

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DJV-28

c/o Ambassade de Belgique  
22 Chemin Tayyebi  
El Biar, Alger

May 1988

ALGERIA IV

Mr. Peter Martin  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
Wheelock House  
4 West Wheelock Street  
Hanover, NH 03755

Dear Peter,

In my two initial reports from Algeria (DJV-23 and DJV-24) I sketched for my readers some of the country's historical and socio-economic background: the War of Independence (1954-1962), the socialist economic experiment under President Boumedienne (1962-1978) and the increasing difficulties between a young, well educated generation and their elders, many of whom participated in the war.

Since that time I have traveled extensively to take a closer look at some of Algeria's industrial complexes. The trip took me from the natural gas liquefaction plants and steel mills along the Mediterranean coast to the petroleum installations around Hassi Messaoud and Hassi R'Mel in the Sahara desert and to the hauntingly beautiful Tassili and Hoggar mountains near the Mali and Niger border - the location of Algeria's newest 'industry', tourism.

After having interviewed several planning officials in Algiers during the last months it was instructive to get an idea of the day-to-day running of some of this country's enormous enterprises. Most of the oil and gas installations are hundreds of miles away from Algiers, in the middle of the desert. Despite these enormous distances and the difficulties in transportation - most of the men working on the bases are flown out by plane for a couple of weeks of vacation every six weeks - the country's giant infrastructure seems remarkably well coordinated.

The impact of developing the country's hydrocarbon riches has been enormous. Since I mostly written until now about events and developments that took place in the northern part of the country - where the big cities and the bureaucracies are located - I would like to expand a bit in this

---

Dirk Vandewalle is a North Africa Fellow of the Institute of Current World Affairs. His interest is the political economy of Egypt and North Africa, in particular the development strategies of Egypt, Algeria, Libya, Tunisia, and Morocco in the last two decades.

newsletter on the role of southern Algeria in the country's past and present development.

