Algeria 2012 Crime and Safety Report

Crime; Political Violence; Terrorism

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Overall Crime and Safety Situation

Generally speaking, the crime and safety situation in Algeria remains unchanged from 2011. Terrorist threats posed by al-Qa‘ida in the Islamic Maghreb continue to dominate security concerns and media reporting. Regional instability brought about by revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, along with a changing regional political climate, has resulted in increased security concerns. Social and civil unrest in the wake of the Arab Spring remain major challenges for the Algerian Government. As has been the case for roughly the past five years, rioting over quality of life issues such as access to housing, unemployment, and work benefits can break out at any moment. Finally, upcoming legislative elections in May 2012 have the potential to spark unrest or violence if voters believe that election results have been manipulated.

The Algerian government does not publish accurate and statistically valid crime reports, but embassy observation indicates that the frequency and intensity of street crime remain at a moderate level. Crimes such as pick pocketing, snatch and grabs, and muggings occur in high-density and low-income areas, occasionally involving foreigners. Auto thefts and residential burglaries are commonplace in low-income neighborhoods but rarely occur in ex-pat neighborhoods. When these crimes do occur in diplomatic or ex-pat residences, it is when they are not secured with heavy duty doors and locks, windows are un-grilled, and other security features are not in place.

Road Safety

Local media reports state that Algeria has the fourth-largest vehicular accident rate in the world and the highest in both the Maghreb and Arab world. The nationwide average is around 5,000 deaths annually. Many factors play a role in traffic fatalities: poorly maintained roads; a severe lack of roadway signage; ill-maintained vehicles; the use of defective, pirated auto parts; driver fatigue; and reckless, unskilled drivers.
Military and police checkpoints are commonplace on major roads within large cities and throughout the countryside. Security personnel at these checkpoints expect full cooperation. Drivers should maintain vigilance as terrorists and criminals often employ false checkpoints as a tactic for ambushes and kidnappings, particularly in rural areas. This tactic is primarily used in the Kabylie regions of Boumerdes and Tizi Ouzou (east of Algiers) but also employed nationwide.

The current road infrastructure in Algeria continues to be insufficient for the large and growing number of vehicles on the roads today. Traffic management resources (such as traffic lights and stop signs) are inadequate, and the ability to create new roads with large cities is limited. The Algerian government has been working on increasing the number of paved roads between major urban areas, which is obvious by the number of foreign contracting firms working on road construction projects. Both a new urban metro rail line and an above ground tramway were recently inaugurated in Algiers along very limited routes. While the systems are modern, clean, and well-maintained, they seem to have done little to alleviate chronic traffic congestion in the capital.

The Algerian government has implemented stricter conditions for licensing vehicles and has introduced the following new measures: withdrawing older vehicles from circulation, reducing the on-road hours for public service vehicle drivers, and barring heavy transport vehicles in Algiers during daylight hours. These measures should improve road safety conditions in years to come.

**Political Violence**

Historical Perspective

Algeria has been fighting Islamist militants since the 1992 cancellation of National Assembly elections. The ensuing conflict, although less intense than it was during its height in the 1990s, has lasted nearly 18 years, and the loss of lives is estimated at more than 200,000. In recent years, the violence has diminished, but the threat of attack by Islamist militants remains ever present. al-Qa’ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is the most active terrorist group in Algeria. This group, known as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat before affiliating with al-Qa’ida in 2006, is a splinter of the Armed Islamic Group that arose in the early 1990s. Although AQIM’s primary targets have been the Algerian government and its institutions, it has also targeted foreign interests, particularly in the Sahel states of Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. To increase its financial resources, AQIM has kidnapped westerners in those countries to obtain ransoms. For that reason, many governments around the world have identified the Sahel region as an area of concern. Kidnappings and the threat of kidnappings have
prompted foreign governments and international organizations to warn their citizens, employees, and constituents against living, traveling, or working in this region. In 2011, regional instability brought about by revolutions in neighboring Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt has led to new security concerns. Reports of arms smuggled out of Libya began at the very onset of the civil war in Libya. Indeed, the number of weapons seized on Algeria’s eastern and southern borders has increased. These weapons have likely increased the ability of terrorist and criminal organizations to menace government security forces and commercial interests for years to come.

