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## **Circumstantial Alliances and Loose Loyalties in Rebellion Making: The Case of Tuareg Insurgency in Northern Niger (2007-2009)**

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**Abstract:** The goal of this paper is to specify the nature of the Mouvement des Nigériens pour la Justice (MNJ) as a non-state armed organisation and to make sense of its shaky existence since its inception, almost three years ago, with a particular focus on the period that made the MNJ a serious political and military opponent to the government. Our argument is that circumstantial alliances and percolation of grievances provoked by local micro-political dynamics and long-standing disenfranchisement of some sections of the Tuareg youth permitted the movement to take off as a credible rebel group. Ultimately, we want to verify if existing analytical tools made available by the theoretical literature on non-state armed groups are adequate to make sense of the MNJ's organisational trajectory, particularly considering Jeremy Weinstein's seminal book "Inside Rebellion" (Weinstein, 2006). By putting too much emphasis on "initial conditions", Weinstein's model, we argue, fails to properly acknowledge the micro-social dynamics that shape armed groups and their erratic trajectory, and we stress the need to investigate what armed organizations are sociologically made of rather than bluntly postulating their existence.

**Keywords:** Militias, Violent Mobilization, Security, Africa, Niger

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## Introduction

On 9 February 2007, the military post of Iferouane, a northern locality of Niger was attacked by a handful of armed men on board of five pick-ups. Three soldiers of the *Forces armées nigériennes* (FAN) were killed and some military material was robbed. Although of unusual gravity, the attack could have been considered as another isolated act of “residual banditry”, as Niger’s authorities used to label any pseudo-criminal act perpetrated in the North by suspected ex-rebels since the low-intensity insurrection that opposed Tuareg armed groups to governmental forces officially ended in the mid-90s.

Indeed, two of the men that were involved in the attack of Iferouane, known as ex-combatants, had also the reputation of being irreducible traffickers operating in the loosely controlled desert zone between Niger, Mali, Algeria, and Libya. But unexpectedly, a group unknown so far, the *Mouvement des Nigériens pour la Justice* (MNJ) soon claimed the attack and almost simultaneously made accessible to the rest of the world a platform of substantial political claims and pursued a fine-tuned propaganda through an internet blog, updated on a daily basis<sup>2</sup>. According to its founders, political and economic marginalisation of the northern populations, unequal and opaque distribution of the uranium rent - exploited in the northern mining town Arlit (see figure 1 in the appendix) - were the two main reasons why the MNJ was born.

A few months later, the MNJ gathered more than 1,000 combatants, mostly concentrated in the Aïr Mountains around Tamgak (see figure 1). From this stronghold, the rebels proved capable of hitting any location of the vast northern Niger desert territory. In parallel, the international media exposure of the MNJ progressively mounted, notably in France, the former colonial power. It mobilised extensively the image of the noble and nomadic “Blue Man of the Desert” standing up against subjugation imposed by central governments, a cliché firmly rooted in French colonial historiography. In March 2008, one of the MNJ spokesmen based in France, Issouf Maha, was offered the opportunity to give a press conference at the French National Assembly, following the invitation of a prominent Green Party MP. Maha accused AREVA, the French nuclear champion holding a *de facto* monopoly on uranium exploitation in Niger, of causing ecological damage and of ignoring the interests of the, mostly Tuareg, inhabitants of the North. Initially

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<sup>2</sup> <http://m-n-j.blogspot.com/>

vaguely articulated, the political discourse of the MNJ dramatically gained consistence. The ‘residual banditry’ story could no longer hold.

In mid-2009, one year after this media success, the military situation on the ground was at a standstill and what used to be a unitary movement had split into three groups while a fourth one, built around an early non-Tuareg military ally and his men, simply vanished. The three remaining groups comprised the *Front des Forces de Redressement* (FFR), the *Front Patriotique Nigérien* (FPN) and the original MNJ. The three fronts’ ideological differences are unclear: initial appeals to justice for all Nigériens have been blurred by ethnic claims and what looks like narrow sectional interests. Significantly, the President of the MNJ, Aghaly Alambo, has been accused of money diversion and denied his leadership by the political cadres of his group. The FPN has disarmed its combatants and returned their guns in Agadez while the MNJ has done the same in Sabha, Libya. These two events have been made possible thanks to Libya’s intervention which led protracted discussions with rebels leaders in Tripoli and materially accommodated the combatants heading back home by offering them cash transfers (I. M. Diallo, 2009). Only the FFR has not surrendered and keeps denouncing its ancient allies. Its objective very likely consists in seeking amnesty for its chief, condemned to death for the assassination of a local politician in 2004. As these lines are written, direct confrontation between rebels and government’s forces no longer happen and ‘residual banditry’ seems to have resumed.

In sum, what started as an obscure isolated attack only temporarily mutated into a credible armed rebellion with a solid political content and later on unraveled into a hardly intelligible mosaic of seemingly separate groups. In fact the oddity here is not the way the movement started nor is it the way it ended: as mentioned above, ‘residual banditry’ perpetrated by ex-combatants was commonplace in the area for years while Libya’s role in accommodating (or inflaming) tensions is another recurrent feature of local politics. The unusual event here is actually the ideological depth and credibility that the rebel movement temporarily showed.

Our goal is to specify the nature of the MNJ as a non-state armed organisation and to make sense of its shaky existence since its inception, almost three years ago, with a particular focus on the period that made the MNJ a serious political and military opponent to the government. Our argument is that circumstantial alliances and percolation of grievances provoked by local micro-

political dynamic and long-standing disenfranchisement of some sections of the Tuareg youth permitted the movement to take off as a credible rebel group. Ultimately, we want to verify if existing analytical tools made available by the theoretical literature on non-state armed groups are adequate to make sense of the MNJ's organisational trajectory.

### **Categorising rebellions, accounting for armed groups' organisational dynamic**

Jeremy Weinstein has recently produced a seminal book – “Inside Rebellion” (Weinstein, 2006) - taking stock of and rejuvenating the analysis of rebellions and mobilisation for political violence along with other contributions by Wood (2003), S. N. Kalyvas (2006) or Collier & Sambanis (2005). Going beyond the somehow sterile ‘greed vs grievances’ debate, it opted for a micro- and meso-level analysis, focusing specifically on non-state armed organisations, their combatants and what makes the former and the latter stick together. In the theoretical chapter of his book, Weinstein exposes the core arguments of his thesis: rebellions derive from an ‘industrial organisation of violence’ through which structural constraints on the rebel group’s finance are converted into peculiar micro-level recruitment strategies. The basic logic goes as follows: if the rebel entrepreneur can secure easy access to finance (e.g. through illegal appropriation of natural resources or external sponsorship) then he will tend to recruit quasi-mercenaries, *i.e.* professionals of violence characterised by short term material accumulation objectives. If access to finance is lacking, then rebel leaders will favour indirect channels of mobilisation based on kinship ties, shared ideologies and, more broadly, what Weinstein puts under the umbrella of ‘social capital’. Stemming from this alternative, the recruits of ‘poor’ rebellions are likely to be politically relatively more aware and educated than the combatants of economically well-endowed rebellions - education standing here as a proxy for low depreciation of the future. Besides, in addition to providing an articulated typology of rebel movements, Weinstein’s model predicts patterns of violence: opportunistic quasi-mercenaries are expected to show a lower degree of loyalty and to be more undisciplined and violent than their politicised, activist counterparts.