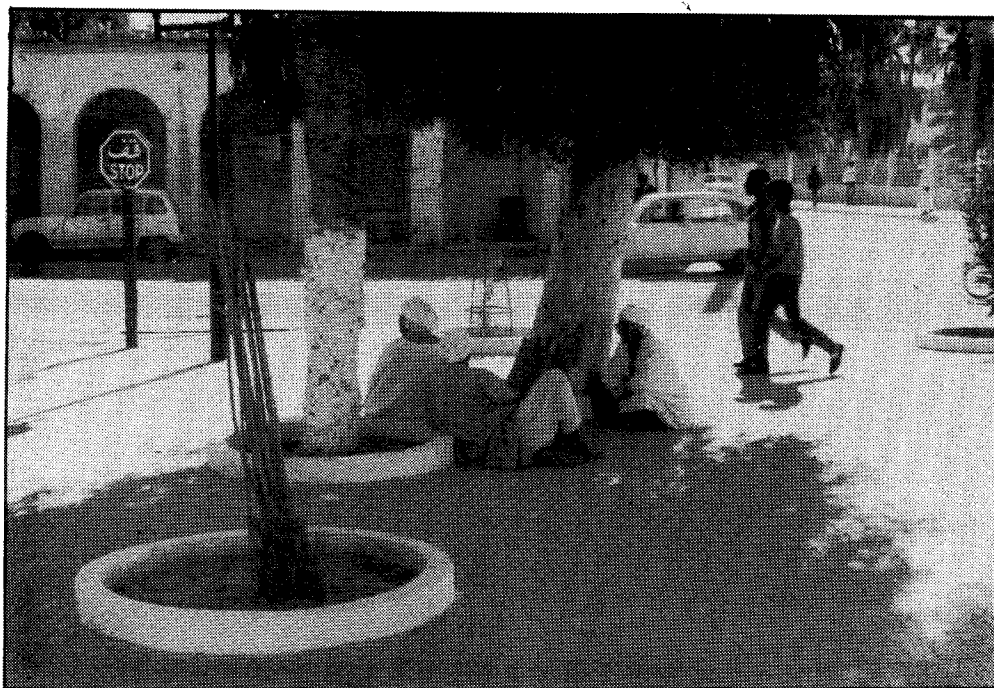
\* \* \*

Algeria is a country of enormous proportions. From Algiers to In Guezzam, near the Niger border where my most recent trip ended, is slightly over 1,500 miles, roughly the distance between the northernmost tip of Minnesota and Brownsville, Texas on the Mexican border. Ninety percent of the country is desert; once you drive past Bou Saada (about 180 miles south of Algiers) it will take a minimum of five days to reach In Guezzam, a ride across some of the most pristine, most beautiful and most uninhabitable places on the African continent. When you get to Tamanrasset after a dusty drive across the Transsaharan route - a road so degraded that most tourists and truck drivers simply drive in the sand beside the road - you find a landscape without equal: a lunar desert of sand and volcanic remnants that rise several thousand feet in the air. From Ilizi to Djanet are almost 300 miles of some of the roughest piste (track) imaginable, almost half of it across a pitchblack rocky plateau that puts even the best four-wheel drive vehicles to a serious test.

Under that vast expanse of desert and rock and sparsely populated villages and oases lies a wealth of oil and natural gas that now fuels what started as a socialist experiment and has been reappraised into some form of capitalism. As you drive along you cannot but notice the signs of this mineral wealth: near Hassi Messaoud, with a deep roar, the plumes of flared-off natural gas dance a hundred feet into the air; miles and miles of pipelines and gathering tanks, the rusty archaeology of a petroleum economy; further south the clouds of dust from tin, wolfram and phosphate mines thrown up by huge trucks and cranes that claw into the desert.

Southern Algeria is changing at an ever quickening pace, despite the enormous difficulties in building an infrastructure here. As I returned from the south crews were rebuilding the Transsaharan, often pouring entire new stretches beside the old road. Even though there remain enormous stretches of that pristine desert, most of the romantic myths about the Great Sahara now only endure in nineteenth century travelogues. The pistes increasingly give way to asphalted roads that shimmer mirrorbright under an unrelenting sun. Even the smaller towns deep in the desert are now equipped with ultra-modern satellite dishes that facilitate communication. (For some reason I could not figure out, international calls to Europe were no problem, but connections with the United States were mostly impossible). The piste from Reggane to the Malian border crossing - once a notoriously difficult route - is now lined with solar powered flashing lights.

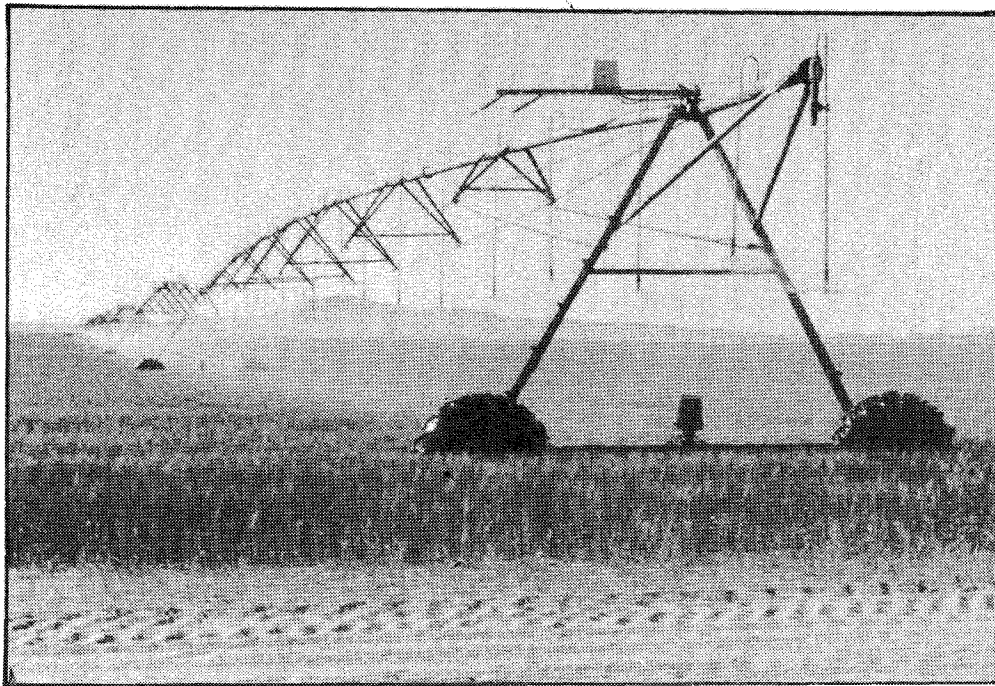
Nevertheless the myths persist, in part encouraged by the government and local travel agencies to attract tourists. Last year the Algerian government signed a contract with a Canadian company to promote the country's natural beauty on the North American continent. Many of those visiting the country will be somewhat disappointed to find out that the mythical blue Tuareg men advertised on promotional posters has become an endangered species. One evening, camped in the desert near Djanet, I



