

# CONTEXT

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## Fighters on Flip Flops

AUTHOR JORIE HORSTHUIS

Photographer Philippe Dudouit is one of the few foreigners who continues to travel to the Sahelo-Sahara region. His remarkable work *The Dynamics of Dust* gives an exceptional insight into the shifting alliances in this vast area that is often neglected in world politics.



Tuareg blues band, Northern Niger, 2008.

‘Here, might is right’, photographer Philippe Dudouit writes about a no-go zone in Mali, where he travels in 2009 to get a shot of a burnt-out shell of an airplane. The territory is thrown into disorder by narcos, armed militias and fighters of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. ‘The desert is vast. Encounters are rare. When they do occur, trouble soon follows.’

At the end of his book *The Dynamics of Dust*, the Swiss photographer shares some valuable details and telling stories about the challenges he encountered while working in the Sahelo-Sahara region. Between 2008 and 2018 Dudouit (1977) travelled extensively through the area, as one of the few foreigners who still dares to visit this increasingly impenetrable territory where borders shift continuously. During his months-long stays, he manages to come close to smugglers, militia men, tribal chiefs and people from all walks of life.





ADC fighter, Northern Mali, 2008. PHILIPPE DUDOUT

The book gives an exceptional insight into the region's political, social, military and criminal developments over the last decade. Life has become extremely unstable for



everyone who lives in the North-Western African desert or happens to cross it in search for a better future, as no single ethnic group or armed movement has managed to take absolute control of specific territories or borders. Focusing on the routes passing from Mauritania to Mali and onwards into Niger and southern Libya, Dudouit documents the shifting alliances in this vast area that is often neglected in world politics.

The area is so off-limits that trouble is never far away. On his trips, Dudouit has to continuously assess risks and find the right people to cover his back. The photographer explains how this becomes more complex over the years, as new militia groups enter the scene. Still, he is not deterred by all the dangers and continues to witness the fast-moving alterations with his analogue large-format camera.



Stranded migrants, Northern Niger, 2010. PHILIPPE DUDOUIT

In *The Dynamics of Dust*, he portrays fighters of the various factions, their eyes piercing the reader as the rest of their bodies are covered against the sand – except for their feet: many militia men wear flip flops. These portraits are alternated with



images of camel drivers, refugees and stranded migrants, who, except for the absence of machine guns, don't seem to look all that different. These men, wherever they come from and whatever aim they have in life, share one enemy: the elements of the desert. Looking at these pictures, one question remains unsolved: where are the women?

This diverse array of portraits is combined with images of deserted police stations, a drilling station, a wreckage of an Mi-8 helicopter and many stunning landscapes. On several occasions, for example in the view of the Algerian border taken from the watchtower of an abandoned Malian Army base, the only thing you see is sand. Then, as a reader you understand that borders are an international concept, no local reality.



Young refugee from the Timbuktu Arab community, Fassala, Mauritania, 2012. PHILIPPE DUDOUIT

‘Everything seems under control’, the photographer writes about his stay in Kidal, a



town that was just abandoned by the Malian army – and as a reader, you immediately understand that nothing is under control. As Dudouit starts to document the empty town, the building that he just entered is surrounded by four pick-ups and around thirty men. ‘They’re here for you’, one of his companions says after he approached the group of armed militia. ‘They’ve surrounded the building to scare us. To make us hand you over.’

The adrenaline starts running through his body and he realizes that he can be kidnapped soon by this unknown group that has just taken advantage of the security vacuum in the town. However, after a few hours of tireless calls and high-stake negotiations, the militia men get back into their pick-up trucks and drive off. The danger is over, even though at that moment Dudouit does not fully grasp who or what has saved his life – he will only find out much later how complex the maneuvering had been to mobilize the right people.



HCUA fighter, Kidal, Northern Mali, 2016. PHILIPPE DUDOIT

Still, during his travels the photographer not only encounters danger – he also finds joy. Maybe the most surreal meeting is with a Tuareg blues band in Niger. The



musicians of the Niger Movement of Justice kick off a tour of all the camps in the region. Dudouit understands he has to take this shot, and asks them to set up their stage even though it is still in the midst of day and they would normally play at night. In the middle of nowhere, the image of those musicians on their carpets is absolutely iconic.

The Dynamics of Dust (2019) by Philippe Dudouit is published by Edition Patrick Frey.

# THE DYNAMICS OF DUST

PHILIPPE DUDOUIT



EDITION PATRICK FREY

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