Hence what characterises rebellion making according to Weinstein is a top-down, demand-driven logic determined by finance constraints, mimicking a firm’s recruitment policy. As a general

approach, applying the firm model to rebellion-making raises some problems. Trivialising political engagement into a narrow economicist framework might be one. We will however concentrate our critique on one aspect of Weinstein's analytical framework, namely the idea that the nature of an armed group can be determined *ex ante* by structural constraints. Weinstein's perspective conceives armed rebellion as a 'plan' unfolding according to a script which is encapsulated in the 'initial conditions' that surround the rebellion making project. Since the type of rebellion that will finally emerge is structurally determined by access to finance, the profiles of the recruits can be known before any actual recruitment takes place. According to Weinstein, recruitment is not a process through which rebel leaders' expectations on their labour force are matched together with the hopes that applicants place in their engagement in violence. Contrarily, recruitment follows the logic of self-selection: those who join have the characteristics required by the structural constraints imposed from the start.

We argue that viewing rebellion as a 'planned action' (Thévenot, 1995) may miss important real life processes - such as trials, error, miscalculations due to blurred time-horizon or loose control over men and their actions - that actually render the characterisation of a non-state armed organisation much less straightforward than what a mere focus on 'initial conditions' would predict. This also applies to recruitment. Purely demand-driven enlistment may not be feasible, especially in the early days of a rebellion: can an armed group in its infancy actually reject spontaneous applications? Does an armed organisation fully control its recruitment policy? If we answer these questions negatively, one must then admit that the profiles of recruits may have a backlash effect on the nature and the trajectory over time of the rebel group.

Drawing on our observations of the MNJ in Northern Niger, we suggest that rebelling can actually resemble a gradual and fragile "bricolage" whose changes can be influenced by external forces - notably state repression - and disturbed by internal struggle over power. We also observe, following in depth interviews with active low-level combatants in May 2009, that joining and defecting are two decisions loosely controlled by commanders, a peculiarity of the MNJ that contributes to its fragility and, analytically, contradicts Weinstein's deterministic structural model. Rather than considering 'opportunistic' vs 'activist' models of violent contention as *ex ante* mutually exclusive characteristics of armed organisations we argue that

opportunism and activism constitute, at least in our case, two undercurrents inherent to armed struggle, more or less prominent over time according to conditions we will explore.

To fully acknowledge the importance of unpredictable bifurcations of the movement and avoid their *ex post* rationalisation by an omniscient eye, we opt for a presentation following the emergence, the rise and the relative decline of the MNJ chronologically, making explicit reference to the hesitations, questionings or strategic choices that the protagonists may have faced in the course of the conflict.

## **Methodology**

The following evidence is based on repeated interviews conducted in Niger in August 2007 with Nigériens officials and non officials directly involved in or sympathizing with the current or past Tuareg rebellions, on various levels (as political cadres or rank and file). Among them are Mohamed Anacko now *Haut Commissaire a la Restauration de la Paix*, Mohamed Akotey, then *Ministre de l'Environnement* and Issyad Kato, *Ministre de l'Elevage et des Industries Animales*. UNDP staffers of the *Programme de Consolidation de la Paix dans l'Aïr et l'Azawak* (PCPAA) in charge of providing assistance to former combatants of the rebellion that happened in the 90s have also been met and followed in their activity in the northern Niger's main city, Agadez. In addition to this field work - partly truncated due to the declaration of a state of emergency by the authorities in the Agadez region making interviews impossible in the area - systematic collection of local and international press articles has been undertaken. Also, numerous interviews and meetings have been conducted among the highly involved politicised Tuareg diaspora in France and their French sympathisers active in the civil society. As we will see, this international facet of the rebellion is of crucial importance for the itinerary of the group. Finally, to overcome the impossibility to work in northern Niger, we traveled to southern Algeria in May 2009 where we met a dozen of Tuareg low-level combatants temporarily away from the front<sup>3</sup>. Their number is

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<sup>3</sup> Algeria has been playing a crucial role in the conflict, offering a sanctuary to the insurgents and providing them with shelter, supplies (food, gasoline) and opening its hospitals to wounded fighters. It's not clear though whether this attitude was centrally decided by Algiers' authorities or if it was permitted by local Tuareg solidarity network based in Tamanrasset or Djanet. Tolerance towards MNJ combatants was certainly partly instrumental for Algerian authorities as, symptomatically, it tended to fade away just at the time when we were there, coinciding with a round

not high as we privileged in-depth repeated interviews with them, covering the many dimensions of their engagement. We spent one week with them in Tamanrasset, conducting group interviews on a daily basis.

### **The background of the MNJ: Tuaregs' longstanding multidimensional destitution**

The MNJ was created against the backdrop of Tuaregs' longstanding social, political and economic destitution, a process that started under French colonisation and resulted in recurrent armed contestations, the first of them being the revolt led by Kaocen in 1917, in the broader context of WWI. In the late 80s, armed struggle resumed, this time targeting the post-independence centralised regime run from the southern state capital Niamey. This wave of low intensity unrest only ended in the mid-90s.

Formerly 'lords of the desert' where they controlled long-distance trade and pastoral activities (camels, donkeys and goats), organised in separate nomadic or semi-nomadic tribes under the firm grip of a caste of noble 'warriors', the Tuaregs lost most of their political hegemony over the century following French occupation of the Sahara. The French defeated the revolt some of them carried out in 1917 and pursued a classic 'divide and rule' policy preventing any further mass mobilisation.

When establishing the administrative structures of the colony, France promoted to offices an educated elite mostly coming from the South of Niger and, particularly, from the Djerma and Songhay ethnic groups<sup>4</sup>. This bias partly stems from the Tuareg communities' reluctance to send

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of negotiations conducted under the auspices of Libya, Algeria's regional political competitor. Actually, one can hypothesise several reasons behind Algeria's tolerance towards MNJ combatants: first Algeria wants to avoid political instability to spread among its own Tuareg communities in the Hoggar (around Tamanrasset) and the Tassili (around Djanet); second, Algeria needs the support of Tuaregs from Mali and Niger to fight the Islamists - now re-branded Al-Qaeda Maghreb (AQMI) - causing political disorder in the region. Finally, there's a more mundane reason: some Algerian military in the zone and the Tuaregs may have common economic interests in the highly profitable cross-border business happening in this region (subsidised food, cigarettes from Nigeria, electronic appliances, drug, arms and illegal migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa).

