Barriers Versus Smugglers: Algeria and Morocco’s Battle for Border Security

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March 19, 2019
Article

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Terrorism, weapons smuggling, drug and human trafficking, and migration flows are driving many North African countries to bolster their border defenses. Current tactics include building miles of trenches, barriers, and fences, as well as employing sophisticated drones and surveillance technology. But will they be effective and at what cost? A close study to answer this question is worthwhile, given the number of countries worldwide either contemplating or adopting such measures.

In the Maghreb region, the efforts of Algeria and Morocco—two antagonistic countries that have gone the furthest to seal themselves off from each other—are falling short. They have had some success in stemming illicit cross-border trade, but smugglers have merely learned to adapt, changing what and how they smuggle and exploiting persistent corruption. Moreover, the security fortifications have worsened the economies of already struggling border regions, fueling protests and leading young smugglers to dabble in drug trafficking. Unless both governments take a more coordinated socioeconomic approach to border security, the isolated communities that populate these neglected peripheries will remain a potential incubator for instability.

Closed Borders Create Thriving Contraband

Border closings between Algeria and Morocco have been the norm rather than the exception. Since Algeria gained independence from France in July 1962, the Algerian-Moroccan land border has only been open for ten years in total. Territorial and resource disputes born from decolonization and continual heightened tensions led the border to close in 1963 (the Sand War), 1975 (the Western Sahara War), and 1994 (after the terrorist attack on the Atlas Asni Hotel in Morocco).[1]

These repeated closures divided families (Moroccans and Algerians along the border have historically married and traded with each other), but they did not disrupt cross-border commercial activities. During the 1970s and early 1980s, trade rules and regulations—and particularly the import restrictions imposed by Algeria—made the clandestine import of Moroccan agricultural products, clothes, shoes, and alcohol highly attractive. By the late 1980s, many Algerian food and petroleum products became subsidized, reversing the flow of goods between the two countries. The smuggling of subsidized products—especially fuel—into Morocco became a lucrative business. Intermediaries and smugglers became indispensable in connecting border communities and delivering affordable basic goods. Contraband and illegal crossings became major facets of everyday life.

State officials initially tolerated this state of affairs because alternative economic options were scarce. National development efforts in border areas were crippled by insufficient budgets, inappropriate allocations, and inadequate quality. For both the Algerian and Moroccan governments, smuggling generated a level of employment that helped attenuate youth unemployment and mitigate poverty. Over decades, smuggling helped to revitalize the Algerian border towns of Zouia, Bab al Assa, and Maghnia and the Moroccan towns of Ahfir and Oujda, transforming them into significant trading centers.

By the late 1980s, the bulk of smuggled commodities comprised fuel, foodstuffs, agricultural products, scrap metal, and alcohol, driven largely by price differentials between the products' source and destination country. For example, heavily subsidized gasoline in Algeria created the incentive for outbound smuggling to Morocco. Currency devaluation in Algeria also made a wide range of commodities cheaper compared to its neighbor, contributing to a boom in illicit trade. And, as is often the case, the trade opened up routes and crossings for the trafficking of other products, including prescription drugs and cigarettes from Algeria and cannabis from Morocco.

This web of trafficking proliferated in the 1990s when terrorism was a significant problem in Algeria, drawing security forces' attention away from smuggling.[2] Smugglers had ample time to perfect their operations. Both residents and smugglers grew savvy in using their knowledge of the border to evade security patrols and collude with border authorities. Both countries' governments maintained a general laissez-faire approach as long as smugglers avoided weapons trafficking and collaboration with terrorists.

In the early 2000s, the black market trade carried on largely unabated. The government, fearing unrest due to lingering high unemployment and poverty, continued to heavily subsidize commodities, maintaining the allure and incentives for border residents to smuggle. The contraband economy also created financial incentives for border officials, corrupt politicians, select formal businessmen, and powerful illicit smugglers to fuel trading in gasoline, food, and cigarettes. Migrant smuggling from Algeria to Morocco also increased. Populations from sub-Saharan Africa grew in the Algerian border town of Maghnia and its surroundings—to include migrants from West Africa as well as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, and Sierra Leone.

But during this time, both governments' fears that terrorists and arms and drug traffickers could operate transnationally by taking the same routes used by cigarette, migrant, and cannabis smugglers began to increase. While the Islamist insurgency in Algeria was weakened in the 2000s, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), formally established in January 2007, continued to crisscross parts of the Maghreb and adjacent Sahelian areas. In the late 2000s, the security risks were further compounded by parts of West Africa becoming a major transit hub for cocaine smugglers out of South America and into Europe. Both Algerian and Moroccan authorities feared that drug cartels could use the cigarette and cannabis trails to expand their territories.

