

**The End of the Line**  
Understanding the Morocco-Algeria Border

“Après la fermée, c’est tout la mort.”  
-Figuigi Man, 22 April 2008

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## **Abstract**

The land border between Morocco and Algeria has gone through cycles of closure and opening over the past decades. This project set out to examine how the closed border has affected the lives of individuals in border towns, specifically Figuig. It explores the border's effect on Figuig's economy, smuggling, healthcare, land ownership, and familial relations. Through interviews, archival research, and participant observation, I found that none of these areas has been affected positively by the current border situation, but that there is no concrete solution in sight to fix the problems the closed border creates.

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## Introduction

After a ten-hour train ride from Casablanca to Oujda, and then a seven-hour bus ride beginning in Oujda, I finally arrived in Figuig, a city with population 12,577 (as of 2004),<sup>1</sup> just on the Moroccan side of the Morocco-Algeria border. Of the original eight *ksars*, or neighborhoods, seven remain in what is now Figuig. The ancient walls dividing them still stand as testament to the water feuds and need for protection that the inhabitants have experienced throughout the centuries. Beni Ounif, the eighth *ksar*, now resides on the other side of the border in Algeria, only a few kilometers away from Figuig proper. The city itself was split with the separation of the nations: a fitting introductory fact for my arrival in Figuig that would set the tone for the rest of my findings.

Despite the background research I had done, and the information I had collected from people before I left for Figuig, I was not prepared for the moment when my guide stopped me in the middle of the street and pointed to three of the four sides around me and said, “That’s Algeria.” I knew before arriving that Figuig is on a peninsula of Morocco that juts into Algeria, but to see for myself that Figuig is effectively cut off from the rest of the country by the neighboring state on three sides and mountains on the fourth was something else. The city is isolated, a seven-hour bus ride from the last train stop in the east. It is the border city at the end of the line: “Figuig, the end of the world, rather forgotten,”<sup>2</sup> as one author noted.

What made me take this trip? Why did I travel for seventeen hours over the span of two days? Why Figuig? I heard about the city by chance. It was mentioned in passing by an acquaintance in Morocco, but for some reason it stuck with me. The acquaintance spoke highly of the city, and told me that it was his favorite place he had traveled to in Morocco. Thus, when

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<sup>1</sup> Figuig. (2008). *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

<sup>2</sup> Berriane, Guitouni, Kaioua, & Laouina 401.

independent study time came, my sights turned to Figuig. The closed border between Morocco and Algeria did not come up in conversation or in class lectures while I was in Rabat, and the lack of information provided about it was one of the major draws to find out for myself. Figuig seemed like a good place to conduct my research in light of my acquaintance's recommendation and the city's geographic location within Morocco. I arrived in Figuig wanting to talk to the citizens, to hear their stories. How has life in Figuig changed since the border closing? What has been the effect on your life?

My primary form of information gathering was the interview. Over the course of two weeks spent on-site in Figuig, I conducted fourteen individual interviews and two group interviews. Before each, I explained who I was and why I was asking questions. I explained the subject of my research, as well as the institution for which I was conducting it. I gave each interviewee an informed consent form<sup>3</sup> translated into Arabic to read and sign if they wished, but also explained that it was fully within their rights to remain anonymous, which some elected to do. All interviews were conducted in French. This presented challenges at some points because French is not my first language, nor am I fluent in it. However, my interviewees were very patient with me and were willing to clarify or explain anything that I did not understand the first time. I realize that some sentiments and nuances were mostly likely lost in translation, but I am confident that I understood the core messages of what the interviewees wanted to communicate.

In addition to interviews, I conducted archival research in order to understand what has been published regarding the Morocco-Algeria border. I used online articles, some of which were news articles regarding the recent talks between Morocco and Algeria to discuss opening the border. I also used two books, both of which were written in French, which I translated myself. The written information I gathered helped prepare me to understand what people spoke

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<sup>3</sup> Appendix A

about, and provided a standard against which to compare what the Figuigis said about their personal experience of the border closing. I found that oftentimes the harsh reality of the situation was glossed over in the published materials.

I interviewed only a small percentage of the population of Figuig, so my findings and conclusions cannot be considered definitive, nor can they be generalized to other border cities since I conducted all my research in one place. However, I feel that the information I gathered, both through interviews and through archival research, portrays the importance of the closed border on people's daily lives. I formed real relationships during my time spent in Figuig, and found that everyone I spoke with was willing to share with me their story and their opinion. I feel that the information I have gathered, though littered with drawbacks as any research is, paints a true picture of the effects of the Morocco-Algeria border closing on individuals' lives in Figuig.