<sup>4</sup> An illuminating point of view on Niger's ethnic groups' alleged psychological traits and their usefulness for the colony is provided by the French colonial officer Maurice Abadie in 1927: "the Djerma are the most intelligent and the most active population in the whole Sudan [a colonial territory corresponding to today's Mali]; they provide very good *tirailleurs*, the best of the colony" (Abadie, 1927, p. 116-117). In sharp contrast, the Tuaregs are presented as a

their children from noble casts to school (Rasmussen, 1992). It resulted, at the time of independence, in the early 60s, in an alienation of the Tuaregs from state positions (Grégoire, 2001), reinforced by a demographic disadvantage compared to other Niger ethnic groups following a design of state boundaries leaving them scattered over five national territories: Niger, Mali, Haute-Volta (now Burkina Faso), Algeria and Libya. Although the figures are contested, recent demographic surveys estimate that the Tuaregs constitute a mere 10 per cent of the Niger's population, while the Hausas represent more than 50 per cent of the population and the Djerma/Songhay around 20 per cent<sup>5</sup> (République du Niger, 2007).

This political destitution was paralleled by a rapid economic decline. The livestock of Tuareg herdsmen was dramatically downsized following Kaocen's military defeat (Triaud, 1993) and was hit again by major droughts in the 70s and the 80s. Long-distance trans-Saharan trade progressively became obsolete due to the opening of new commercial routes (by air or boat from the Gulf of Guinea coastal metropolis, see Brachet (2004) and Grégoire (2001)), thus forcing large sections of the population to abandon their nomadic mode of production, at the price of serious internal hierarchical reversals. Partial abandonment of caravanning and nomadic activities meant that nobles and their tributary chiefs, owners of camels *par excellence* lost prestige and political influence over their obliged traditional subalterns, namely the blacksmiths (providing them with tools, jewels and arms and singing their praises during social events) and former slaves (looking after livestock and performing domestic chores) attached to their families. In the new economic climate, blacksmiths as well as slaves had a relatively greater disposition to adapt to sedentary activities such as artisanship or gardening and sometimes became economically better off than their former masters.

Another major consequence of economic deprivation was the migration of many youths of Tuareg origin in cities of neighbouring countries, Algeria or Libya (Tamanrasset, Ghat, Sabha...). In Libya particularly, some of them benefited from the hospitality of Col. Ghaddafi at a time when his country was supporting many liberation movements on the African continent (Chad) and beyond (Lebanon). Disgruntled Tuareg youths became a welcome labour force in Ghaddafi's

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much less obeying people and their martial ethos is stressed: they are "always armed" and "force is ultimately the only argument capable of safeguarding peace and keeping the Tuaregs on the right track" (Abadie, 1927, p. 169).

<sup>5</sup> The rest of the population is distributed among Fulanis, Kanuris, Arabs, Tubus or Gourmantchés.

Islamic Legion where they received military training and contributed to military actions in various war theaters. They also performed urban activities unknown to most Tuaregs so far or participated in cross-border smuggling of cigarettes or Algerian subsidized goods, taking advantage of the price difference between Algeria and Mali and Niger and using their deep knowledge of the desert to escape Algerian or Nigérien borders control<sup>6</sup> (Ag Ahar, 1990). Many of them remained under-employed which earned them the label *ishumar* (after the French word *chômeur*, i.e. unemployed). Rejecting total cultural alienation, Tuareg migrants of the *teshumara* movement (i.e. the identity created abroad by the *ishumar*) elaborated an egalitarian, revolutionary form of nationalism, spread across the desert through the songs of activist musicians, the most famous of them being the Malian collective Tinariwen ('deserts')<sup>7</sup> which explicitly and powerfully advocated armed rebellion (Belalimat, 2003; Lecocq, 2004). Ideologically converted to insurgency and militarily trained by Libya, the *ishumar* were the revengeful vanguard of the rebel movements that formed in the late 80s.

In the mid-80s, Tuareg activists allied with the son of former and first post-independence President of Niger Diori Hamani overthrown by General Seyni Kountche in 1974. They perpetrated an unsuccessful attack against the city of Tchintabaraden, north east of Niamey. Much more serious rebellious attempts were made in the end of the 80s as democracy was introduced in Niger following France's conversion for multipartism in Africa after decades of support to monolithic authoritarian regimes. Social tensions were then mounting. Many Tuareg migrants returned to Niger as they were promised some assistance to settle back in the country. Default in the delivery of the promised assistance by authorities triggered the anger of some youths who then decided to attack a military post in Tchintabaraden. The national security forces retaliated forcefully, killing hundreds of Tuareg men and women in what resembled a pogrom operation. The absence of serious prosecution against the perpetrators of the 'Tchintabaraden massacres' in times of democratic aspirations coinciding with the organization of a national

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<sup>6</sup> Coping in the desert requires a wide range of idiosyncratic competences – of which survival often depend - that Tuareg pastoralists learn over the years: knowing the routes through the dunes and the mountains, knowing where to find water, where to find wood for the evening's fire (and knowing which wood to select), knowing how, where and when to hunt, how to identify and where to find medicinal plants, anticipating bad weather conditions... This specific knowledge is of crucial importance for anyone carrying out long-distance business in the area.

<sup>7</sup> This band, now a popular representative of the 'world music' scene, was created in the late 70s by Malian ex-combatants of Ghaddafi's Islamic Legion.

conference meant to promote a new political deal sealed a political divorce between Tuareg leaders and Niamey's central authorities.

The rebel project, envisaged before the Tchintabaraden massacres (Casajus, 1995) concretized in the early 90s. Its leaders had federalist ideals. A low-intensity guerrilla was triggered in 1991 that lasted 6 years, causing several hundred deaths. Peace talks only started in late 1993 when first military truces were accepted. What was then a unitary movement (the *Front de l'Air et de l'Azawak*, FLAA) led by the educated and energetic Rhissa ag Boula then progressively unraveled into a confusing subdivision of fronts organised around clan and geographic proximities with no major ideological divergence between them (see figure 2 in the appendix). Each front being entitled access to post-conflict benefits as a peace negotiator, the structural incentive to factionalise increased.

