



## RESEARCH REPORT

UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER  
FOR REFUGEES (UNHCR)

ENHANCING PROTECTION FOR  
REFUGEES IN THE AZAWAD MOVEMENT

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## Basic Overview of the Issue

The Azawad Crisis is a crisis going on in the northern region of Mali, the area referred to as Azawad, that primarily involves the Tuareg ethnic group and the Malian government. It began in 2012. This happened when the group known as the National Movement for The Liberation of Azawad proclaimed the independence of Azawad. As the region encompasses Timbuktu, Gao, and Kidal, these were also places that were claimed to have become independent from Mali. This particular independence movement was not recognized diplomatically as an international state, which led to several armed conflicts involving groups such as Islamist factions. This crisis also resulted in a military intervention by the French government in the hopes of helping the Malian government take back their northern territories.

This crisis has deeply affected the lives of many civilians, causing huge refugee and displacement crises. The violence in the region caused almost 20,000 people to flee the country in order to seek safety in neighboring countries such as Mauritania, Niger and Burkina Faso. However, these refugees faced incredibly harsh and difficult conditions, and there were many human rights concerns regarding food shortages and insufficient access to healthcare. This mass exodus has also limited the resources of the countries who are acting as hosts for the refugees, creating further, worrying implications regarding the safety of these migrants amidst the conflict.

## Explanation of Important Terms

### *Refugee*

“A person who has escaped from their own country for political, religious, or economic reasons, or because of a war.” (Cambridge Dictionary)

### *Human Rights*

“The basic rights to fair and moral treatment that every person is believed to have from birth.” (Cambridge Dictionary)

### *Uprising*

“An act of opposition, sometimes using violence, by many people in one area of a country, against those who are in power.” (Cambridge Dictionary)

### *Guerrilla*

“A member of an unofficial military group that is trying to change the government by making sudden, unexpected attacks on official army forces.” (Cambridge Dictionary)

### *Tactic*

“A planned way of doing something, otherwise known as a method or a strategy.”  
(Cambridge Dictionary)

### *Coup d’Etat*

“The sudden defeat of a government through illegal force by a small group, often one that is military in nature.” (Cambridge Dictionary)

### *Sharia Law*

“One of the holy laws of Islam that cover all parts of a Muslim’s life, and govern the way in which they are allowed to act on a daily basis.” (Cambridge Dictionary)

### *Pastoralism*

“The practice of herding domesticated animals, as the primary economic activity of a society.” (Collins Dictionary)

### *Insurgency*

“An occasion where a group of people attempt to take control of their respective country by using violence and force.” (Cambridge Dictionary)

### *Ceasefire*

“A type of agreement, usually between two armies, to stop fighting in order to progress discussions regarding peace.” (Cambridge Dictionary)

### *Decentralization*

“The act or process of decentralizing an organization or government, which entails moving control from a single body or committee to several smaller ones.”  
(Cambridge Dictionary)

### *Autonomy*

“The right of an organization, country, or region to be independent and to govern itself without external intervention.” (Cambridge Dictionary)

## **Detailed Background of the Issue**

The Azawad crisis is an important one affecting more than 20,000 refugees who are struggling under harsh conditions. It is important to look at this crisis throughout different time

intervals, and from different perspectives, to fully grasp the significance of the issue since it has many implications for the economic, social and political environment of North Africa.

## Reasons for the Azawad Crisis

### *Tuareg Marginalization*

This reason for the Azawad Movement mostly relies on historic factors and causes. The Tuareg are a nomadic Berber ethnic group. They have throughout history lived in regions across the Sahara, which also includes the northern regions of Mali, colloquially referred to as the Azawad region. After the independence of Mali, it has been claimed that the Tuareg have been discriminated against by the central Malian government. Thus this has led to certain outbursts and protests from this ethnic group throughout the past.

These uprisings go all the way to the 1960s. However, there have also been some in the 1990s as well as in 2006. The reason behind most of these uprisings have been on the grounds of political exclusion and economic neglect, as the Tuareg feel as though their views are not reflected clearly by those of the centralized government of Mali.