Tightened Borders Achieve Marginal Success

It was ultimately the 2011 Arab uprisings and the resultant political turmoil that engulfed Libya and Tunisia that drove both Algeria and Morocco to tighten border control. The overthrow of Libyan strongman Muammar Gaddafi triggered a far-reaching chain of events, resulting in a wave of refugees and arms proliferation. Algerian and Moroccan officials feared that transnational weapons smugglers, human traffickers, and terrorist groups would exploit the contraband trade and the corruption of some border officials to expand their routes. As a result, both governments began reinforcing their architecture for border management, increasing the number of observation posts, regular mobile patrols, and surveillance systems. This required investment in new technologies and man power, which, in turn, necessitated substantial financial capital, especially for the Algerian government, which was facing mounting security threats along its borders with Libya, Tunisia, Mali, and Niger, as well as rising social discontent.

In the summer of 2013, the Algerian regime started cracking down on smuggled fuel, hoping that regaining lost state revenues would help pay for its investments in border management and the substantial increase in social transfers, food subsidies, and state salaries intended to weaken popular opposition and shore up regime stability. At the time, Algeria was reportedly losing $1.3 billion in tax revenues a year to cross-border petrol smuggling. With an upcoming presidential election in April 2014, the Algerian regime had a strong incentive to combat the smuggling. The Moroccan government also took unilateral initiatives to clamp down on the inflow of undocumented migrants, tobacco, and medicines. In addition to enhanced electronic surveillance at the border, the authorities invested in strengthening national-level security coordination among the different agencies in charge of border security. The Directorate of Migration and Border Surveillance saw its interdiction and coordination powers increase, making its head officially the kingdom's border czar. But both countries' endeavors were only marginally successful.

For example, in response to reinforced border control measures and the rationing of subsidized gasoline in Algeria's Tlemcen Province, smuggling networks and cross-border intermediaries merely adjusted their methods. Previously, young intermediaries would buy gasoline in Tlemcen, using ordinary passenger cars that have a double gas tank or trucks with extra large tanks. They would then transport it to warehouses, where they put it in storage tanks. Once the gasoline was put into jerry cans, smugglers used four-wheel-drive vehicles or motorcycles to transport the cans across the border to the Moroccan town Oujda. The smugglers negotiated shipments with their counterparts across the border to ensure they were "paid for and delivered." In late 2013, however, fuel smugglers replaced the four-wheel-drive vehicles with donkeys and mules, animals that could discreetly transport up to thirty jerry cans of fuel. Smugglers of cigarettes, psychotropic drugs, and cannabis also used these animals. The bulk of the smuggling profits were then "invested" in the formal economy, especially real estate.

To undermine the smugglers' new strategies, especially fuel traffickers, Algeria dug a trench along its border with Morocco (completed in 2016), with a large berm behind it. To stem the flow of human smuggling and prevent the possible infiltration of terrorists, Morocco began building a security fence (begun in 2014 and ongoing) with electronic sensors. Moroccan authorities also began identifying the donkeys in the region and branding them with ear tags for traceability, while Algeria started to purportedly shoot at any animals crossing the border unaccompanied.

These enhanced border control measures appear to have succeeded in curbing the cross-border smuggling of Algerian fuel and other consumer goods such as dates, milk, and Turkish-made clothes. The impact is noticeable on the Moroccan side of the border, where the number of roadside stalls selling fuel has dwindled. Tightened border security, supplemented by government regulations and price changes, has also reduced cigarette smuggling. The 38 percent increase in the price of Algerian cigarettes between 2014 and 2016 and the emergence of low-priced brands in Morocco in 2015 led to a 49 percent decline in the inflows of counterfeit and contraband cigarettes from Algeria to Morocco in 2016. However, the allure of contraband cigarettes has not disappeared completely, as Algerian products are still about 43 percent cheaper than those available in Morocco. This helps explain why one in eight cigarettes consumed in Morocco come from contraband. Algerian illicit cigarettes are also prized in the European market, especially in France where, in 2016, Algeria supplied more than 31 percent of contraband cigarettes.

Trafficking Terrain Shifts in Response

Advocates of border defenses point to this relative success in disrupting illicit cross-border trade. Yet, ramped-up enforcement and surveillance have not stemmed the illicit flow of all products between Algeria and Morocco. The most organized and well-resourced trafficking networks have shifted from trafficking highly lucrative fuel to smuggling migrants, cannabis, psychotropic tablets and other medicines, and narcotics.