In early 1994, the fronts built up a new entity, the *Coordination de la Résistance Armée* (CRA) and re-structured their claims, to be voiced during official peace negotiations in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, under Algerian auspices. In April 1995, an Agreement was issued which followed three main directions: decentralization of state's prerogatives to municipalities (*communes*) instead of autonomy of regions in a federal system as originally demanded by the insurgents; economic development in the North, and integration and access to jobs of combatants<sup>8</sup>. Other agreements concerned the personal fate of rebel leaders: the latter were most probably offered some substantial cash transfers. In 1997, the last front still operating, led by Mohamed Anacko, joined the peace process. Ironically, Mohamed Anacko is now the *Haut Commissaire à la Restauration de la Paix* in which capacity he is currently promoting dialogue with the ongoing rebellion on behalf of the President Mamadou Tandja. Rhissa ag Boula was offered a position of Minister of Tourism which he held during seven years following the peace accords. Tourism is a strategic income-generating activity in the North and a sector entirely controlled by the Tuaregs. By being granted this mandate, Rhissa Boula was also implicitly given discretionary powers to prevent any insurrectional aspiration to resume in the Agadez region and, one may argue, to keep

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<sup>8</sup> Integration entails that positions in the security forces or civil state's bodies are secured for ex-combatants while access to jobs (*'réinsertion'*) means giving pooled financial assistance to subaltern, non-integrated combatants to run a business cooperatively.

an eye on cross-border trade: when not used to carry tourists, one obvious way to make four-wheel drive cars profitable is to use them for smuggling<sup>9</sup>.

Historically entrenched reasons for discontent among the Tuaregs have been numerous and multidimensional: economic, political and social. Tuareg migrants experimenting exile in Algeria and Libya - where they also acquired military competence - constituted the frontrunners of a revolutionary project that unfolded in the 90s. As we will now see, today's insurgency can be viewed as an offshoot of the 90s rebellion due to the poor management of micro-political tensions that arose in the post-conflict. Yet, the rebellion that started in 2007 also contains new facets.

### **Gathering support through conditional alliances and the percolation of resentments**

*'Finishing the job', righting the wrongs: the micropolitics of rebellion resumption*

Amoumoune Kalakoua and (now late) Boubacar Alambo are the names of the two main perpetrators of the attack on the Iferouane military post in February 2007. They are both ex-members of the FLAA where they gained a reputation of brave and determined warriors. For reasons still to be clarified, Kalakoua and Boubacar Alambo did not benefit (maybe deliberately from their part) from integration nor were they included in the *réinsertion* programmes, certainly too modest for their middle commander rank. In fact, in the post-peace process era, they earned a reputation of smugglers and roving bandits (I. M. Diallo, 2004). Boubacar Alambo was reported, along with Elhadj Mohamed Ag Boula - Rhissa ag Boula's brother – to be the main kidnapper of FAN soldiers in late 2004 at a time when Kalakoua was jailed. Their purpose was to liberate Rhissa ag Boula, sacked from the government and imprisoned after the killing of a local political figure, a murder he was accused of being involved in. The FLAA was then re-formed temporarily to serve the interests of its chief. Indeed, Rhissa ag Boula was soon freed and, in

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<sup>9</sup> The Sahara is a very loosely monitored zone of cross-border trafficking. Cross-border trade is necessary to the subsistence of local communities as it is mostly composed (in terms of volume) of basic livelihoods, to which gas or cigarettes should be added. Highly profitable illegal trade of illicit commodities (cannabis, arms) is also pervasive in which Tuaregs play a determinant role as conveyors and drivers (Brachet, 2007) but not as heads of the long-distance trafficking networks (personal communication with Jean-Luc Peduzzi). The transportation of illegal migrants between Agadez and Tamanrasset *via* Arlit or between Agadez and Djanet *via* the Tenere desert is another widespread cross-border cash-earning activity.

August 2005, 500 ex-FLAA combatants, including Elhadj Mohamed Ag Boula, were given Libyan protection (and, allegedly Libyan nationality) as part of what seems to be a deal between Niger and its powerful neighbour to calm down the demands of ex-combatants unhappy with their situation (I. M. Diallo, 2005b; I. M. Diallo, 2005a).

The 2007 Iferouane attack can be seen as another round of this same process, aiming at facilitating the integration of those who did not benefit from Niger's peace commitments nor from Libyan protection: having found shelter in Libya, Elhadj Mohamed Ag Boula did not take part in it, unlike his former companions Kalakoua (who had escaped prison) and Boubacar Alambo. As put by one of our informants, an ex-FLAA combatant, the idea was to 'finish the job' under the auspices of figures who only played supporting roles in the previous rebellion and were sidelined from preceding integration deals. By doing so, they also signaled some degree of opposition to the ag Boula's clan, implicitly accused of misappropriating the 'dividends of peace'<sup>10</sup>. This was confirmed to us by UNDP staffers who also pointed the delay, due to lack of funding, in the implementation of the programme of *réinsertion* and the low amounts of finance available for distribution to former fighters. FLAA members in particular seemed particularly reluctant to enlist in the UNDP-run programme (PCPAA, 2007).

The frustration of those left aside from the peace deals was echoed by grievances of some ex-combatants who actually gained positions as part of the peace deals but suffered from what they express as a lack of consideration and marginalisation within their new military corps, illustrated by delayed promotions and the use of derogatory language against them. The *Forces Nationales d'Intervention et de Sécurité* (FNIS), a military body meant to monitor desert areas which hosted many ex-combatants, witnessed several defections soon after the inception of the MNJ.

Obtaining the promised financial assistance, getting secure positions and promotions in security forces - preferably in a military body mostly composed of Tuaregs - to permit the control of the

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<sup>10</sup> Inter family gory disputes are also said to have fuelled division between the ag Boula clan and the Alambos. One should note that ag Boula and Alambos are both Kel Tadele, a sub- group of the Kel Air, *i.e.* the pastoralist Tuareg groups originating from the Air mountains, north of Agadez and near the Algerian border. These disputes might have to do with Rhissa ag Boula using his position as a Minister to police the Air underground economy, partly based on smuggling, for his own benefit. In 2005, once liberated thanks to his brother's hostage-taking action, Rhissa Boula took over the *Union pour la Démocratie et le Progrès social* (UDPS), the dominant "Tuareg" political party, in another attempt to maintain his hold on the region and pursue a political career. The Iferouane attack definitely caught Rhissa Boula by surprise and constituted a blow to his leadership among the Tuaregs.

vast northern territory and its lucrative cross-border businesses seems to have been the priority motivations of the initiators of the MNJ and their immediate Tuareg followers. This statement may also hold for non Tuareg professionals of arms who later allied with the newly formed movement: the disgruntled general Kindo Zada, an ethnic Djerma on the run after the kidnapping of one of his competitors in the FAN, serving with his men as mercenary in the region (e.g. in Central African Republic); the *Jeunesses Arabes*, an Arab militia suspected of cross-border trafficking; the *Forces Armées Révolutionnaires du Sahara* (FARS), a Tubu militia which also fought the national armed forces in the 90s in the far eastern part of the country. All these various groups joined the MNJ with dozens of men and light military material (AK47, pick-ups, RPGs or landmines). Common military interests hence coalesced around the initiative of a few. To these first-movers, the MNJ appeared to be the right place from which some access to security-related state's rents could be demanded and extorted.

