

The making of terrorists: Anthropology and the alternative truth of America's 'War on Terror' in the Sahara

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Abstract: This article, based on almost eight years of continuous anthropological research amongst the Tuareg people of the Sahara and Sahel, suggests that the launch by the US and its main regional ally, Algeria, in 2002–2003 of a 'new', 'second', or 'Saharan' Front in the 'War on Terror' was largely a fabrication on the part of the US and Algerian military intelligence services. The 'official truth', embodied in an estimated 3,000 articles and reports of one sort or another, is largely disinformation. The article summarizes how and why this deception was effected and examines briefly its implications for both the region and its people as well as the future of US international relations and especially its global pursuance of an increasingly suspect 'War on Terror'.

Keywords: Algeria, disinformation, Sahara, Tuareg, 'War on Terror'

I first undertook anthropological fieldwork amongst the Tuareg of the Central Sahara, mostly amongst the Kel Ahaggar of southern Algeria, during the period 1964–1971.¹ It was a period of tumultuous change, following the recent independence of Algeria (1962), during which a number of pressures, notably successive drought years and a number of ideologically driven government policies, led to some 50 percent of the Kel Ahaggar being more or less sedentarized by the time I left at the end of 1971 (Keenan [1977] 2002: xi–xxviii).

I did not return to the Sahara again until 1999. The ensuing almost eight years of more or less continuous fieldwork in the Central Sahara and northern Sahel have been remarkable for two reasons.² The first is that my 1999 return coincided with the reopening of the Algerian

Sahara following its effective closure to the outside world during the eight-year period of civil conflict that followed the Algerian army's annulment of the 1991–1992 elections that would have brought to power the world's first ever democratically elected Islamist government. I was thus able to witness an entire society, in one of the world's most isolated and remote regions, re-enter and begin to catch up, as it were, with the modern world. The Tuareg entered the new millennium having skipped globalization and associated technological changes that had characterized the last decade of the twentieth century.

The first three years of this century were thus a new dawn for many Tuareg. The re-opening of the Sahara not only enabled them to rebuild their tourism industry, their point of insertion into the global cash economy, but the arrival of

the Internet around 2001 enabled them to exercise a large measure of control over the process of that insertion by giving them direct access to their markets (mostly in Europe) and the means to engineer their development toward the environmentally sustainable goals that several Tuareg leaders had actually drafted at an international WTO-sponsored conference in Tamanrasset, the administrative capital of the region, in 1989. The Internet provided them with the means to explore the freedom that lay beyond the inefficiencies, constraints, and controls of Algeria's statist system. Also, along with satellite phones, it has enabled me to remain in more or less continuous communication with my informants during the increasingly difficult times that I address below.

These circumstances, namely my fortuitous return to the region at that time and the new technological means of communication, have given rise to the second remarkable feature of this 'return'. This is that I have been able to witness and record the 'truth', or what I have referred to in other articles on this subject (Keenan 2004a, 2004b, 2004c, 2005, 2006, forthcoming) as the 'alternative truth', about a most appalling sequence of events that many Tuareg now believe has irreversibly transformed the Central Sahara and Sahel, as well as their lives and livelihoods.

The events to which I refer relate to America's 'War on Terror'. In 2002–2003, the US, in collusion with its new regional ally, Algeria, launched what has generally become known as a 'New' or 'Second' Front in its global War on Terror across the Sahara and Sahelian regions of Africa. The precise nature of this Saharan War on Terror; the intelligence on which it was based; the motives of the US and Algerian governments in various stages of its pursuance; and its local, regional, and global implications have all been shrouded in opacity, dissemblance, and obfuscation. That is not at all surprising in the light of the fact that senior members of the US administration, including the president himself, are on record as saying that disinformation is a legitimate weapon in their post-9/11 War on Terror. In late 2002 and in the weeks immediately preceding the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003,

there were several signs, which, when read with hindsight, show how the US and Algeria were planning to launch a 'New' or 'Second' Front in the War on Terror that would link the 'terrorist' groups of the Maghreb (North West Africa), notably northern Algeria, with the Sahel. Although local Tuareg, especially in southern Algeria and northern Mali, had noted that US intelligence agencies were showing an interest in the extreme northern parts of Mali and that Algeria's military was engaged in a number of suspicious activities on its side of the border, none of them had any inkling at that stage of the headline-grabbing events that were to lead US military commanders³ to describe their hitherto relatively tranquil region as a "Swamp of Terror".

