

Curtailing Illicit and Terrorist Activity in Algeria's Tamanrasset

By Geoff D. Porter

ALTHOUGH ALGERIAN TERRORIST groups mostly undertake attacks against the government in the north of the country, it is widely recognized that they have exploited southern Algeria's vast desert to train and raise money.¹ Apart from several opportunistic kidnappings and murders during the last several years, there has been little terrorism proper in southern Algeria. Instead, there is ample illicit activity. Some of these activities—gun-running, drug smuggling and human trafficking—circumvent the state because they are illegal.² Others, such as contraband, sidestep the state because taxes, tariffs, and kickbacks erode profits. Because Islamist terrorist groups in the north of the country, such as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) and al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), have historically profited from the south's illicit activities, curtailing them is a top priority of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's government. Increasingly easy access to the Sahara and navigation through it, however, makes Bouteflika's goal of expanding state control and choking the flow of illicit funds to the north especially challenging.

Algiers in Tamanrasset

Some have observed that Algiers is closer to London than it is to Tamanrasset. Although technically untrue, it clearly conveys the sense of how far Tamanrasset is from Algiers and how different the two cities are, not just geographically, demographically, or economically, but in makeup and outlook. While Algiers is oriented toward Europe and the Middle East, Tamanrasset is geared toward the south. Algiers clings to its Arab and Mediterranean identity, but Tamanrasset is Taoureg and Saharan.

1 Information in this article is drawn from the author's discussions with current and retired members of the Algerian administration in Tamanrasset in May 2008 as well as informal conversations with Tamanrasset residents.

2 Jean-Luc Marret, "Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 31:6 (2008): pp. 541-552.

Nevertheless (or maybe because of this), Algiers' presence in Tamanrasset is very palpable. In some ways, Tamanrasset has always been tied to the state. Unlike Timbuktu or Kano, Tamanrasset is not a historic desert city. In the 19th century, it was a small but critical bastion in France's attempts to pacify the Algerian desert. Following the pacification that lasted through the early 1920s, Tamanrasset was a trans-Saharan trade waypoint. Even then, it was more of a large village than a small town. It still had only between 4,000-5,000 residents in the 1960s. Today, the town has grown to more than 100,000 people and it has become an important regional commercial hub, an entrepot for people and goods transiting from sub-Saharan Africa to the Mediterranean coast and from the coast to south of the Sahara. For many sub-Saharans, it has even become a destination in its own right.

The most obvious indication of the state presence in current-day Tamanrasset is the military. The 6th Division, which is responsible for patrolling the country's deep south and policing Algeria's borders with Niger, Mali and Libya, is based there. Troops are not conspicuous off the base and throughout town, but the barracks on both sides of the riverbed that cuts through town make the military almost omnipresent. Its presence is amplified (and enshrouded in mystery) by the half-finished military base next to Tamanrasset's airport.

Algiers augments its projection of hard power with a comprehensive soft power campaign. In particular, it is building a large mosque complex on Tamanrasset's highest point. The mosque succinctly conveys the state's intention to exercise influence, if not outright control, over Islamic activity in the city. Beyond the mosque, the state also promotes the activities of Sufi religious orders. These orders have historically been politically powerful in the region and the Tijaniyya in particular has proven to be a valuable supporter of Bouteflika's National Liberation Front (FLN). Near the center of town, the state built a new headquarters for the Association of Religious Orders (*Jami`at al-Zawaya*).

Outside the religious sphere, the state is invested in the city's secular life, having recently finished a sprawling public university on the airport road

where it is a visible symbol of the state. It has also recently opened a youth center in the middle of town. Brand new housing blocks that now ring the town are destined for current residents of the unregulated shantytowns that have been built during the last several decades. Two-family units with small gardens in front, the projects are laid out on street grids with asphalt roads and electric street lights.

