea of their country being split in two. They point out that the 'white' Tuareg and Arabs aren't the only ethnicities in the north. There are also Songhoi, Peul, Bozo, who are black like them. Why should they be forced to secede and become part of this Azawad? It is a pertinent question that the intellectual wing of the MNLA are trying hard to answer with their claims that Azawad will be for ALL the people of the north, not only the Tuareg. And of course, most Malians realise that under those northern deserts there are immense deposits of oil, uranium, gold and phosphates that could one day make their nation rich. They are loath to give up on that enticing prospect.

Nonetheless, the Tuareg who are fighting the Malian army have no doubt in their minds that theirs is a just cause, that their land and freedom and dignity were taken from them by subterfuge in 1960 and that they have been duped ever since into accepting their unhappy state. No longer. The father of the military leader of MNLA, Mohammed Ag Najm, was killed by the Malian army during the first ever uprising in 1963. Make no mistake, this is not a storm in a tea cup involving a few disgruntled returnees from the Libyan war, or a few irate drug dealers and traffickers settling scores, it's battle driven by dreams of a better future, although tainted in a small way, no doubt, as is the way of the world, by other motivations like vengeance and gain. Whether those dreams are justified or not is debatable, but they are real.

Why rebel now?

In December, before the outbreak of hostilities, a revealing essay entitled "Azawad, it's now or never" appeared on the Toumast Press website. Written by Ahmeyede Ag Ilkamassene, it outlined the apparently favourable geo-political climate for the Azawad cause that existed at the end of 2011, citing the independence of South Sudan and Eritrea as examples of mistakes made at the time of decolonisation that had been rectified and which therefore proved that the idea of an independent Azawad wasn't just pie in the sky. It pointed out that the structures that had dominated global politics since the second world war were changing, that new powers like China, Russia, Brazil and India were coming to the fore and that these powers were more open to the idea of the post-colonial settlement in Africa being dismantled and rebuilt.

Ag Ilkamassene also proudly stated that, this time, the Tuareg revolutionaries were prepared for battle. They would not be hampered by the syndrome of the rusty canon that refused to fire on French forces during the capture of Agadez in 1916, thereby ensuring the defeat of an uprising led by the first great Tuareg independence fighter, Kaocene Ag Gedda. This time the dreams of Kaocene, Zeid Ag Attaher and Mohammed Ali Ag Attaher could come true. Another inspiration was the Arab spring, which had been closely followed throughout the southern Sahara. "For the first time in the history of humanity," writes Ag Ilkamessene, "revolutions are occurring simultaneously at all four points of the compass."

The essay defined a zeitgeist that, claimed Ag Ilkamessene, was propitious for the decisive move. Then there were the local realities on the ground in Northern Mali, the opportunities not to

be missed, such as the arrival of the Libyan contingent with their arms. The MNLA also cite the fact that the Malian government had been progressively rebuilding and reequipping its military infrastructure in the North east since early autumn 2011, using money that was supposed to be spent on economic and social development in the region, or fighting Al Qaida. Add to that the recruiting of Arabs for Ould Meydou's militias, and the rumours that the Ganda Koy were getting ready to rearm, and that feeling of 'It's now or never' became overwhelming.

Hama Ag Sid'Ahmed puts the outbreak of war down to the repeated refusal of the Malian government to negotiate seriously with the MNLA, or even to give it any official recognition. "We called on the government of Bamako to take the difficult situation in the region seriously on several occasions," he says. "Bamako's response was simply that the situation didn't exist. They thought any problems were under control or if not, they could be solved by trickery. We told them to be careful, because the problem exists and it's serious. There's permanent insecurity in the region, and terrorism too. We can't live with that."

In late November, Bamako sent a delegation of National Assembly deputies to the desert north of Kidal to go and meet with the Tuareg soldiers who had returned from Libya. The Malian newspaper L'Essor recently published a fascinating eye-witness account of these meetings out in the open bush, which ultimately ended in failure. The delegation of eminent senior northerners found it hard to listen to the demands and discourse of the relatively young secretary general of the MNLA, Bilal Ag Cherif. Age is very highly respected and deferred to in Tuareg society. But apparently not this time. "You speak in the name of Azawad when you don't even know what it is," retorted an angry deputy after Ag Cherif had spoken. "We deputies have been elected and we are natives of this region. You're demanding something in the name of the inhabitants of the north without having any mandate from them. Where is your legitimacy?"

Then, on January 7, Bamako sent Mohammed Ag Erlaf, a former Tuareg rebel and a senior bureaucrat in the Malian administration, who for the past few years has been managing a huge project called The Special Programme for Peace, Security and the Development of Northern Mali (PSPSDN), to talk to the MNLA leadership. He outlined a set of promises that sounded uncannily like those Mali had already made in 1992 and 2006. They included a special offer aimed directly at Iyad Ag Ghali to create a new post of *cadi*, or Muslim judge, for each administra