These alliances however show a high degree of instability - as the Weinstein's approach of opportunism-driven rebellion would predict: the *Jeunesses Arabes* surrendered to governmental forces only a few months after rallying the insurgency. The MNJ argued that they were actually sacked and accused them to free-ride, *i.e.* to carry out trafficking for private purposes under the umbrella of the rebellion. In early 2009, Kindo Zada disappeared after he was dismissed from the MNJ for suspicion of intelligence activities for the government. He rallied very recently the FPN, the MNJ splinter group that first decided to lay down arms, through a communiqué sent from N'djamena, Chad - certainly to show his good inclination toward peace<sup>11</sup>.

Certainly the biggest blow to the MNJ's cohesion was the creation, in March 2008, of a dissident Tuareg front, the *Front des forces de redressement*<sup>12</sup>, whose sole purpose was to permit a return of Rhissa ag Boula to the front stage. As an ex-chief of the rebellion, Rhissa ag Boula could not reasonably pledge allegiance to his former military subordinates while the inglorious episode of his liberation from jail following the hostage-taking action led by his brother alienated him from governmental support. Creating his own front was then the sole tractable option Rhissa ag Boula had to salvage his political existence. By doing so he seriously undermined the MNJ's capacity to speak with one voice.

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<sup>11</sup> See <http://xrl.in/3ppp>.

<sup>12</sup> <http://redressement.unblog.fr/>

The strong personalities and their armed affiliates that composed the multiple commanding heads of the MNJ certainly do not share any mechanical sense of solidarity. Their behaviours are guided by shifting instrumental loyalties, a phenomenon observed elsewhere in the region (see Debos, 2008, on Chad). These groups have heterogeneous objectives and time horizons and, punctually, decide to act together<sup>13</sup>. They share some features with Hobsbawm's seminal 'social bandits': they are not anti-social criminals; they do indeed constitute one dimension of social order as extra-legal actors and might contest the authorities violently if they feel they have been treated unjustly; they then attempt to "right the wrongs". They are the ones, within a community, brave enough "to say no". Their political agenda generally does not go beyond this assertion of opposition<sup>14</sup> (Hobsbawm, 2000).

Importantly however, this characterisation of the MNJ as a complex of outlaws does not apply so systematically to its later developments.

#### *Building political legitimacy with the help of international expertise*

Two major developments intervened soon after the Iferouane attack: Aghaly Alambo (Boubacar's brother) was asked to lead the movement and a political platform was issued which formed the basis of political debate and activism beyond Niger's boundary and, particularly in France, granting the movement a rather credible political dimension.

Unlike his brother considered as a desperado, Aghaly Alambo enjoyed the reputation of an honest Tuareg notable. He too was a member of the FLAA, second in command of Rhissa ag

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<sup>13</sup> This perspective applies well to Amoumoune Kalakoua who participated in an attack against the Malian garrison of Kidal in 2006, giving a hand to Malian Tuaregs claiming better integration in the Malian army.

<sup>14</sup> One may add two other features of social bandits, as described by Hobsbawm, which may apply to our case. Hobsbawm stresses that social bandits are sociologically more likely to be found in pastoralist or herdsman societies. Most of the Tuareg leaders of the 2007 rebellion actually originate from the Air Mountains where pastoral activities are still central to the economy. Another interesting trait of the social bandits evoked by Hobsbawm concerns the popularity (mixed with fear) they enjoy among the population and the grand narratives that generally describe their feats. Interestingly the most detailed and, strikingly, uninterrupted account we heard during our interviews was the epic story that forced Boubacar Alambo to desert the army and become an outlaw: when still a military, he had lent his arm to a friend willing to go hunting but the friend did not return the gun. This would mean severe punishment for Alambo which is why he decided to collect the gun instead of going back to the barracks. He was then considered as a deserter and got chased by the security forces, but cleverly escaped in the mountains, took some hostages there, managed to gain temporary impunity etc.

Boula in the 90s. He occupied the position of *sous-préfet* in Arlit, the uranium mining town located north of Agadez, and had invested in tourism and had become a prosperous travel agent, a lucrative activity he sacrificed to embrace armed struggle again in 2007. The implication of his brother in the attack maybe did not leave him any choice. Aghaly Alambo's installation as the head of MNJ significantly improved the initial dubious image of the MNJ.

The publication of a comprehensive, though eclectic, platform of claims on an internet blog later on strengthened the MNJ's more political turn<sup>15</sup>. The movement smartly downplayed its ethnic coloration by claiming justice for all Nigériens and denouncing the malpractices of the central government. Despite making specific demands for the North, the MNJ took care of making them regional rather than ethnic. They consisted in securing more positions for Northerners in the army and the civil service (echoing the concerns just exposed above), accelerating the decentralisation process and fulfilling the promises of budget transfers to municipalities and, crucially, revising the sharing arrangements of the uranium rents extracted from the Arlit mines and mitigating the ecological damages and health hazards associated with the extractive industry.

Uranium extraction in Arlit and, more broadly, in the Agadez region, was an issue already present in the rebellion's discourse of the 90s which however gained a crucial importance in the discourse of the MNJ. Crucially, this discourse was not only carried by MNJ's leaders operating in the Aïr Mountains but also, more vividly, by those who soon formed the "political cell" of the MNJ, e.g. the intellectual cadres, all based in France, from where the internet blog was also conceived and updated. Prominent political cadres firmly played the environmental card to publicise their struggle, enlisting French anti-globalisation movements, Green Party officials (including the popular MP Noel Mamère) or anti-nuclear activists into their cause. This was the result of a deliberate attempt to broaden the media coverage of the conflict.

Such a wide mobilisation among diverse groups was made possible by the activation of personal ties by French sympathisers of the Tuareg cause – often running small NGOs in the Aïr region (Casajus, 1995; Grégoire, 2006) - and hosts of exiled Tuareg dignitaries<sup>16</sup>. Numerous cultural

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<sup>15</sup> See: [http://m-n-j.blogspot.com/2007\\_04\\_15\\_archive.html](http://m-n-j.blogspot.com/2007_04_15_archive.html).

<sup>16</sup> This strategy has not been systematically successful. Strangely, some associations once at the forefront of pro-Tuareg activism, such as the *Fondation Danièle Mitterand* (the charity founded by the ex-French president Francois

events such as gigs of Tuareg blues, small political rallies and happenings at the front door of the French nuclear giant AREVA - which, until the very recent months, had the monopoly of exploitation of Niger's uranium – were organised<sup>17</sup>. A great deal of expertise in environmental activism was then transferred from French semi-professional activists to Tuareg activists.

