STUDENT HANDOUT

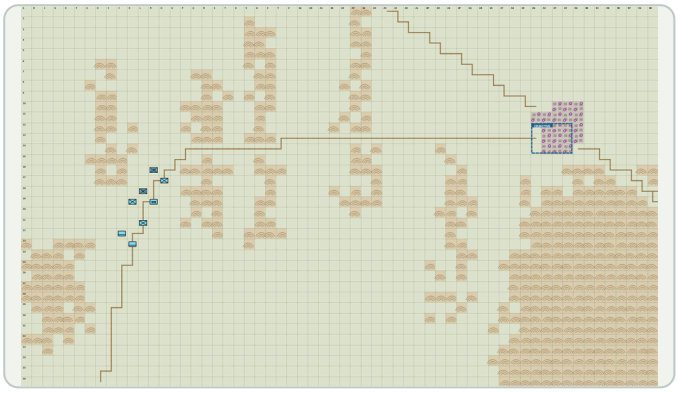
The Battle of Tinzaouaten

Outskirts of Tinzaouaten, Abeïbara Cercle, Kidal Region, Mali, on the Algerian border · 25 to 27 July 2024

Information as of September 2026



Scenario illustration · AI generated



Student map · own side only · Simulation situation map · reconstructed terrain and estimated deployments; not verified historical positions.

Learning objectives

- Compare observation around the model’s convoy route with the exposure and losses shown in the review. Distinguish approximate terrain and assumed TB2 support from independently verified historical convoy positions and capabilities.
- Assess how the simulation's scripted dust storm changes drone availability, while distinguishing its weather and TB2 support assumptions from independently confirmed events in the battle.
- Evaluate disputed claims about losses, outside help and civilian harm by naming who made each claim and what was independently verified.

Run time and a good result

Default run clock: 5 minutes 30 seconds at 1×, excluding pauses, briefing and discussion. Time controls change elapsed play time.

Objective: Get the convoy to Tinzaouaten and clear the Malian side of the town by the end of 27 July. Your three Bayraktar TB2 drones can find the CSP fighters on the ridges above the track, but a dust storm will ground them for a day. Civilians live in Tinzaouaten and across the border in Tin Zaouatine, so choose your strike targets with care, and keep your trucks and tankers alive.

The Battle of Tinzaouaten: Get the convoy to Tinzaouaten and clear the Malian side of the town by the end of 27 July. Your three Bayraktar TB2 drones can find the CSP fighters on the ridges above the track, but a dust storm will ground them for a day. Civilians live in Tinzaouaten and across the border in Tin Zaouatine, so choose your strike targets with care, and keep your trucks and tankers alive. Occupy the marked zone with at least one combat unit and no opposing combat unit for 8 continuous simulation seconds. The authored limit is 330 simulation seconds across 3 stages.

Compare objective progress, time, losses, drone expenditure and recorded civilian harm with a second run. A strong classroom result also explains the source evidence and reconstruction estimates; it does not verify a historical casualty count.

Atrocity notice

Human Rights Watch documented serious abuses against civilians by Mali's armed forces, Wagner and Islamist armed groups. Its December 2024 report provides conflict context, not a finding that every reported abuse occurred at Kidal, Tinzaouaten or the later convoy battle.

These reports describe the wider conflict. They do not establish that every crime occurred in this modeled battle.

Studying or commanding a side does not endorse its conduct. Drone Front never lets players target civilians, hospitals, schools or places of worship. Civilian harm from simulated strikes is counted and shown in the debrief, including nonzero harm. Civilian massacres are never playable operations. Designated terrorist forces and Wagner remain computer controlled; Gaza war events remain excluded from play.

