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## THE WIDER WORLD

### The Land of Azawad

By Diane Chido  
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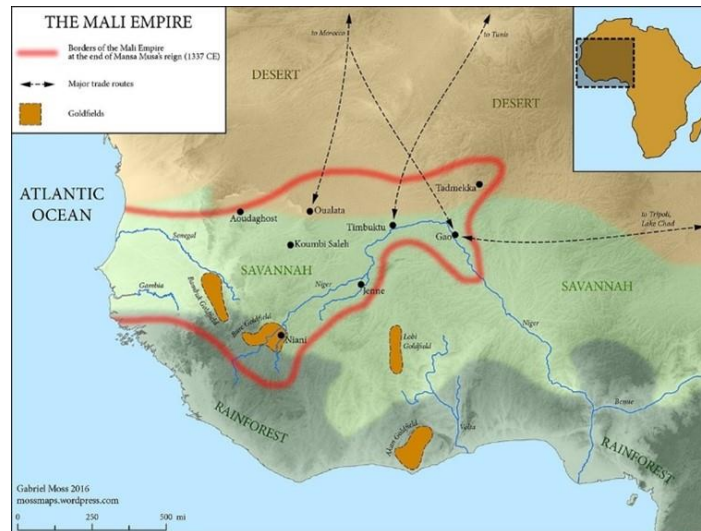
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“That place might as well be in Timbuktu!” ... “You better watch out, or you’ll end up in Timbuktu.”

Today we use the allusion to this ancient city, Timbuktu, as a disparaging exaggeration of things too remote to contemplate. That we remember this ancient city at all, even if we don’t know why, is a testament to its former glory.

Move over Elon Musk and Warren Buffet (before he gave it away), and even Jeff Bezos and Bill Gates (before the very public divorces). Mansa Musa, who ruled Mali in the 12th century, is often called the richest man who ever lived. He made Timbuktu a center of learning and architecture. Sometimes called the “King of Bling,” Mansa Musa ruled over a kingdom of shocking wealth in gold and jewels because he controlled the trading routes for salt.



*Extent of Mansa Musa's kingdom in late 12th century*

As shown on the map,[i] Musa's kingdom extended across parts of not only modern Mali, but also Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Mauritania, Niger, and Senegal. Mansa Musa was a devout and learned Muslim and he promoted a flourishing literary culture with surviving manuscripts illuminated in gold and once ornamented with precious gems. The 2016 book, *The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu*,[ii] describes the harrowing efforts undertaken by those who have sought to preserve and protect this treasure trove from marauders over the centuries, including Islamic militants in the past 10 years.

Mali matters for many reasons. Not least of which, the U.S. is participating with advisers, not troops, in one of the deadliest and longer United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations (UNDPKO) missions in history. Since 2013, the U.N. Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) – note the word “peace” is not in the title – has operated in Mali essentially to protect the government and civilians from its own people, despite the U.N.'s mandate for impartiality. Some Malians have joined armed groups, some waging jihad, and others seeking an independent state. With no real peace to keep and mainly staying in their heavily fortified base for fear of attack, 303 peacekeeping personnel have died in Mali in the past decade.[iii]

Since its independence from France in 1960, the West considered Mali a “democratic success story.” From the 1970s, the Malian government began to decentralize control over the Northern trade routes and began to give security contracts to select local ethnic groups who had historically supported government initiatives or were corrupt partners of certain officials in the capital Bamako, in southern Mali. This resulted in increasing restiveness among the

Tuaregs, whose tribes in the North were progressively marginalized and alienated.

For millennia, the Tuaregs had been revered for their tracking and trading skills with extensive networks to key transit routes to the Mediterranean and on to Europe. In the modern era, as cargo increasingly traveled by ship and air, these historic routes through “lawless” desert areas became less efficient. Today’s most lucrative types of cargo traveling these routes are cocaine, weapons, and human migrants.

Concurrently, the southern Malian government instituted agricultural quotas, forcing nomadic Tuaregs to grow crops, such as cotton, in untenable amounts that were inappropriate to the arid climate and sandy soil. Increased desertification led to depressed economic conditions in the region, forcing Tuaregs to return to their traditional livelihoods – but now not as legal traders, but as smugglers of illicit goods, such as untaxed cigarettes and counterfeit goods. This led to trafficking in the North becoming fully integrated with corrupt police, military, and political officials.

