



## Networks of Discontent in Northern Morocco: Drugs, Opposition and Urban Unrest

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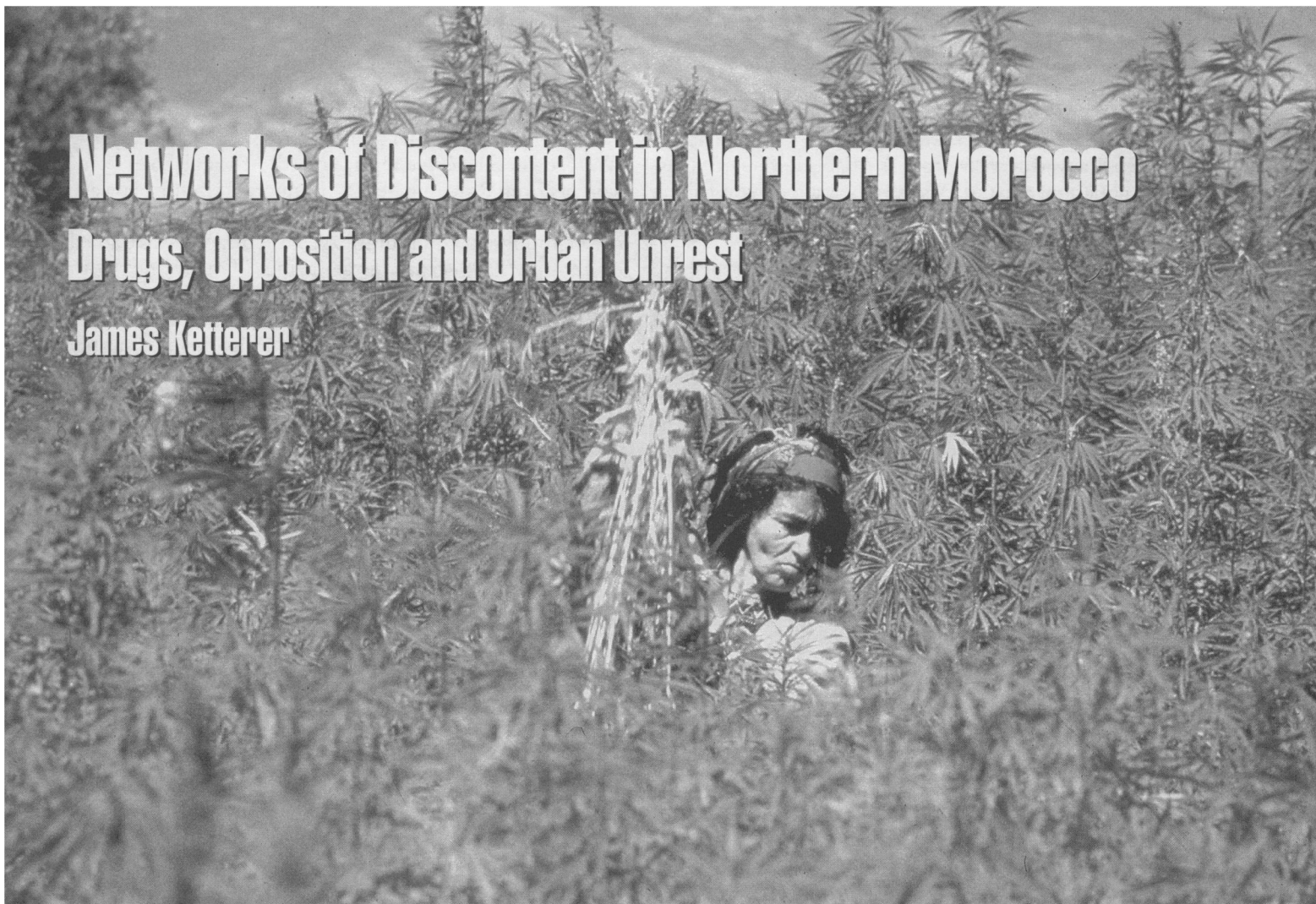
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# Networks of Discontent in Northern Morocco

## Drugs, Opposition and Urban Unrest

James Ketterer



Farmer extracting male cannabis plants from field in Ketama.