▼ Dated reports and findings

- 2024-12-12 · Human Rights Watch: Mali, atrocities by the army and Wagner Group

Learn more: the laws of war

- ICRC: Geneva Conventions and commentaries
- ICRC: Customary IHL database
- UN: Genocide Convention (9 December 1948)
- UN: Rome Statute (17 July 1998), articles 6–8

Historical source notes

The convoy's defeat does not establish that drones failed to save it: the sources checked do not confirm Malian TB2 strikes during 25–27 July 2024. The simulation provides TB2s as a labelled assumption about support potentially available from Mali's fleet. Wagner attributed a pause in fighting to a dust storm; the model scripts dust that grounds larger drones. Compare the runs as a model exercise, while keeping those assumptions separate from the documented battle.

Every number in this battle is disputed. Wagner dead range from at least 20 to 84 depending on who counts, Ukraine's military intelligence said it had helped the rebels while the CSP denied it, and BBC Verify found that a widely shared flag image was false. Commanders and analysts have to separate claims from what has been verified, and say who is making each claim.

After the defeat on the ground, the Malian army used drones over Tinzaouaten. Human Rights Watch found that a drone strike near a pharmacy on 25 August 2024 killed seven civilians, five of them children. Le Monde reported that an Akıncı strike on 1 December killed Tuareg rebel figures, including FLA leaders; that platform identification is attributed to Le Monde. Reuters separately reported the government’s report of a drone strike killing rebel commanders without identifying the model. Border strikes also affect neighbours: Algeria raised the August strikes at the UN. Reuters’ April 2025 account relayed Algeria’s claimed drone interception and Mali’s reported surveillance-aircraft crash; the accounts differed and that report did not identify an Akıncı.

Civilian harm

Human Rights Watch found that a Malian military drone strike near a pharmacy killed seven civilians, five of them children aged 14 to 16, about ten minutes after a first strike on vehicles parked in front of it. Human Rights Watch geolocated photographs of the site and reviewed lists of victims compiled by relatives.

The CSP said the strikes killed 21 people, 11 of them children, and injured dozens (Reuters; Al Jazeera). Algeria's representative at the UN called for accountability for a drone strike that killed 20 civilians, and Mali accused Algeria of spreading terrorist propaganda (RFI, as cited by Wikipedia).

Mali and Burkina Faso carried out joint air strikes against what they called a coalition of terrorists. The CSP said Burkinabe drone strikes killed more than 50 migrant gold miners from Chad, Niger and Sudan (as recorded by Wikipedia). No independent investigation of this claim was found in the sources used.

Evidence for learning objectives

The scenario allocates aircraft as model stock. An inventory does not establish that aircraft are airborne, that they provide current observations or that the real convoy occupied the terrain relationship described in the former question.

Wagner attributed its opponents' regrouping and increased numbers to a sandstorm (Reuters, 29 July 2024). Treat this as a party account. The simulation's dust timing and TB2 support remain model assumptions.

Human Rights Watch found that a Malian military drone strike near a pharmacy in Tinzaouaten on 25 August 2024 killed seven civilians, five of them children. Algeria raised the August strikes at the UN (Human Rights Watch; Wikipedia).

Timings

For 60 minutes, brief for 10, run it once with a pause at each stage for 25 and review for 25; for 90 minutes, add a run in which the TB2s fly only before the dust storm and compare how far the convoy got; for 180 minutes, have half the syndicates command the CSP-DPA, add a run with strict rules of engagement for the town, and close with a reading of the Human Rights Watch findings on the August 2024 strikes and the competing loss claims.

Session	Plan
45 minutes	Brief: 10 min; Run: 15 min; Collect: 5 min; Review: 15 min
60 minutes	Before questions: 5 min; Brief: 10 min; Run: 20 min; Collect: 5 min; Debrief and after questions: 15 min; Discussion: 5 min
90 minutes	Before questions: 5 min; Brief: 10 min; Run 1: with drones: 20 min; Run 2: without drones: 15 min; Collect: 5 min; Compare and discuss: 25 min; After questions: 10 min
180 minutes	Before questions: 10 min; Brief and staff roles: 15 min; Run 1: with drones: 25 min; Run 2: without drones: 20 min; Break: 10 min; Run 3: syndicates: 30 min; Collect: 10 min; Seminar replay and debrief: 40 min; After questions: 10 min; Close: 10 min

