

## **Desert Faux: The Sahara's Mirage of Terrorism**

**By Conn Hallinan | March 2, 2006**

When two U.S. Marine helicopters recently went down off Djibouti, a tiny slice of desert at the entrance to the Red Sea, they exposed a low-profile program that has poured money and troops into a broad swath of northern Africa from the Indian to the Atlantic Oceans, which encompasses some nine nations in the region.

The Bush administration claims the target of this program, called the Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Initiative, is the growing presence of al-Qaida-influenced organizations in the region. Critics, however, charge that the enterprise has more to do with oil than with Osama bin Laden, and that stepped up military aid to Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia will most likely end up being used against internal opposition groups in those countries, not “terrorists” hiding out in the desert.

“As we pursue the global war on terrorism,” says Marine General James L. Jones of European Command, “we’re going to have to go where the terrorists are. And we’re seeing evidence, at least preliminarily, that more and more of these large uncontrolled areas are going to be potential havens for that kind of activity.”

As part of the initiative, the United States has re-routed satellites and aircraft to monitor “terrorist” groups in the region. “These are groups that are similar to al-Qaida, but not as sophisticated or with the same reach, but the same objectives,” says Air Force General Charles Wald. “They’re bad people, and we need to keep an eye on that.”

But according to the Brussels-based International Crisis Group, the Sahara is “not a hotbed of terrorism,” and North African governments are only going along with the Initiative because it gives

them training and weapons they can use on their own people.

A case in point is the southern Algerian Salafist Group for Fighting and Preaching, which kidnapped 31 tourists in 2003. Algerian authorities say the group, led by a former Algerian paratrooper, is associated with al-Qaida, and on the basis of this claim, U.S. Special Forces helped track down organization members in neighboring Chad, killing and capturing 43 of them.

However, according to Jeremy Kennan, a Sahara specialist at Britain’s East Anglia University, the Salafist Group has no links to al-Qaida and was simply after ransom money. And if it wasn’t for the tourist kidnapping—which Kennan argues was hardly cooked up in the caves of Tora Bora—U.S. and Algerian authorities can’t point to “a single act of alleged terrorism in the Sahara.”

North Africa certainly has terrorists, as a 2002 attack on a Tunisian synagogue and a 2003 bombing attack in Casablanca demonstrated. The 2004 Madrid bombers were associated with the Moroccan Islamic Combat Group, the same organization that carried out the Casablanca attack. But none of the groups have ever been tied to al-Qaida, nor do they originate in the Sahara, the main focus of the Initiative.



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Indeed, rather than tamping down terrorism, Kennan says the Initiative will instead “generate terrorism, by which I mean to the overall U.S. presence and strategy.”

### Petropolitics in the Sahara

A recent Zogby International poll of six Middle Eastern countries gives support to the theory that the presence of Americans engenders opposition. The survey found that while only 6% of those polled supported al-Qaida, 30% “sympathized” with the organization because it “stood up to America.”

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There may not be a terrorism problem in the Sahara, but there is plenty of gas and oil. According to a 2002 report by the National Energy Policy Development Group, by 2015 up to a quarter of the United States’ oil will be supplied from West and North Africa. Algeria has nine billion barrels in its reserves, and offshore fields in Mauritania may make that country Africa’s fourth largest oil supplier by 2007.

The Trans-Sahara Initiative covers not only traditional North African nations like Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco, but Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Senegal, and Chad as well. It also parallels a series of basing agreements that go considerably beyond the reach of the great desert, including ones in Uganda, Ghana, Gabon, Namibia, and Zambia.

While some of these bases are little more than airfields, the United States is seeking to build major facilities as well. According to General Jones, the military is looking for bases that could host up to a full brigade of 5,000 troops, “Something that could be robustly used for a significant military presence.”

So far, the \$500 million program has mainly underwritten training, radios, and pickup trucks for local forces. But Special Forces units and the Army’s 173 Airborne Brigade are carrying out joint maneuvers with the Moroccan army.