The Algerian border town of Maghnia continues to be a strategic transit point for sub-Saharan migrants intent on crossing into Morocco and eventually Spain. Since Moroccan King Mohammed VI ordered the regularization of over 25,000 undocumented sub-Saharans in 2014, Morocco has seen the number of migrants increase significantly. Most migrants enter Algeria from Niger, where they travel south through the cities of Tamanrasset and Ghardaia to reach Tlemcen, near the Moroccan border. Assisted by Algerian smugglers, they cross Maghnia into Oujda. From there, they head into the forest of Mount Gourougou in Morocco's Nador Province. Some attempt to get into the Spanish autonomous city of Melilla by jumping over the fence, swimming around the harbor, or hiding under a truck. Others seek smugglers who can help them procure false documents to enter Melilla or Ceuta or attempt the sea crossing to Spain.

Since 2015, cannabis seizures have also increased significantly in Algeria. The enhanced border security between Spain and Morocco has driven more cannabis trafficking east.[3] The Algerian Tlemcen route leading to the southern towns of Ghardaïa, Ouargla, and El-Oued continues to be a primary conduit for reaching Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, and then finally Eastern Europe. The cannabis shipments to Oran and Algiers are smuggled onto ferries traveling to France, Italy, and Spain.

Psychotropic drugs, which enter the Algerian market through the country's southern borders and other ports of entry, constitute the second-largest category in terms of seizures. Moroccan authorities are alarmed by the staggering rise in the smuggling of psychotropic drugs. Once the shipments cross the Moroccan border through Oujda or Figuig Province in the country's far southeast, the drugs are transported to coastal cities.

Local media have reported numerous incidents of violent crime being committed by an increasing number of young men under the influence of amphetamine pills (Rivotril or Qarqobi in Moroccan colloquial Arabic).

Media stories also abound about the dangers of black market medications. In Morocco, these medicines are among the leading causes of poisoning, with 4,697 cases in 2016 compared to 4,139 in 2015, an increase of almost 30 percent. Yet the smuggling of prescription drugs into the Moroccan black market continues to boom. According to the Secretary General of the Federation of Pharmaceutical Unions, Abdelhamid Nacer, Algerian medicines for asthma, diabetes, and hypertension are prevalent in the Moroccan border town of Oujda. In his estimation, the black market for pharmaceuticals account for at least 10 percent of medicine consumption in the region of Oujda-Nador-Tetouan.

Moroccan authorities have tried without success to dismantle this market. Every year, the number of seizures of large quantities of smuggled medicines goes up, but the cross-border trade in prescription medication endures. More worrisome, there has been a steady increase in the distribution of counterfeit medicines, further impacting public health and safety. The trade in fraudulent medicines tends to be linked to organized crime groups, who are attracted to the huge profits. The concern for Morocco is that the logistical infrastructure established for the trafficking and sale of counterfeit medicine may also be utilized by drug trafficking organizations.

Both Algeria and Morocco fear becoming a transit route for cocaine originating from South America. Moroccan authorities regularly report interceptions of cocaine air couriers of mostly West African origin on the Rio de Janeiro–Casablanca flight. In 2016, authorities announced two major drug busts that netted 250 kilograms at a cocaine conversion laboratory in Oujda operated by two Peruvian “cooks” and 1,230 kilograms of cocaine aboard a ship in Dakhla near the Mauritanian border. In 2017, the head of the Central Bureau of Judicial Investigations (BCIJ), Abdelhak Khiam, reported the largest cocaine seizure in Morocco’s history. Thirteen traffickers were arrested in the country’s north and west for possessing about 2.4 tons of cocaine. In 2018, the BCIJ announced the seizure of 541 kilograms of cocaine at the port of Casablanca in a container transported by a cargo ship coming from Brazil. The bureau’s investigations also led to the arrest of twenty-nine senior officials of Morocco’s Royal Gendarmerie, including five colonels. The drug busts provide a window into the drug-related corruption of law enforcement officials. They also signal that narcotic traffickers might be shifting their routes to the Maghreb.

Another 2018 cocaine scandal underscores the growing importance of the region to transnational drug-trafficking organizations. It also reaffirms the central role that corruption plays. The major bust in the western Algerian port of Oran not only netted 701 kilograms of cocaine but also revealed the involvement of influential real estate moguls, judges, prosecutors, mayors, and the children of prominent politicians. The ringleader, Kamel Chikhi, was a well-connected real estate mogul. His contacts and reach reportedly ran deep, from government circles to the military, intelligence, and police sectors. The Algerian daily *El Watan* compared his influence and political ties to that of Ahmed Yousfi Saïd (“the emigrant”) and Ahmed Zendjabil (“the Pablo Escobar of Oran”), who controlled drug trafficking in the 1990s and early 2000s and operated with impunity through evasion and bribes.