### *Aftermath of the Libyan Civil War*

The Libyan Civil War occurred in 2011. The war itself had several negative and long-lasting effects for Mali, and for the Tuareg ethnic group. Firstly, during the Libyan Civil War, the Tuareg were expected to fight in the war mostly as mercenaries for Muammar Gaddafi's regime. This was because when tensions rose in Libya in 2011, Gaddafi recruited the Tuareg fighters, who had primarily served in his army previously. This had several huge repercussions regarding the severity of the Azawad Movement since Gaddafi- an authoritarian leader who supported the Tuareg's desire to split away from Mali- recruited them to his army, provided them with weapons, and gave them political backing for their cause. Thus, when these Tuareg fighters returned to Mali after the war, they brought with them the arms they had been given, which they were able to make use of with the strict training they had gone through. This intensified the scale of the Movement, as it sparked numerous armed conflicts in which the Tuareg had the military advantage.

Furthermore, Tuareg fighters returning from the Libyan Civil War also rose up the

ranks of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (NMLA) for several reasons. Firstly, they had improved combat experience as they had received formal military training under Gadaffi's regime, making them exceptionally proficient in desert warfare, guerrilla tactics (which emphasize avoiding direct clashes with enemy troops and aiming to make them retreat instead), and the correct usage of heavy weapons. These Tuareg fighters had also brought back dangerous military technology such as heavy machine guns, rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), anti-aircraft weapons and even some armored vehicles. This made the Tuareg much stronger, which was a significant difference when compared to their previous uprisings.

When these Tuareg fighters joined the NMLA after the war, they boosted its strength from numbers and made it much more functional. Thus, the previously weak NMLA, after the integration of the Tuareg fighters, successfully pulled off an operation in 2012, where they captured relevant cities such as Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktu. Some of these Tuareg fighters also joined the NMLA as that was the only place they could go to after the fall of Gadaffi, when they had lost their previous jobs. For example, Mohamed Ag Najim, who had previously been a part of Gadaffi's army, later became a crucial part of the NMLA, where he helped organize and lead the rebellion that happened in Mali from the frontlines.

Lastly, following March of 2012, the central government of Mali became weak due to a military coup, giving the Tuareg an opportunity to make use of their strong fighters to take control of the Azawad region, which they did in only three months.

### ***Rise of Islamist Extremism***

Islamist extremist groups, and their involvement in the Azawad Movement, has made the situation even more complex. At first, the NMLA and Islamist groups such as Ansar Dine developed alliances that would help strengthen their military prospects in order to properly fight against the Malian government. However, due to certain ideological differences, particularly regarding the Islamist groups' aims of imposing Sharia Law all across Mali, tensions rose. This division, exacerbated by NMLA's non-religious nationalist values, further intensified the conflict.

There were also issues regarding territorial control that arose from the involvement of Islamist extremists. Groups such as Ansar Dine and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) wanted to take over certain regions of northern Mali through capitalizing on the instability going on in the region. As these two groups were also linked, they provided each other with vast military resources that helped to solidify their presence in the region of Azawad. Thus, this factor is also a very important one that should be considered.

### *Political Instability*

During the time the NMLA were carrying out their uprisings, there was also political instability and internal political turbulence that helped the NMLA with their mission. On March 21st, 2012, a group of junior military officers initiated a Coup d'Etat against the president of Mali, Amadou Toumani Touré, due to the exasperation they felt as they were not pleased with how the government was handling the Tuareg crisis in northern Mali. This coup had many immediate and long term consequences, some of which bled over to the Azawad movement.

Firstly, Mali got suspended from international organizations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union because of the intense criticism they faced regarding the coup. Furthermore, as the president was abruptly removed from office, this created further complications and therefore weakened the already vulnerable central Mali government. This created opportunities for the NMLA and the Islamist extremist groups to seize power. Just a few weeks after the coup, on April 6th, 2012, the NMLA declared the independence of the Azawad region from Mali, taking advantage of the government's inability to fight back. This power vacuum caused even more political instability, increased economic challenges, and humanitarian crises.

### *Socio-economic Disparities*

The socio-economic disparities are divided into two parts, since there was a very huge problem regarding government neglect, which was one of the factors directly responsible for the Azawad Movement. The first one was economic underdevelopment. The northern regions of Mali had limited infrastructure development. They lacked proper roads, healthcare facilities, and educational institutions. This put a toll on the economic growth, and prevented access to these important services, which frustrated local communities, particularly the Tuareg ethnic group.

The economic activities of the region consisted mostly of agriculture and pastoralism. Since there was no substantial investment to these areas, poverty was an unwavering factor in the region, and no economic growth could be seen. The misallocation of resources and the unequal distribution of wealth between the North and the South, which was much more developed, highlighted the disparities that were happening in the region. This caused the local communities to be frustrated even further.