The "nightmare situation", as one prominent Tuareg described it, began in the second week of March 2003 with reports that European tourists, mostly German or German-speaking, were 'missing' somewhere in southern Algeria. As the wider picture unfolded, it became clear that thirty-two tourists had been captured and taken hostage in the Algerian Sahara. The hostage-taking was soon attributed by the Algerian authorities and their American allies to Algeria's Islamist 'terrorist' organization, the *Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat* (GSPC; Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat). The mastermind of the plot was presumed to be the GSPC's second-in-command, who went by at least a dozen aliases, including El Para after his stint as a parachutist in the Algerian army.

The hostages were held captive in two groups in the mountains of Tameirik and Immidir, two of the many ranges that comprise the Tassili-n-Ajjer and Ahaggar regions of southern Algeria. After nearly three months, one of the groups was liberated by an Algerian army assault. The other group was taken by its captors to northern Mali where its fourteen members (one had died en route) were finally released in August, after six months in captivity, following the alleged ransom payment of EUR 5 million.

Even before the hostage-taking, the US had identified a banana-shaped swath of territory across the Sahelian regions of the southern Sahara that it presumed was harboring Islamic mil-

itants and bin Laden sympathizers on the run from Afghanistan. The hostage-taking confirmed US suspicions and 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’.

Between the time of the release of the hostages in August 2003 and the end of the year, the entire Central Saharan region of southern Algeria, northern Mali, and northern Niger became heavily ‘securitized’, with Algeria reporting various, albeit small-scale, ‘bandit’ activities in the region. Then, following earlier visits from the US Office of Counterterrorism to Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, Bush’s Pan-Sahel Initiative (PSI)⁴ rolled into action with the arrival of a five-hundred-strong US ‘anti-terror team’ in Nouakchott (Mauritania’s capital) on 10 January 2004. A further four hundred US Rangers were deployed into the Chad-Niger border region the following week.

By the end of January, Algerian and Malian forces, reportedly with US support, were said to have driven the GSPC from northern Mali. Then, in a series of engagements, El Para’s men were chased by a combined military operation of Niger and Algerian forces, supported by US satellite surveillance, across the Tamesna, Air, and Tenere regions of Niger into the Tibesti Mountains of Chad. There, thanks to the support of US aerial reconnaissance, Chadian forces engaged El Para’s group in early March in a battle lasting three days, reportedly killing forty-three GSPCs. El Para managed to escape the carnage but reportedly fell into the hands of the rebel *Mouvement pour La Démocratie et la Justice au Tchad* (MDJT). 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 of “creating an armed terrorist group and spreading terror among the population” and sentenced him to life imprisonment.

We can thus see how, within the space of one 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, US military commanders were describing terrorists as “swarming” across the Sahel and the Sahara as a “Swamp of Terror” (in Powell 2004). They were describing the region as having become “a magnet for terrorists ... A terrorist infestation ... [that] we need to drain” (ibid.). Typical of the media hype are articles like the one in the *Village Voice* titled “Pursuing terrorists in the Great Desert: The US military’s \$500 million gamble to prevent the next Afghanistan. Part one: Hunting the ‘bin Laden of the Sahara’” (Khatchadourian 2006).

This summary account of the events that took place in the Sahara-Sahel during this period has been described, albeit sometimes in nothing more than short newspaper items, in an estimated 3,000 official government press releases, articles, and media reports of one sort or another.⁵ Virtually all of them are ultimately sourced, although sometimes rather vaguely, to US and/or Algerian government spokespersons and/or their military intelligence agencies.

However, we now know that this very dramatic account, what I call the ‘official truth’, was US-Algerian spin and largely untrue. It was, in short, a remarkably well-constructed narrative of disinformation. As a result of more or less continuous and at times microscopically detailed field research, much of which was undertaken by and in collaboration with local Tuareg in Algeria, Niger, Mali, Libya, and Toubou in Chad, we now know that all 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 US and Algerian military intelligence services.