I have divided this paper into sections, distinguishing what I found to be the largest areas of impact: the economy, contraband and smuggling, healthcare, land ownership, and family issues. All five aspects of life have been negatively and severely affected by the border closing. Published materials acknowledged changes in all topics, but it took the personal stories of the people of Figuig to make me understand how monumentally detrimental the border situation is.

## **1. The Morocco-Algeria Border Situation, in Brief**

Since Algerian independence, in keeping with the reigning climate and bilateral relations, the Morocco-Algeria border saw cycles of opening and closing over a period of 38 years that totaled 20 years of closure: 1963, from 1975 to 1988 and from 1994 to today.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Berriane, et al. 425.

Beginning in 1963, the year after Algeria gained independence, the borderland has been an area of dispute between Morocco and Algeria. In 1963, despite the fact that, “when Morocco gained its independence in 1956, it had become the launch base of Algerian resistance,”<sup>5</sup> and Figuig had done its part by giving money, food, and lodging to the Algerian revolutionaries, Algerian troops advanced into Morocco and took land that had belonged to Figuigi families for generations. It felt like a betrayal after all the aid Figuig had given the Algerian independence movement. The citizens of Figuig could no longer harvest dates or take care of palmeries that their grandfathers planted if they lay on the wrong side of the imaginary line near the mountains. Thus began the ongoing land ownership troubles that have continued through to the present day.

The most recent border closure between Morocco and Algeria began in the summer of 1994 following an attack on Atlas Asni hotel in Marrakech where the wedding celebration of one of the daughters of former King Hassan II was taking place. Rabat blamed the attack on the Algerian secret service, and in response to the attack, King Hassan II imposed entry visas on all Algerian citizens. Unhappy with this unilateral action, Algeria reacted by closing the border between the countries. Since then, the common land border has remained closed, fundamentally altering life at the edges of the two nations.

The reasons behind the perpetual border closings have always been unclear. What would have led Algeria to turn on those who helped it in its time of need? Why does the border remain closed when it is to the detriment of so many spheres of life? Scholars believe that some of the motivation is ideological. Academics make a distinction between Morocco’s “conservative ideological orientation” and “Algeria’s socialist direction.”<sup>6</sup> The two different orientations of the neighboring governments have led to a cautious relationship at the best of times, and a hostile

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<sup>5</sup> Abah, <http://www.asharq-e.com>

<sup>6</sup> Algeria Africa, [http://www.photius.com/countries/algeria/government/algeria\\_government\\_africa.html](http://www.photius.com/countries/algeria/government/algeria_government_africa.html)

one at the worst. The monarchy of Morocco is wary of the militaristic government to its east, because it is from there that antiroyalist sentiments penetrate the country. The 1973 antiroyalist uprisings in Figuig were backed and ignited by Algerians and people sympathetic to the Algerian government. Since 1973, many of the people I interviewed have said that Figuig has been under punishment from the Moroccan government, and the punishment has been carried out as an era of neglect: no investment in infrastructure, no defense against the ever-encroaching Algeria. The ideology of the socialist country is dangerous to the status-quo in Morocco, and that is one motivating factor for keeping the borders closed, and the disrupting philosophy at bay.

Throughout my time talking with people in Figuig, the issue of the Western Sahara arose repeatedly. I found that the topic of the Morocco-Algeria border is inextricably linked to that of the territorial dispute between Morocco and the Polisario Front and Sahrawis. This has been a relevant, ongoing issue since the late 1970s, and academics agree that, “Algeria’s relations with Morocco, its neighbor to the west and most significant Maghrib rival, have been dominated by the issue of self-determination for the Western Sahara.”<sup>7</sup> The border closure from 1975 to 1988 was largely due to the Western Sahara conflict. Though recognized by the United Nations and international community as an independent state, the Western Sahara remains under Moroccan jurisdiction, as it has been since Spain pulled its colonizing forces out of that region of Africa. Enough evidence to prove conclusively that the Polisario is a front for the Algerian government has not been gathered, but it is generally acknowledged that Algeria is, at the least, the financial backing for the revolutionary forces. When the border between Morocco and Algeria was open, it was easy for Algerians to run arms to help the Polisario, and even now, “Most of the approximately 102,000 Sahrawi refugees are sheltered in camps in Tindouf, Algeria.”<sup>8</sup> The

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<sup>7</sup> Algeria Africa, [http://www.photius.com/countries/algeria/government/algeria\\_government\\_africa.html](http://www.photius.com/countries/algeria/government/algeria_government_africa.html)

<sup>8</sup> Western Sahara, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/wi.html>

individuals I interviewed cited Algeria's desire to have access to the Atlantic Ocean as the motivation for funding the Polisario. As long as Morocco controls the territory, Algeria does not have unlimited access to the potential economic boon of an approach to the sea. If Western Sahara gains independence, Algeria will hold immense sway with a government it helped to install, and thus will be able to negotiate whatever policies they wish regarding coastal usage and fishing rights.