Regional Terrorism and Organized Crime
Terrorism is one of the principal challenges faced by the Algerian government. However, organized crime groups involved in drug and weapon smuggling continue to be the main organized crime problem in Algeria. Authorities have dismantled several counterfeiting rings specializing in producing fraudulent Euros and Algerian Dinars. Local media increasingly report on arrests of drug, weapon, and cash smugglers near Algerian borders.

Algeria is a transit point for internationally trafficked persons, primarily from Sub-Saharan Africa, but as European nations are cracking down on illegal immigration, Algeria is growing as a destination country. The majority of illegal migrants arrive in Algeria voluntarily, having paid smuggling organizations for assistance in getting to Europe.

International Terrorism or Transnational Terrorism
The threat posed by AQIM continued to menace the Algerian government and ex-pat business operating throughout Algeria in 2011. By some accounts, the threat has grown. AQIM operatives in Algeria have stated their intention to overthrow the Algerian government and attack Algerian, French, Spanish, and American targets. AQIM continues to execute small-scale ambushes on security forces, the use of improvised explosive devices, and kidnappings for ransom. The Embassy has noted the following salient developments in 2011: an increased use of double suicide attacks, the use of homemade rockets and mortars targeting industrial compounds, and several high profile kidnappings. In total, AQIM attacks in Algeria resulted in the deaths of over 160 civilians and Algerian security forces in 2011.

AQIM executed several notable operations in 2011. In April, approximately 40 AQIM militants attacked an army barracks 140 kilometers east of Algiers and killed 17 soldiers. At the start of Ramadan, a pair of suicide bombers near Boumerdes attacked a police station and killed about ten police officers. Nine days later, police at a checkpoint 50 kilometers east of Algiers shot and killed three terrorists, who had planned to strike public buildings in Algiers with
suicide bombs. One month later, on August 26th, a double suicide bombing took place at the Algerian Military Academy of Cherchell, 90 kilometers west of Algiers, killing 18 people. The overthrow of the Qaddafi regime in Libya has had a destabilizing effect in North Africa. Countless weapons were looted from Libyan stockpiles or captured from fleeing or defeated Libyan forces. Observers fear that many of these weapons have left Libya and are being smuggled throughout North Africa by terrorist elements, weapons smugglers, and other criminal enterprises. These weapons include assault rifles, machine guns, rockets, mortars, mines, explosives, and anti-aircraft weapons. In September 2011, the embassy issued an alert to several companies working in Algeria that AQIM had acquired anti-aircraft weapons and may target an international flight originating in London. To date, the embassy has received no direct indication that this threat has diminished, although the U.S. and other governments are working with Algerian security forces to counter this threat to air traffic. Algeria is leading other Maghreb countries in efforts to eradicate the terrorist threat in the region. The GOA is spearheading the Committee of Joint Chiefs (CEMOC) partnership that also includes Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. The CEMOC partnership is intended to provide a forum for cross-border coordination in counter-terrorist activity in the largely ungoverned Sahel Region. Two multi-national conferences have been held in Algiers, and Algeria has established a CEMOC command center in the southern city of Tamanrasset. In 2011, Algeria participated in several cross-border counterterrorist raids that were successful in denying AQIM factions the ability to seek cover by crossing international borders. Of ongoing concern are recently reported links between AQIM and other, more violent African terrorist groups like al-Shabaab and Boko Haram. Media reports indicate that these groups have participated in information sharing concern tactics, the construction and implementation of IEDs, and ambush and suicide bombing strategies. Local media continues to link AQIM to narcotics traffickers. Domestic recruitment by terrorist organizations in Algeria appears to be low, and AQIM’s support within the larger Algerian community has gravely eroded as Algerian security forces continue to dismantle its support groups. At the same time, recruitment efforts in neighboring countries of the trans-Sahara region, like Mali and Mauritania, appear to be on the rise. AQIM operations in the trans-Sahara are well documented in both the local and international media. The following statistics for 2011 paint a picture of the security situation in Algeria (statistics compiled by Embassy investigators):

Police/Military/Gendarme/Security Killed: 174
Bombings in Algeria: 243
Kidnappings: 19
Other Terrorist Acts: 126
 Civilians Killed in Terrorist Acts: 38
 Civilians Injured in Terrorist Acts: 285
 Terrorists Killed Government Forces: 329
 Terrorists Arrested by Government Agents: 489

Note: Terrorist incident figures do not include statistics for other criminal activity or civil disturbance.

