

Caravans transporting arms from the Sahara to Ziban 1954-1962

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• **Abstract:**

The procurement of weapons was the means adopted by the Algerian Revolution to liberate the country, and it was called the Armed Revolution due to the use of weapons by the mujahideen against the French forces. Therefore, Algeria regained its sovereignty through armed resistance against the occupation. It is noteworthy that the leadership of the Algerian Revolution resorted to weapons after realizing the failure of other peaceful means to achieve freedom and independence. They began to gather weapons, and the Ziban region was particularly effective in this regard. The mujahideen in the Ziban region obtained weapons from within the country through donations from citizens or purchases. They also acquired weapons from outside, especially along the eastern borders of Algeria with Tunisia and Libya, or from the southern borders with Mali and other countries in the African Sahel.

The procurement of weapons played a crucial role in enabling the Algerian Revolution to confront and resist the colonial occupation. It provided the necessary means to carry out armed operations, defend Algerian territories, and challenge the French forces. The armed struggle became a symbol of the revolution and a powerful tool in reclaiming Algeria's sovereignty.

• **Keywords:** Armament, Caravans, Ziban, Sahara.

• **Introduction**

The structuring and organization are the backbone of the liberation revolution, with its most important pillars enabling the success and continuity of the revolution. Since its inception in 1954, the liberation revolution has achieved several political and military victories, organizing the revolution internally and externally, expanding its reach, and controlling the organization of its bases. Therefore, the revolution organized the entire national territory, including the Algerian Sahara (Drouaz, 2002, p59,60). The eastern part of the Sahara was under the jurisdiction of the first province, while the western part was under the fifth province. A top priority for the leadership was organizing the Sahara from the initial spark, by enhancing the organization of the National Liberation Army and intensifying military activities until the convening of the Soummam Conference, which later became the sixth province (Zghadoud, 2010, p61).

1. Arms Transportation Lines:

At the beginning of 1955, Gamal Abdel Nasser decided to provide eighty thousand pounds (£80,000) to the National Liberation Front through the Arab League to purchase weapons. Ahmed Ben Bella undertook their transportation to the port of Tripoli and then to Algeria through the

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Libyan border in coordination with the fighters of Ouadi Souf and Biskra. There, the arms were stored before being moved to the command center in the Aurès region. Some weapons also came from the south, originating from Guinea, Mali, and Niger, traveling through the Saharan caravans via Ouargla and Touggourt, then to Biskra, following the weapons and supplies supply map in Algeria.(Bouzabid,2007,p37)

After the preparations made by Ahmed Ben Bella, may he rest in peace, for the material readiness of the revolution, particularly in the matter of collecting weapons before the revolution, and his success in securing Egyptian support and overseeing its transfer to the state leaders, Mustafa Ben Boulaid, the leader of Aurès, was informed of Egypt's readiness and agreement to support the Algerian struggle. Ben Bella moved to Tripoli where he finalized numerous deals for transporting weapons to Algeria, especially to the eastern border at the start of the revolution. For this purpose, Mustafa Ben Boulaid began considering bringing weapons from abroad through the south from Biskra (Bou Bakr,2011,p215).

With the increasing number of recruits in the ranks of the Liberation Army, it became imperative for the revolution to provide them with the necessary arms. This strategically required keeping the third region or the Sahara branch as a center for supplying them with weapons, as well as remaining a source of food and clothing. Among the most important areas for this supply were Biskra, Mechounech, and Ouadi Souf (Association November 1st,1994,p54), which were significant regions for supplying from the southern side of the Algerian border coming from Mali, Niger, and Mauritania (November 1st Revolution,2009,158).

One of the most important areas that supplied weapons to the Biskra region was southern Tunisia and Libya, especially. Libya was actively involved in forming a committee to provide assistance to Algerians and smuggle weapons since the beginning of the revolution until the end of 1958. According to Abdelmadjid Bouzabid's testimony, Tunisia and Libya were organized to host over five hundred units, thanks to the efforts of Ahmed Ben Bella, Ahmed Mahsas, and Amar Boukhilaz in Tunisia. These weapons were transported from the port of Zwara in Libya, some of which were then moved northward through Souq Ahras and distributed to all regions, including the Sahara branch in Biskra, albeit in limited quantities(Khalifa,2007,p134).

