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Algeria's Achilles' Heel? Resource Regionalism in Ouargla

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INTRODUCTION

In mid-January of this year, some 5,000 people in Ouargla, a province that straddles central and southern Algeria, held a demonstration calling on the government to end their region's marginalization, create employment opportunities, and fight corruption in public institutions. According to their spokesperson, Kamel Bouchoul, who at one point read out [nineteen demands](#) on behalf of the assembled protesters, corruption is endemic within the National Employment Agency (ANEM). Bouchoul accused the Ouargla branch of ANEM of rigging its hiring system to the benefit of "outsiders," meaning northern Algerians, despite a [2005 law](#) obliging companies to give priority to locals in matters of employment and to make adequate provisions for their training. Through Bouchoul, the demonstrators, most of whom were unemployed or underemployed, went on to demand that the authorities dismiss the local ANEM director, investigate the agency, and dismiss those officials responsible for abuse of power, corruption, and nepotism.



The local office of the National Employment Agency in Ouargla has been a focus of discontent about inequality in central Algeria.

These demonstrations were nothing new. The sparsely populated center and south of Algeria, the largest country in Africa, may have escaped [the civil war of the 1990s](#), but they have suffered decades of governmental neglect. In the 2000s, these historically peripheral regions began to undergo a political awakening, much of it stemming



from widespread indignation that, despite oil-extraction progressing apace, locals continued to see little in the way of economic dividends. As part of such “resource regionalism,” voices of dissent made themselves heard from Ghardaïa, in north-central Algeria, to In Salah, in the south-central part of the country.

Sitting on oilfields that have enriched Algeria’s north, Ouargla Province, which lies some 570 kilometers south of the capital, Algiers, witnessed the most political ferment of all. With each round of protests by Ouarglis, the state launched or promised to launch investment projects even as it intensified its policing of local communities. Little came of the measures ostensibly intended to ameliorate the plight of people in Ouargla, and the repression created further resentment. Perhaps the most telling example of the state’s failure was the Ouarglis’ call during the January protest for the disbandment of the local ANEM branch. In the eyes of the people of Ouargla, the very agency meant to ensure their participation in local economic ventures had lost its legitimacy.

Now, Ouarglis appear to have reached the end of their tether. In March, a judicial court found local activist and blogger Ameer Guerrache, who hails from the Mekhedma quarter of Ouargla, guilty of “condoning acts of terrorism.” The verdict was widely seen as political, as Guerrache had voiced his support for antigovernment demonstrators. In response to the court’s decision to sentence Guerrache to a seven-year prison term, Mekhedma **erupted in protest**. Alarming, the protest degenerated into violence between locals and the gendarmerie, which may portend a slide toward greater confrontation.

RICH LAND, POOR PEOPLE

Ouargla Province is one of Algeria’s wealth poles, with the extraction of oil from the Hassi Messaoud oil fields playing a crucial role in keeping the national economy afloat. Hassi Messaoud supplies 400,000 barrels of oil