Due to drugs coming in from multiple origins and pervasive corruption, Algeria and Morocco are struggling to fight against the rising volume of cannabis, cocaine, and pharmaceuticals. Unfortunately, the two countries’ counternarcotics cooperation remains minimal, providing opportunities for drug traders to operate undetected.

A Narrow Approach Has Counterproductive Side Effects

In the case of Algeria and Morocco, the vast array of border control measures have had serious side effects. For example, they have crippled the economies of borderland communities. The countries’ perverse rivalries and parochial animosities have undermined security cooperation and the economic potential of what would otherwise be a “booming crossroads.” “It is crazy that goods need to transit between these neighbors via the French port of Marseilles when they could simply cross over by land,” wrote Wadia Ait Hamza, the head of social engagement at the World Economic Forum. There seems to be little or no limit to these disruptive absurdities. In the first two months of 2018, Algeria imported “some 8,036 ‘semi-assembled’ vehicles from the Dacia plant in Romania,” even though such products are fully assembled and readily available in Tangier. The same applies to agricultural commodities that Algeria imports in mass from outside of the Maghreb—many of the commodities are produced by Morocco. This importing practice has been prohibitively costly. As reported in the *Economist*, “Over the decade to 2015 . . . their two economies would each have almost have doubled in size." Instead, Algeria's economy expanded "only by 33% and Morocco by 37%,"—insufficient growth to tackle the stubbornly high youth unemployment in their countries.

The failure of the Algerian and Moroccan governments to provide formal employment opportunities has exacerbated the problem. The disruption of illicit trade has caused regional distress and popular anger along both sides of the Algerian-Moroccan border. In Morocco's northeast, which borders Algeria, 70 percent of the economy depends on the informal sector, while the rest depends on remittances from Moroccans living abroad and agriculture, which has historically relied heavily on contraband fuel. The crackdown on fuel smuggling has set off intermittent protests. According to Driss Houat, former president of the Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Services of Oujda, this situation pushed 30,000 families living on profits from contraband fuel to organize many sit-ins in 2016—in one instance, blocking the national road linking Oujda to Saidia. The months-long protests over the deaths of three young men extracting coal from abandoned mines in the impoverished eastern town of Jerada in January 2018 demonstrated this rising tension.

Algerian border towns have also been gripped by intermittent protests. In February 2018, angry protests broke out in the impoverished border towns of Souani and Labtime**,** where residents demanded alternative economic options to mitigate the impact of border fortifications on their livelihood. In December 2018, *El Watan* reported that protesters at Souani were blocking the main roads, denouncing the onslaught on their legitimate livelihood and, simultaneously, the government's failure to protect the border and stem the flow of drugs. The continuing absence of alternative employment makes young people a "time bomb," reported the Algerian daily.

The situation bodes ill for other countries considering the use of fortified walls to help control access to their territory. In Maghreb countries that have even less resources and man power than Algeria and Morocco—such as Libya, Mauritania, and Tunisia—the impact on border populations is likely to be even worse.

Broader Reforms Are Needed

As long as Algeria and Morocco are taking a narrow approach to border security, enhancing law enforcement, erecting barriers, and increasing surveillance will not be wholly effective.

Barriers and technology need to be accompanied by fully integrated border control strategies that account for the geographical, political, and socioeconomic contexts. Border enforcement measures that ignore smuggling as a core development issue and disregard win-win neighborly endeavors are likely to fail. The stifling of illicit cross-border trade in subsidized commodities such as fuel and food has merely resulted in new markets and routes. Smugglers still elude border control or bribe their way across the border. Others have simply set up new supply lines.

Moreover, as long as Algeria and Morocco continue to work unilaterally, traffickers will continue to bore holes into the border strategies, aided and abetted by the corruption of security officials. Police and judicial reforms are necessary, but so is the political will to address corruption, the greatest enabler of drug trafficking and organized crime. In recent years, Algeria and Morocco have begun to reform and modernize their customs administrations. But more needs to be done to enhance both countries border management systems, including professionalizing the training, recruitment, and promotion of their customs officials and security managers.

Notes

[1] Michael Willis, *Politics and Power in the Maghreb: Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco From Independence to the Arab Spring* (London: Hurst & Company, 2012); and Anouar Boukhars and Jacques Roussellier, *Perspectives on the Western Sahara: Myths, Nationalisms, and Geopolitics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013).

[2] Author interview with Matt Herbert of Maharbal, a Tunisia-based consulting firm, January 8, 2019.

[3] Ibid.

This publication was produced with support from the X-Border Local Research Network, a program funded by UK aid from the UK government. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.