Whatever the political reasons behind the border closing and separation between states, I was told unanimously by all my interviewees that the people who reside on both the Moroccan and Algerian sides of the border are united by blood and tradition. A former police officer of Figuig explained, "Whether or not the borders are open or closed, there are things that tie us together." Along the border region, and especially in Figuig, families living on both sides of the border are descendants of the same Amazigh (Berber) tribe, the native inhabitants of North Africa. Families spread across borderlines, which is not difficult to conceive when Beni Ounif, one of the original *ksars* that now lies in Algeria, is but a few kilometers away. As Benjamin Stora states in his book, *Algérie, Maroc: Histoires parallèles, destines croisées*, that "the people of this divided territory have the same language, the same culture, the same faith."<sup>9</sup> Because of these extremely close ties, the border closing is all the more tragic, as families who are physically close, and neighbors that have so much in common, are unable to interact.

The history, the political intrigue, and the sameness of the border population make for a complex situation along the Morocco-Algeria frontier that defines the way life is lived in border cities.

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<sup>9</sup> Stora 116.

## 2. The Border Economy

The first thing that Touria Amrou, the owner of a photocopy shop in Figuig, said when I asked her about Figuig's economy was, "It is the major problem. Especially the economy."<sup>10</sup> Even as a brief visitor, I could tell that there is not much commerce or monetary flow occurring in Figuig, that "the closing of the border translated into a stagnation of commerce, hotel business, and urban activities in the border cities."<sup>11</sup> The pace of life is slow, businesses close for hours a day, there are few things to attract the tourist set despite the rich history of the city, and there are few office buildings, the ones that do exist are largely unidentifiable from the houses or empty buildings around them. Since the border closing, Figuig's economy has come to a standstill. There are few jobs in this forgotten city at the edge of the country, and Figuigis continue to leave for larger cities in Morocco, or for cities abroad where they have a chance to make a living. Many of the people that remain in Figuig live off the remittances of family members living abroad or in other regions of the country.

A history teacher I interviewed while in Figuig explained that city's dependence on Algeria was the cause of the economic crash when the borders closed. Figuig, I learned, was more intertwined economically with the south of Algeria than with the north of Morocco. Its geographic location (a two-hour bus ride from Bouarfa, the nearest Moroccan city) makes it difficult for citizens to rely on other areas of Morocco to stimulate their economy. Algeria is closer, more similar, and has a history of economic relations with Figuig. When the border closed, however, all legal trade stopped. Inhabitants of Beni Ounif could no longer buy fresh Figuigi dates, and citizens of Figuig no longer had easy access to affordable cigarettes or fossil fuel sources. A large customer sector for Figuigi businesses was lost. Prices on goods in Figuig

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<sup>10</sup> Amrou, Touria. Personal interview. 22 April 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Berriane, et al. 425.

rose almost across the board. Petrol and natural gas became extremely expensive, as did the prices of many manufactured goods. If a Figuigi does not want to participate in illicit economic activity, he or she will find herself paying sometimes more than double the pre-border closing price of goods.

Aside from commerce and trade, the border closing has decimated the tourist economy in Figuig. Previously, the city was an important stop for people passing through Morocco to Algeria and to the rest of North Africa. It was a stopover for pilgrims on their way to Mecca. It was an entry and an exit point in the extreme east of Morocco. Now, it takes a seven-hour bus ride from the last train stop to get to the city. It is at the end of the line. The Lonely Planet guidebook gives Figuig a few scant paragraphs, and though the Rough Guide guidebook speaks highly of the city, it devotes much the same amount of space. With the exception of the annual musical festival, few people make the trip to the border city. While I was in Figuig, I did encounter a handful of French tourists who were making the rounds in their motor homes of the remote locales of Morocco; they were there to learn about a place that others forgot. They fancied themselves real trekkers. I think that speaks volumes for how Figuig is perceived by the tourist set today: remote and unvisited.