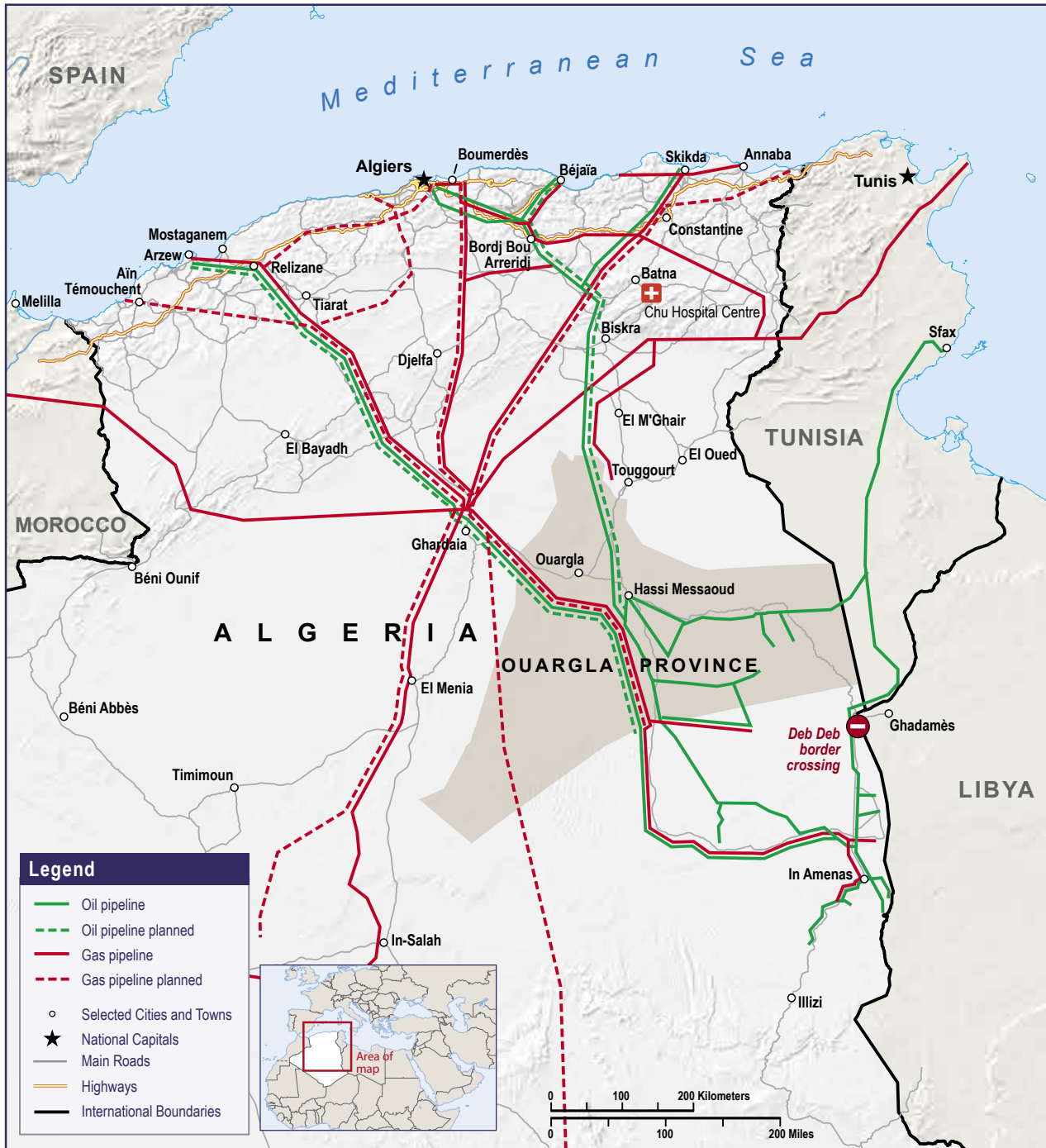
per day and contains 71 percent of the country’s crude oil reserves. Until recently, Ouargla was home to an estimated 600,000 people, which is high when compared to other provinces south of the Edough Massif, which runs across northern Algeria.¹ The province is divided into three districts and seven municipalities. Ouargla City, which lends its name to the province, is the most populous and serves as an administrative center.