Some weapons were also brought in from the south, near Ouadi Souf, stored in Biskra, and later transferred to the Aurès region. In November 1958, there was a significant smuggling operation where five trucks belonging to the National Liberation Front crossed from Libya, carrying over fifty tons of weapons and equipment. Some of these were sent to the fourth region of the sixth province from the southeast through Ouadi Souf (Lulub,2009,p 67). This was further supported by the arrival of another shipment of weapons in late 1958 following an attack led by a group of Libyan fighters on four French trucks loaded with supplies and weapons near El Oued, headed for their camp in Gannat(Khalifa,2007,p150).

The fighters in the Biskra region were overseeing the procurement of weapons from the south, particularly from the residents of Timimoun. According to the statements of the mujahid Boudaïa, the fighters were collecting weapons from Algerian soldiers in the French army covertly under the supervision of mujahideen Alal Naitour and Tahami Lhassan. They worked on transporting these weapons to El Menia, where they were loaded onto camels wrapped in camel skins (qirqoor) and barrels of carbide heading towards the northern desert areas, including Biskra.

The southeastern southern regions served as centers and rear bases for the revolution, especially after the independence of Mali in 1960. Among these centers for our National Liberation Army was the Gaou base, located 1600 kilometers from the Malian capital of Bamako, which is considered the first and primary base for supplying and arming the revolution in the eastern states like Ouadi Souf and Biskra(National Organization of Mujahideen,1984,p240).

In this context, many fighters affirm that broad segments of the population at the beginning of the revolution were donating their most valuable possessions, whoever had anything to give. Some would gift or donate items like clothing resembling military uniforms, shoes, hats, or fabrics due to the organic connection between the people and the fighters(Qalil,1991,p278-279).

Mujahid Saeed Pasha mentions that providing clothing in the Biskra region was done through ready-made clothing and fabric merchants(Interview with the Mujahid Saeed Pasha,2012). Additionally, Mujahid Ahmed Zrouak confirms that most fabrics were imported from southern traders across the Algerian and Malian borders(Interview with the Mujahid Ahmed Zerouak,2012).

Additionally, the policy of separating the Sahara also contributed to raising the issue of armament in the Biskra region, considering it the most important area for acquiring weapons. Efforts were made to enhance its security position and increase its military capabilities by:

- Establishing and strengthening military forces in the south, including Biskra, especially with General de Gaulle coming to power in mid-1958.
- Creating restricted areas in the south covering more than 6000 km².
- Intensifying repression in the region and conducting widespread inspection and arrest operations(November 1st Revolution,2009 ,p54).

2. Examples of Weapon Shipments from the Sahara:

There are detailed tables of those aid shipments from the beginning of the revolution up to May 1956 along the Saharan route.

The first table

Number of boxes	Type	the total
500	Germany's arsenal	500000
320	Hand grenades	7680
600	.303 caliber ammunition	600000
200	English rifles .303 caliber	1000
400	English rifles .303 caliber	2000
800	English rifles .303 caliber	4000
2	Wireless radio devices	4
1000	English rifles .303 caliber	1248000
80	German rifles	800
50	German hand grenades	1000
20	Explosives	800
/	English rifles .303 caliber	2000
32	Collagen paste for explosives	800 kilograms
01	English pistol .38 caliber	There are 26 pistols and 720 rounds

(Khalifa,2007,p137)

Based on the previous tables, it becomes evident to us the volume of these military aids that were provided to Algeria, especially towards the direction of El-Zibane. The majority of these aids came from Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya through the eastern Saharan borders. They were then transported using camel caravans and livestock along the Ghat-Djanet road to El-Zibane (Al-Sadiq,2000,p141).