Civil Unrest
Algeria continues to face social and civil challenges in the wake of the Arab Spring. In early January 2011, nationwide riots briefly overtook Algeria while concurrent protests led to the overthrow of governments in Tunisia and Egypt. Local authorities quickly brought civil unrest under control using conciliatory tactics. The Algerian government lifted a long-standing state of emergency law and announced constitutional reforms that would liberalize and open the democratic process. In May, the government announced significant subsidies on staple goods like milk, flour, cooking oil, and sugar. A series of large-scale labor protests and strikes led to near-ubiquitous salary increases in the public sector.

In recent years, localized protests concerning housing shortages, unemployment, staple goods and utility prices, the cost of living, the lack of government infrastructure and services, and other perceived wrongs have become commonplace in Algeria, and 2011 was not an exception. These demonstrations involved the full professional spectrum of Algerian society including teachers, students, doctors, veterans, outraged citizens, and unskilled workers. Occasionally, these protests devolve into riots that threaten local businesses and passer-bys but have not gathered momentum to threaten le pouvoir. The threat of large scale civil unrest will continue to challenge the Algerian government for the foreseeable future due to the continued high level of unemployment, cost of staple goods, and still-unresolved housing shortages.

Post-Specific Concerns
Environmental Hazards
Algeria has a significant history of earthquakes and floods, although Algeria has not experienced a major earthquake in the capital city in recent years. In 2011, several low-magnitude earthquakes shook Algiers but caused no discernable damage. In May 2010, a 5.2-magnitude earthquake occurred outside the city of Melouza, 250 kilometers southeast of
Algiers. Forty-three people were hurt, and two were killed. In 2003, an earthquake in Boumerdes, 40 kilometers east of Algiers, killed 2,300 people and caused major structural damage in Boumerdes and Algiers. The last massive earthquake, in 1980, occurred in el-Asnam and left 5,000 people dead. On average, Algeria experiences three to four earthquakes of 3.0-magnitude or greater per month.

Inundations and floods are also a constant threat in Algeria. Storms often flood wadis (small valleys) with little or no warning. For example, flash floods killed 29 people and injured many more in the town of Ghardaia in 2008. In October 2011, eight people were killed in the town when flash floods inundated the town of el-Bayadha, 435 kilometers south of Algiers.

Industrial and Transportation Accidents
Due to the poor road infrastructure and poor driver training, serious traffic accidents involving buses and other vehicles of mass transportation occur regularly. Emergency response resources are adequate in Algiers. However, this is not the case outside of major population centers.

Industrial accidents are not regularly reported in the media. Local authorities’ resources and ability to deal with industrial accidents appear to be limited. In the oil sector, the government depends on resources imported by foreign oil companies and private organizations.

Kidnappings
Kidnappings, orchestrated by both criminals and terrorists, are a common occurrence in Algeria. Kidnappings for ransom occur intermittently in the Kabylie region, and victims are often released unharmed if ransom is paid or if the community mobilizes for the release of the hostages. Kidnapping by terrorist organizations, namely AQIM, remains a much more immediate threat in the trans-Sahara region south of Algeria, especially for foreigners or prominent Algerians travelling in the region.

In February, AQIM kidnapped an Italian tourist near the town of Alidena. In October, AQIM kidnapped two Spanish and one Italian aid workers from a Polisario-run refugee camp near Tindouf. In mid January 2011, a provincial governor was kidnapped in Illizi, transported to nearby Libya, and released after the intervention of Libyan authorities. In response to kidnappings in recent years, the Algerian government is giving increased attention to the threat of westerners travelling throughout Algeria. As an ongoing security precaution, the government has closed a road between the southern tourist destinations of Tamanrasset and Djanet.

Concern about the threat to western tourists in southern Algeria in early 2010 led to severe
restrictions on overland movement in that region that remain in place.

Drug and Narcoterrorism
In 2011, law enforcement drug seizures and detentions increased. More seizures of “kif” (a slang term for hashish widely used in the Maghreb) were reported than of any other drug found in Algeria in 2011. According to press reports, the kif originates in Morocco and is transported through Algeria to destinations in Europe and other Arab countries.

Drug smuggling in Algeria is part of the larger phenomenon of cross-border smuggling and general lawlessness in some in all of Algeria’s border regions. Algerian officials believe that branches of AQIM operating in the far south of Algeria, near the borders with Mali and Mauritania, exert significant influence over smuggling cocaine from South America. Several media reports link Columbian drug cartels to AQIM, claiming that AQIM provides protection for narcotics shipments headed into Europe.