SEAN SPRAGUE/IMPACT VISUALS

*What are kingdoms but gangs of criminals on a large scale? What are criminal gangs but petty kingdoms? A gang is a group of men under the command of a leader, bound by a compact of association, in which the plunder is divided according to an agreed convention. If this villainy wins so many recruits from the ranks of the demoralized that it acquires territory, establishes a base, captures cities and subdues people, it openly arrogates itself the title of kingdom.—Saint Augustine*

**P**erched on the rocks between the Mediterranean and the base of Jebel Mousa, Morocco's version of the Rock of Gibraltar, is an ornate but almost psychedelic mosque. "It's a drug mosque," says a local taxi driver. "Everything here is from the drugs." Further up Jebel Mousa's cliffs you can look down on the coast and see a steady stream of high-powered boats outrunning the Moroccan authorities. The police don't have the horsepower to keep up with the drug barons' next shipment to Europe.

Driving east from Tangier along the Mediterranean coast, the signs of drug power are obvious: heavily guarded villas

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with strangely stylized pagodas, frequent roadblocks with police looking for the next payoff and an endless supply of young men going about their workdays in the drug business. Here in northern Morocco lurks a key challenge to the Moroccan state: a potent mix of discontent, drugs, organized political opposition and religion. Morocco's drug barons have steadily made themselves into a serious crime problem and security threat, and also major players in the Moroccan political system.

Nearly everyone outside of Morocco who follows Moroccan politics seems to be concerned with the threat of an Islamist challenge to Morocco's stability. But while the Islamist bogeyman is capturing all the attention, international

drug trafficking is relentlessly chipping away at the state's power. Morocco's drug networks operate just below the surface, slowly developing and organizing in unrecognized configurations. The drug barons and the Islamists in the north draw upon the same group of discontented poor, creating possible alliances, sharing of resources and tactics. A confluence of these forces could shake the state to its core.

## A Booming Drug Trade

Morocco is the world's largest hashish exporter. According to the World Customs Organization, Morocco supplies 70 percent of the European hashish market. Although statistics vary widely, hashish production is estimated to be 2,000 metric tons per year, with up to 85,000 hectares devoted to cannabis production, with a market value of \$2 billion. In the mid-1990s, due to record rainfalls following drought years, European experts reported that the area under cultivation for cannabis increased by almost 10 percent (the average hectare of cannabis produces two to eight metric tons of raw plant). The rains of late 1995 and 1996 were a blessing for Morocco, ending a multi-year drought. Those same rains were also a boon to the drug trade. In Tangier, this meant more jobs in the drug trade for those who could find no other work, particularly as the tourist trade dried up with the drought. Today, the drug trade continues to grow, with areas used for cultivation spreading beyond the traditional growing areas of the central Rif to the west and south in provinces including Chefchaouen, Larache and Taounate. This growth continues despite a well-publicized campaign in 1990s to eradicate drug trafficking.

The Moroccan government's anti-drug "cleansing" campaign of the mid-1990s is instructive for both its pronounced inability to deter the drug trade's growth and what it revealed about the size and scope of the drug business. Growing drugs was briefly made legal under the French Protectorate, but was declared illegal in 1956, the year of Moroccan independence. As European tourism and drug markets expanded in the 1960s and 1970s, a huge underground market for drugs developed, which was not only allowed by government officials, but encouraged.

In the late 1980s, the situation changed. Tangier became a transit point for cocaine and other hard drugs coming from Latin America and heading to Europe. These transactions infused large amounts of cash into the local drug market. At the same time, the start of the Algerian civil war next door created a black market in small arms passing through Morocco. This mixture of weapons and money spurred intense and violent competition among drug runners in northern Morocco.

## Concentration of Wealth

By 1992, a few drug barons had prevailed, concentrating an enormous amount of wealth and valuable international connections in their hands. Morocco's drug barons held a summit meeting in 1992 near the city of El Hoceima in

order to coordinate further activities.<sup>1</sup> With the stability of decreased competition and a declared truce among the drug barons, they constructed extensive networks of loyal workers within Morocco. These networks drew upon the discontented poor whose economic needs were not being met by the state, and who felt that the traditional opposition political parties were not viable channels of dissent and discontent. The numbers of Moroccans involved in drug trafficking are eye-opening: in 1996 alone, the Ministry of the Interior announced that 18,794 people were arrested for charges related to drug trafficking, surely just a percentage of those working in the drug trade. Of those arrested, only 342 were foreigners.

As the drug trade boomed, drug lords had more money to bribe security officials and corrupt politicians. Corruption does not exist as an exception to an otherwise regulated and transparent system. Instead, it goes to the very heart of the political system, and has been institutionalized by those in power. The drug barons simply availed themselves of an efficient and accepted means of doing business.

