

The Collapse of the Second Front

By Jeremy Keenan | September 26, 2006

It started in 2002 with a few hesitant probes that were low on intelligence, high on imagination, and short a couple of helicopters reportedly lost in the desert wastelands of northern Mali. Then, in 2003, the U.S. launch of a second front in its “war on terror” moved into top gear. In collaboration with its regional ally Algeria, the Bush administration identified a banana-shaped swath of territory across the Sahelian regions of the southern Sahara that presumably harbored Islamic militants and bin Laden sympathizers on the run from Afghanistan.

Although the United States had vague suspicions that the Sahel region of Africa might become a possible terrorist haven following its dislodgment of the Taliban from Afghanistan, the gear change was triggered by the hostage-taking of 32 tourists in the Algerian Sahara. The United States attributed their capture in March 2003 to Algeria’s Islamist “terrorist” organization, the *Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat* (GSPC). The presumed mastermind of the plot was the GSPC’s second-in-command, who goes by many aliases, including *El Para* after his stint as a parachutist in the Algerian army.

The GSPC held the hostages in two groups approximately 300 kilometers apart in the Algerian Sahara. An Algerian army assault liberated one of the groups. The captors took the other group to northern Mali and finally released the hostages following the alleged ransom payment of five million Euros. The hostage-taking confirmed U.S. suspicions. Even before the hostages were released, the Bush administration was branding the Sahara as a terror zone and *El Para* as a top al-Qaida operative and “bin Laden’s man in the Sahel.”

The U.S. spin on these events was all very dramatic. And it was all largely untrue.

The Pan-Sahel Initiative

In January 2004, following earlier visits from the U.S. Office of Counterterrorism to Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, Bush’s Pan-Sahel Initiative (PSI) rolled into action with the arrival of a U.S. “anti-terror team” in Nouakchott, Mauritania’s capital. U.S. Deputy Undersecretary of State Pamela Bridgewater confirmed that the team comprised 500 U.S. troops and a deployment of 400 U.S. Rangers into the Chad-Niger border region the following week. (In 2005, the PSI expanded to include Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Senegal, and Nigeria, and the organization became the Trans-Saharan Counter-Terrorism Initiative).

By the end of January, Algerian and Malian forces, reportedly with U.S. support, were said to have driven the GSPC from northern Mali. Then, in a series of engagements, a combined military operation of Niger and Algerian forces, supported by U.S. satellite surveillance, chased *El Para’s* men across the Tamesna, Aïr, and Tenere regions of Niger into the Tibesti Mountains of Chad. There, thanks to the support of U.S. aerial reconnaissance, Chadian forces engaged the GSPC in early March in a battle lasting three days, reportedly killing 43 GSPC. *El Para* managed to escape the carnage but fell into the hands of a Chadian rebel movement. This group held him hostage until October 2004 when he was returned to



Algeria, allegedly with the help of Libya. In June 2005, an Algerian court convicted him *in absentia* of “creating an armed terrorist group and spreading terror among the population.” It sentenced *El Para* to life imprisonment.

Within a year, the United States and its allies had transformed the Sahara-Sahel region into a second front in the global “war on terror.” Prior to the hostage-taking in March 2003, no act of terror, in the conventional meaning of the term, had occurred in this vast region. Yet, by the following year, U.S. military commanders were describing terrorists as “swarming” across the Sahel and the region as a “Swamp of Terror.” The area was, in the words of European Command’s deputy commander General Charles F. Wald, a “terrorist infestation” that “we need to drain.” Stewart M. Powell, writing in *Air Force Magazine*, claimed that the Sahara “is now a magnet for terrorists.” Typical of the media hype were articles in the *Village Voice* such as “Pursuing Terrorists in the Great Desert.”

But the incidents used to justify the launch of this new front in the “war on terror” were either fiction, in that they simply did not happen, or fabricated by U.S. and Algerian military intelligence services. *El Para* was not “Bin Laden’s man in the Sahara,” but an agent of Algeria’s counter-terrorist organization, the *Direction des Renseignements et de la Sécurité*. Many Algerians believe him to have been trained as a Green Beret at Fort Bragg in the 1990s. Almost every Algerian statement issued during the course of the hostage drama has now been proven to be false. No combined military force chased *El Para* and his men across the Sahel. *El Para* was not even with his men as they stumbled around the Air Mountains in search of a guide and having themselves photographed by tourists. As for the much-lauded battle in Chad, there is no evidence that it happened. Leaders of the Chadian rebel movement say it never occurred, while nomads, after two years of scratching around in the area, have still not found a single cartridge case or other material evidence.

How and why did such a deception take place? The “how” is simple. First, the Algerian and U.S. military intelligence services channeled a stream of disinformation to an industry of terrorism “experts,” conservative ideologues, and compliant journalists who produced a barrage of articles. Second, if a story is to be fabricated, it helps if the location is far away and remote. The Sahara is the perfect place: larger than the United States and effectively closed to public access.

The “why” has much to do with Washington’s “banana theory” of terrorism, so named because of the banana-shaped route Washington believed the dislodged terrorists from Afghanistan were taking into Africa and across the Sahelian countries of Chad, Niger, Mali, and Mauritania to link up with Islamist militants in the Maghreb. Hard evidence for this theory was lacking. There was little or no Islamic extremism in the Sahel, no indigenous cases of terrorism, and no firm evidence that “terrorists” from Afghanistan, Pakistan, or the Middle East were taking this route.

