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SUBJECT: GHARDAIA: IDEOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL OASIS

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Classified By: Ambassador David D. Pearce for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (U) SUMMARY: Proud of its independent spirit and unique heritage, the oasis town of Ghardaia stands at the gateway to the Sahara as a example of what a community whose traditional structures continue to thrive can achieve when left to its own devices. During his November 14-16 visit to the region, the Ambassador observed the fiercely self-sufficient spirit of a population recovering from the most devastating floods to hit the town in the last 100 years. Local residents said the central government relief effort was relatively swift, and does not appear to have exacerbated the ethnic and religious fault lines in the Ghardaia region (reftel), which erupted in violence earlier this year. Meetings with the



energetic members of the regional parliament and with the leader of the moderate Ibadi Islamic sect further highlighted the fact that Ghardaia's centuries of isolation in the desert have created a unique and strong community in Algeria's interior. END SUMMARY.

OUT OF THE RIVERBED

2. (U) The October 2 flash floods that struck Ghardaia were the worst the region has seen in over a century, killing 33 and leaving nearly 2000 homeless. Lying at the heart of the M'zab Valley, Ghardaia's residents responded to an increased demand for housing during the 1960s by building homes on the valley floor amidst oases that are the region's lifeblood. After witnessing the destruction caused by flood waters as much as nine meters, the wali (governor) began working to implement a new urban plan that bans construction in the flood zone and moves residents away from the valley to the currently uninhabited hilltops. As one member of the regional assembly (APW) put it, "We forgot what our ancestors knew about this valley. There has always been one great flood per century." Houses build prior to 1960 were built well above the potential flood plain and incorporated intricate systems of drainage and flood water diversion, thus the area's historic sites escaped the October floods undamaged.

3. (U) The humanitarian relief effort already follows this new development plan with pre-fabricated housing lining the roads into town, to soon provide accommodation for those families still residing in tents. The wilaya's Secretary-General (Lt. Governor equivalent) stated that the vast majority of displaced families will occupy these semi-permanent homes by the end of the year. President Bouteflika visited Ghardaia on December 28 to inspect the relief efforts.

4. (C) Despite initial criticism of the perceived slow central government response, local residents appear pleased with the reconstruction efforts underway and several praised the quick response of the military in delivering critical relief supplies in the early days following the floods. It was clear that while funding for the relief effort came from the central government, Ghardaia's closely knit society and effective local government were largely responsible for this rapid recovery. Local officials were proud that the recovery effort was well underway without any foreign assistance. When asked whether the government needed any assistance in developing a flood warning system, our interlocutors stated that technical aid would be welcome, but that an alert system was already being developed using Algerian satellites.

A GHARDAIA FOR THE 21ST CENTURY



5. (U) Whereas many regional capitals are dotted with monolithic housing projects built by Chinese construction companies, Ghardaia's community leaders have developed a suburban planning model that integrates elements of the region's uniquely Saharan architecture while providing for modern conveniences. After viewing Ben-Isguen, one of the M'zab Valley's hilltop towns that forms part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site, we were taken to a new housing compound on a neighboring hill.

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6. (U) The Tafilelt housing development, begun in 1998, was the brainchild of Dr. Nouh Ahmed, a local surgeon. Built with central and regional government funds, the project provides 600 new family homes at reasonable prices. Plans are already underway to expand the model to provide additional housing for those left homeless by the floods. Using local materials, and roughly following the design of the historic towns nearby, the development incorporates local architectural touches such as perimeter walls and ramparts, rooftop terraces for summer living, and a color scheme that incorporates the region's earth tones. On the interior, however, the homes feature modern kitchens and bathrooms, and spacious living quarters.

7. (U) Breaking with the widespread modern disconnect between traditional architecture and modern urban planning, the Tafilelt project replicates not only the architecture, but also the traditional societal norms of the M'Zab Valley. The streets are all pedestrian, there are small patches of earth for the cultivation of fruits and vegetables, as well as a collective goat farm. Trash collection is not handled by the city administration, but by a system whereby the area's youth provide the service, thereby imparting a sense of local ownership and citizenship.

8. (U) The development has met with some international reknown, as the project's leaders have been invited to many conferences on promoting urban development sensitive to traditional societies. When asked why the model not been replicated in other parts of Algeria, our interlocutors stated that other cities had attempted similar projects, but failed, possibly due to the lack of the social cohesion one finds in Ghardaia. Whereas M'zab Valley residents have clear and proud example of their region's traditional architecture, many cities in Algeria are dominated by French colonial buildings for which the local residents harbor less fondness.

REGIONALISM STRUGGLING TO BREAK FREE



9. (C) As part of our MEPI programming, post has sought to expand our parliamentary training program to include a select group of regional assemblies (APW). We met with the President of the Ghardaia APW, Ahmed Boukari, and several of its members to discuss the recent floods and float the idea of participation in MEPI programs. Mr. Boukari explained to us that Ghardaia's APW consists of 36 members, representing seven political parties, who are elected by proportional representation. The assembly meets in plenary four times per year and is responsible for approving the wali's budget, albeit reportedly without much debate. Most interesting was the fact that the APW has topical committees on issues such as education, public works, and youth and sports. We were able to meet with the culture committee, which took seriously its role of influencing central government projects in the wilaya and providing policy guidance to the wali's office.

10. (C) Boukari stated that the Ghardaia assembly had never participated in exchanges or training organized by a foreign government. In fact, he stated that despite the degree of devolved authority the APW has for affairs within the wilaya, all contact with foreign representatives is strictly controlled by the national government. He noted the example of Ghardaia once trying to become a sister city with a city in France, only to be told that such decisions must go through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Nonetheless, the APW members expressed a serious interest in participating in our parliamentary training and visits by American legislators, but reminded us that the Ministry of the Interior must approve any such program.

EVEN THE ISLAM IS DIFFERENT

11. (C) Ghardaia's independent spirit is equally represented in the sect of Islam practiced by the majority of its residents. While the majority of Algerian Muslims are Sunni, the M'zab Valley is home to one of the world's few Ibadi (originally Kharijite) communities, who have remained largely isolated in Ghardaia for several hundred years. During the

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French period, Shi'a Muslims were forcibly resettled by colonial authorities to the Ghardaia region, a move which has led to sectarian violence in recent years (reftel). (Comment: A relatively swift central government response to the October floods is unsurprising given the sensitivity of these local ethnic and religious tensions. End comment.)

12. (U) During our meeting with Sheikh Boukermouche, the head of the Ibadi Qur'anic school, we were struck by the openness of the Ibadis. In presenting their curriculum, the teachers stated that that they would like to increase the level of

English instruction in the school. They were interested in the possibility of obtaining books through the Embassy and inquired if there would be a way to bring English teachers from the U.S. As the group presented the doctrine of Islam taught at the school, they highlighted that Ibadis believe that the Qur'an should be re-interpreted in light of modern times. While extensive programming with a religious institution may not be possible, we will continue to cultivate a relationship with this moderate Islamic sect.

PEARCE





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