Police Response
How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment
Americans may request permission to communicate with the U.S. Embassy Consular Section in Algiers in the event of a crime or arrest but should not expect Algerian police to be helpful. The police emergency number is 17, but unless the victim speaks Arabic or French, it is better to ask a local resident to call for them. American citizens are strongly encouraged to keep the Embassy’s after-hours emergency phone number (213-0770-08-2000) in the event that they need to contact the embassy.

Where to Turn for Assistance if You Become a Victim of a Crime and Local Police Telephone Numbers
Police in Algeria can be contacted for emergency assistance but are occasionally slow to respond. You can call the police by dialing 17, the firemen by dialing 14, or medical emergency services by dialing 14.

Medical Emergencies
Contact Information for Local Hospitals and Clinics
In Algiers, the police will likely be the first agency informed in the event of an emergency. The police will then advise the local hospital to send an ambulance to a given location. This is a common practice due to security concerns. Medical expertise and resources vary widely according to the victim’s location at the time of the emergency. The best hospitals are the military hospitals, but these are not open to the general public. If the visitor does not have contacts or established medical resources, he/she will likely be taken to the medical facility...
closest to the location of the emergency.

Air Ambulance Services
The RedMed group offers air ambulance services in Algeria. Other international companies offer air ambulance services from Algeria to Europe, many of which contract with RedMed. These services are generally used by companies and individuals in the gas and oil sector. In Algiers, the RedMed group can be contacted at +213 (0) 21 376583. In Hassi Messaoud, the RedMed group can be contacted at +213 (0) 297 39 400 and +213 (0) 770 27 80 10 / 20 / 30.

Tips on How to Avoid Becoming a Victim
Although the major concern in Algeria is terrorism, there has also been an increase in Internet-based lotteries and visa scams. These scams usually target locals, but foreign visitors and Embassy staff have also received communications informing them of their good fortune in winning lotteries in Canada and the United Kingdom.

Algiers is generally considered a safe city due to the volume of police officers deployed in the streets and at intersections, although street crimes still occur. The security of the capital city is paramount to the government. However, visitors should maintain a low profile, avoid establishing predictable patterns, avoid crowds, and stay in hotels where adequate security is provided. Also, your company’s in-country staff or your hotel should make arrangements to secure trusted transportation while you are visiting Algeria. This includes transportation from the airport to your destinations in Algiers.

Exercise caution when traveling outside of Algiers. Make special security arrangements, including making provisions for reliable and experienced logistical support, if considering travel to outside of the capital. Avoid mountainous areas; under no circumstances consider hiking or visiting the mountains in Algeria unless as part of a tour group under security escort. The Kabylie region and the regions of Tamanrasset and Timimoun are notorious for armed engagements between terrorists and Algerian military and security forces.

U.S. citizens living or traveling in Algeria are encouraged to enroll in the U.S. Department of State’s Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP) to receive the latest travel updates and information and to obtain updated information on travel and security within Algeria. U.S. citizens without Internet access may register directly with the U.S. Embassy in Algiers. By registering, U.S. citizens make it easier for the Embassy to contact them in case of emergency.

You may obtain up-to-date information on security conditions by calling 1-888-407-4747 toll-free in the United States and Canada or, outside the United States and Canada, on a regular toll line at 1-202-501-4444.
For further information on general crime and security issues, U.S. citizens should also consult the U.S. Department of State’s Country Specific Information on Algeria as well as the Worldwide Caution, available on the Bureau of Consular Affairs Internet website.

**Further Information**

Embassy Contact Numbers:
- After-Hours Emergency: 213-0770-08-2000
- Regional Security Office: 213-0770-08-2168
- Embassy Operator: 213-0770-08-2000
- Medical Unit: 213-0770-08-2131
- Consular Affairs: 213-0770-08-2032
- Political/Economic Section: 213-0770-08-2255
- Marine at Post One: 213-0770-08-2200

U.S. Embassy Street Address: 5 Chemin Cheikh Bachir El-Ibrahim
   El Biar district of Algiers

**OSAC Country Council**

Post has an OSAC Country Council managed by the Regional Security Office. For information, please contact the e-mail address: Algiers_RSO@state.gov.