Even more basic infrastructure is further reminder of Algiers' hand in (and over) Tamanrasset's affairs. The state recently finished repaving the highway that connects Tamanrasset to the cities to the north and Mali and Niger to the south. The soon to be completed water pipeline from In Salah will bring Tamanrasset's most fundamental commodity into the state's remit and displace the private water sellers. Recently, the state even manifested itself in person. In January 2008, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika and his powerful interior minister, Nourredine Zerhouni, paid an official visit to Tamanrasset.

Tamanrasset's Importance to the State

There are a lot of possible explanations why the state is so heavily invested in Tamanrasset. The state's rationale is that it is simply ensuring its citizens' welfare and well-being. With record hard currency reserves (estimated at more than \$150 billion, by far the most in Africa, surpassing Egypt and South Africa combined), there is no shortage of money to build new infrastructure and expand public institutions.³ There are also more political explanations. Algiers is willing to devote significant resources to ensure that the south's Taoureg population remains loyal to the Algerian state and does not seek common cause with Taoureg groups in Niger and Mali that have been problematic for those countries. Tamanrasset has also historically been an FLN stronghold. With Bouteflika trying to position himself for a third presidential term (or an extended second term) and the National Democratic Rally making a resurgence, Bouteflika's government wants to guarantee continued support for his party. Additionally, ever since the 1990s the state has sought to counter indications of increasing Islamist

3 Statistic compiled from Banque d'Algérie, IMF and EFG-Hermes.

influence, such as the wider prevalence of Islamist dress in Tamanrasset and closer adherence to Islamic rituals. Lastly, the state is clearly concerned with illicit activities in and around Tamanrasset and their potential link to AQIM.

Illicit Activities

Even with the state's multilayered presence in town, the state does not exert complete control over Tamanrasset's activities. Trans-Saharan truckers camp out under their trailers in the dry riverbed in the center of town until they get a full load of goods to take back south across the Sahara to Niger and Mali. Contraband often gets mixed in with legitimate freight. Nigerien and Malian teenagers ranging around the streets in the evening testify to the south's fluid borders. One security representative said that many entered Algeria illegally, but are largely left alone as long as they only stay for six or seven months and do not try to head further north—after all, Tamanrasset's state-fueled construction boom far outpaces the locally available labor and “the Africans” are valued as hard workers. Informal banking also points to the limitations of state control. Most Tamanrasset residents turn to storekeepers for their banking needs rather than the state banks. In particular, storekeepers change euros at better rates than the state banks.⁴

Government Influence Disappears Outside Tamanrasset

Outside Tamanrasset, the state presence disappears dramatically. The city is encircled by police checkpoints on the paved roads that lead in and out of it, but beyond these there is little state presence in terms of security services, social services or infrastructure.

There are several reasons why state presence tails off so dramatically once beyond the city's immediate periphery. The most obvious is that with only 7,000 troops, the 6th Division is severely undermanned. Tamanrasset *wilaya* (province) and France are roughly the same geographic size, but between the military and the gendarmerie France has more than 450,000 personnel at its disposal. The fact that most personnel

assigned to Tamanrasset are from the north of the country and are generally rotated out of the region after only short service periods complicates the problems of personnel shortages. Troops at military checkpoints around the city do not speak Tamahak (the local language), are unfamiliar with local practices, and are intimidated by the surrounding terrain.

Others have put forward more insidious explanations for the lack of state presence outside Tamanrasset, suggesting that the local government is in cahoots with smuggling mafias, or worse still with Islamist terrorists themselves.⁵ The

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state steers clear of the desert to give smugglers and terrorist supporters room to operate. Allegations of this sort are impossible to corroborate, and the military's shortcomings seem to be adequate explanation in their own right.

In addition to the military's absence in the desert, the tools of soft power—schools, electricity and health care—are also missing, if only because the region is so sparsely populated that the costs of projecting soft power become impractically expensive.

Desert Mobility Becomes Easier

Although the desert is sparsely populated, it is not empty and it is not inaccessible. Displaying somewhat convoluted logic, one Tamanrasset resident said that there are seven or eight roads out of town but hundreds

back in. At any point, one can veer off one of Tamanrasset's paved roads and head for the hills and at any point one can come bumping back to Tamanrasset. Another resident said that the gauge of local knowledge is never having to use the same route into town as the one used to leave it.