3. Distribution of Weapons in the El-Zibane Region:

The Algerian War of Independence broke out on the 1st of November 1954, 6th of Rabi' al-Awwal 1374 AH. Its operations were comprehensive across the entire nation, including the Biskra region, which had the honor of executing five military operations under the leadership of Hussein Berrahal. As the revolution spread and some weapons became available, the revolution encompassed all remaining areas, with varying degrees of intensity from one place to another (Interview with the Mujahid Bjaoui M'dani,2012). These regions participated in the revolution's strategy in three stages:

Stage 1: Creating an atmosphere of insecurity and targeting the colonial infrastructure.

Stage 2: Infiltrating deep into society and eliminating those loyal to the colonial regime.

Stage 3: Intensifying and activating military activity (Bou Bakr,2011,p180,181).

Some sources mention that the army count of the first region ranged between one thousand and fifteen hundred (1000 to 1500) mujahideen. As for the weapons possessed by the fighters, 75% were military weapons and 25% were hunting weapons. There were one thousand one hundred (1100) men ready to bear arms and three thousand (3000) reserves ready to join the armed Liberation Army armed with rifles and sticks (Menasria,1999,p34,35).

Mustafa Ben Boulaid placed great hopes on the Biskra region as it was a passage for transporting weapons and the main source of funding for the revolution. However, there was a shortage of weapons, and this issue persisted until the beginning of 1955 when Mustafa Ben Boulaid went to Libya to acquire weapons. He was apprehended by the French authorities on February 11, 1955, transferred from Tunisia to the Kediet-prison in Constantine, and managed to escape on November 4, 1955. He returned to organize the first region, especially the Sahara branch, including the Biskra region, due to its strategic and vital importance for the revolution (Bou Bakr,2011,p183,184).

According to the testimony of the mujahid Mohamed Essami, the collection and distribution of weapons in the Biskra region and its surroundings continued even after the outbreak of the revolution, specifically into early 1956. He was tasked with gathering weapons and then transporting some of them to the Aurès region, from where they were distributed to other areas (Zaghidi,2009,p115,116). On one hand, weapons were also distributed in the Sahara branch, particularly in the areas surrounding the capital of Biskra. From there, they were given to the fighters located in places such as Touggourt, Khenguet Sidi Naji, Bir Ben Azzouz, El Kantara, Djemorah, El Ouata, as well as the tribes of Ouled Zakri in Ouled Djellal, extending to Ouled Nail in Bousaada and El Golea in an organized and planned manner (Hashia,2001,p12).

In addition to all this, it is noteworthy that all the mujahideen were Algerians, especially in the first region of Aurès. There were no boundaries between them, creating a unified and cohesive group. Mujahideen from Aurès were found in Bousaada and Biskra, showcasing a seamless integration. Consequently, there were no issues in distributing weapons, whether within or outside

of Biskra. Therefore, the weapons were considered to be on a unified front, indicating the strong bond among the fighters on one hand and their belief in a common enemy, the French, on the other hand. This unity helped in overcoming any potential ethnic divides among them.

The distribution of weapons was done in the form of caravans, especially towards the end of 1955 and the beginning of 1956. Some of these weapons were sent to the second and third regions in groups containing more than 30 fighters, relying on agility, activity, cunning, determination, and the vigilance of the Front's men spread along the route (Boualtamine,1987,p205).

These caravans used various means of transportation for the weapons transfer, including horses, camels, and at times even carrying them on their shoulders along the way. They would travel more than 30 kilometers at night, sometimes even reaching up to 70 kilometers. Their goal was to transport and distribute weapons to other areas, despite the difficulties and hardships faced by the mujahideen. These challenges included the fear of the enemy and the surveillance of the French administration on one hand, and on the other hand, exhaustion, hunger, and thirst due to the intense heat of the region, especially during the summer. However, they managed to successfully carry out all their tasks (November 1st Revolution,2009 ,p344).

The intelligence officers in the Biskra region played a significant role in supervising the distribution of weapons, including martyrs like the first sergeant intelligence officer Barbary Mohamed El Sadik and the first sergeant intelligence officer Barbary El Arabi (Interview with the Mujahid Saeed Pasha,2012).

