

The French Occupation of the City of In Salah and Its Role in Subjugating the Hoggar Region in Southern Algeria during the 20th Century

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Abstract

This article examines one of the methods employed by French colonial expansionist policy in Algeria, namely, the control of supply centers and commercial markets in order to subjugate the populations that depended primarily on them for their supplies. In this study, we examine the French control of the city of In Salah and its impact on the Hoggar region, for which In Salah was the only market capable of ensuring its food security. France employed a policy of economic blockade against the Hoggar region, forcing it to surrender in 1904, following its successful occupation of In Salah and the Tidikelt region in general in 1900.

In its interventions in the affairs of the Hoggar, France repeatedly threatened to cut off supplies to the inhabitants of the region by preventing them from accessing the markets of In Salah. This study concludes that the exploratory expeditions that preceded the occupation succeeded in identifying the principal trade routes, markets, and supply centers, as well as their role in subjugating the local populations. These expeditions therefore constituted a genuine cornerstone of the French colonial occupation strategy.

Keywords: French colonialism, In Salah, Tidikelt, Hoggar, Tuareg, trans-Saharan trade, trade caravans.

Introduction

One of the consequences of the French colonial geographical explorations of the various regions and territories of the Algerian Sahara was that they enabled the French to identify the complex network of internal and external trade routes, in addition to the main supply centers. This knowledge subsequently facilitated the subjugation of the local populations and enabled the occupation of major supply centers in order to cut off supplies to the regions they served. The In Salah region constituted a major center of both internal and external Saharan trade, which made it an important target of the French occupation and a strategic objective for the subjugation of the Hoggar region, whose inhabitants relied heavily on it to ensure their food security. Hence, the central research question of this study is: How did the occupation of the city of In Salah at the end of 1899 contribute to the subjugation of the Hoggar region?

This central question gives rise to several subsidiary questions, including: What was the strategic importance of the city of In Salah? How was the city brought under French control? And how did the subjugation of the city contribute to the occupation of the Hoggar region?

1. Definition of the City of In Salah

A. Definition of the City of In Salah

The Tidikelt region, together with the Central Touat and Gourara regions, constitutes what is known as the Touat region, which lies south of the Oran region, in the central Sahara. The city of In Salah is the capital of the Tidikelt region, which is divided into six districts: In Salah, Aoulef, Akabli, Foggaret ez-Zoua, Tit, and In Ghar. Tidikelt is situated between the Oued Messaoud to the west and the hills of Oued Massine and Tiguéntourine to the east, and between Oued Djerat to the south and the Tademaït Plateau to the north.

Four Arab tribes shared influence and authority in Tidikelt, each possessing a certain degree of power. At the forefront were the Ouled Bahamou, who enjoyed clear predominance and superiority throughout Tidikelt without serious competition. They were followed by the Ouled Mokhtar, a tribe that rivalled the Ouled Bahamou. Although smaller in number, the Ouled Mokhtar were extremely wealthy and were almost the sole sponsors and organizers of trade in the region. The Ouled Zenane controlled the districts of Aoulef and Akabli and had adopted almost all of the customs of the Tuareg. The fourth tribe was that of Zoua Sidi El Hadj Amhamed, which represented an extension of the influence of the Ouled Sidi Cheikh. This tribe inhabited the district bearing its name, namely Foggaret ez-Zoua. The Ouled Bahamou, the most influential tribe in Tidikelt, were led by the Bajouda branch.

As is commonly the case, a country or region is sometimes referred to by mentioning its capital. Several French writings dealing with the importance of the Tidikelt region followed this approach by referring simply to In Salah, since it was the most important district among the six districts constituting the region, namely Tidikelt.

The French historian Henri Duveyrier, in 1864, argued that there was no document mentioning the city of In Salah or its inhabitants prior to the fifteenth century. He further maintained that, in his view, the city had been founded only about two hundred years earlier, that is, around the middle of the seventeenth century. He used the name In Salah to designate four ksour, or residential settlements, located next to one another: Ksar al-Arab, also known as the Grand Ksar; Ksar Belkacem; Ksar Ouled El Hadj; and Ksar al-Daghmach. Among these four ksour, the Grand Ksar, or Ksar al-Arab, was regarded as the centre of the city. In Salah had a population of approximately 4,500 inhabitants, who owned around 230,000 date palms.

In Salah was considered the principal commercial centre of the Touat region in its relations with Africa, Algeria, Tunisia, and Tripoli. It also constituted the main route linking Morocco with Libya, as well as Morocco with Ghat and Ghadames. All these routes were primarily commercial in nature. From a commercial perspective, In Salah was also an important transit centre and a depot for goods arriving from or destined for the lands of the Sudan. It was therefore an important commercial centre not only in the Tidikelt region but throughout the entire Touat region. The inhabitants of Central Touat, as well as the populations of the other districts of Tidikelt, undoubtedly obtained their supplies there.

