

Uncharted Territory: Understanding the Tuaregs

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In collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), the Association of Researchers on the Middle East and Africa (ORDAF) organized an international conference in Istanbul on June 23, 2012 on the African Nomads, alias Tuaregs. Although they are the ancient and principal inhabitants of the Saharan interior of North Africa, Tuaregs are exclusively known in the francophone world, basically due to the French political influence in the region – which has, without any doubt, prevailed to continue its presence in the post-colonization era. As they are almost totally unknown in Turkey despite the Ottoman legacy in the region, this institutional attempt to launch an interaction between the political and tribal leaders of Tuaregs and the academicians and politicians of Turkey, therefore, enters into the uncharted territories of social sciences and political aspiration in Turkey. Behind this attempt lie two fundamental dynamics that have emerged in the post-Cold War era and contribute into the shaping of the region: (i) the increasing significance of the political role of Tuaregs to determine the future of North Africa and (ii) the assertive aspiration of the new political elite to ascend Turkey into a regional power by relying both on the Ottoman legacy in the region and the geostrategic chance to maneuver in the post-Cold War world. This article, in this respect, aims to clarify the political and social role of Tuaregs in North Africa and to analyze, for this specific case, Turkey’s political, economic, and cultural means and discourses of influence to realize her goal of being a regional power in the given international dynamics and circumstances.

The population of the Tuaregs, a Berber people, which is estimated around 1.2 to 1.3 million, is scattered all over the Sahara, as it is mainly a mobile population due to its nomadic pastoralist lifestyle. Although most of them live in the Saharan parts of Niger and Mali, relatively small groups of Tuaregs are also found in southeastern Algeria, southwestern Libya, northern Burkina Faso, and northern Nigeria. Tuaregs, “the lions of the Sahara”, are commonly known as a rebellious people. Indeed, their appearance on the stage of modern history has begun by the Tuareg rebellion against the French colonial rule in northern Niger during 1916 – 17. Shortly after Mali achieved her independence from France in 1960, a much more decisive Tuareg insurgency erupted in the northern regions of the country from 1962 to 1964. In the post-Cold War period, Tuaregs that live in Niger and Mali had launched two other major rebellions with the aim of achieving their autonomy during 1990 – 1995 and 2005 – 2007. Eventually, the Tuareg rebellion of 2012 against the Malian government – which has turned into a war of independence – in the Saharan desert region of Azawad has concluded with the unilateral declaration of the internationally unrecognized state of Azawad by the Tuareg armed organization in Mali, i.e. the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA). In this regard, many of the Tuareg participants of the conference – who exclusively came from Niger – underlined the urgent necessity to continue the policies of decentralization for the Tuareg community in Niger. For instance, Mohamed Anacko, the president of the Regional Council of Agadez, argued that Tuaregs in Niger call for decentralization, instead of separation and independence, in line with the peace accord of 1995. As the

civil war was erupted and the following state of Azawad was established due to the lack of decentralized policies in Mali, the representatives of Tuaregs in Niger openly asked for Turkey's support for decentralization in the region. Regarding the social structure of Tuareg communities, Seydou Kaocen Maiga, a Tuareg journalist, argued that as one could find democratic dynamics in the traditional Tuareg society, from gender equality to freedom of expression and self-government¹, Tuaregs are enthusiastic to be part of the newly established decentralized institutions of democratic governance.

For centuries, Tuaregs have managed to survive in the hostile environment of the Saharan desert. In response to the unpredictable and sporadic patterns of rainfall, Tuaregs have developed a nomadic lifestyle that is based on livestock and agriculture in the oases of the desert, in addition to the caravan trade – which interconnects, thanks to Tuaregs, the northern and internal regions of Africa that are separated by the Saharan desert. These traditional means of existence, thus the very existence of Tuaregs, are under threat of extinction due to depletion of water caused not only by the rapid climate change, but also by the massive uranium extraction in the region. As the French geologists, in 1956, realized the abundance of the uranium, petroleum, and coal deposits in the regions populated by Tuaregs, the French industry has taken roots in North Africa to exploit these resources. As Khamed Abdoulaye, a Tuareg academician and journalist, noted in the conference, the problem is not just the exploitation of the underground resources of Niger for a handful of international companies, primarily the French firm *Avera*, instead for the general welfare of the country², but also the destructive results of the current mining industry for the indigenous peoples of the region. Not only does the mining industry produce radioactive waste that dangerously contaminates the ground water and results in cancer, stillbirths, and genetic defects in the native population, but it also uses up huge quantities of water in a region where water is already scarce. Anacko openly calls for public or private mining companies of Turkey, interested in the economic resources of the region, under only one condition that they would present a contrasting model for the traditional French and newly established Chinese companies by respecting the environment and the indigenous peoples of Niger and by providing humane working conditions for the native workers.

Related with the destructive results of mining industry, which continues to process as a *primitive accumulation of capital* in Marx's terms, two other major threats for the Tuareg community in Niger are the rising trends of drought and terrorism. As water means life for the peoples live in desert, Tuaregs, for their struggle against drought, asks for assistance from Turkey to build clean water wells in the region. With respect to the rising trend of terrorist organizations in the region, the representatives of the Tuareg community emphasize the need for security³ and

¹ Maiga argued that in the Tuareg communities, it is men, not women, who cover themselves and Tuareg women have strong status in the economic, political, and cultural governance of their communities. Therefore, Tuaregs, Maiga asserted, have developed an idiosyncratic type of moderate Islam. Moreover, the traditional structure of Tuareg society naturally relies on a decentralized and federal political structure that is composed of confederations of tribes.