## Time Intervals for the Azawad Movement

### 1960s - 1990s

The first uprising happened between 1963 and 1964. This was just after the independence of Mali. The main causes of this uprising were political exclusion and economic neglect. However, the government of Mali took care of the uprising by using military force. Then later, two agreements were signed that hoped to give northern regions some level of autonomy, however limited: the Tamanrasset Accords (1991) and the National Pact (1992). These were the result of renewed insurgencies.

Both these agreements were considered crucial to solve the Tuareg uprisings. The Tamanrasset Accords aimed to demilitarize the northern regions of Mali. There were several provisions involved within the agreement. The first one was a ceasefire that was set to happen between the Tuareg and the Malian military forces, as it was stated that Mali's own troops would withdraw from specific northern areas. Another provision included the formal recognition of the culture of the northern regions.

The National Pact also had similar aims, with the addition of improving the socio-economic state of northern Mali. The provisions for the National Pact can be divided into four segments: security measures, institutional reforms, economic and social development, and implementation mechanisms. The security measures included an immediate ceasefire, the inclusion of Tuareg fighters into the military forces of Mali, and the creation of units that would be specialized in maintaining the security in these vulnerable regions. The institutional reforms included the enlargement of autonomy in the northern regions of Mali and the formation of local governance structures in order to work closely with local communities, such that their needs can be quickly addressed. The economic and social development included the establishment of certain programs which would be focused on improving infrastructure, healthcare, education, and increasing the number of economic

activities available to marginalized communities. Lastly, the implementation mechanisms included the creation of monitoring parties to closely watch whether or not the Pact's provisions were being applied, and the involvement of national and local parties to address any concerns that could come up along the way. However, many of these policies were never actually put into place, which fueled further dissatisfaction.

### **2011 - 2012**

The MNLA was established in October 2011. It aimed to make the northern region of Mali, the Azawad region, independent. Following the coup that happened in March of 2012, on April 6th, 2012 the MNLA officially declared the independence of the Azawad region. However, as mentioned prior, this independence did not receive international recognition. Thus, it was heavily criticized by many nations.

Later in 2012, Islamic groups such as Ansar Dine and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), who had initially aligned with the MNLA in order to bring down the Malian government, had tensions with the movement due to the aforementioned ideological differences.

### **2013-2016**

In January of 2013, France got involved with the Azawad Movement in the hopes of stopping the movement and mitigating its detrimental effects regarding refugees. Thus, France started a military intervention operation called Operation Serval that aimed to get back the northern region of Mali from the Islamist groups. This operation was nearly entirely successful, as it managed to take back important cities such as Gao and Timbuktu.

The High Council for the Unity of Azawad (HCUA) was formed in May of 2013. The HCUA was created to engage in negotiations between the Tuareg and the central government of Mali. It aimed for the Azawad Movement to end peacefully to resolve the conflict happening in the northern region of Mali. Led by Mohamed Ag Intalla, it was against the separation of Azawad, and desired to promote the necessary dialogue to keep the region attached to Mali.

In June of 2015, the Algiers Accord was signed between the central government of Mali and the MNLA. The Accord's main aim was to create a framework to establish peace and security in the region. The key provisions of this Accord included the need to grant more autonomy to the northern regions of Mali by promoting decentralization (so that local communities were more likely to be recognized politically). It also mentioned that the individuals involved in groups such as MNLA would be integrated into the Malian military forces and that these forces would be redeployed into the northern regions of Mali, in order to fairly represent the local communities. Lastly, the Accord also included the need to prioritize and focus on improving the infrastructure, education, and healthcare in order to address the long-lasting factors behind societal discord.

On September 2nd, 2016, a movement called The Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (MSA) was established. This movement was started by individuals who were former MNLA members. It aimed to represent the views and ideologies of the local communities living in the Azawad region.

### **2021 - 2024**

In May of 2021, the MSA connected with the Permanent Strategic Framework for Peace, Security, and Development (CSP-PSD), a coalition of military and political movements in Azawad. Its aim was to promote peace, unity, and security between two important armed groups: the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA), a platform that relied on the alliance of the Tuareg and Arab nationalists who wanted autonomy for their region, and the Platform, a pro-government group with the main aim of supporting the Malian governments' decisions of maintaining territorial integrity as well as national unity. The main objective of the CSP-PSD was to implement the Algiers Accord. Thus, it engaged in negotiations with the government of Mali.

However, later on September 24th, 2023, the MSA withdrew from CSP-PSD. This paved the way for renewed conflict with the government of Mali. The reason was alleged to be the poor implementation of the accords, and violations of the agreement by national security forces. This made the conflict and the issue develop even further.