4. Challenges Encountered in the Armament Process:

The Ben Lounis Movement: The French did not hesitate to support this conspiratorial movement after it allied itself with the enemy army in early 1957. They provided it with all necessary weapons, equipment, protection, and assistance in selecting deployment locations in exchange for combating the National Liberation Front, uncovering its cells and organizations, and disrupting its supply routes. Therefore, they worked on recruiting loyal elements from various parts of the country. This movement was active in the regions of El Djelfa, Bousaada, and Ouled Djellal. The French army eliminated it by the end of 1958, but its elements continued to fight against the National Liberation Front until the end (Drouaz,2009,p44).

The Sharif Ben Saeed Movement: This movement was also aligned with the loyalist movement and collaborated with the enemy to eliminate the revolution, expose its plans, particularly in terms of weapons, enabling it to eliminate the leader of the Sixth Wilaya, Ali Mellah, and establish a faction to fight against the revolutionaries. Its activities intensified further after de Gaulle came to power, using it as a tool to strike the region and sow division among the people (Interview with the Mujahid Bjaoui M'dani,2012).

In addition to the aforementioned challenges, in the year 1960, France carried out its largest genocidal military operations with the aim of eradicating the National Liberation Army. These massive and hellish operations utilized all of the French military's vast capabilities. The French army mobilized advanced and lethal weapons, including attack helicopters, troop carriers for rapid interventions, as well as aircraft specialized in using napalm and poisonous gases. During these operations, France withdrew some of its forces from the NATO alliance and deployed them with sophisticated weaponry to engage in these brutal campaigns against the National Liberation Army(National Organization of Mujahideen,1984 ,p5).

These operations covered all regions of the country in rotation, with a focus on areas dense with forests, rugged terrains, and where guerrilla gatherings were prevalent. Therefore, the region

of Biskra and its surroundings (El Zibane) stands out as one of the rugged areas with its mountains stretching from the eastern borders in the Aures Mountains to the western borders in the Thamer Mountains near Ain M'lila and Ouled Djellal.

These areas were among the most rebellious against the French enemy, aiming to thwart de Gaulle's hellish economic project which sought to deplete the country's resources of oil and gas, and the political project of desert separation. Based on these characteristics, the Biskra region became a stage for these brutal operations, hindering the armament and supply processes in the area (Interview with the Mujahid Bjaoui M'dani,2012).

Ahmed Ben Bella, may he rest in peace, made significant preparations for the material readiness of the revolution, particularly in the matter of collecting weapons before the revolution. He managed to secure Egyptian support and oversee its transfer to the leaders of the Wilayas. Mustafa Ben Boulaid, the leader of the Aures, was informed about Egypt's readiness and agreement to support the Algerian struggle.

Ben Bella moved to Tripoli where he brokered several deals to transport weapons to Algeria, especially on the eastern border as the revolution began. For this purpose, Mustafa Ben Boulaid began considering bringing weapons from abroad via the south from Biskra. With the increasing number of recruits in the ranks of the National Liberation Army, it became imperative for the revolution to provide them with necessary arms.

Strategically, it was necessary to keep the third region, or the Saharan branch, as a center for supplying weapons and also to ensure it remained a hub for supplying food and clothing. Among the most important of these regions were Biskra, Mechouneche, and Ouadi Souf, which were significant areas for supplies from the southern side of the Algerian borders coming from Mali, Niger, and Mauritania (November 1st Revolution,2009,p158).

• Conclusion

The El Zibane region managed to diversify its sources and lines of armament, both from within the country through donations and contributions from locals, as well as through battles and ambushes against the enemy, or via deserters from the French army carrying their weapons. Additionally, arms supplies also came from outside the country through the Saharan side. Initially, these sources were limited due to the initial lack of organization within the revolution.

Numerous reports confirm the entry of many arms convoys through the Saharan borders and their arrival in the Zab region. This reflects significant efforts made by the region's residents to enhance their weapon supplies and diversify their sources to confront the French occupation.

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