For decades, Young Tuaregs have also found employment in neighboring Libya. In the 1960s, as a respected African head of state who had always courted favor to gain influence in the region, late Libyan President Muammar Gaddafi often brokered peace deals between Tuaregs and the constituent governments in the six states in which they reside in a contiguous territory Tuaregs call *Azawad*, shown on the map,[iv] comprising parts of Algeria, Burkina Faso, Libya, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger.



*Idealized Tuareg homeland of Azawad*

Next time you look at a map, look at places like Mali, that were clearly carved up without local knowledge. See how its shape alone suggests the impossibility of governing it effectively. America's Michigan (upper and lower peninsulas) is another example of complex political geography.

In the 1970s, Gaddafi formed the "Islamic Legion" to create a unified Islamic state in northern Africa. During times of severe drought, the Legion offered cash for service, which enticed disenfranchised Tuaregs throughout the region. In 1987, the Legion disbanded, causing an influx of unemployed mercenaries to head back to Mali, while some joined the Libyan armed forces. As the Arab Spring unfolded in March 2011, Malian Tuaregs began to head to Libya to support pro-Gaddafi forces with an offer of a \$10,000 signing bonus and a \$1,000 daily wage, the local equivalent of *annual* income in northern Mali.

With the fall of Gaddafi in late 2011, hundreds if not thousands, of these armed and battle-tested Tuaregs returned from Libya ready to form the Azawad National Liberation Movement (MNLA), which took control of several northern Malian towns by December 2011. While Tuaregs are united in their desire to carve out a contiguous homeland as national borders hamper their traditional nomadic herding and trading activities, they are by no means monolithic and have enjoyed centuries of rivalry and infighting.

When a leading Tuareg, Iyad Ag Ghaly, was not selected to lead the MNLA, he formed a rival separatist group, called *Ansar al Dine*, meaning "Defenders of the Faith," which had a more violent and radical Islamic agenda. Once well-respected as a hostage negotiator and known to be fond of "whiskey and music," Ag Galy had served in the Malian consulate in Jedda, Saudi Arabia from 2007 until 2010, where it is believed he became radicalized. His extreme views and stated intention to unite the area of Azawad under a *sharia* structure was anathema to the Tuareg traditional brand of Islam and lost him the leadership of MNLA. In most Tuareg cultures, women make the majority of household decisions, and the men are veiled.

*Ansar al Dine* pledged allegiance to Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the regional AQ affiliate, which is largely known as a "kidnapping for ransom" syndicate, much like Abu Sayyaf, the AQ affiliate in the southern Philippines. By 2013, AQIM is believed to have netted over \$100 million in ransoms, but is also funded through trafficking in arms, vehicles, cigarettes, persons, and narcotics, via its close links to South American cocaine cartels. AQIM leader Mokhtar Belmokhtar is incidentally known as the "one-eyed Marlboro Man" for a bombmaking mishap and his control over the illicit cigarette market.

MNLA and *Ansar al Dine* already had close ties through Ag Ghaly and local kinship among members and worked together to attack government facilities in a bid to secede the northern parts of Mali, mainly around the cities including

Timbuktu. Unfortunately, this allowed the Malian government to label MNLA a “terrorist” organization implying Islamic radicalism, when they were actually national separatists with a secular agenda that did not attack civilians, only government and police facilities. This label ensured international funding and assistance for the government, which was fighting Ansar al Dine and AQIM; however, MNLA was also lumped in as an international threat when its only interest was in creating a Tuareg homeland.

This happens a lot. Governments know that if they label opponents as “terrorists” and mention connections to AQ or the Islamic State group, however tenuous, the U.S. will give them enormous amounts of aid and support.

The main catalyst for all this is that Gaddafi was an autocrat and, as such, was justifiably paranoid. He also styled himself “King of Kings” in Africa and was trying to take over the entire continent diplomatically, thanks to his massive oil revenues. To bolster his strength, he had enormous arms caches hidden all over the country. When his grip began to weaken, global experts began to scream that “someone” needed to secure those arms or Sub-Saharan Africa would be in flames for a century. Well, no one responsible responded to these calls and, as anticipated, the arms were seized by disaffected Libyan military personnel and Tuaregs on their exodus.