The 10 U.S. soldiers that perished off Djibouti were part of a 1,800-strong task force supposedly controlling “terrorism” in the Horn of Africa. The helicopters flew out of Camp Lemonier, a French military base.

An operation scheduled for later this year will bring together 5,100 troops from nine Saharan nations, and 700 U.S. Special Forces units—Delta Force, Navy SEALs, Rangers, and Green Berets—for joint maneuvers.

The Initiative was behind U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s recent visit to Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco. When Rumsfeld met with Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, arms sales were on the agenda. The Secretary was coy about the specific weapon systems discussed—“They have things they desire, and we have things we can be helpful with,” he said—but according to the *New*

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*York Times*, night-vision equipment and helicopters are on Algeria's wish list.

Rumsfeld cast the visit and sales as part of the Bush administration's worldwide war on terrorism. "It is instructive for us to realize," he said, "that the struggle we're in is not unlike the struggle the people of Algeria went through."

### Miscasting Repression in North Africa

But the Algerian civil war, a brutal conflict that took up to 200,000 lives, had nothing to do with organizations like al-Qaida. The conflict was touched off in 1992 when the Algerian government canceled elections it would have lost to the Islamic Salvation Front. During the war, both sides engaged in the horrific massacre of civilians. The military still dominates the national government and its opponents are routinely imprisoned and tortured.

Tunisia also has a poor human rights record, as does the Moroccan monarchy. Following the 2003 Casablanca bombing, Morocco passed a host of draconian security laws making the country even more repressive.

One worry is that Morocco will use weapons and training from the Initiative to try to resolve its long-running dispute with the Polisario Front over sovereignty for Western Sahara. Morocco seized Western Sahara after Spain withdrew in 1975, and has systemically derailed efforts by the United Nations to hold a referendum of the area's people.

So far, Morocco's outright seizure of the Western Sahara has been blocked by a combination of the region's daunting terrain and the Polisario's wide support, including important backing from Algeria. Might the temptation to modernize its army influence Algeria to back away from its long-time

support of sovereignty for Western Sahara, freeing Morocco to break the current ceasefire and seek a military solution to the stalemate?

The "terrorists" the Trans-Sahara Initiative seems aimed at are domestic opposition groups, albeit some of them strongly Islamic in character. Besides those in Algeria and Morocco, similar groups in Chad, Mali, and other countries in the region may soon find themselves labeled "terrorists" and the target of U.S. Special Forces.

According to the International Crisis Group, many Mauritians oppose the Initiative because former president Maaouya Sid'Ahmed Ould Taya used the supposed threat of the Salafist Group to harass and jail political opponents.

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The Initiative is part of a broader tapestry, a piece of the administration's "long war" on terrorism and its ever-elusive boogeyman, al-Qaida. But the Iraq war has badly wounded the U.S. military, and Americans are suddenly remembering why the Vietnam Syndrome was such an effective deterrent to a hasty call-to-arms.

The need to reduce the number of body bags, and the growing opposition casualty rates engendered, was clearly behind the thinking that went into the 2005 Quadrennial Defense Review. The Review

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proposes cutting the regular armed forces, but stepping up the use of Special Forces and local proxy armies.

In keeping with the Review, the 2007 military budget will see funding for Special Forces jump 15%. According to the Review, these Special Forces “will have the capacity to operate in dozens of countries simultaneously ... relying on a combination of direct (visible) and indirect (clandestine) approaches.”

To pull this off, the Bush administration needs enemies it can label as “terrorists” or “al-Qaida-influenced groups,” even if these organizations are part of the domestic opposition to authoritarian governments.

“Terrorism” in North Africa is, at most, marginal, and, in the “Trans-Sahara,” largely a phantom. But the gas and oil that lies under the Gulf of Guinea, off the coast of Mauritania, and under the blistering rock pans of the deep desert are anything but a mirage.

That is what the 10 Americans in Djibouti died for Feb. 17. They are unlikely to be the last.

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