Lastly, in October 2024, a drone attack happened in the Timbuktu region of northern Mali. This attack caused at least 8 fatalities, including children, and left 20 people injured. The CSP-PSD accredited this drone attack to the government of Mali and their allied groups, but Malian armed forces did not immediately respond to this request. This sparked tension, and conflict escalated to its present degree. Thus, as a result, the human rights and refugee crises that are happening are still persisting.

## Aspects of the Azawad Movement

### *Economic Aspects*

The northern regions of Mali, the Azawad region, faced economic neglect. They lacked proper infrastructure, healthcare, and education. The populace was also exposed to certain criminal groups that engaged in illicit activities such as drug trafficking and smuggling, which further destabilized the already aggrieved region.

### *Political Aspects*

Throughout the Azawad Movement, there has always been a desire for political autonomy, which motivated the calls for independence that were behind many of the Tuareg's uprisings. Several diplomatic efforts have been made to try and resolve this political strife, such as the Tamanrasset Accords and the National Pact; however, due to the problems regarding their implementation and enforcement, these have also failed to work properly.

### *Social Aspects*

A very important reason behind the Azawad Movement is the social aspect. The Tuareg have distinct cultural norms, languages, and traditions that they want to preserve. This explains why the Tuareg want to establish the independence of the region in which they are residing, so that their culture is protected against outside influence.

There have also been humanitarian aspects regarding the consequences of the Azawad Movement. Due to the ongoing conflict in the region, there have been many people fleeing the region, which in turn, has prompted a huge refugee crisis. As a result of this mass displacement, host countries in North Africa have struggled to maintain and provide

adequate resources for all the people seeking refuge in their country. Therefore, this has caused refugees to sometimes lack proper healthcare and education, and it has also put a strain on the food and water resources. This has created a number of humanitarian concerns, as these refugees are deprived of their basic needs.

## Major Parties Involved

### *National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA)*

A group comprised of Tuareg fighters. This group declared the independence of Azawad in 2012 because they wanted autonomy for the northern regions of Mali.

### *Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA)*

The CMA is an organization consisting of the Tuareg and other allied groups including the MNLA. Just like the MNLA, they had similar goals of separating from the rest of Mali, and chasing independence.

### *Azawad Liberation Front (FLA)*

Another separatist group, along the same lines of the previous two, that has the liberation of the Tuareg as its top priority. Its recent creation highlights the extent to which tensions still persist in the region.

### *Mali*

The central Malian government is against the Azawad movement, owing to the fact that it denies claims of political exclusion, marginalization, and attempting to assimilate the Tuareg into the cultures of other ethnic groups. Thus, upholding their territorial integrity and sovereignty guides every decision that they make.

### *United Nations (UN)*

The UN got involved in the Azawad issue through the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). Through this mission, the UN deployed peacekeeping forces in order to stabilize the ongoing conflict in the region, albeit to limited success.

### *African Union (AU)*

The AU has also engaged in mediation efforts, done in order to resolve the conflict going on in the Azawad region.

### *Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)*

The ECOWAS is a regional group. It has played a crucial part in facilitating dialogue between conflicting parties in order to ensure peace.

### *European Union (EU)*

The European Union has continuously supported peacekeeping operations in the northern region of Mali. They have also contributed to projects that aim to address the underlying issues of the crisis.

### *France*

France has conducted military interventions in the Azawad region, one of which was Operation Serval in 2013. This operation aimed to ease the conflict going on in the region while also combating Islamist extremists, separatist groups, and providing support for the central Malian government.

### *United States of America (USA)*

The USA has provided logistical support to both French and Malian forces in order to diminish the conflict going on in the northern regions of Mali.

### *Russia*

Russia has shown its support to the Malian government. They have been reported to do this through private military contractors such as the Wagner Group, who have played a crucial role in the latest developments of the conflict.

### *Ukraine*

Many reports claim that Ukraine is siding with the Tuareg who are conflicting with the Malian government. They have done this to oppose the Russia-backed Malian government due to their internal conflict and ideologies.

## **Chronology of Important Events**

Date	Description of Event
<b>May, 1990</b>	First Tuareg rebellion occurs in Azawad.
<b>October, 2011</b>	The MNLA is established.