It has not just been Figuig itself or other border cities that have lost revenue from cut economic ties with Algeria. The country as a whole has felt the fiscal strain: “Morocco has been losing up to \$1.0 billion per year in trade and tourism revenue because of the closed border, officials and economists said.”<sup>12</sup> The revenue loss is perhaps most evident in the border cities because they have a limited range of economic sectors and thus have no other sources with which to camouflage the monetary loss, and nobody aside from Algeria to rely on to stimulate the economy. However, the closed border is draining the entire country, not just the border

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<sup>12</sup> Reuters, <http://www.reuters.com>

region, of capital that could help fund necessary projects. Opening the border would reintroduce money from tourism, and, “during periods of open borders, the influx of tourists is extreme (in 1991, two million tourists passed between Algeria and Morocco),”<sup>13</sup> so it stands to reason that the money lost from the inability of people to pass between the neighboring North African countries is a substantial sum. Opening would also reintroduce potentially lucrative trade with Algeria. The negative economic effects of the closed border reach far beyond Figuig, and far beyond the border region. It is a national, not solely a local, economic problem.

### **3. Contraband and Smuggling**

“They know that smuggling is illegal, but they have to do it,” Hadda Zegnoun,<sup>14</sup> an El Assala Association Ensemble Artisanal worker in Figuig, explained to me one morning in Figuig. No one disputed the fact that bringing in and purchasing goods from Algeria is illegal, but also no one seemed to have any real moral conviction that the practice is wrong. How could they afford to disapprove though, when it is their only option? The legal Figuigi economy is in shambles, but people need goods, and they need to be able to afford to purchase those goods. Abderrahmane Chachil, an instructor and coordinator at the Center for Cross-Cultural Learning in Rabat, told me that smuggling activity along the border follows the cycle of border opening and closing: when the border is closed and economic activity is halted, people are forced to turn to the illicit market, “because people couldn’t travel easily, they reacted negatively.”<sup>15</sup> Being unable to legally transfer goods between countries forced merchants and intermediaries to do it illegally, or to lose their livelihoods: smuggling “compensates for the weakness or absence of commercial exchanges (in the case of the Morocco-Algeria border), and has become a substitute

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<sup>13</sup> Berriane, et al. 426.

<sup>14</sup> Zegnoun, Hadda. Personal interview. 24 April 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Chachil, Abderrahmane. Personal interview. 16 April 2008.

urban and regional economy in eastern Morocco.”<sup>16</sup> One young Figuigi man estimated that twenty percent of people in Figuig are involved in the contraband business. The mountains surrounding Figuig make it more difficult for effective smuggling to take place compared to a city like Oujda, so the young man said that the rate of people who participate in smuggling in Figuig would stay relatively low at twenty percent.

The necessity and conditions of smuggling once again return to Figuig’s geographic location. Not only does the mountainous landscape play a role, but also Figuig’s distance from everything else in Morocco influences the activity. A group of Moroccan youths that I spoke with about the topic justified the existence of smuggling and contraband to me by telling me that it is necessary for life because Figuig is so far away – its location in the country necessitates an illegal economy. The most affordable goods in Figuig come from its closest neighbors. For example, a pack of contraband cigarettes from Algeria cost fifteen dirham, while the same pack sold legally would cost thirty-six dirham. The price difference is substantial, and when goods other than cigarettes, such as petrol, gas, and clothes, are considered, the necessity of the products in question becomes more apparent. All of my interviewees commented negatively on the increase in price of goods that were previously affordable for everyone.

One of the men I interviewed worked as a police officer in Figuig for twelve years after years working in larger, western cities. Though he maintained that police work in Figuig was never very challenging or thrilling, he confirmed that the amount of smuggling significantly increased every time the borders closed. He told me that, if caught, a smuggler faces arrest and a prison sentence. The time in jail depends on what is being smuggled and how it is accomplished. The former police officer estimated sentences ranging from three to twenty years. He did also say that if terrorism was a suspected factor, Interpol becomes involved. Never did he mention

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<sup>16</sup> Berriane, et al. 425.

shooting or harming perpetrators in any way; however, force was one of the main concerns and deterrents to the illegal activity, according to the Figuigi youths with whom I spoke. The young men told me that smuggling is a very dangerous business, because if the Algerian soldiers along the border see what is happening, the smuggler is shot. The youths made no mention of Moroccan forces harming smugglers, and neither did the former police officer, but I wonder if that was more out of pride for their own countrymen, or if that was entirely factual.

Smuggling and contraband have become key aspects of life not only in Figuig, but also in cities along the entire Morocco-Algeria border. With the border closure, legitimate economic activity is halted, but people still need to obtain the goods and money that they require to live, so they turn to prohibited measures.