There is insufficient space here to itemize all the evidence. Suffice it to say that 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* (DRS; see Mellah and Rivoire 2005), and one whom many Algerians believe was trained as a Green Beret at Fort Bragg in the 1990s (Chevalérias 2003). In the case of the hostage capture,

there is now strong evidence in support of the alternative truth. Firstly, it appears that elements within the Algerian security forces communicated the travel schedules of the tourists taken hostage to their captors. Moreover, El Para was in radio contact with outside parties, presumably his handlers, and his radio transmissions, as well as those between the two groups of hostage takers, were being monitored by US Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) surveillance. In addition, both the Algerian security forces and US intelligence had precise knowledge of the hostage locations almost from the outset and most of the official statements issued by the Algerian authorities throughout the entire hostage drama were false and nothing more than deliberate disinformation. It appears moreover that Algeria's ground troops were pulled back whenever they got too close to the hostage locations and that the Algerian army's assault that liberated the first group of hostages was an act of theatre: there were almost certainly no fatalities and all the captors were allowed to escape, regroup, and be taken to Mali. Also, there is evidence that the 'escape' of the second group from Tamelrik was arranged and facilitated by the Algerian military intelligence (DRS), as was the entire six-week long journey to Mali, including the provision of such things as fuel supplies, etc. And finally, there is strong reason to believe the Malian terrain was 'cleared' by Algerian agents, with at least six of the negotiators in the hostage release being found subsequently to have had links with the DRS.

As for the sojourn of El Para and his GSPC group in the Sahel, detailed 'field research' has revealed no evidence for the dramatic official narrative outlined above. Local people are adamant that no combined military force chased El Para and his men across the Sahel. Nor, as interviews with local residents and guides have revealed, was El Para even with his men as they stumbled around the Air Mountains, lost, in search of a guide, and having themselves photographed by tourists! As for the much-lauded battle in Chad, there appears to be no evidence that it actually took place. Leaders of the rebel MDJT 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. It is therefore hardly surprising that El Para's conviction and sentence by an Algerian court was made in absentia!

How and why did such a monstrous deception take place? The 'how' is simple. First, the Algerian and US military intelligence services channeled a stream of disinformation to an industry of 'terrorism experts', conservative ideologues, a dissipated academe, and compliant media hacks, whose research methodology is limited by their predominant 'cut and paste' culture. The result is that some 3,000 articles have turned the great 'lie' into the official 'truth'. Second, if a story is to be fabricated, it helps if the location is far away and 'beyond verification'. 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 banana theory on an unpublished academic commentary and Algerian press reports on banditry in the Sahel and associated smuggling across the Sahara.⁶ It also misconstrued the *Tablighi Jama'at*⁷ movement, whose two hundred or so members in Mali are nick-named 'the Pakistanis' because the sect's headquarters are in Pakistan. Finally, local government agents told US officials what they wanted to hear.

Notwithstanding the lack of evidence, Washington probably saw a Saharan Front as the linchpin in creating the ideological conditions for the militarization of Africa, and especially (but not exclusively) its oil resources⁸, and for sustaining 'old Europe's' involvement in America's

contentious counter-terrorism program. More significantly, by demonstrating that al-Qaida's influence had spread to North Africa, a Saharan Front reinforced the intelligence justifying the invasion of Iraq that had been cherry-picked by Paul Wolfowitz, then Deputy Secretary of Defense, and Douglas Feith, then Under-Secretary of Defense for Policy and Director of the Pentagon's controversial Office of Special Plans.

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 his country was seeking specific equipment that would enable it 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 had left 200,000 people dead. This common ground in the war against terrorism was the basis of a new US-Algerian relationship. However, by late 2002, Algeria was publicly admonishing the US 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 crucial missing link in its banana theory of terrorism.

Who conned who is perhaps immaterial, although the US lack of human intelligence on the ground and its cherry picking of unverified intelligence certainly made the Bush Administration vulnerable to Algeria's military intelligence services. The Sahara-Sahel replicated the 'Chalabi syndrome'.⁹ However, while Algeria certainly duped US intelligence services, the overall fabrication of the so-called Second Front involved the collusion of both parties. The extremely close relationship between the two countries' intelligence agencies and the US monitoring of the hostage situation, including the provision of AWACS surveillance, are testimony to Washington's willing participation.

The Second Front deception has done immense damage to the people 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 (2005), the Tuareg revolts in Niger (2004) and Mali (2006), the riots in southern Algeria (2005) and the political crisis in Chad (ongoing) are direct outcomes of this policy. Indeed, the regime of Ould Taya in Mauritania, as in many other countries, such as Libya, used the cover of the War on Terror to crack down on political opponents, as well as legitimate Islamic organisations. In Niger, the government directly provoked the Tuareg of Air into taking up arms by trumping up false murder charges and jailing their main leader, Rhisa ag Boula. (In the ensuing operation, Niger's US-trained military forces were seriously embarrassed by the Tuareg!) In Mali, it now appears that the rebellion of former Tuareg rebels around Kidal in May 2006 was at least partly orchestrated by Algeria's counter-terrorism services in order to provoke such trouble in the region and thus convince the US of the region's potential for

'terrorism'. Algeria also sought to embarrass Libya, whose Leader, Mouamar Qadhafi, had been trying to expand his influence in that part of the Sahel, by suggesting that Qadhafi's actions in the region had been largely responsible for the rebellion. Similarly, the riots in Tamanrasset in July 2005 were whipped up by Algerian government *agents provocateurs*, almost certainly working for the state's military intelligence services. One of the reasons for this was to justify a greater military presence and state repression in the region. However, the rioters, mostly Tuareg youths, were all released from jail when the role of the *agents provocateurs* was explained in court.