<b>January 17, 2012</b>	They declare war against the Malian government.
<b>April 6, 2012</b>	The MNLA declares the independence of the Azawad region.
<b>2012</b>	Armed separatist groups form alliances with Islamist extremists.
<b>June, 2012</b>	The MNLA severs this alliance, only months later.
<b>April, 2013</b>	The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) is created.
<b>June, 2013</b>	France conducts a military intervention, Operation Serval.
<b>June, 2014</b>	The CMA is formed.
<b>June, 2015</b>	The Algiers Peace Accord is signed.
<b>December, 2022</b>	The CSP-DPA withdraws from peace talks.
<b>July, 2024</b>	The CSP-DPA conducts its most recent wide-scale attack.
<b>October, 2024</b>	A drone strike leads to multiple civilian casualties.

## Relevant International Documents

- Action Plan to End and Prevent Recruitment and Use of Children, Sexual Violence, and Other Grave Violations Against Children in Conflict, March 2017, <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/tools-for-action/action-plans/>
- Preliminary Peace Agreement between the Transitional Government of Mali, MNLA, and HCUA, June 18. 2013, <https://www.peaceau.org/uploads/auc-com-mali-18-06-2013.pdf>

## Past Attempts to Resolve the Issue

One of the past attempts to resolve the issue came from the United Nations (UN). The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) was created in April 2013, as a provision of the UN Security Council (UNSC) resolution 2100. This happened after the French intervention against the separatist groups in Mali. This mission aimed to stabilize the conflict in the region and bring a comprehensive end to all actions that violated human rights. Even though this mission had a comprehensive agenda that was supposed to solve the issue, several political complications, security threats, and guerilla warfare tactics by separatist groups posed intense challenges that slowed its progress. Due to its ineffectiveness in stabilizing the region, the central government of Mali requested that the UN withdraw the MINUSMA mission. This request happened in early June of 2023, and the mission officially ended on the 30th.

The Algiers Peace Agreement was also another attempt at solving the issue. The Malian government, and several armed groups including the CMA, signed the peace agreement in May and June of 2015. This was an agreement that the UN also supported. The main purpose of this agreement was to address the conflicts and challenges going on in the Azawad region. However, there have been several issues regarding its implementation such as clashes between non-signatory and signatory groups.

## Solution Alternatives

Firstly, one may try to focus on solving some of the issues regarding the local communities, including the Tuareg against the Malian government. These issues include political exclusion, economic neglect, and lack of proper infrastructure. It is important to include solution alternatives that include the local communities more in the political and ideological aspects of the issue. It is also crucial to focus on improving the infrastructure with the collaboration of appropriate organizations such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

The security system of the Azawad region should be strengthened. The Malian military forces must be strengthened and should be made out to be more capable. They

should aim to stop any further arising conflicts. Military alliances with other regional organizations and private corporations could also be promoted to combat terrorism and border security, while supporting territorial integrity.

One can also focus on political dialogue and reconciliation. A mediator state can be chosen to facilitate peace talks between the armed groups and the Malian government, to find common ground and sustain peace. Another mission like MINUSMA could also be created, but with stronger and more direct objectives. This mission could be led with the support of the UN, and it could engage in peacekeeping operations if necessary.

Lastly, it is of utmost importance to focus on the humanitarian aspect of the issue since there is a high number of displaced people as a result of the problem. Organizations such as the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the World Food Programme (WFP) can also be included in any resolutions or clauses that may be written, in order to provide humanitarian aid to those in need.

## Useful Links

- <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15325.doc.htm> (This press release talks about the UN Security Council's discussions regarding the renewal of MINUSMA, since the humanitarian conditions in Mali were getting worse. However, the government of Mali demanded the withdrawal of MINUSMA due to security concerns.)
- <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15398.doc.htm> (This press release further talks about how the UNSC debated upon the complexities regarding the withdrawal of MINUSMA while the Malian government was very adamant regarding its departure.)
- [https://www.un.org/en/pdfs/EN-ML\\_150620\\_Accord-pour-la-paix-et-la-reconciliation-au-Mali\\_Issu-du-Processus-d'Alger.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/pdfs/EN-ML_150620_Accord-pour-la-paix-et-la-reconciliation-au-Mali_Issu-du-Processus-d'Alger.pdf) (This official United Nations document contains the entire Algiers Peace Agreement in writing, if delegates may wish to refer to it later on.)
- <https://www.undp.org/arab-states/humanitarian-development-peace-nexus-approaches#:~:text=The%20humanitarian%2Ddevelopment%2Dpeace%20nexus.risks%20and%20vulnerabilities%20they%20face>. (This document talks about the approaches that the United Nations

Development Programme takes regarding conflicts or any sort of disasters. Accordingly, it also explains how the Azawad issue could be tackled in a broader way.)

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