#### **4. Healthcare**

In an isolated city such as Figuig, one would think that the available health facilities must be of a high quality. The citizens, after all, would not be able to easily access medical care other than what the city itself provides. Unfortunately, this is not the case in Figuig. I visited the hospital while in Figuig, and found that it resembles a clinic, not a hospital with the resources to provide quality medical care for a variety of ailments. Hadda<sup>17</sup> confirmed the lack of adequate care in the Figuig Hospital through her own experience. This past year, her father and mother both fell ill and had to seek medical attention. When they arrived at the Figuigi hospital, the doctor diagnosed them, but then told her parents that the hospital could not provide the care that they needed to get well; the facility did not have the supplies to treat them. As a result, Hadda had to take her parents to Bouarfa and Oujda to get the treatment they required. The trip was long, especially while traveling with invalids, and added to the cost of the already expensive

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<sup>17</sup> Zegnoun, Hadda. Personal interview. 24 April 2008.

medical care. The alternative was to leave her parents without treatment, but since Hadda had the means with which to obtain care, there was no deliberation involved.

Not everyone in Figuig is lucky enough to be able to afford to travel to Bouarfa or Oujda for medical treatment. Some are too ill to travel. Some do not have the money to do so. Hadda said that pregnancy has become more dangerous in Figuig, both in the city and in the nomadic community that lives in the surrounding lands. She said that the Figuigi hospital is unequipped to deal with especially difficult cases, and that if the woman is already at the hospital seeking care, it is usually too late to be able to make even the two-hour bus ride to the next-nearest Moroccan hospital in Bouarfa. The overall health of the city, I was told, has decreased as a result of lack of convenient and affordable medical treatment.

When the borders are open, a Figuigi high school history teacher told me, Algeria is the first choice for hospitalization. The hospitals there are closer, less expensive, and provide better service. Touria<sup>18</sup> was the first to bring up the subject of healthcare with me in my series of interviews. She is disabled and has to use crutches to walk, and so has had ample experience with the healthcare system in Figuig. Touria told me that before the borders closed, she sought all medical care in Bechar, Algeria. There is a large hospital there with good doctors and facilities. It is the closest facility to Figuig, and is less expensive than Oujda. Moroccans who live on the border regularly took advantage of the nearby Algerian facility, and saw healthier lives because of it. Now, due to the closed land border, Figuigis can no longer access services that could save their lives. If they want to receive premium care, they now need to make the seven-hour journey by bus to Oujda, as the hospital in Bouarfa still lacks some services. Were the borders to open, Touria predicts that the overall health of the city would rise, and fewer people would die and remain ill due to lack of access to required healthcare.

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<sup>18</sup> Amrou, Touria. Personal interview. 22 April 2008.

## **5. Land Ownership**

To one who has not seen the Morocco-Algeria border control station on the road from Figuig to Beni Ounif in Algeria up close before, the location of it does not seem to make much sense: it is in the middle of a palmerie. Indeed, that is how much of the rest of the border near Figuig is, cutting up property lines. For people who have experienced the continuous conflict over land and border issues, the location of the border does not come as a surprise, but it is just as puzzling and distressing. Much of the land just on the other side of Morocco's border with Algeria is former Figuigi property. The past generations of Figuigi planted the palmeries there, carefully tended the trees, and harvested the dates, passing the gardens from father to son, until now, when the gardens have become inaccessible because of the border closure. It seemed ridiculous to me, as I leaned against the metal roadblock just outside the Moroccan guard building, that the family who owned the tree next to me could feasibly harvest their crop, but the people who wanted to get dates from the tree six feet in front of me were prevented from approaching it by governmental decree. There was nothing divisive in the border palmerie other than an imaginary line drawn up by politicians in cities far away.

The issue of occupied land was one of the most heated I encountered during my research in Figuig. Farmers, people whose livelihoods come from the palmeries, make up a large portion of the population of the city. Throughout history, when more and more palmeries came under Algerian control, it did not create only an economic problem, but also one of identity and ownership. The trees stand as a testament to many generations' hard work, and are a symbol of life and prosperity in a family. The destruction and isolation of the palmeries is an issue that brings forth much emotion in the population. I was walking with a Figuigi man along the border

between two mountains by the river. There was once a palmerie that lined the banks of the water, stretching into what is now Algeria. Some trees remain on the Moroccan side, but they are overgrown with other shrubbery, and appear distended. Omar, the man, began to tell me about when he was a boy, how his father would bring him down to this palmerie where their family's trees grew, and how they would sleep under the stars during the summer to better tend the trees and to escape the oppressive heat in the city. He told me about going there for the date harvest, and about how his grandfather had planted the trees and then passed them along to his father. Omar does not farm. He is a schoolteacher. The palmerie that once partially belonged to his family now lies in Algeria, and Algerian soldiers have long since burned the trees on their side of the border to the ground. Omar apologized to me as we stood on a hill overlooking the river valley, explaining that he could not come here and look at this destroyed landscape without shedding tears.<sup>19</sup>