In Salah was visited by French colonial exploratory missions seeking to investigate and learn more about the region. Among the explorers who reached the city or its vicinity were Palat and Doulès. Gérard Rohlfs also stayed there in 1864. In 1890, M. Foureau organized an expedition whose objective was to reach the furthest possible point in the direction of In Salah. In 1893, another exploratory expedition was dispatched. The final expedition took place at the end of 1899 under the leadership of the explorer M. Flamand, and it ultimately resulted in the occupation of In Salah

B. Definition of the Hoggar Region

The Hoggar is a vast mountainous massif and is considered the ancestral homeland of the Tuareg. Consequently, the Tuareg who inhabit this region are referred to as the Tuareg of the Hoggar. Some of their tribes and individuals chose to settle in other areas and territories. For example, the Azdjer settled in the Ghat Mountains, the Moudir in the Assekrem Mountains, and the Fougas in the Fougas Mountains. **(Algérien, 1845, p. 03)**

The position of Amenokal represents the highest authority within Tuareg society. It is equivalent to the position of tribal chief, and the office is attained through election. **(Terrier, 1903, p. 330)** The Hoggar region is located approximately 600 km from the city of In Salah and 2,000 km from Algiers, and lies a few hundred kilometres from the Tanezrouft. **(Hoggar, 1937, p. 28)** Its population does not exceed 3,200 inhabitants, while its area is approximately equivalent to that of France. **(sahariennes, 1932, p. 03)**

Several exploratory expeditions visited the region in an attempt to gather information. Among the most notable was the expedition led by Eugène Cavaignac in 1847, who arrived from the Touat region. **(Merjani, 2019)** This was followed by the expedition of Flatters, who left Ouargla on 4 December 1880. He and many of his companions were assassinated at Bir Tajmout, approximately 150 km east of Tamanrasset. This event had a tremendous impact and contributed to enhancing the prestige and authority of the Tuareg. **(Marcel, 1946, p. 415)**

2. The French Occupation of In Salah

It is important to note that the city of In Salah was the first city or station in the Touat region to be attacked and occupied by French colonial forces. The French colonial historiographical school claimed and promoted the idea that the occupation of In Salah occurred by chance, and that the reason for the occupation was the attack carried out by the Ouled Bajouda tribe* against a peaceful French scientific expedition led by Flamand, forcing the expedition to defend itself. However, it would be erroneous to be misled by this French claim. The facts that substantiate and refute this assertion can be presented as follows:

There had previously been military preparations aimed at advancing toward and occupying In Salah, particularly during the tenure of Governor-General M. J. Cambon (1891–1897). His decision to withdraw was mainly due to the diplomatic calculations of the French government in Paris and its hesitation.[7]

The Flamand expedition was also military in nature and was equipped to occupy the city, or at least had taken into consideration the possibility of a response from the tribes of In Salah. The expedition was aware of the opposition of the inhabitants of the city and of the Tidikelt region as a whole to exploratory expeditions, as well as the fact that the usual response of tribal leaders to such expeditions was assassination. This was the case with Palat, who was killed near In

Salah on 8 March 1886, and Douls, who was killed between the two districts of Ouled and Akabli in February 1889. (Terrier, 1903, p. 21)

If the French expedition had been motivated solely by scientific objectives, it would have withdrawn after successfully repelling the attack launched by the Ouled Baghouda on December 28, 1899. However, what happened was quite the opposite. As soon as news reached the French authorities in Algiers, the seat of the French governor, concerning the confrontation with the inhabitants of Aïn Salah and their retreat in the face of the French expedition, the authorities promptly issued orders to dispatch reinforcements to Aïn Salah. These consisted of 200 French soldiers and 300 auxiliaries under the command of Baumgarten. They set out from El Menia, passing through Fort Miribel, and arrived at the Grand Ksar of Aïn Salah on January 18, 1900. (sahariennes, 1932, p. 75) They subsequently completed the occupation of the districts of Tidikelt. In Guezzam? [Note: the original text states “Inger”] fell on March 19, 1900, (Marcel, 1946, p. 52) Tît was occupied on March 24, 1900, followed by Akabli on March 25, 1900. The occupation of Tidikelt was completed with the capture of Ouelf on March 28, 1900. (Merjani, 2019, p. 112)

The Flamand expedition was sponsored by the Minister of Education and the Minister of the Colonies, with the support of the Governor-General of Algeria, and was organized in Algiers. (Flamand, 1900, p. 355)

The construction of Fort Miribel in 1893, which served as a military base, was located at Hassi Chebaba, south of El Menia, 135 km away along the road leading to Tidikelt. This provides evidence of the French preparations made well in advance for the occupation of Aïn Salah.