Ouargla may sit on oil reserves, but it has fared no better than other provinces in Algeria’s center and south, a vast area that falls within the Sahara Desert. Due to spatial disparities, a legacy of the colonial past that continued after independence in 1962, there is twice as much poverty among people living in the Sahara as among those in the coastal region. If anything, the imbalance is even more apparent when a desert locality is resource-rich. In such cases, the government pours money into the area for the purpose of extracting resources that power the national economy, but often avoids diverting any of the subsequent revenue to local communities. This is readily apparent in Ouargla, which remains poor and underdeveloped. Many Ouarglis complain of being abandoned in a country blessed with oil reserves (*mahgurin fi bled al-petrol*).²

The deficiency in public services is best illustrated by the health sector. Few and far between to begin with, health facilities in Ouargla Province are also understaffed and underequipped. In fact, it is common for several health dispensaries to rely on a single roving doctor.³ University-affiliated public hospitals and private health clinics, which generally provide better care, are at a considerable distance from Ouargla municipality. For example, the nearest health clinic is located in El Oued, 320 kilometers away, while the closest university hospital is in Batna, 550 kilometers away. People who can afford it seek medical care in El Oued, Batna, or even across the border in Tunisia, where medical facilities are of a higher standard than those in southern Algeria.⁴

Those who opt to try their luck in Ouargla may find themselves in a hospital that lacks certain specialists. In

MAP: ALGERIA'S RESOURCE HUB, OUARGLA PROVINCE





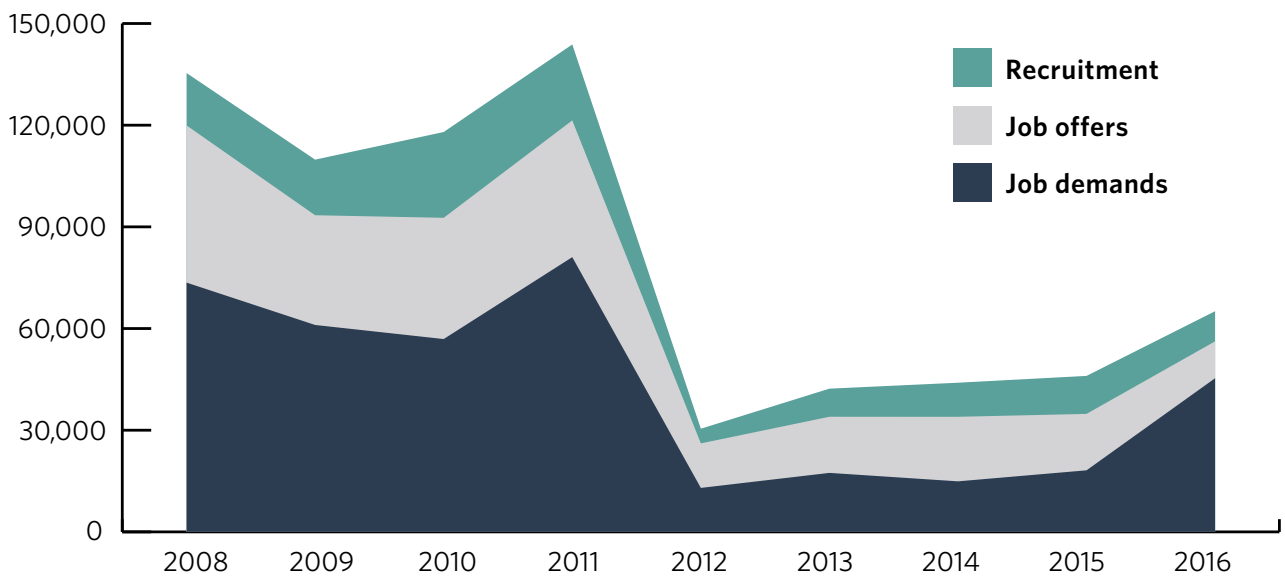
2018, the death of academic **Aïcha Aouissat** following a venomous scorpion sting prompted Ouarglis to publicly denounce subpar healthcare conditions and accuse political leaders of criminal negligence. According to Aouissat's brother, her death due to respiratory failure stemmed from the absence of both a cardiologist and a neurologist at the Ouargla hospital where she was admitted. Her death was neither the first nor the last of its kind. That year, Aouissat was one of seven people in Ouargla who died of complications following a scorpion sting.