In the hinterland, the land is carved with innumerable tracks. The more prominent ones have been leveled with a grader, others run up and down dry riverbeds, and still others are no more than camel paths. In riverbeds, drivers can reach 100 kilometers per hour, while on the camel paths speeds slow to less than 15 km/hr. On average, an experienced driver can make 40 km/hr in an unmodified diesel 4x4. Some routes are well-traveled, crisscrossed with dozens of tire tracks. Others are not as well-used. At one point, a driver said a faint set of tracks in a riverbed were from his own truck when he last passed that way more than two months before.

During the last decade, GPS and satellite phones have made desert travel easier, but cell phone service has lowered the bar even further. A signal from the privately-owned cell phone service Djezzy picked up 75 miles outside of Tamanrasset was steady enough to send and receive text messages from London, Washington D.C. and New York. Even those not intimately familiar with the region can now navigate across it and communicate around the world. The number of routes and ease of communication means it is possible to drive from Kidal in northern Mali to Ouargla in northeastern Algeria in three days without ever traveling on a marked road.

The Paradox of the Desert

The paradox of the desert around Tamanrasset makes Bouteflika's job of curtailing illicit activities somewhat easier. The desert is indeed sparsely populated, but it is not at all empty. There are not enough people moving through the region for interlopers to blend in, but there are not so few people that strangers go unnoticed.

There are few true nomads left in the Algerian Sahara, but pastoralists still move their herds throughout

⁴ Unlike money changers around Port Said in Algiers, Tamanrasset money changers only deal in euros and will not change U.S. dollars, sterling or Swiss francs.

⁵ Jeremy Keenan, “Americans and ‘Bad People’ in the Sahara-Sahel,” *Review of African Political Economy* 31:99 (2004): pp. 130-139.

the province.⁶ Shepherds watch their animals and any traffic passing by. Trucks carry men to the market and back. Tourists and their guides irregularly pass through. Some trucks run through the night, skirting close to hamlets and camps, and even if their contents and purpose are unknown, they too are noticed and noted. While the state's presence may be minimal outside Tamanrasset proper, little happens in the desert without someone knowing about it.

Exemplifying this paradox is Yahia Djouadi, AQIM's new *amir* in Algeria's southern provinces. AQIM continues to operate in the south, harassed by the government but unstoppable. Nevertheless, there is no shortage of information about the group's leadership. The 38-year-old Djouadi is a former member of al-Takfir wa'l-Hijra and the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) and took over the region in March 2008 from Mokhtar Belmokhtar.⁷ Belmokhtar decamped to Mali after Abdelmalek Droukdel changed the GSPC's name to AQIM, and he has largely shifted his focus to strictly for-profit activities. Formerly known as Zone IX under Belmokhtar's leadership, the southern region is now recognized as Zone III following a spring 2008 restructuring.⁸ Given the GIA's history of brutal violence, Djouadi's association with that group is a worrying development for the south. In contrast to Belmokhtar—who began his career as a local smuggler, formed a marriage of convenience with the GSPC, and has now gone his own way—Djouadi is ideologically motivated and quite capable of violence. Also unlike Belmokhtar, however, Djouadi is not from the region, which means that he will likely struggle to form a functioning network in the south.

Adopting the proper stance vis-à-vis the local population has allowed the government in Algiers to tap into this local wellspring of information about the flows of people and goods across the Sahara's vast stretches. The ongoing

challenge is to continue to expand the state's soft power in the region, building infrastructure, providing services, growing an economy and preventing AQIM infiltration.

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6 Jeremy Keenan, "The Father's Friend: Returning to the Tuareg as an 'Elder,'" *Anthropology Today* 16:4 (2000): pp. 7-11.

7 Anne Giudicelli, "Al-Qaïda: OPA réussie sur le GSPC," *Bakchich*, March 18, 2008.

8 Ikram Ghioua, "Révélations sur la Nouvelle Cartographie du GSPC," *L'Expression*, May 18, 2008.