3. The Consequences of the Occupation of Aïn Salah for the Ahaggar Region

A. The Importance of Aïn Salah for the Ahaggar Region

The French colonial school of thought, through many of its representatives, regarded the occupation of Aïn Salah as an event of great importance for France’s future in the Sahara. This is hardly surprising, given its strategic location. Aïn Salah is approximately 1,100 km from Algiers and 1,200 km from the city of Timbuktu, meaning that it lies roughly midway between them. It is also 400 km from Amguid, 500 km from Tamasine, and less than 900 km from Taoudenni. It is likewise situated at an approximately equal distance from the cities that it geographically connects, namely Timbuktu, Mogador, Tangier, and Tripoli. (Terrier, 1903, p. 76)

Consequently, whoever established control over Aïn Salah and Timbuktu would become the master of the western part of the Sahara. Colonel d’Eu stated that Aïn Salah was “the key to the Sahara” and the true point from which the Tuareg of Ahaggar could be monitored. The French considered the Tuareg of Ahaggar to have long constituted an obstacle to French penetration and influence in the Sahara, particularly toward the lands of Sudan and, more broadly, Africa. They repeatedly caused problems for France, as demonstrated by the disaster that befell the expedition of the explorer Flatters, [who was killed in 1881.

What, then, was the importance of Aïn Salah for the Ahaggar region? This question can be answered through the following points:

Following the occupation of Timbuktu, one of the most important cities of Sudan, in 1894, and subsequently the occupation of Aïn Salah and Tidikelt more generally in 1900, France had

virtually completed the encirclement and siege of the Tuareg of Ahaggar. This was the view expressed by Flamand, and the idea had already been accepted by many French strategists. Among those who had expressed a similar position earlier was J. Bernard d'Attanoux, who advanced the same argument in 1895. **(Drapeyron, 1902, p. 116)**

The Tidikelt region is characterized by an abundance of groundwater, which the local population exploited by digging a large number of wells and establishing an extensive irrigation network known among the inhabitants of the region as the foggara system. These underground waters also accumulate in a vast, sandy depression where numerous and abundant plants grow. This area is known by the local population as El-Ghaba (the forest). It begins in the district of Foggara ez-Zoua, extends as far as the vicinity of Tit, and ends in the district of Aghabli. The area provides ideal grazing grounds for camels, goats, adman (a ram considered a local breed in the Touat region), donkeys, and other livestock.

These pastures were particularly important to the Tuareg of the Hoggar, especially on the Moudir Plateau south of In Salah, which contains abundant vegetation.

During periods of drought and throughout the summer, it was the customary place where the Hoggar Tuareg settled to graze their herds. The French considered the occupation of these pastures—which constituted the principal source of sustenance for livestock during critical periods of drought—to be a decisive blow against the Hoggar Tuareg, as it would deprive them of their only major form of wealth, namely livestock. **(Marcel, 1946, p. 38)**

In Salah served as a kind of warehouse for the Hoggar Tuareg, as it was their preferred place for storing part of their wealth in specially designated storage facilities, which they did not take with them during their movements and seasonal migrations.

Without the protection provided by the inhabitants of the Hoggar (the Tuareg) to the caravans of In Salah, there would have been no trade capable of making the town prosperous. Likewise, without the food supplies provided by the people of In Salah to the Hoggar region, the latter would frequently have been exposed to famine. **(Terrier, 1903, p. 297)**

Following the occupation of In Salah, the French planned and openly declared that, before attacking the Tuareg, they had to adopt a policy of starving and weakening them by cutting off the food supplies provided to them by the town. In that case, they would have been left with only Ghadames and Ghat, both of which were located far from them.

This meant that In Salah was the only market available to the Hoggar Tuareg. They brought meat, butter, and sheep there, as well as edged weapons, leather goods, fabrics, and many other basic necessities, in exchange for the dates produced in large quantities in In Salah. **(Vellard, 1904, pp. 391–392)**

These dates were highly valued and praised by the Hoggar Tuareg, who removed the pits from the dates and carried only the edible flesh, thereby reducing the excess weight in order to transport and benefit from the largest possible quantity. The Hoggar imported approximately 60 tons of dates annually from In Salah, while the Hoggar and Ajjer sent between 1,000 and 1,500 goats. **(Drapeyron, 1902, p. 62)**

B – The Actual Effects of the Occupation of In Salah on the Hoggar

Through its exploratory missions, French colonialism realized that if it wished to occupy the Hoggar region easily or subjugate it at any time, it first had to bring In Salah under its control.