Over and above shortcomings in basic services, such as healthcare and potable water, is the issue of perennial unemployment (see figure). On the face of it, Ouargla is not unique in this regard. As with other central and southern regions of Algeria, natural population growth, a decline in agriculture, rapid urbanization, and a decrease in cross-border commerce due to the militarization and securitization of Algeria's borders with Tunisia and Libya have all contributed to a situation in which many people cannot find work. Yet there is an additional reason for unemployment in Ouargla:

discrimination. Local applicants, competing against better educated and highly skilled northerners for a limited number of vacancies at the Hassi Messaoud oil fields, have traditionally experienced great difficulty landing such jobs.

Indeed, the **159 companies** engaged in oil-related projects throughout Ouargla have long favored northerners. The national state-owned oil company, SONATRACH, is the leading employer in the region and embodies this phenomenon. High- and mid-level positions for SONATRACH's Ouargla projects are generally filled by employees whom the company has transferred from Algiers and other major northern cities such as Oran and Constantine. SONATRACH has even built apartment complexes in Hassi Messaoud to house such employees. This has sharpened a sense of exclusion among locals, who until the end of the 2000s needed a pass simply to enter the town. SONATRACH and other companies would hire Ouarglis for lower-level positions, but the locals would still earn less than lower-level employees from the north.⁵

FIGURE 1: EMPLOYMENT IN OUARGLA PROVINCE



Source: The National Employment Agency's local office in Ouargla.

Over the past decade and a half, Ouarglis have grown increasingly vocal about acquiring what they view as their rightful share of the oil bonanza. Two movements giving voice to people's grievances emerged during this period. In 2004, a group of young men who wanted to remain unconnected to traditional parties and tribal leaders formed the [Southern Children's Movement for Justice \(MSJ\)](#). The MSJ issued a list of demands: more jobs, with companies doing business in Ouargla obliged to grant locals preference when hiring; more money devoted to local projects; and the implementation of development programs that had until then existed only on paper. Significantly, when it came to this last point, the MSJ insisted that it should have a say in the development programs in order to maximize the benefits to local communities and simultaneously minimize adverse effects on the environment.

In 2011, the [National Committee for the Defense of the Rights of the Unemployed \(CNDDC\)](#) was established. The CNDDC, like the MSJ a largely male youth organization, was an outgrowth of an earlier Ouargla-based union, the National Autonomous Union of Public Administration Staff. Significantly, the CNDDC charted a course that was more overtly political than its predecessor, creating a popular movement that sought to represent all unemployed Algerians and pressure the government to take action to alleviate their plight. It also successfully transcended divisions between secularists and Islamists, with its cadres drawn from both camps, and won the support of sectors of society sympathetic to the cause of marginalized southerners: human rights activists, university students, and politicized members of the middle class. Thanks in large part to the CNDDC, which enjoyed a wider support base than the MSJ, ordinary yet disaffected Ouarglis became more informed, better organized and connected, and oftentimes more politically engaged than previously.

BETWEEN DEVELOPMENT AND REPRESSION

In response to the establishment of the CNDDC as well as the frequency of the protests that the MSJ helped organize, Algiers moved toward enacting reforms. The government overhauled ANEM and [tasked the](#) employment agency with recruiting locally and raising salaries. It also pledged to reduce the [interest](#) rate for loans granted to southerners and invested in [professional training](#) for them. For a while, it looked as though the government was making good on its promises. In 2013, a [training center](#) for oil-related professions, the first of its kind, was opened in Ouargla. And in 2018, [training programs](#) were inaugurated in fields such as cereal farming, construction, telecommunications, and new technologies. The authorities also invested in a [tramway](#) that went operational in 2018.

It soon became apparent, however, that the government was more interested in appearances than in bringing about real change. Most development projects did not benefit ordinary people. Some were never even completed. For example, much-needed roads and irrigation canals were left unfinished. The fact that large sums of money were clearly invested in such ventures heightened suspicions among locals that they were elaborate schemes to enrich the government's cronies.