Staff roles

commander
Set the pre-run posture and available standing orders, allocate drone flights, and report automatic convoy movement, weather changes and progress toward the take zone. Individual halt, formation and withdrawal commands are unavailable; allied units remain computer controlled.

intelligence
Map contacts revealed by the TB2s, record what remains visible during scripted dust, and distinguish the authored final-stage allied arrivals from independently verified historical participation.

fires
Observe automatic convoy fire and drone strikes, recommend available standing orders, and flag civilian or boundary risk before a launch. The model does not provide individual gun-target assignment.

droneOps
Share the TB2s between the ridges beside the track and the route ahead, bring them home before the dust storm, and report how many remain and how much flight time is left.

Opposing staff objective

Stop the Malian and Wagner convoy from taking Tinzaouaten. Hold the ridges above the track, use the dust storm to regroup and close in, and keep your fighters dispersed and hidden from the TB2 drones. Civilians live in the town behind you.

Decision points

- Before launching, compare TB2 observation areas around the authored convoy route and the town. Set the pre-run posture; during the run, report the convoy’s automatic movement rather than issue an unavailable halt command.
- Before the authored dust change, compare using the TB2s now with retaining aircraft for the later clear-weather interval. Their return and grounding follow the model’s weather rules.
- In the final authored stage, observe the new computer-controlled allied units and remaining convoy strength. What do drone launches, standing orders and the take-zone result show, and what withdrawal choices would require a different model?

Before and after questions

1. **What did Wagner claim the sandstorm allowed the rebels to do?**

   A. It enabled movement north before the column resumed operations
   B. It enabled renewed supplies before the column resumed operations
   C. Wagner claimed the sandstorm allowed its opponents to regroup and increase their numbers
   D. It enabled aerial observation despite the reduced local visibility

2. **If reported loss totals for Tinzaouaten differ, what should an analyst do?**

   A. Attribute estimates and distinguish verified evidence from claims
   B. Prefer the highest estimate as the most comprehensive
   C. Prefer the Russian estimate as the most cautious
   D. Average the estimates into a single verified total

3. **In this simulation, what can the TB2 inventory establish before any drone has flown?**

   A. A complete current picture of opposing positions along the convoy route
   B. A verified explanation of the real convoy's July 2024 battlefield losses
   C. Available modeled aircraft, without proof of a current reconnaissance picture
   D. A confirmed historical deployment pattern for aircraft across the entire campaign

4. **What did Human Rights Watch find about the drone strike near a pharmacy in Tinzaouaten on 25 August 2024?**

   A. It affected vehicles without any reported civilian casualties
   B. It involved Algerian aircraft rather than Malian aircraft
   C. It struck an evacuated pharmacy without causing casualties
   D. It reportedly killed seven civilians, including five children

5. **Tinzaouaten lies on the Algerian border. How did the drone strikes near the town reach Algeria?**

   A. Algeria treated the incidents mainly as a joint border-security issue
   B. Algeria protested strikes and later claimed a drone interception
   C. Algeria confined its response to movement restrictions at the border
   D. Algeria treated the incidents mainly as disputed civilian-damage reports

Discussion

- Compare the authored terrain and convoy route with the sources' accounts. Which observations can the model produce, and which claims about real positions, visibility and causation need evidence beyond it?
- When parties give competing casualty figures or conflicting accounts of outside help, what would you record about claimant, date, counting basis and independent corroboration? Explain why averaging the claims does not verify them.
- After the battle, Human Rights Watch found that a Malian drone strike near a pharmacy in Tinzaouaten killed seven civilians, five of them children, about ten minutes after a first strike on vehicles. What do the laws of war require before a second strike on the same place, and what does it mean for a force to replace a ground presence with drones?
- Compare the reported diplomatic dispute over civilian deaths with Reuters' April 2025 account of Algeria's claimed drone interception and Mali's reported surveillance-aircraft crash. The accounts differ and do not identify an Akıncı in that report. What evidence would be needed to establish the aircraft, location and responsibility?