Corruption allegedly touches the very highest levels of government. The French newspaper *Le Monde* famously leveled the charge that drug corruption in Morocco reaches into the palace itself.<sup>2</sup> The monarchy, however, has always been able to distance itself from the drug trade. At the same time, it turns a blind eye to the drug economy in the north—an area King Hassan II had difficulty controlling and to which he sent limited resources. As with the political parties, which the monarchy has simultaneously encouraged and fragmented, the drug trade and accompanying corruption flourished, while the wealth was purposely spread out among many drug bosses.

## Hassan II's War on Drugs

When money and power became centralized around a few drug barons, the monarchy moved against them. Too much power in too few hands presented a clear and present danger to the monarchy in a way that the small dealers hadn't. The Moroccan anti-drug trafficking campaign of the mid-1990s was also partly a response to pressure from the international financial institutions and the European Union (with whom Morocco was negotiating a Free Trade Agreement). The campaign soon reeled in two big fish: Abdelaziz El Yakhoulfi and Ahmed Bounekkoub, a.k.a. H'midou Dib.

Yakhoulfi was arrested in December 1995. His subsequent show trial revealed a sophisticated and massive organization with an international reach. His own organization transported hashish out of the central Rif, stockpiled it in Tetouan, shipped it to Spain by sea and then delivered to wholesalers in Amsterdam. In addition to bank accounts in Morocco, Spain, Gibraltar and Canada, along with a yacht and 15 cars, Yakhoulfi boasted of personal, commercial and political ties to the Castro regime in Cuba. These ties facilitated contacts with the Colombian cocaine cartels, which craved Morocco's easily penetrable borders as distribution points into Europe. Yakhoulfi was sentenced to ten years in jail

and died of an apparent heart attack in 1998. "He was too dangerous—he knew too much," said one Tangier street dealer of Yakhloufi's death.

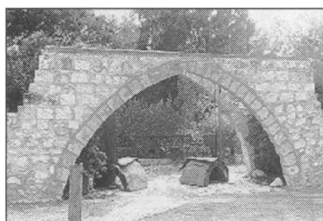
H'midou Dib still retains folk hero status in northern Morocco. A former fisherman, he constructed his own port in Sidi Kankouch on the coast north of Tangier, which was an embarkation point for a steady stream of speedboats on their way to Europe with drug shipments. Dib constructed an enormous network of loyal foot soldiers and villagers eager to protect him. He supplied jobs, built mosques, delivered social services and kept the despised authorities at bay. Dib was also involved in complex real estate transactions in Tangier, money laundering operations and other elements of organized crime. Through their wealth and organization, Dib and Yakhloufi had become leaders of a quasi-state in the north. More than the international pressure, this presented a serious challenge to the monarchy.

## "Cleansing" in Vain

Despite the high-profile arrests, the drug barons are not separate from the state. Both Dib and Yakhloufi avoided jail time in previous cleansing campaigns in 1992-1993, relying on the protection of key Moroccan officials. Only a few of these officials were investigated in the mid-1990s. Abderrahman Arbain, a member of a prominent family and head of the conservative RNI party in the Tangier neighborhood of Beni

Makkada—ground zero for drug operations in Tangier—was arrested in March 1996 but quickly released. The Dib trial revealed other links between drug traffickers and government officials, including two advisors to former governors in the Tangier province, three civilian police colonels, the military police colonel in charge of coastal surveillance and three former chiefs of the Tangier urban judiciary and national security police services.<sup>3</sup> Some of these officials were fired, arrested and tried, but it is clear that the cleansing campaign of the mid-1990s did little to curb the growth of the drug trade or its ties to official Morocco.

Several more recent incidents underscore the continued vitality of Morocco's drug trade. Bagged kilos of cocaine worth \$2 million—dumped off a ship being pursued by Spanish authorities—washed ashore in Morocco. The cargo ship *Volga* was captured with 36 tons of hashish on board. Increasingly complex money laundering schemes involving many countries, and the use of drug funds by seemingly legitimate banking establishments, most notably Chaabi, have come to light. These revelations are clearly just the tip of the iceberg. The Observatoire Geopolitique des Drogues (OGD) notes that the Moroccan drug trade has gone industrial, integrating itself into large Moroccan firms in agribusiness, fishing, transportation and import-export operations. OGD maintains that this represents a shift away from the Tangier cartels of Dib and Yakhloufi and toward the Casablanca cartels, which are more acceptable to the



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government because they do not contest state power in the same way. If OGD's analysis is correct, the *makhzen* is predictably moving against northern interests that had grown too large and powerful to control, all the while lending succor to the industrial traffickers in Morocco's commercial centers. In this light, Hassan II's ineffectual drug war appears to be a simple diversion of the EU's attention.