The dispute over which country owns the land in the area to the east of Figuig has been continuous since Algerian independence, and history is never far from the minds of the people of Figuig. The people I interviewed still expressed shock, disappointment, and disbelief at Algeria taking Figuigi land the year after Figuig had helped them gain independence. The wound still seemed fresh to many I interviewed who expressed similar sentiments to Abdellatif Alitdal, a Figuigi currently working in the United States and back in Figuig for a visit, when he said, "To thank Morocco for its help, Algeria gave us a slap in the face and took our land."<sup>20</sup> Mohammed Slimani, the tour guide at Hotel Figuig, lamented the fertile land as, "lost riches."<sup>21</sup> The money that could come from the date harvest of the disputed trees is lost to everyone. Figuigis cannot reach their families' trees, because if they try to cross the border to care for them, Algerian

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<sup>19</sup> Omar. Personal interview. 24 April 2008.

<sup>20</sup> Alitdal, Abdellatif. Personal interview. 22 April 2008.

<sup>21</sup> Slimani, Mohammed. Personal interview. 22 April 2008.

authorities will chase them back into Morocco. The Algerian border citizens of Beni Ounif refuse to cultivate the gardens or harvest the dates because they know that the gardens are not theirs, that the palms belong to the people of Figuig. As a result, when one stands at the border and gazes into Algeria, a forest of dead trees makes the view. All that is left of the palm groves are trunks rising from the dusty ground. Nothing flourishes.

One of the other unanimous comments from the interviewees regarding the occupied land was the lack of governmental action taken to attempt to reclaim the lost land, or to compensate the families who lost their source of income. There is currently an association, I was told, in Figuig that is beginning to address the issue of compensation, but the Moroccan government has been largely silent on the issue. Mohammed Benefice (a requested alias for a Figuigi male I interviewed) attributed the national government's negligence to the state of punishment Figuig has been in since 1973 when it was home to antiroyalist uprisings under King Hassan II. Since the uprisings, the monarchy has taken very little initiative to develop or help the citizens in the far eastern city. Morocco is doing very little to recover Figuigi land, and the people are not happy. Abdellatif took my notebook out of my hands in order to write for himself the sentiment that so many farmers of Figuig feel: "I wish [we] will get back our fathers' land."<sup>22</sup>

## **6. Familial Relations**

Before the Morocco-Algeria border began its cycles of opening and closing, Figuig did not seriously consider itself part of Morocco, but rather as part of the border region. This mentality stretches through history, originating in the time when that area of the world was part of one Amazigh kingdom. The same customs, traditions, and family lines have survived to the

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<sup>22</sup> Alitdal, Abdellatif. Personal interview. 22 April 2008.

present day. Indeed, the Algerian city of Beni Ounif used to be the eight *ksar* of Figuig. Up until 1975, the train station at Beni Ounif read, “Beni Ounif de Figuig,” when it was scratched out to differentiate between the countries. After the border closing, many people in the border region found themselves separated from their loved ones who had previously been their closest neighbors.

One of the men I interviewed in Figuig, Abdelkarim, was born in Beni Ounif. He lived there for the first thirty years of his life until 1975 when, after the Green March into the Western Sahara, Algeria gathered the Moroccans within its borders and kicked them out. Despite the fact that he was born on Algerian soil, Abdelkarim’s father was born in Figuig, and that was the basis upon which he was included in the round up. He told me the story of how Algerian soldiers collected the Moroccans and brought them to the border at either Oujda or Figuig. There, they put them out of the trucks, and watched them leave Algeria. They were not allowed time to pack or to bring anything other than what they were wearing. Abdelkarim estimated that 45,000 people were expelled, and ended up in refugee tents in Bouarfa and Oujda. The Moroccan government did what it could to provide food and work for the refugees. Abdelkarim first worked at a boulangerie and then was provided another job posting. Not all Moroccans within Algeria were expelled; the professionals were allowed to stay. Doctors, lawyers, engineers, and the like remained behind. Their families, however, were not exempt. Abdelkarim’s brother stayed behind in Algeria, but the rest of the family was removed to Morocco. This forcibly stranded relatives on either side of a closed border.<sup>23</sup>

The universal tone I encountered while conducting interviews and asking questions about familial relations across the closed border was profound sadness. “We never see them. It is truly

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<sup>23</sup> Abdelkarim. Personal interview. 25 April 2008.

a crisis,”<sup>24</sup> Khadija Ettahri, a Figuigi woman licensed for work in public rights, explained about her family members that currently live in Algeria. When the borders are open, it is easy to see one’s family; Beni Ounif is a fifteen-minute journey from Figuig by land. However, when the borders are closed, the fifteen-minute journey turns into a long, expensive voyage in which one must travel from Figuig to the airport in Casablanca (which would have taken me over seventeen hours to accomplish by bus and train), take a plane to Algiers, and then make one’s way south from Algiers down the other side of the border. Abdelkarim estimated the cost at upwards of 4,000 dirham, and Hadda simply cited the cost as, “a very large amount of money.”<sup>25</sup> Most families, if they can afford to make the trip at all, can only do so every few years. Abderrahmane used to see his cousins that live in Algeria every summer. He now sees them every four or five years.<sup>26</sup> During times of border closure, people have to rely on letters and phone calls to communicate with their family members even though they live but a few kilometers apart.