Marketplace, Touggourt

caught the Voice of America on my shortwave. By pure coincidence a young American journalist, "specialized in vanishing cultures", reported on the Tuaregs, "the legendary blue men that roam the desert." With me was Dahmane Ben Amor, a Tuareg I befriended in Algiers last year and at whose house I had just spent several days. The reporter repeated just about all the stereotypes that have ever been written about these formerly nomadic people. Especially the exotic-looking litham, the veil Tuareg men normally wear, was singled out for comment. She described all kinds of cultural and symbolic values to it, much to the amusement of Dahmane. As he pointed out, the litham is worn in several African countries that border the Sahara and is not restricted to the Tuareg. Furthermore, Dahmane added sarcastically, "if she would spend a few days around here with the sand constantly blowing around her face and without her fancy sunglasses, she would know why we bundle up our faces."

Dahmane represents one among a new generation of Tuaregs. In some ways he symbolizes some of the changes his people have experienced over the last thirty years. He is an aggressive young businessman who flies back and forth between Algiers and Tamanrasset [the last major town before the Niger border], impeccably dressed in conservative business suits, to get the necessary permits and provisions for his small travel agency. His family, as many Tuaregs, has settled in a government-built concrete house.



Agricultural model farm, near Illizi.

Neither Dahmane nor his brothers seemed particularly vexed that the migratory life of their father's generation has come to an end. There is no romantic attachment among the young men to the backbreaking labor of the former caravan trade.

Curiously, there was also little interest in what modernization had brought them. The four-wheel drive vehicles parked outside in the blazing sun were a means to make money. The house was sparsely furnished with rugs and pillows. Dahmane had not brought back a television or household appliances from Algiers; the only intrusion was a small cassette player that kept playing local Tarqui [Tuareg in the local dialect] music. He is the brash young travel agent who freely mixes the new and the traditional. In Algiers I knew him as a hard-drinking young man - "don't ever tell my family; we drink only tea at home" - who had preserved the strong oral traditions of a desert culture. Each night at the restaurant he would spend almost an hour each day telling stories before stuffing his food down his throat in a matter of minutes.