This communication strategy closely followed, not consciously, the 'recipes' observed by Bob (2002) about the Ogoni struggle of the late 90s in Nigeria against Shell and the Nigerian government. Following Bob, the trinity of smart international activism includes: i) avoiding perpetrating violence (notably against civilians); ii) minimising internal divisions; iii) privileging environmentalism over nationalism. One could add: directing attention to the multinational corporations operating in the country rather than placing the focus on its mildly democratic authorities. Most of these conditions have been fulfilled by the MNJ's 'political cell', at least in the period of time during which it was particularly active. Anti-nuclear activism went as far as prosecuting one head of AREVA's security for racist comments he made against the Tuaregs. The case was prepared by a lawyer specialised in the disputes opposing multinational corporations and indigenous communities. It was ultimately lost but gained significant media coverage (Le Monde, 2009; Libessart, 2009).

One should not overlook that the many events aiming at attracting media attention also constituted occasions to raise funds for the Tuareg populations of the Aïr and, most probably, for the MNJ combatants themselves. Important efforts were also devoted to alert local populations in Niger: digitalised material informing on uranium exploitation and its current and prospective effects on public health, land ownership etc. was prepared from Paris and sent to Niger to be circulated among combatants and the population on memory sticks. Figure 3 in the appendix is the most glaring example of these efforts. Incidentally, this shows, contrarily to Weinstein's argument, that external material sponsorship and ideological advocacy can actually go hand in hand.

Our point here is not to overlook the objective problems caused by uranium extraction in Niger. Uranium exploitation does pose serious problems to Niger: after decades of opaque management

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Mitterrand's widow) or the *Mouvement contre le Racisme et pour l'Amitié entre les Peuples* later became much more discreet.

<sup>17</sup> For an illustration see: <http://xrl.in/3qd5>.

jointly by the French company AREVA and the Nigérien government, the national authorities have decided to frantically allocate hundreds of exploration and exploitation permits to foreign companies, completely disregarding the fate of local populations and failing to provide guarantees on the transparency of financial deals with multinational corporations (M. Diallo, 2009). What we want to highlight here is not the objectively appalling conditions in which natural resources are exploited in Niger but the way these conditions entered the political debate surrounding the MNJ: by gathering external expertise on the, now widely publicised, mechanisms of the ‘natural resources curse’ and systematically de-emphasizing other facets of the rebellion: ethnic-based grievances and sectional interests such as those carried by the ex-combatants evoked above. A sanitised version of the MNJ then emerged between mid-2007 and 2008 and one may hypothesise that Parisian activism of the ‘political cell’ and its French sympathisers affected operations on the ground: limited military actions have been undertaken at a time when the MNJ could have pushed its tactical military advantage further, at the cost of raising impatience among the fighters but also among the most nationalist of the Tuareg cadres<sup>18</sup>.

*“Joining Tamgak”, the liberating experience of the ishumar*

In addition to disgruntled professionals of arms seeking privileges and to activists of the diaspora striving to instil political content in the movement, the MNJ is composed of at least one more stratum of militants: the so-called *ishumar*, generally enlisted as rank-and-file. We met some of them in Tamanrasset in May 2009.

These low-level combatants did not join the MNJ immediately after its creation. Most of them joined after August 2007, i.e. six months after the official birth of the movement. Unlike the initiators and early joiners of the 2007 rebellion, these combatants are not ex-combatants of the 90s rebellion. They are youths of Agadez and Arlit who thought the situation was ripe for them to join. In Tamgak, the headquarter of the MNJ in the Air mountains, they lived the life of combatants for the first time.

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<sup>18</sup> Symptomatically, as we were attending one of the Parisian events debating the situation in Northern Niger, we witnessed a serious verbal dispute between a French left-wing activist, expert of the ‘Françafrique’ – i.e. France’s ambiguous relations with African dictatorships -, and one prominent Tuareg activist, the former blaming the latter for being publicly too vocal about the racial dimension of the conflict.

Although it's hard to find any particular event that ultimately decided them to join, the infamous and gory killing by the army of three old men in Tezirzeit, a locality in the Aïr, in May 2007 (see the poem in homage to the victims in the appendix)<sup>19</sup> and the other exactions perpetrated by the Forces Armées Nigériennes were often quoted as the signal they needed to finally join Tamgak<sup>20</sup>. They could also perfectly see the tension rising in the years preceding the outbreak of violence: one other immediate factor behind their enlistment is the huge new Imouraren extractive complex allocated to AREVA and the will of many locals not to be excluded from the deal this time, contrarily to what happened in the 70s when AREVA settled in Arlit and recruited most of its skilled labour force in Niamey, the far away state capital<sup>21</sup>. Inhabitants of Arlit and Agadez, our respondents continue, also saw numerous Chinese engineers travelling across the desert in the years 2004-5, carrying heavy measurement instruments as part of the government's plans to distribute mining concessions. Finally they could perfectly observe that all the peace agreements of the late 90s were going nowhere.

The subjective less immediate reasons behind the Tamanrasset's combatants' decision to join the MNJ revolve around three interconnected themes: racism, unequal access to jobs and territorial sovereignty. The educational trajectories of the interviewees are full of anecdotal evidence of open rejection of their Tuareg identity by the teachers or non-Tuareg classmates. These discriminatory behaviours were perpetuated after school when these young men sought jobs and tried to pass interviews or exams: I was told countless episodes of candidates "not known by anyone", "not born in Agadez", "not brought up among us", and, importantly, "not more qualified than we are" finally being granted the job they were coveting.

The feeling of injustice is reinforced by the fact that MNJ combatants consider the northern region as their own. This does not just express sentimental attachment. As stressed above, Tuaregs have plenty of very practical competences intimately linked to their life in the desert

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<sup>19</sup> What gave particular resonance to this event was also the fact that one of the victims was Kalakoua's father.

<sup>20</sup> See S. N. Kalyvas & Kocher (2007) for an interpretative framework linking enlistment of combatants and state repression.

<sup>21</sup> None of the dozens of exploration permits granted by Niger to foreign multinational corporations has concretised yet, except one, the Imouraren project which will be, in the next 2 years, the second largest uranium mine in the world, thanks to €1bn investment. Ironically, this new exploitation site is run by AREVA which, in 2007, conceded more advantageous financial deals to Niger's authorities and, as a result, has been allocated this promising exploitation site.

which sustain their sense of territorial belonging. The desert is their land and there is a shared feeling among our respondents that the Tuaregs are being dispossessed of it. In fact the view that Agadez is suffering a second colonisation by the ‘Southerners’ is commonplace in the interviews I have carried out, not only in Tamanrasset but also in 2007 in Agadez and Niamey. This brings about racial statements: “we’re occupied by the Blacks” - as Tuaregs consider themselves as “Whites”. This distinction carries a heavy historical weight since, in past centuries, the sedentary ‘Blacks’, notably the Hausa, used to live under the Tuaregs’ supremacy who regularly raided them and used them as slaves<sup>22</sup>.