Fatima Lahyane, a Figuigi woman working with the Ensemble Artisanal, made it clear that it is a “very large problem” when family members cannot be with each other in times of trouble.<sup>27</sup> She has an aunt in Algeria who is very ill but does not have a husband or children to take care of her. Fatima herself cannot afford to make the trip to care for her aunt, and so the aunt is left alone in her time of need. This is not an isolated story of forced separation during times of trial. Hadda’s aunt who lives in Algeria could not attend her grandfather’s funeral in Morocco because the cost was too expensive and the journey too long.<sup>28</sup> I heard other stories of parents on one side of the border and children on the other. Everyone I spoke with had family that he or she could no longer easily reach, and each person was heartsick over it.

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<sup>24</sup> Ettahri, Khadija. Personal interview. 22 April 2008.

<sup>25</sup> Zegnoun, Hadda. Personal interview. 24 April 2008.

<sup>26</sup> Chachil, Abderrahmane. Personal interview. 16 April 2008.

<sup>27</sup> Lahyane, Fatima. Personal interview. 22 April 2008.

<sup>28</sup> Zegnoun, Hadda. Personal interview. 24 April 2008.

In a culture that is so extremely family-oriented, the separation of extended families and support networks strikes a harsher blow. The border closing has disrupted familial relations and ties, and it is the everyday citizens who are suffering, not the governmental officials who made the decision to close the border in the first place.

## **7. The Future of the Border**

A communiqué issued on Thursday (March 20th) by the Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs said: "The Kingdom of Morocco reiterates its willingness to open a new page in the relationship between the two neighbouring countries, taking into account their common past and shared destiny." The ministry added, however, that some of Algeria's "statements have indicated that finding a definitive solution to the question of the Moroccan Sahara is a prerequisite."<sup>29</sup>

On March 20, 2008, after the latest round of talks in the United States with the Polisario Front, Morocco called for the opening of its border with Algeria. The border remains closed. Algeria refused the proposition. The Algerian government says that it recognizes the benefits of opening the border, but has said that it will remain closed until certain political situations, namely the Western Sahara issue, can be resolved. The people I interviewed in Figuig were not always aware of the recent offer to open the border, but most people cited the Western Sahara conflict as one of the major obstacles toward an open border. Abdellatif was aware of Morocco's recent offer, and explained Algeria's refusal on the basis that Algeria wants Morocco to keep spending money in Western Sahara so that Algeria can, one day, more easily dominate North Africa.<sup>30</sup>

Everyone I interviewed distinguished between the will of the two national governments and the will of the citizens of both countries. "We are brothers," Touria told me, but the politics

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<sup>29</sup> Touahri, S., & Fethi, N. (2008).

<sup>30</sup> Alitdal, Abdellatif. Personal interview. 22 April 2008.

of the situation is what controls the border situation.<sup>31</sup> The majority of the Algerian population wants the border to open, I was told, despite the fact that it has been Algeria that refuses to change the status quo. The Chaouia is an anti-Morocco group in Algeria that upholds the necessity of the closed border. The group controls many positions in the military, which, in turn, controls the government, and it is the government that makes the decisions, not the more sympathetic Algerian population. The Moroccan government itself has some reservations about normalizing ties with Algeria, concisely summarized by Abdellatif: “Fear of instability, that’s the most of it.”<sup>32</sup> The threat of terrorism, it is believed, will increase if the land border is opened because arms movement from Algeria will be easier. There is also the threat of antiroyalist ideologies entering Morocco from the socialist state. The borders remain closed for political reasons, even though the people that the closure most affects desperately want a change.

Another reason an interviewee gave for Algeria’s latest refusal to open its border with Morocco is the so-called, “Arab Mentality.”<sup>33</sup> Omar told me that Arabs all over the world have an inherent lack of trust in each other that prevents them from effectively joining together or negotiating agreements. The lack of confidence in each other is a debilitating factor that permeates all relationships, even those between family members. Because of this, Omar explained, it will be a very long time before anything between Morocco and Algeria can be resolved. As written in a recent news article, “Any talk about prospects of normalization of the relations of the two neighboring countries and the factors of Maghreb unity remain mere ink on paper, unless it is accompanied by a genuine will to open the closed border.”<sup>34</sup> Cooperation toward a common goal or common good is missing between the Moroccan and Algerian

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<sup>31</sup> Amrou, Touria. Personal interview. 22 April 2008.