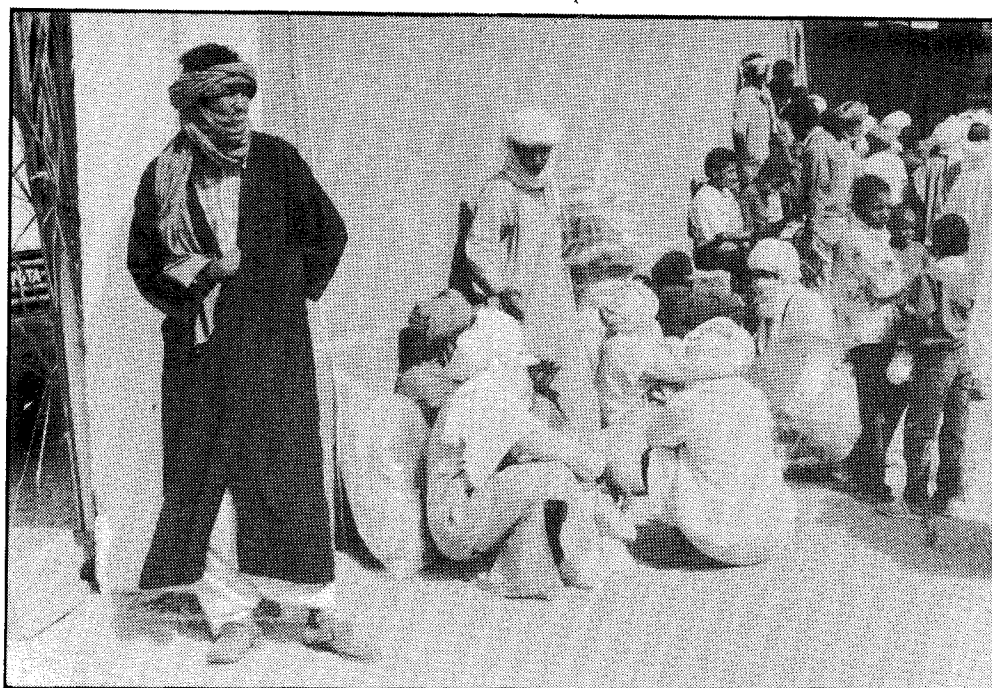
And he had also been slightly disingenuous when scorning the journalist's story about the litham. Each day, when meeting new clients, he and his brothers would wrap their heads in gauzy indigo cloth - no longer made from hand-dyed African cotton but from Hongkong or Korean polyester - and drive toward town. "For the tourists" they would say for



Landscape between Illizi and Djanet.



Tuareg in Djanet.

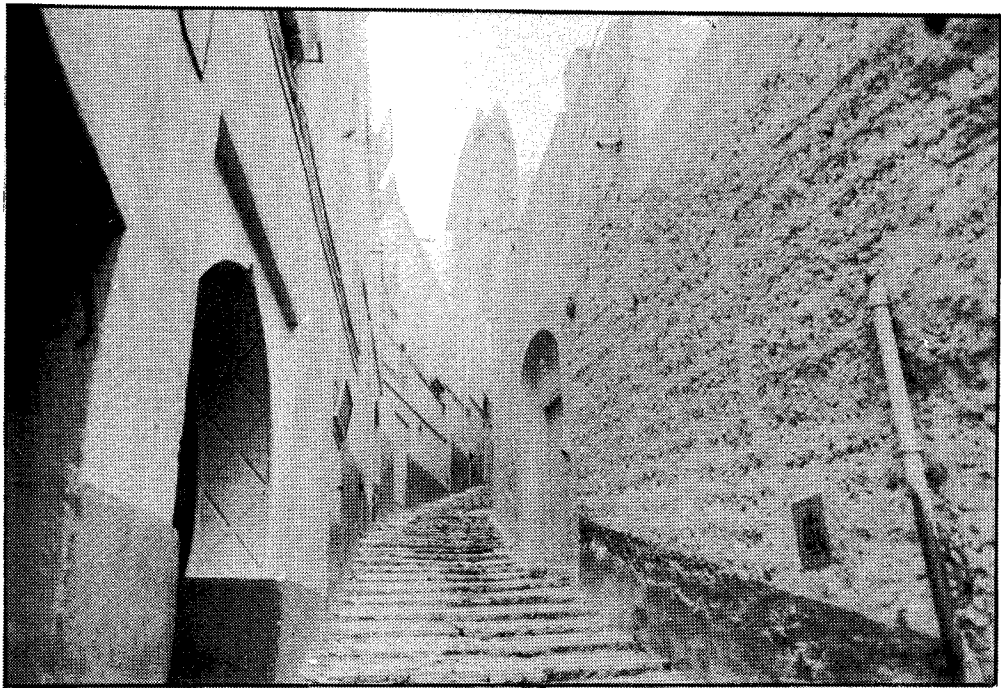


Tuareg in Djanet marketplace.