Struggling to get jobs, feeling discriminated against, the fighters I met, lived the typical life of the *ishumar*, made of temporary jobs in tourism and idleness with other non-married male fellows consisting of playing the guitar, smoking, drinking and running political debates. Being an *achamor* (singular of *ishumar*) reflects much more than being unemployed: it carries quasi-socialist values: *ishumar* live together, eat together, sing together and share all their belongings. They form a small all-male cell of solidarity ties and a space for political debate which tends to be self-validating. The music they listen to describes their daily misery, glorifies the desert, celebrates friendship ties and urges them to stand up<sup>23</sup>. The stigma of being unemployed has somehow been transformed into a pride. Crucially, our point is that the *teshumara* represents an alternative lifestyle which is very adequate for warlike purposes<sup>24</sup>.

What does “going to Tamgak” or “exiting” (*sortir*) mean in this context? We suggest that it implies the extension of the *teshumara* lifestyle at a full scale with the additional satisfaction that one, at least in theory, contributes to political change. By enlisting, *ishumar* make something collectively useful: “we assert our culture and we make it advance at the same time”. Such a statement brings us rather far from the standard collective action puzzle and moves the logic closer to what Wood called “the pleasure of agency” (Wood, 2003). Fear of exposing one’s life, sacrifice, military discipline and obligations are obviously present but what the militants insisted

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<sup>22</sup> The racial dimension of MNJ combatants’ discourse is echoed in a video one can buy in Tamanrasset’s or Djanet’s music and DVD shops: in parallel with the celebration of MNJ fighters’ courage, it shows their reactions immediately after they destroyed a convoy of the *Forces armées nigériennes*, which are replete with racist allusions.

<sup>23</sup> This is what Tinariwen songs are about. Note that Tinariwen is just one band among many other, very prolific and talented, Tuareg musicians.

<sup>24</sup> It actually recalls the lifestyle of some of the radical left’s groups of the 70s in Europe or in the US, such as the Weathermen (Sommier, 2008).

on was the joy of joining their Agadez friends - sometimes after days of lonely walk in the desert - and the liberating experience that being in Tamgak represented for them. Rebellious is not just about obtaining more from central authorities (political representation, jobs, access to uranium rents), it is also about promoting a different social model, which draws on a revisited Tuareg identity.

Joining and staying for a while in Tamgak is about “learning”, “living an adventure” much more than obeying orders and being under the command of military chiefs. Discipline in Tamgak is pretty loose. Formally, new recruits seal their loyalty to the group by swearing on the Quran<sup>25</sup>; then their military abilities are tested. They receive a military rank but the gesture is “more a public display of respect than a real military rank”. The fighting community, like the urban collective of *ishumar* is seen as an egalitarian group: rewards are banned because – as I was told – “a reward is a division”. Importantly, this point should be mitigated by the fact that arms are selectively distributed to combatants, on the basis of ‘merits’.

Defecting is permitted and not necessarily associated with the betrayal of the cause. Intelligence with the enemy may be suspected but “if you betray us, that’s a problem between you and your consciousness”<sup>26</sup>. The leadership is respected but not blindly worshipped. The fact that some of the leaders might have opportunistic agendas is fully acknowledged but this does not cast a shadow of doubt on the *ishumars*’ own motives to enlist as decisions are primarily the outcome of individuals’ internal deliberations: “everybody has to do his own revolution”; “the leaders just did the first step”.

According to the Tamanrasset militants’ accounts, the MNJ looks like a ‘hop on – hop off’ rebellion loosely controlled by their chiefs. The interviewees might have exaggerated the role their agency played in the process of enlistment they reported to me. Yet their detailed personal stories do show a high degree of reflexivity and stress that no one, except a few friends (i.e. chosen social relations), needed to be consulted to decide whether or not to join. In addition, the

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<sup>25</sup> Dandois & Creisson (2008) mention that recruits’ oath is threefold: they promise to obey their chiefs, to never attack civilians nor to loot (p. 143).

<sup>26</sup> This principle strikingly contrasts with the norm that prevailed in many Latin American insurgencies where defectors were physically eliminated (Arenas, 1972).

military structure they describe hardly resembles the neat hierarchical outfit that an “industrial organization of violence” would suggest.

**Conclusion: the MNJ as the temporary coalescence of heterogeneous sectional interests**

The empirical evidence exposed above shows the intrinsic ambivalence of the MNJ as an armed group. The first-movers, composed of opportunistic professionals of violence, have been joined by politicized activists giving advice from abroad and youths carrying out their “own revolution” and deeply moved by a revisited ‘Tuareg’ ethos encapsulated in the *teshumara* movement. The activists of the Diaspora gained prominence several months after the movement started and, as intellectuals, are favorably positioned to lead peace negotiations with the government, under the control of those who still detain arms. Some *ishumar* may gain modest material advantages and resume their lives as before. These heterogeneous groups only temporarily united their forces, forming an organizational complex that hardly resembled a neat military structure.

Where to situate the MNJ in Weinstein’s typology hence seems quite undecidable. Blatantly, narrow categories of ideology and opportunism coexisted in the MNJ, in sharp contrast with Weinstein’s exclusive categorisation. By putting too much emphasis on “initial conditions”, Weinstein’s model, we argue, fails to properly acknowledge the micro-social dynamics that shape armed groups and their erratic trajectory: alliances at the top of the movement might be the results of exceptional micro-political circumstances; full control of recruitment might not be feasible, particularly in the early stages of a rebellion; the sociological content of waves of would-be combatants varies over time, following the unfolding of the conflict itself; “intellectuals” might jump in the process, shifting the rebel agenda away from the initial objectives of the first-movers. While not articulating a model making sense of this dynamic, our contribution does stress the need to investigate what armed organizations are sociologically made of rather than bluntly postulating their existence.