Occasional repair of sidewalks is one way that the Algerian government has attempted to reduce wealth inequality between its provinces.



Basically, following an opaque bidding process, a company whose owner was connected to high-ranking government figures would win a tender, despite having inflated the projected cost of the venture in question. The company's owner would then take the money that the government paid his company and divide it into three portions: one for himself, one as a kickback for the government official who ensured that his company won the tender, and one for the agreed-upon project, which was invariably of shoddy quality and sometimes not even completed.⁶

Certain projects were questionable to begin with, given their lack of relevance. In Ouargla, locals have complained that while development of one kind or another is almost always underway, oftentimes it does not cater to their needs. A good example of this occurred in the municipality of Frane. Locals had asked for a health dispensary. Instead, they got a library. Worse yet, the facility never opened its doors to the public. Saleh, a thirty-five-year-old resident of Frane, spoke for many of his town's inhabitants when summing up the situation:

In this neighborhood, there are some 23 projects underway. [With the politicians] it is all about corruption. . . . They eat and feed their clique. . . . We ask for one thing, and they bring us another. . . . You ask them for a glass, and they bring you a chair. They brought us a sanitation network, and we do not even have water. . . . So today, the road remains broken, and the network is not connected.⁷

Going over the heads of the developers to complain to state officials is seen as futile. State officials, including representatives who are presumably answerable to the people, rarely prove willing to arbitrate disagreements between them and developers. This creates mistrust and suspicion toward the state. Many Ouarglis view state officials as highly unscrupulous middlemen between the cash cow that is the government and greedy developers. Institutional controls are weak and accountability is nonexistent, meaning that judicial courts are of little



Frane, a city in Algeria's Ouargla Province, is representative of the disconnect from the wealthier areas.

help. Ultimately, a closed bidding process, secretive contracts for tender awardees, inappropriate projects with murky rules governing the procurement of materials, high costs, and shoddy work have caused the government's development spree in Ouargla to fail—both at the municipal and provincial levels.

At the same time that the government was attempting to mollify the inhabitants of Ouargla with development projects, it was increasing its repression of political activists. Members of the MSJ and CNDDC were often targeted for arrest—particularly after protests that these groups organized. Algiers did not only intensify policing in general when it came to Ouargla and other disaffected areas, but went so far as to attempt to prevent media coverage of grassroots movements agitating for change. Indeed, although the government lifted the country's three-decade-old state of emergency in 2011, it quickly passed [laws that restricted media freedoms and NGO activity](#). Activists who fell afoul of these laws were often imprisoned, a development that was to have far-reaching consequences.

According to human rights activist and trade unionist Yacine Zaïd, [who has himself spent time in Ouargla prison](#), jihadi inmates launched recruitment drives among the disaffected southerners who had wound up

behind bars. In Ouargla prison, the jihadists succeeded in radicalizing nonviolent MSJ and other activists arrested on trumped-up charges of “secessionism” or trying to destabilize the country. It was not long before this had an impact. For unlike many of the jihadis themselves, the newly radicalized southerners were released from prison.

Some of these men made their way back to the MSJ and sought to tap into widespread frustration among its members, many of whom had begun to feel that the group was ineffectual. The radicalized returnees tried to steer the group in an altogether different direction, one that was both Islamist and confrontational. Together with the state’s continued harassment of the MSJ, this internal pressure eventually caused the group to disintegrate. Several of its former activists who had spent time in prison, including Lamine Bencheneb and Abdessalam Termoun, joined jihadi groups and took up arms.

Bencheneb went underground and is believed to have had a hand in the attack on the Djanet airport in 2007, as well as the 2012 attack on the headquarters of the Ouargla gendarmerie. At some point he, along with similarly inclined former members of the MSJ, established the Southern Children’s Movement for Islamic Justice (MSJI). In 2013, the MSJI collaborated with infamous jihadi Mokhtar Bel Mokhtar in the four-day siege of the Tiguentourine (Ain Amenas) gas facility. In that notorious incident, thirty-seven hostages and twenty-nine jihadis—among them Bencheneb—were killed before Algerian special forces ended the siege.