Washington appears to have based its notion on some unpublished sources and Algerian press reports on the banditry and smuggling activities of the outlaw Mokhtar ben Mokhtar. It also misconstrued the *Tablighi Jama`at* movement, whose 200 or so members in Mali are nicknamed “the Pakistanis” because the sect’s headquarters are in Pakistan. Finally, local government agents told U.S. officials what they wanted to hear.

Notwithstanding the lack of evidence, Washington saw a Saharan Front as the linchpin for the militarization of Africa, greater access to its oil resources (Africa will supply 25% of U.S. hydrocarbons by 2015), and the sustained involvement of Europe in America’s counterterrorism program. More significantly, a Saharan front reinforced the intelligence cherry-picked by top Pentagon brass to justify the invasion of Iraq by demonstrating that al-Qaida’s influence had spread to North Africa.

The Algerian Connection

Washington's interest in the Sahel and the flimsiness of its intelligence were extremely propitious for Algeria's own designs. As western countries became aware of the Algerian army's role in its "dirty war" of the 1990s against Islamic extremists, they became increasingly reluctant to sell it arms for fear of Islamist reprisals and criticism from human rights groups. As a result, Algeria's army became progressively under-equipped and increasingly preoccupied with acquiring modern, high-tech weapon systems, notably night vision devices, sophisticated radar systems, an integrated surveillance system, tactical communications equipment, and certain lethal weapon systems. Whereas the Clinton administration kept its distance, the Bush administration invited Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika as one of its first guests to Washington. Bouteflika told his American counterpart that Algeria wanted specific equipment to maintain peace, security, and stability.

September 11 was a golden opportunity for both regimes, especially Algeria, which sold its "expertise" in counter-terrorism to Washington on the basis of its long "war" against Islamists through the 1990s that left 200,000 people dead. This common ground in the war against terrorism was the basis of a new U.S.-Algerian relationship. However, by late 2002, Algeria was publicly admonishing the United States for its tardiness in delivering on its promises of military equipment. Washington's caution, however, was justified by the fact that Algeria was on top of its "terrorist" problem and consequently no longer in need of such sophisticated equipment.

El Para was proof that "terrorism" was far from eradicated in Algeria and that Islamic militancy now linked the Maghreb and Sahel. His activities not only eased Washington's political reticence on military support for Algeria, but also provided the missing link in its banana theory of terrorism.

Who conned whom is perhaps immaterial, although the U.S. lack of human intelligence on the ground

and its cherry-picking of unverified intelligence certainly made it unusually receptive to the wooing of Algeria's military intelligence services. The situation resembled Ahmed Chalabi's manipulation of U.S. intelligence agencies in the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. However, while Algeria certainly duped U.S. intelligence services, the overall fabrication of the so-called Second Front involved the collusion of both parties. U.S. monitoring of the hostage situation, including the use of AWAC surveillance, speaks to Washington's willing participation.

The Front Collapses

The Second Front deception has done immense damage to the peoples and fabric of the Sahara-Sahel region. The launch of a Sahara front in the "war on terror" has created immense anger, frustration, rebellion, political instability, and insecurity across the entire region. The successful Mauritanian coup, the Tuareg revolts in Mali and Niger, the riots in southern Algeria, and the political crisis in Chad are direct outcomes of this policy. It has also destroyed the region's tourism industry and the livelihoods of families across the entire region, forcing hundreds of young men into the burgeoning smuggling and trafficking businesses for a living. In Washington, the same people who failed to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and al-Qaida links to Saddam Hussein are now busy classifying these innocent victims of U.S. foreign policy as putative "terrorists."

Fortunately for the people of the region, this Second Front is collapsing. U.S. regional commanders admitted to a German journalist this last spring that their EUCOM predecessors had over-hyped the terrorist situation. In the meantime, U.S. skullduggery in the region is likely to be exposed further by President Bouteflika's recent investigation into fraud and corruption by the Halliburton subsidiary, Brown & Root Condor (BRC), set up and registered as an Algerian company by Dick Cheney in 1994.

The Bush administration fabricated an entire front in the "war on terror" for its own political purposes. Its

obsession with secrecy is not for reasons of national security but to conceal falsehood. That is why the Senate Intelligence Committee is stalling its investigation of Douglas Feith and his role at the Pentagon's controversial Office of Special Plans. The investigation is likely to open "an even bigger can of worms," as one former intelligence officer has warned.

The collapse of the second front is likely to have widespread implications for America's "war on terror." At a global level, it will reduce the credibility of the Bush administration still further, reinforcing the already widespread belief that much of what it has been saying about terrorism is simply not true. While of little consequence for those countries with which U.S. relations are already at an all-time low, the ramifications will be far more serious for countries such as those in the European Union on whom America still relies for a modicum of support. Increasing public skepticism toward the Bush administration's claims about terrorism and disapproval of the conduct of its "war on terror" has been forcing the governments of many of these countries to reconsider the extent and nature of their support for the American enterprise. This erosion of U.S. credibility in the world will carry over to subsequent U.S. administrations, even ones that attempt to reform American foreign policy.

This North African imbroglio also holds serious implications for America's principle regional allies in the deception. In Algeria, Mali, Niger, Chad, and pre-coup Mauritania, the launch of the Saharan front went hand in hand with an increase in repressive behavior by the security establishments of these countries against their civilian populations. Not surprisingly, the front's collapse is now leading to outbreaks of rebellious anger against these governments and a consequent increase in political instability and insecurity. In a terrible irony, the attempt to fight terrorists in a terrorism-free land might ultimately produce the very movements and activities that the U.S. government claimed it wanted to expunge in the first place.

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