Debrief rubric

Strong
Meets the objective or explains why it was not met; uses the published sources and run evidence, separates known facts from assumptions, compares both sides' losses and cost exchange, and evaluates precautions against civilian harm.

Adequate
Describes the objective and main decisions, identifies at least one source and model limitation, reports losses and harm, and gives a reasoned change for a second run.

Weak
Reports only victory or points, treats teaching settings as real performance, gives unsupported historical claims, or omits uncertainty and civilian harm.

Published readings

1. AFP, via Voice of America: Mali army, Russian allies suffer heavy losses in country's north, sources say (27 July 2024)
2. Reuters, via Voice of America: Mali rebels say they killed and injured dozens of soldiers, Wagner mercenaries in fighting (28 July 2024)
3. Reuters: Russia's Wagner says it took losses in heavy fighting against rebels in Mali (29 July 2024)

Complete source list

Wikipedia: Battle of Tinzaouaten (2024)
Wikipedia: Tinzaouaten
Wikipedia: Tin Zaouatine
Wikipedia: Strategic Framework for the Defense of the People of Azawad
Wikipedia: Azawad Liberation Front
Wikipedia: Baykar Bayraktar TB2
Wikipedia: Baykar Bayraktar Akinci
Wikipedia: Algeria–Mali relations
AFP, via Voice of America: Mali army, Russian allies suffer heavy losses in country's north, sources say (27 July 2024)
Reuters, via Voice of America: Mali rebels say they killed and injured dozens of soldiers, Wagner mercenaries in fighting (28 July 2024)
Reuters: Russia's Wagner says it took losses in heavy fighting against rebels in Mali (29 July 2024)
RFI: Mali separatists claim major victory over army, Russian allies (28 July 2024)
The Daily Telegraph: Dozens of Wagner fighters killed and Russian helicopter destroyed in Mali ambush (28 July 2024)
Al Jazeera: Mali rebels claim major victory over army, Russian mercenaries (28 July 2024)
France 24: Russia's Wagner group reports casualties in intense clash with Tuareg rebels in Mali (29 July 2024)
CNN: Dozens of Russian mercenaries killed in rebel ambush in Mali, in their worst known loss in Africa (29 July 2024)
Institute for the Study of War: Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 29, 2024
Reuters: Al Qaeda branch says it killed 50 Russian mercenaries, 10 Malian soldiers in Mali (30 July 2024)
BBC News: Mali army admits significant losses in joint battle with Wagner (30 July 2024)
Voice of America: Wagner lost veteran fighters in Mali ambush, in setback to Russia's Africa campaign
The New York Times: How Wagner's ruthless image crumbled in Mali (1 November 2024)
RUSI: Mercenary politics, Algeria's response to Wagner in Mali

Reuters: Mali drone strikes kill at least 21 in northern town, rebels say (25 August 2024)
Al Jazeera: Twenty one civilians killed in Mali drone strikes, separatist group says (26 August 2024)
RFI: Tinzaouatène, le Mali accuse l'Algérie de diffuser de la propagande terroriste et hausse le ton à l'ONU (31 August 2024)
Human Rights Watch: Mali, atrocities by the army and Wagner Group (12 December 2024)
Human Rights Watch: World Report 2025, Mali
defenceWeb: Malian Air Force commissions Bayraktar TB2 UAVs and other aircraft (20 March 2023)
Military Africa: Mali acquired Akinci drone, after Bayraktar TB2 (December 2024)
Military Africa: Algeria shoot down Mali's newly acquired Akinci drone (April 2025)
US Department of State: Foreign Terrorist Organizations
UK Home Office: Proscribed terrorist groups or organisations (updated 7 July 2026)
Reuters, via SRN News: Algeria, Mali report downed drone in border area but differ on details (1 April 2025)
Le Monde: Au Mali, les chefs rebelles de l’Azawad s’unissent et subissent un bombardement mortel (2 December 2024; updated 3 December)
Reuters, via VOA: Mali says army drone strike killed senior rebel commander, others (1 December 2024; model unspecified)