The palace must have relished its attack on Dib, the illiterate fisherman and an ideal sacrificial lamb for Moroccans and the West. But the state didn't count on the vehement reaction of Dib's loyal followers. They love Dib *because* he is illiterate, *because* he is one of them, a poor boy made good. With no jobs, no future and no meaningful political representation in Tangier, the drug business is the only game in town. Take it away and you have an explosion.

## Tangier Fights Back

Tangier's Beni Makkada has been the scene of riots and protests throughout the 1990s. In June 1996, the dislocation created by the drug crackdown and a confluence of other forces led to violence in Tangier. In Rabat, a legally unrecognized organization of college graduates without jobs organized a sit-in to call for government job creation programs. When political comedian Ahmed Snoussi tried to perform for the group on June 4, he was beaten unconscious by the police and hospitalized. The action was condemned by Amnesty International and PEN, the international writers group.

News of the attack on Snoussi quickly spread to Tangier, further enflaming a tense situation. The next day, Morocco's two largest labor unions held an unrelated general strike to press the government to raise the minimum wage. In downtown Tangier, most of the shops and businesses were closed and a boisterous but peaceful rally was held in the old city (*medina*). Across town in Beni Makkada, an estimated 2,000 youths went on a rampage, destroying one bank, looting another, burning cars, smashing shop windows and attacking the tax assessor's office. In addition, a national guard post was attacked. Police surrounded the neighborhood and subdued the protestors. Ninety-eight were jailed, dozens of rioters and police were hospitalized and there were reports in Beni Makkada that two rioters were killed.

Interviews and firsthand accounts indicate that those involved in the riots in Beni Makkada were young men with no legal jobs and a deep level of resentment against the government, as indicated clearly by their choice of targets—banks, the national guard and the tax assessor. More importantly, the riots took place in the neighborhood in Tangier best known for the trafficking in drugs and contraband, and therefore hit the hardest by the government crack-

down. "Why [crack down] now when we're already hurting?" asked one dealer. Many other residents indicated in interviews that the economic pressure created by the crack-down was behind the riots.

Union leaders who had called the general strike were quick to distance themselves from the rioters. "The protesters had no connection to the general strike...the residents of Beni Makkada are suffering from grave social problems, which require urgent solution, but none of our members were

among the rioters," said Abdelmejid Bouzouba.<sup>4</sup> A local journalist who had previously held positions in the government echoed the theme: "There are problems in Beni Makkada, and the people are frustrated, but these were just young boys temporarily out of control. It does not mean anything more." Other Tangier businessmen and diplomats sounded the same note in conversations. But residents of Beni Makkada, and residents of a similar Tangier neighborhood called Dra Deb told a different story: "The government is hurting our business, while at the same time giving us no alternative. They are cracking down at the command of the West, be-

cause the King is their puppet. We are fighting back, and this may be just the beginning."

## Drug Traffickers and Islamists

In Beni Makkada, two noteworthy anti-government networks overlap: drug traffickers and Islamists. As the region was enmeshed in the upheavals surrounding the Gulf war in 1990, riots broke out in Beni Makkada protesting the Moroccan government's decision to send troops to support the American-led coalition. Many of these riots were underscored by anti-Hassan/pro-Saddam themes articulated in terms common to Islamist movements.<sup>5</sup> In 1996, many lectures given by self-described Islamist sheikhs (*islamiyyun*) were well-attended by large groups of young men who ply their trade in the drug and contraband sectors. The message from the sheikhs is clear: The monarchy, which is hypocritically un-Islamic, has entered an unholy alliance with the West to oppress the average Muslim.

This author encountered countless young men who were engaged in the drug trade at some level, but also professed close adherence to Islamist ideas, most often the ideas of Sheikh Zamzami of Tangier. Zamzami's philosophy is not so clearly politically motivated as other well-known Islamists in Morocco, but his ideas are attractive to many of the discontented in and around Tangier. He died in 1989, but his views maintain currency through the efforts of his three

*Continued on page 45.*

sons and other followers. A Zamzami theme continually sounded is that of official corruption and the exploitation of the poor by the Moroccan elite. While Zamzami's followers appear to address issues of Islamic purity and behavior in public, the subtext often casts a critical eye on the hypocrisy of the monarchy and its willingness to do the bidding of the West—all at the expense of the Moroccan people.

Clearly, those who see H'midou Dib as a modern Robin Hood, helping the poor find work and build community in the face of oppression from Rabat and the West, are comfortable with Zamzami's worldview. Drug traffickers and some Islamists share tactics—and a deep distrust of the monarchy. "[The authorities] turned Tangier from the blushing bride of the north into a poor, dirty, homeless widow," said a well-educated but unemployed resident. "Tangier is slowly dying."