As a result, the region is awash in weapons, from small arms, to rockets, to every other basic destructive tactical item you can imagine. What could Mali have done differently? History rarely gives you the “Goofus and Gallant”[v] versions of events for straight comparison, but in this case it has.

Malian President Amadou Toumani Touré was so keen to overcome encroaching Islamic radicalism with radical tolerance and optimism that he refused to recognize the threat and was toppled in a coup, just days before the end of his 2012 term. He has been succeeded by a series of military interim presidents who have come to power through coups, and Mali is still engaged in civil war.

Niger has the same discontented Tuaregs as Mali. In its case, however, instead of failing to monitor its borders, Niger established a comprehensive disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) strategy, meeting the Tuareg groups as they entered the country. They confiscated their weapons and integrated Tuareg leaders into the government, including the prime minister and local officials in the Tuareg-majority region. In support, the U.S. conducted aerial surveillance. Niger has remained peaceful and was rewarded with the U.S. building a \$1 billion drone base there for patrolling the entire region.

President Mahamadou Issoufou of Niger remained in power from 2011 until 2021. Then he respected the new two-term presidential limit and left of his own accord. New President Mohamed Bazoum is the first to have been popularly

elected with a peaceful transition of power. The U.S. Embassy in Niger reported in 2021, “Since 2012, the DOD and the Department of State have provided Niger more than \$500 million in military assistance equipment and training programs – one of the largest security assistance and training programs in Sub-Saharan Africa.”[vi]



*Veiled Tuareg men prepare for camel races in Niger.*

Niger is even stable enough to host the prestigious annual Saharan Camel Festival (see photo).[vii]

The three-day festival brings people from up to 250 miles away to the Nigerian oasis town of Ingall, Niger’s traditional “gateway to the Sahara” and includes weddings, trading, ritual dances and other rites, and vaccinations for people and livestock. The highlight is a camel race across three salt and mineral-rich springs, swollen from September rains. “There is football in Europe, here we have camel racing,” says Khamid Ekwel, a celebrated racing camel owner.[viii] Thus, post-conflict stabilization can bear fruit as long as the host nation remains vigilant and is supported by regional allies and international security force assistance. This explains why U.S. soldiers are operating in this remote region, even if those in Congress allocating the funds are not fully cognizant of all that is happening there.

*Author note: some of this narrative is paraphrased from my 2017 monograph “Intelligence Sharing, Transnational Organized Crime and Multinational Peacekeeping” funded by the U.S. Army’s Peace Keeping and Stability Operations Institute (PKSOI) and published by Springer-Nature, available [here](#).*

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## References

[i] Map reference available [here](#), accessed on July 19, 2023

[ii] Hamer, Joshua. *The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu*. 2016. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster. Available [here](#), accessed on July 21, 2023.

- [iii] MINUSMA Fact sheet, *UN Peacekeeping*, available [here](#), accessed on July 19, 2023.
- [iv] Second map reference available [here](#), accessed on July 20, 2023.
- [v] For those who recall the Christian children's magazine, *Highlights*, ubiquitous in doctor and dentist offices in the 1970s and 80s, this reference to a recurring column of how to and not to behave will be familiar.
- [vi] "U.S. Defense and Security in Niger: Enhancing Our Partner's Capacity," January 21, 2021 Statement of US Embassy in Niger available [here](#), accessed on July 19, 2023.
- [vii] Photo reference available [here](#), accessed on July 20, 2023.
- [viii] "Niger hosts prestigious camel race in the Sahara," *Al Jazeera*, September 21, 2021 available [here](#), accessed on July 21, 2023.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Diane Chido is an Erie native who spent her early career in Washington, D.C, returning to found DC Analytics, a research and analysis firm. She has taught Intelligence Studies at Mercyhurst University, Political Science at Gannon University, and Cultural Analysis at the US Army War College and has conducted research for numerous US defense agencies. She holds an MS in Applied Intelligence Analysis, an MA in Russian Language, and a BA in International Relations and Soviet Studies.



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