² While Niger is known as a wealthy country in terms of her underground resources, Mohamed Benhamaye, a young Tuareg participant of the conference, noted that 7 million people in Niger live with 1 dollar per day.

³ The lack of security, Anacko argued, is also the main reason for the underdeveloped situation of desert tourism in the region.

education for the future of the Tuareg community. For instance, Anacko claims that as many Tuaregs have begun to adopt a sedentary life, they are open and ready to send their children to schools to protect not only their future from the rising fundamentalism in the region, but also the cultural values deriving from their nomadic past. In the face of the standardizing trends of globalization, the oral laws and the native language of Tuaregs, *Tamasheq*, are particularly vulnerable.⁴ In short, in the words of Mohamed Houma, the mayor of Iferouane in Niger, Tuaregs are willing to be partners with Turkey in political, economic, and cultural realms of action in North Africa.

Now, the obvious and difficult question to address is whether Turkey is willing and capable enough to respond Tuaregs' call, or in other words, could her current means and discourses of influence realize her goal of being a regional power with reference to her newly developed political aspirations in North Africa? Regarding the willingness of the political elite of Turkey, first of all, it is crucial to grasp the historical rupture that occurred in Turkey's foreign policy after the end of the Cold War. Despite the political, economic, and cultural legacy of the Ottoman State in North Africa, Turkey's interest in the African continent has begun in the late 1990s.⁵ As the former pro-status quo and one (Western) dimensional Turkish foreign policy is replaced by an active and multi-dimensional foreign policy agenda, Turkey's interest in Africa, which was initiated by the "Action Plan for Opening to Africa" by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1995, has acquired a new phase by the Justice and Development Party's coming to power in 2002 – which regularly displays its determination to use Turkey's ability to maneuver in the post-Cold War period to make her a regional power and takes advantage from these assertive foreign policies and the eventual external image of Turkey for a new kind of nationalism and legitimacy in domestic politics.⁶ Not only has Turkey become the strategic partner of the African Union and a member of the African Development Bank and the African Development Fund in 2008, but she also played a leading role in numerous international initiatives in the African continent, from participating to peacekeeping operations of the United Nations to leading various economic, cultural, and humanitarian initiatives.⁷ Indeed, Turkey's trade volume with the countries of the

⁴ Note that Tuareg participants of the conference speak in French and most of them do not know their native language. Hamed Haidara, a deputy of the National Assembly of Niger, asserted that only 10% of the Tuareg population speaks Tamasheq.

⁵ It is a historical record of shame in Turkey's foreign policy that Turkey took her side with the colonial powers between 1950 – 60 at several sessions on the rights of self-determination of North Africa countries in the General Assembly of the United Nations while Greece was with the non-aligned countries of Africa and Asia. For Turkey's attitude on Algeria's independence, for instance, see: Baskın Oran (ed.), *Türk Dış Politikası (Turkish Foreign Policy)*, Istanbul: İletişim Yay., Vol. 1, 2003, pp. 634 – 635.

⁶ See: Kerem Öktem et al. (eds), *Another Empire?: A Decade of Turkey's Foreign Policy under the Justice and Development Party*, Istanbul: İstanbul Bilgi University Press, 2012. Also see: Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu (Strategic Depth: Turkey's International Position)*, Istanbul: Küre Yay., 2005.

⁷ In this new foreign policy framework, the case of Somalia holds a special status: See: Ahmet Ozcan, *İnsanlığımız ve Geo-Stratejik Gerçekler Işığında Somali (Somalia: Our Humanity and Geo-Strategic Facts)*, Istanbul: ARI Movement, 2012, http://www.ari.org.tr/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=398&Itemid=30

Sub-Saharan region, according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, raised 4 billion dollars from 2000 to 2010.⁸

Artemis Sümer, the vice director of the West Africa Office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and one of the key speakers of the conference, clearly underlined Turkey's increasing interest in the region. In addition to opening of embassies, financial and humanitarian aids, and the increasing trade volume in the region, Sümer noted that as the regional security is the first condition of the development of the region, Turkey is currently playing a leading role in the five of the total six peacekeeping operations of the UN. According to Enver Arpa, the director of the Africa Office of TİKA, Turkey is implementing an agricultural development project in cooperation with thirteen countries of Africa, providing vocational and technical education for the development of agriculture and husbandry, and building wells and hospitals in the region. It is crucial to note that state institutions' burden of formation, enrichment, and implementation of Turkey's new active foreign policy is shared with various civil society organizations and private companies. The role of the organizing institution of the conference, ORDAF, was defined by its director Zekeriya Kurşun as the production and share of academic knowledge on the Middle East and Africa. In this respect, Ahmet Kavas, the vice president of ORDAF, presented the history of the Ottoman presence in the region.⁹ This emphasis on the Ottoman legacy – together with the identity of Islam as the common denominator and Westernized state and societal institutions as a role model – constitutes the discursive aspect of the new active foreign policy of Turkey. While Prof. Ali Özek, one of the participants of the conference, argued that Turkey's interest in the Middle East and Africa – which derives from the common Islamic past – is not colonialist, but humanitarian, Mohamed Ghabdouane, the mayor of Ingall, welcomes Turkey with enthusiasm: "We've found our family!" The success of Turkey in her goal of being a regional power, however, shall be determined not only by her discourses and means of influence, but also by the international competition in the region.

⁸ "Turkey – Africa Relations", *Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, accessed on July 20, 2012, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey-africa-relations.en.mfa>

⁹ See: Ahmet Kavas, *Osmanlı-Afrika İlişkileri (Ottoman-Africa Relations)*, Istanbul: Kitabevi, 2011.