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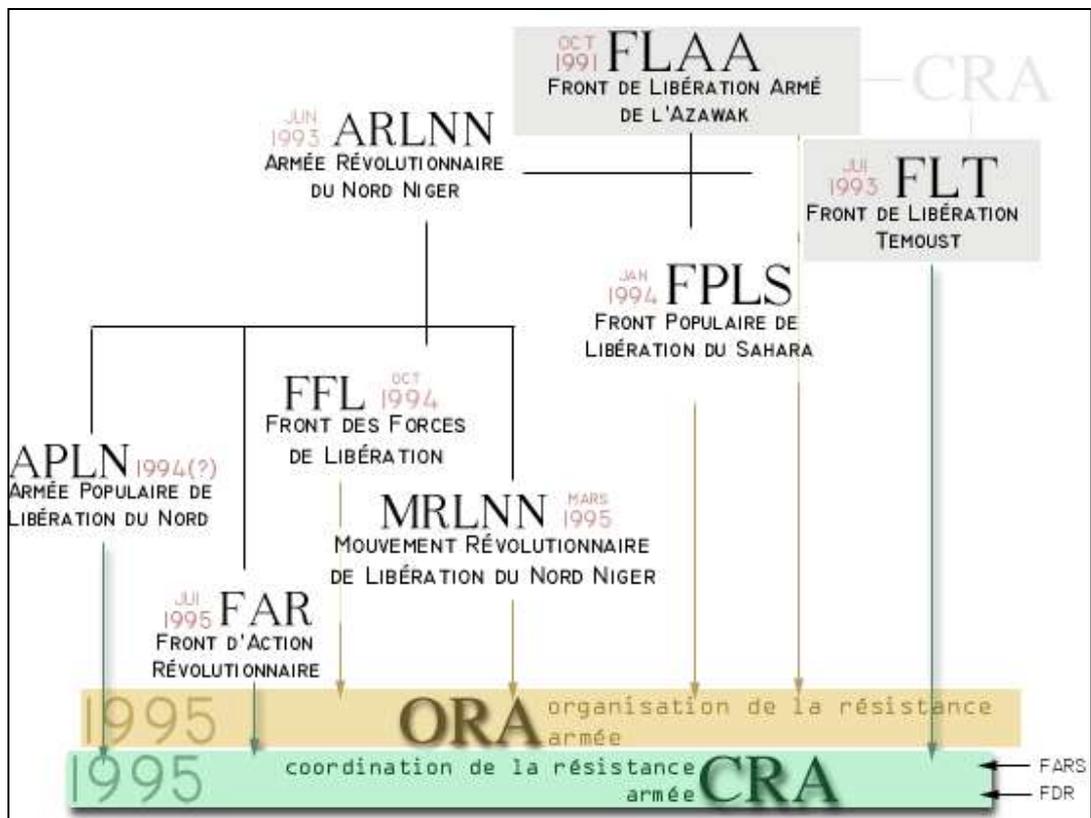
## Appendix

Figure 1: Map of the region indicating the strategic localities quoted in the text



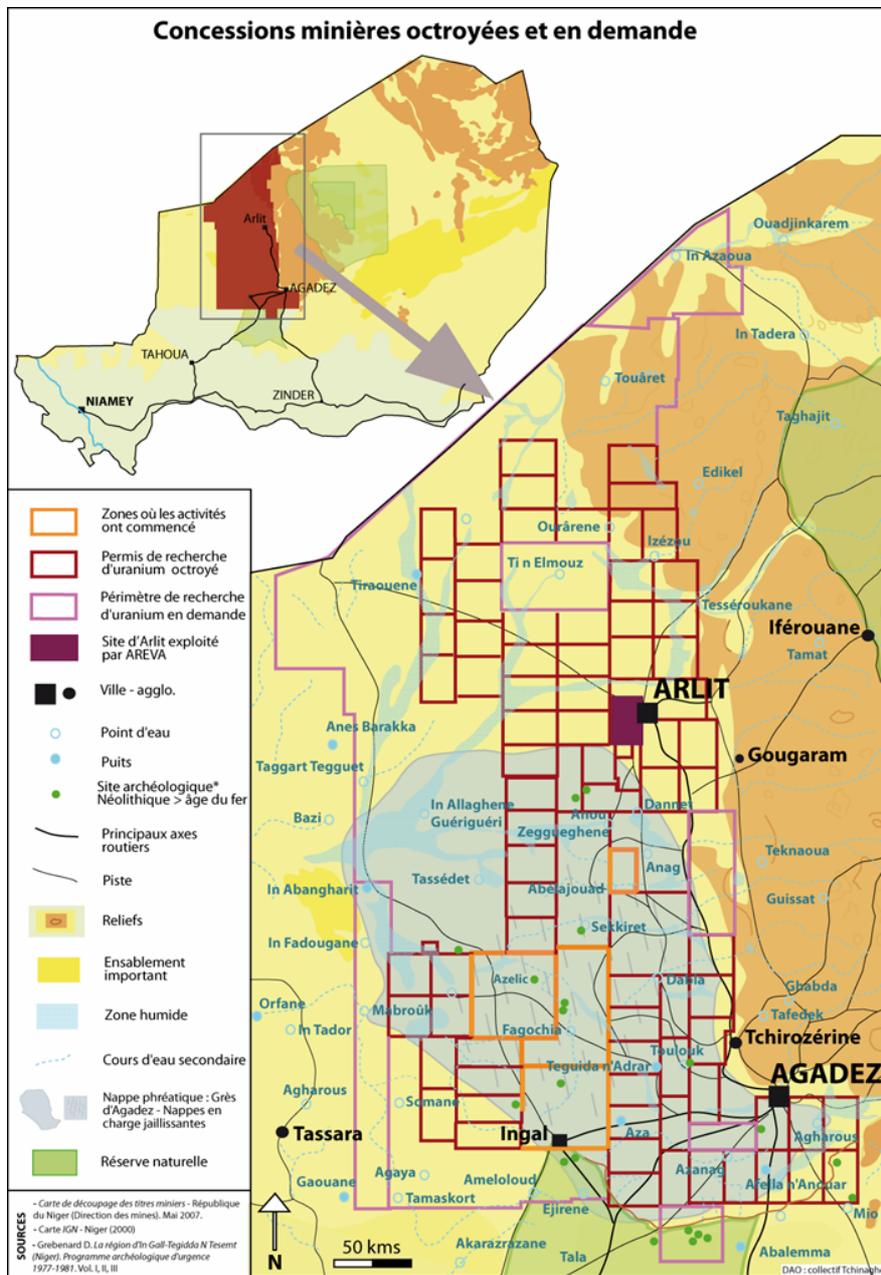
Source: Google Earth

Figure 2. The process of factionalisation of the rebellion in the 90s



Source: [http://tuaregs.free.fr/touareg\\_f/pages/dossiers/organi\\_niger.htm](http://tuaregs.free.fr/touareg_f/pages/dossiers/organi_niger.htm)

Figure 3. Uranium exploration or exploitation permits granted by the government (April 2007)



Source: (Tchinaghen, 2008), p. 9; Ministère des Mines et de l'Énergie du Niger

Celebrating the martyrs, galvanising the troops. Anonymous song, in homage to Tezirzeit victims

Quand nous avons libéré Tezirzeit, moi et mes frères, en partant nous avions mal à l'âme et mal au plus profond de nous !

Les armes lourdes et légères ont secoué les positions ennemies, ces mêmes ennemis qui avaient martyrisé nos parents et massacré leurs animaux

Sous notre puissante conviction et notre soif de justice, les combattants de l'armée du Niger se sont rendus

Ils n'ont pas pu résister car nous avons une cause, eux n'avaient seulement qu'un ordre !

Quelle souffrance ! Quel mal être !

Quand nous avons découvert la fosse où ils avaient enterré nos parents, morts en martyrs!

Source: [m-n-j.blogspot.com](http://m-n-j.blogspot.com)