Drug traffickers, contraband smugglers, prostitution rings, the chronic unemployed, Islamists and other groups in Tangier have built up elaborate networks based on illegal commerce, political opposition, corruption and violent protest that have infiltrated the local political system and now challenge the state's power in northern Morocco. Periodic attempts to control these informal networks and their participants' activities have largely been unsuccessful, sporadically resulting in riots in Tangier by those most affected by government crackdowns on drug trafficking. Drawing upon a deep reservoir of discontent in northern Morocco, participation in these networks is increasingly attractive to those seeking economic opportunities and/or substantive changes in the current political situation, while participation in formal politics attracts few. Although informal, these networks are highly organized.

The level of organization is critical when examining a network's ability to challenge the state. Waterbury and Richards write that "all [Middle Eastern] cities are full of people who in fact are rootless or, if organized, are so in ways that enjoy no respect or legitimacy: beggars, prostitutes, dope pushers, scavengers, drifters and derelicts."<sup>6</sup> As most Moroccans know, these people abound in Tangier. The city is abuzz with tale after tale accusing the Moroccan authorities of shipping petty criminals to Tangier from other areas of the country. In the summer, many prostitutes and street hustlers come to Tangier to seek profits from tourists and Moroccans returning from Europe. However, these elements are often *not* rootless, but organized through criminal rings overseen by drug barons who, like other organized crime operations around the world, are expanding their business into compatible areas. The criminal rings are seen as legitimate circumventions of an illegitimate state. Hustlers, beggars and petty criminals, when even loosely organized, can turn minor urban protests into major conflagrations, particularly in the absence of any formal political groupings to articulate grievances.

## Horns of a Dilemma

King Muhammad VI sits on the horns of a dilemma: If he were to commence another crackdown on the drug

traffickers, he will likely engender more violent resistance in northern Morocco. If he does not crack down, he will suffer the displeasure of the West, and will eventually tacitly cede a great deal of power in northern Morocco to the traffickers. He cannot currently create enough jobs in northern Morocco to adequately compete with the traffickers, while the growth of the trafficking economy detracts from the formal economy and government revenues. The use of violence against these networks will certainly cause a violent reaction, yet to allow the networks to flourish will give them further opportunity to create more international connections and gain access to more resources. The new king has made inroads in the north, with several official visits, pledges to carry out renewal projects in Tangier's *medina*, support projects for the poor of the north and high-profile purchases of property for royal use.

But the drugs keep flowing. In November 2000, Spanish authorities busted a Moroccan, Rachid Tamsamani, bringing in 15 kilos of cocaine, 12 tons of hashish, 12 tons of cannabis resin, large quantities of ecstasy and cash. In a pattern now familiar to observers, the major drug ring headed by Tamsamani used a network of contacts in Morocco and across Europe to transport large quantities of hashish from Morocco to Spain, then to Holland, where it was distributed all across Europe. More telling than Tamsamani's arrest, though, were serious charges of official complicity in his operation: The head of Hassan II's royal security services, Haj Mediouri, was linked to Tamsamani by the Moroccan paper *Demain*. The result? The paper was banned. It all sounds like business as usual.

There is no honor among thieves. The drug traffickers are not a monolithic group, and the threat of open conflict between rival barons is real. For over three decades, the monarchy has adeptly played competing political actors off one another. But Morocco's drug traffickers possess enough wealth, connections, weapons and internal networks of loyalty to render King Hassan's survival strategy obsolete. With the money at stake ballooning each year, the northern drug trafficking networks and their Islamist supporters will be in increasing competition with the industrial drug traffickers and their right-wing supporters. If Muhammad VI cannot neutralize those two factions, he may very well find himself caught in the crossfire. ■

**Author's Note:** *The author wishes to thank Lisa Angerame, Catherine Sweet and Karim Mezran for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this manuscript.*

## Endnotes

1 H. Prolongeau, "Bidonvilles et trafic de drogue à Tanger," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, May 1996.

2 "A Tanger, deux milles jeunes émeutiers ont affronté les forces de l'ordre," *Le Monde*, June 7, 1996.

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4 *Le Monde*, June 7, 1996.

5 See Mounia Bennani-Chraïbi, *Soumis et Rebelles, Les Jeunes au Maroc* (Paris: Editions Le Fennec, 1994).

6 Alan Richards and John Waterbury, *A Political Economy of the Middle East* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990), p. 290.