<sup>32</sup> Alitdal, Abdellatif. Personal interview. 22 April 2008.

<sup>33</sup> Omar. Personal interview. 24 April 2008.

<sup>34</sup> Ashab, <http://www.english.daralhayat.com>

governments, and it seems the genuine will to fix the situation is too. Thus, the borders remain shut, with no foreseeable alteration of current circumstances.

## **Conclusion**

Out of all the things that I learned during my independent study experience, the extreme relevance of the border situation in Figuig struck me most. Everything that takes place in the city, including the minute things, such as buying a cigarette for an afternoon smoke, are affected by the greater political climate between Morocco and Algeria, and the people are aware of it. They speak with great sadness and frustration about how the Morocco-Algeria border closing has affected the economy (both legal and illegal), land ownership, healthcare, and relations between family members. Everyone I spoke with acknowledged the fact that with the borders closed, Figuig is an isolated, stagnant city, but as Fatima said, “If the border opens, Figuig will become something.”<sup>35</sup>

The economy in Figuig has crashed, smuggling has increased, quality healthcare is lacking, land has been lost, and families are separated. And the people can do nothing about it. “We’re the last ones to know...We have no say. That’s for sure. They will decide,” Abdellatif said in reference to the Moroccan and Algerian governments.<sup>36</sup> The people I spoke with felt that they have no say about, and cannot affect, what happens as regards the international border. They saw themselves, and those people, their families and neighbors, that live on the Algerian side of the border, as casualties of greater governmental decisions. On more than one occasion during my independent study project, the person I was interviewing told me that I was the first person to come to Figuig and ask how people feel about the border closure. They had never

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<sup>35</sup> Lahyane, Fatima. Personal interview. 22 April 2008.

<sup>36</sup> Alitdal, Abdellatif. Personal interview. 22 April 2008.

before been asked for their opinion on the situation, nor been asked about how the policy decisions affect their lives. I was told that I was the first outsider to care about what they experience every day, and about what they want for the future.

There is always a distinction about what the people want, and what the governments want, but what the people overwhelmingly want is for the borders to open. Life will improve for everyone that way. Not only will the border citizens have a revitalized mode of living in their home cities, but the two countries at large will also benefit from the eased economic flow and personal relations solidified by opening the land border. Unfortunately, if current events are any indication, there is a long way to go before the two nations can gain a friendly relationship. Western Sahara still looms in the background, monarchical and socialist ideals are in opposition, and old rivalries between two nations vying for dominance in North Africa continue under the surface. Abderrahmane believes, and it seems supported by current and historical evidence, that “none of them is really willing to solve the problems,”<sup>37</sup> and no people I interviewed could conceive of a political and international climate in the near future that would result in the borders opening. The current face-off seems destined to last indefinitely until the two nations can overcome their differences.

After I thought our interview had finished, Hadda stopped me packing up my materials. She leaned toward me, and said slowly as she looked at me, “My last answer: I hope that the border will open.”<sup>38</sup> Her words can stand for every single person with whom I spoke. They want the borders open.

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<sup>37</sup> Chachil, Abderrahmane. Personal interview. 16 April 2008.

<sup>38</sup> Zegnoun, Hadda. Personal interview. 24 April 2008.

# Appendix A

## Statement of Consent – English Version (Also translated into Arabic)

### Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the effect of the border closure between Morocco and Algeria on the lives of individuals in border towns, specifically, Figuig. This study will examine how life in Figuig has changed, how the people of Figuig perceive that change, and what the people hope for in the future regarding the Morocco-Algeria border.

### Duration and Elements of Study

The study will be conducted over a period of three weeks, from April 19 to May 10 2008. It will include observations of participants as well as interviews and fieldwork.

### Risks

The study has no foreseeable risks for participants. However, if you feel uncomfortable with the observation or interview process at any time, you are free to terminate your involvement.

### Compensation

Participation in this study will not be compensated, financially or otherwise. However, your assistance is greatly appreciated by our research team.

### Confidentiality

Every effort to keep your personal information confidential will be made in this project. Your names and other identifying information will be changed in the final write-up, and will only be known to the research team.

### Participation

I, the undersigned, have read the above statements. I affirm that my participation in this study is voluntary and understand that I am free to withdraw my consent at any time without penalty.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

I recognize that this study involves interviews and/or observations that may be audio-recorded and transcribed.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

### Research Team:

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Researchers may be contacted by e-mail or telephone for any reason.

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