Termoun vacillated between militancy and legal political activity until 2012. In that year’s legislative elections, he attempted to run as a candidate on an Islamist party’s slate. However, he was disqualified by the authorities owing to his past membership in a terrorist organization. Termoun subsequently committed himself to militancy, went underground, and passed through several jihadi groups, including Signatories by Blood, which was led by Bel Mokhtar. He eventually had a falling out with the latter, who called for his death. Termoun was killed by unidentified jihadis in 2018 in Sebha, southwestern Libya.

In short, the central authorities’ dual strategy for containing the situation in Ouargla is demonstrably unsustainable. The strategy might have worked had the economic development that was meant to accompany the increased repression borne greater fruit. Yet the very limited tangible improvement in people’s everyday lives has made the state’s repression all the more unpalatable. Consequently, the possibility of social unrest has increased, with the riots in the wake of Guerrache’s sentencing a clear indication of this phenomenon. Moreover, outright militancy is on the rise. While most social movements in the south are rooted in nonviolent activism despite facing increased repression, many of their members have grown frustrated with the ineffectuality of petitions and even demonstrations. As evidenced by the trajectories of Bencheneb and Termoun, the region’s jihadi groups, which are always looking for new recruits, sometimes succeed in capitalizing on such members’ frustration.

CONCLUSION: TROUBLE IN THE DESERT

The Algerian regime’s maneuverability vis-à-vis the volatile situation in Ouargla, already considerably reduced by the failure of its dual approach of indiscriminate development and political repression, has shrunk further due to a host of national crises. Foremost among these are an economic recession that was intensified by the coronavirus pandemic, a new president who has proven highly unpopular, and a nationwide protest movement that toppled the previous president in April 2019 and has recently regained momentum following a period of inactivity. All this means that the government will find it difficult to preserve the already tenuous peace in Ouargla.

Further agitation on the part of Ouarglis, which is almost inevitable given their dismal conditions, may prompt Algiers to ramp up repression. From the perspective of a regime that, irrespective of who stands at its helm, is allied with the military and has often relied on security solutions for social problems, the attractiveness of such a perceived remedy lies first and foremost in the success of

previous clampdowns elsewhere in Algeria. Yet Algiers has an additional motivation to use force. The economic crisis, which has been compounded by the pandemic, has depleted state coffers and indefinitely suspended the rentier-oriented economy. There is little money left for bloated development projects meant to enrich political officials and appease locals. Consequently, the state may well choose to dispense with the carrot and wield the stick. Time will tell if such a heavy hand succeeds in stamping out protests, or if the latter mutate into unrest and spread to other central and southern provinces.

NOTES

- 1 In March 2021, the Algeria government upgraded Touggourt to a province, removing it administratively from Ouargla. At that point, the population of Ouargla fell from 600,000 to a little under 400,000.
- 2 Several interviewees of disparate backgrounds used this expression during interviews conducted in Ouargla and its outskirts, December 2020 - February 2021.
- 3 Fieldwork visits and interviews conducted in Frane and Sidi Khouiled, December 2020.
- 4 Interviews with locals in Ouargla, December 2020 – February 2021.
- 5 Hassi Messaoud consists of the town and the oil fields. There is no distinction between the two; in fact, the oil fields encroach onto the urban space.
- 6 Interviews conducted in Ouargla with several people, including activists, former civil servants, and ordinary citizens, December 2020–February 2021.
- 7 Interview conducted in Frane, December 19, 2020. Salah is a former SONATRACH employee and an activist in a local association.

For your convenience, this document contains hyperlinked source notes indicated by teal-colored text.

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