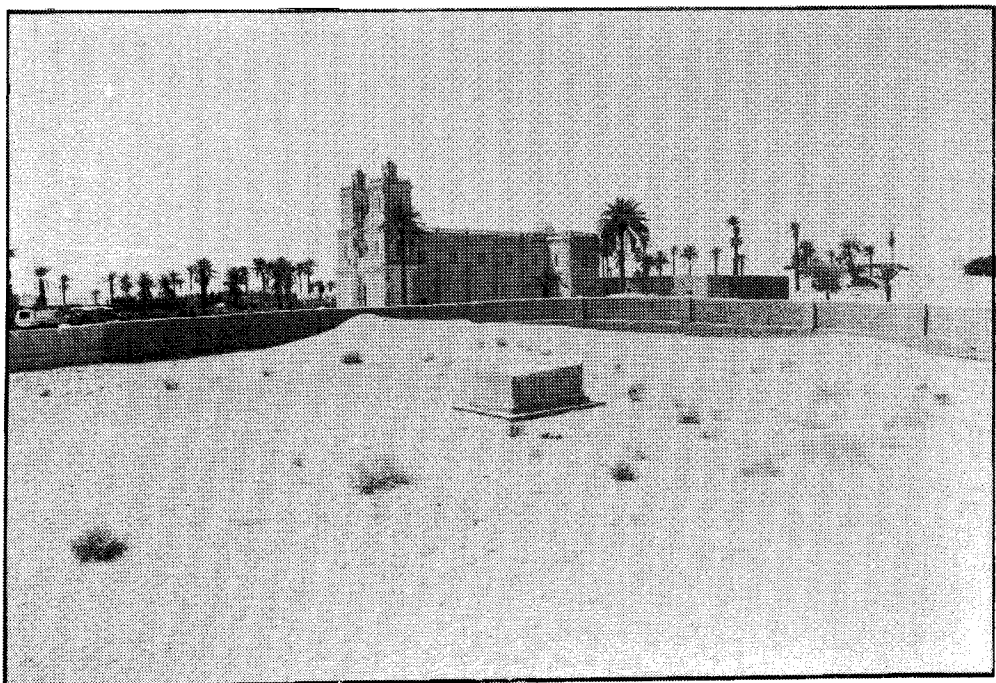
my benefit as they climbed into their Land Rovers and Landcruisers, "they love it!!"

Even when I finally encountered one of the increasingly rare camel caravans that still ply the desert routes, I was rudely reminded of the old and the new in Algeria. For days I had asked Dahmane to inquire in Tamanrasset for an incoming caravan in order to follow them into the desert and take some pictures. The old caravans that shuttled goods back and forth between Algeria, Niger and Mali have almost ceased to exist. Heavy six-by-four trucks now negotiate all but the most difficult desert pistes; their tracks often run mileswide across the enormous expanse of southern Algeria and the dust plumes they raise can be seen a mile away. Most camel caravans now consist of men from tiny isolated villages who travel to the bigger towns where the trucks deliver supplies.

The one I saw that morning in Tamanrasset was small, only eight men. After the traditional buying rituals - the merchant clusters his wares on a plastic tarp, wedging himself among the goods for sale; the customers squat at the edge of the tarp and pretend to stare at the sky until the price drops down to an acceptable level - the group quickly loaded up their camels and took off. We followed them frantically across a few miles of rocky desert (it never ceases to amaze me how fast camels can walk) and I was taking my last pictures when an airliner roared closely overhead on its



Pisé mosque at Ghardaia.



Tomb of Father de Foucault at El Golea.



Sign at El Golea: "Socialism is not a religion  
but a development strategy."

approach to Iamanrasset airport. The juxtaposition struck me immediately but Dahmane sat indifferently in the Land Rover - since he was not on business that day he wore sunglasses and blue jeans!

The changes in the lives of the Algerian Tuaregs represent only a small vignette in the rapid transformations the entire Algerian population has experienced. In a period of thirty years the country has passed through several phases of development, each leaving its distinct imprint. Perhaps the greatest change still lays ahead: the economic liberalization program is introducing a process that gives individuals greater disgression in economic - and ultimately, in the long run, political - decisions. In a country where solidarity and group interest have so long been the moving ideological force, such a change could have some dramatic effects. Despite the inevitable setbacks and delays I suspect we will see some of those effects in the years ahead.

All the best,

*Dahmane*

Received in Hanover 6/3/88