The Second Front 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. 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 victims of US foreign policy as putative 'terrorists'. Given the absurdity of this failed policy, and the Tuareg's sense of humor, most of the region's inhabitants will soon be able to call themselves 'terrorists'.

The not-so-empty spaces of the Sahara-Sahel are likely to soon leave US African policy in tatters. They provide the proof, if any was needed, that the Bush Administration has 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 a 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 (in Byrne 2006).

The revelation, accomplished largely by the Tuareg themselves, notably the network of informants with whom I was working, that the Saharan Front in the War on Terror has been based largely on disinformation is likely to have widespread implications. At a global level, it will reduce the credibility of the Bush administra-

tion 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 US relations are already at an all-time low, the ramifications will be far more serious for countries such as those in the EU 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 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 those countries against their civilian populations. Not surprisingly, the US 'invasion' of the Sahara-Sahel, as some locals refer to it, is now leading to outbreaks of rebellious anger against these governments and a consequent increase in political instability and insecurity. In fact, the most likely and ironic outcome of US policy in the region is that the attempt to fight 'terrorists' in what was a 'terrorism'-free region will most likely produce the very movements and activities that the US government claimed it wanted to expunge in the first place.¹⁰

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Notes

1. This is a revised version of a paper entitled “Anthropology in the firing line: Alternative truths in the US War on Terror” originally given at the workshop on “Ourselves and the great powers” at the 9th EASA Biennial Conference, 18–21 September 2006, Bristol (UK). A similar but slightly longer version of this article is being published in the December (2006) issue of *Anthropology Today*.
2. In addition to the work of Mustafa Barth (2003), this fieldwork has resulted in the publication of three books a fourth in preparation and forty-four book chapters and journal articles. Those relating specifically to the War on Terror in the Sahara include Keenan (2004 a, 2004b, 2004c, 2005, 2006, forthcoming).
3. For example, US Air Force General Charles F. Wald, deputy commander of US-EUCO, quoted in Powell (2004).
4. In 2005, the Pan-Sahel Initiative expanded to include Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Senegal, and Nigeria, and the organization became the Trans-Saharan Counter-Terrorism Initiative.
5. This number is probably an under-estimate considering that reports by the world’s main line agencies are translated into dozens of languages and reproduced in countless newspapers around the world. There have also been countless radio and TV broadcasts of news and commentary on ‘Terror’ in the Sahara.
6. Most of these articles refer to the activities of Mokhtar ben Mokhtar, who, like El Para, is regarded by many Algerians, especially those of the Sahara, as a ‘phantom’: there are at least two official reports of El Para’s death prior to 2003, while Mokhtar’s death has been reported at least six times!
7. *Tablighi Jama’at* is usually translated as “prose-lytizing group” or “group that propagates the faith”. *Tabligh* in Arabic means “to deliver (the message)”. *Tablighi Jama’at* claims to revive this duty which they consider as a primary duty of Muslims; it is basically a missionary organization and regards itself as a-political and law-abiding.
8. Africa will supply 25 percent of US hydrocarbons by 2015 (see Volman 2003).
9. Ahmed Chalabi manipulated US intelligence agencies in the run-up to 2003 invasion of Iraq.
10. The Sahara-Sahel has been ‘securitized’ and its people, notably the Tuareg, re-branded as ‘ter-

rorists’, reflecting both a fundamental disrespect and inherent racism toward these people. In Germany, the Tuareg name has already been expropriated and commoditized by Volkswagen. Would such a crass symbol of Western gas-guzzling hedonism have sold better if called ‘The Arab’? And, for what reason other than ignorant racism did the Italian police name their operation against a suspected terrorist cell in Milan on 2 October 2006 as ‘Operation Tuareg’? What thought processes, if any, led Milan’s Commissioner of Police to go for ‘Operation Tuareg’ in preference to ‘Operation Arab’ or ‘Operation Algerian’, especially when no Tuareg were in the slightest way involved?

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