Once this was achieved, it began implementing the following measures with regard to the Hoggar:

French colonialism made In Salah a base for its exploratory operations, reconnaissance missions, and military campaigns aimed at occupying the Hoggar region. An example of this was the mission led by Lieutenant Cottenest, who left In Salah on March 25, 1902, heading toward the Hoggar. On May 7, 1902, an armed confrontation took place with the Tuareg in the Hoggar, during which many Tuareg were killed due to the disparity in military equipment. Lieutenant Cottenest's column returned to In Salah on May 23, 1902.

This battle was known as the Battle of Tit, after the location where it took place, situated approximately 40 km north of Tamanrasset. It represented the first penetration of French forces into the Hoggar. **(Commandant, 1946, pp. 414–415.)**

French colonialism used In Salah as the sole supply center for the Hoggar region on several occasions. We have identified three such instances. The first occurred during the French attempt to occupy the region.

Some Hoggar tribes, such as the Kel Ahnet and Taitoq, were affected by the new situation after the French colonial authorities created commercial difficulties for them in their dealings with In Salah. Consequently, they decided to surrender in 1901. Following numerous events, France concluded a treaty in In Salah with Musa Ag Amastan, the leader of the Hoggar Tuareg, stipulating the surrender of the Hoggar on January 20, 1904.[3]

There is no doubt that the problem of supplying the Hoggar exclusively from In Salah played a role in this development.

The second instance occurred in the struggle over the position of Amenokal, the leader or chief of the Hoggar Tuareg, a contest between Musa Ag Amastan and Atisi Ag Mellal.

The latter was considered the more likely candidate; however, the French authorities favored Musa Ag Amastan because of his greater flexibility toward them. In order to achieve this objective, the colonial authorities in In Salah prevented the Hoggar tribes opposed to Musa Ag Amastan from obtaining supplies. This measure strengthened his position, in addition to other factors that cannot be discussed in detail here. **(Merjani, 2019, pp. 221–222)**

The third instance occurred following the outbreak of resistance in the Hoggar, which led to the killing of the missionary Father Charles de Foucauld in 1916.

A report by Captain de Pommier, commander of the Tidikelt region, stated that the rebellious Hoggar inhabitants would not be able to withstand the situation for long because France had cut off their commercial relations with In Salah, Touat, and the Sudan. The resistance in the Hoggar was weakened by this economic factor, whereas the resistance of the Tuareg of Ajjer was much stronger, since France was unable to impose an economic blockade on them or use it as a means of coercion. The Fezzan region therefore served as an outlet for them. **(Kedida, 2019, p. 115)**

Appendices

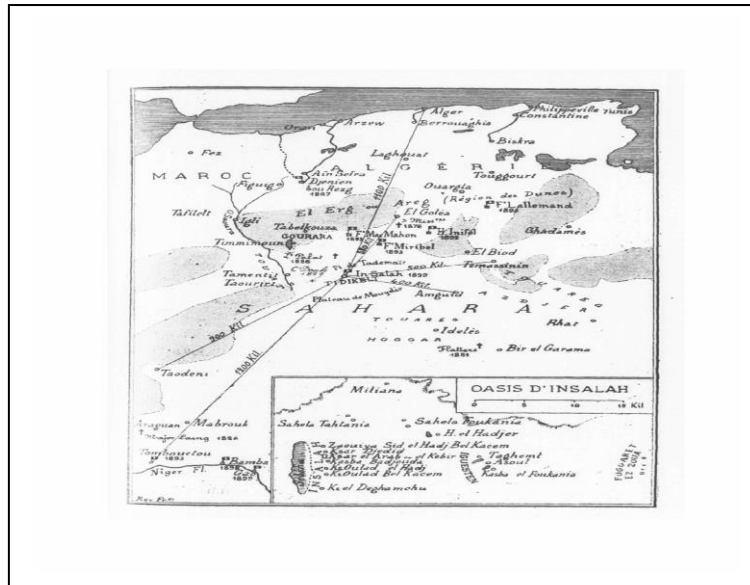
Appendix No. 01:

	Gourara Region	It consists of 9 districts.
	Central Touat Region	It consists of 11 districts.

The Touat Region	Tidikelt Region	It consists of 6 districts, the most important of which is In Salah, which serves as the capital of the region.
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Table No. 01: An overview of the regions constituting the Touat territory, with an indication of the regional affiliation of the district or city of In Salah. (Vellard, 1904, p. 73)

Appendix No. 02:



Map illustrating the strategic importance of the city of In Salah as a center situated between the North African region and the Sub-Saharan region.

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