

The French Colonial Plan through the Railway Network from Biskra and Touggourt to Timbuktu

Pr. Yasser Ferkous ¹, Dr. Gharbi Elhaouas ²

¹ Professor of Higher Education, University of 8 May 1945, Guelma, Algeria

Email: ferkous.yasser@univ-guelma.dz ; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-6697-9055>

² Assistant Professor "A", University of 8 May 1945, Guelma, Algeria

Email: gharbi.elhaouas@univ-guelma.dz ; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5515-8556>

Received: 15.05.2025 ; Accepted: 15.08.2025 ; Published: 24.09.2025

Abstract

This study examines the French colonial strategy in southeastern Algeria through the construction of the railway line linking Biskra and Touggourt, considering it a key instrument for economic exploitation, military control, and territorial integration. The research highlights the strategic importance of the Saharan region as a gateway toward the Sahel and sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in the context of French ambitions to extend colonial influence toward Timbuktu. It analyzes the political, economic, and technical dimensions of the railway project, including the legislative framework, financial investments, and engineering challenges faced during its construction. The study also explores the role of the railway in facilitating the exploitation of agricultural resources, especially date palm cultivation, and in transforming traditional trade systems by replacing caravan routes with

modern transport infrastructure. Furthermore, the paper addresses colonial rivalries and the ideological discourse that portrayed the railway as part of a civilizing mission. The research concludes that the Biskra–Touggourt railway exemplifies the integrated colonial policy pursued by France in Algeria, combining infrastructure development with domination and control over Saharan spaces.

Keywords: French colonialism, Southeastern Algeria, Railway infrastructure, Algerian Sahara, Colonial expansion, Economic exploitation, Date palm cultivation, Traditional trade

Introduction:

The French colonial presence in Algeria was not limited to military conquest but relied heavily on infrastructure as a central instrument of domination and territorial control. Among the most significant projects undertaken in this context was the construction

of railway networks, which played a decisive role in integrating occupied territories into the colonial system. In southeastern Algeria, the Biskra–Touggourt railway line emerged as a strategic project reflecting the broader objectives of French colonial policy in the Sahara.

The Sahara was perceived by French political and military circles not as an empty space, but as a vital corridor linking North Africa to the Sahel and sub-Saharan Africa. This perception intensified in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when colonial competition among European powers pushed France to consolidate its presence in Saharan regions and secure communication routes toward its African possessions. Consequently, railway construction became a key element in overcoming geographical constraints and ensuring continuous control over vast desert areas.

The Biskra–Touggourt railway was designed to serve multiple functions. Economically, it facilitated the exploitation of Saharan agricultural resources, particularly date palm cultivation in the oases of Oued Righ, and enabled their integration into international markets. Militarily, it ensured rapid troop movement and reinforced French authority over the Southern Territories. Politically, the railway symbolized the permanence of colonial rule and the transformation of the

Sahara into a structured and administrated space.

This study seeks to analyze the historical, economic, and strategic dimensions of the Biskra–Touggourt railway project, shedding light on the motivations behind its construction and its impact on Saharan society and space. By examining contemporary colonial discourse, official reports, and press accounts, the research aims to demonstrate how infrastructure functioned as a core component of the French colonial system in Algeria, rather than a neutral tool of modernization.

1 - Biskra–Touggourt: Railways and the Colonial Reconfiguration of the Sahara

This paper addresses a strategically significant region within Algeria's national geography, specifically the southeastern part of the country, focusing on the regions of Touggourt and Biskra during the French colonial period. This Saharan area was not spared from colonial exploitation; rather, it was subjected to systematic economic domination similar to that imposed on other Algerian regions, based on precise studies conducted by the colonial administration for each territory (Lutaud, 1914).

The southeastern region, due to its strategic position bordering the Sahelian states and, to the east, Tunisia and Libya, represented a crucial zone despite its harsh climate and

difficult terrain. French colonial authorities transformed this region into a secure corridor toward the Sahel, extending their possessions as far as Timbuktu through railway infrastructure (Meynier, 1913). This project, initiated at the beginning of the twentieth century between Biskra and Touggourt, was described as one of France's greatest colonial achievements (*La Revue politique et littéraire*, 1914).

This paper examines the colonial policies implemented in the region to ensure full control over the Algerian Sahara and, through it, over sub-Saharan Africa.

2- From Biskra to Touggourt

After thirty-two years of anticipation, the railway line connecting Biskra to Touggourt was completed and put into operation. Its construction constituted a major event for French African possessions from both an economic and political perspective (Meynier, 1913).

Economically, the railway profoundly transformed the regions it crossed by integrating them into colonial markets. Politically, it reinforced what colonial discourse described as France's "moral authority" over Saharan populations, portrayed as distant from modern civilization (*La Revue politique et littéraire*, 1914).

This first phase from Biskra to Touggourt fostered renewed hopes of extending the railway to Timbuktu, thereby fulfilling colonial ambitions to unify Algeria with sub-Saharan Africa (Lutaud, 1914).

3- The Biskra–Touggourt Railway Line

The first request for a concession for the Biskra–Touggourt railway dates back to 1882. From that moment, French authorities recognized that the conquest of the Sahara required railway infrastructure capable of ensuring permanent control and economic exploitation (Meynier, 1913).

A law authorized the Southern Territories Administration to borrow 8,500,000 francs for construction. Authorization of railway revenues was delayed until April 4, 1910, when the loan was increased to 9,500,000 francs (Lutaud, 1914).

The railway reached Touggourt, a Saharan oasis 247 kilometers from Biskra, on March 20, 1914. Its official inauguration took place on May 2 in the presence of senior military and administrative officials, illustrating the strategic importance attributed to the project (Excelsior, 1914).

4- Project Difficulties

The construction of the railway faced significant obstacles related to sandy terrain and groundwater saturated with magnesium,

which caused corrosion and structural difficulties. Despite these challenges, the line was completed within four years, a fact celebrated in colonial newspapers (*Excelsior*, 1914).

Colonial reports credited Lieutenant Colonel Engineer Godefroy, assisted by military officers and civilian personnel, for overcoming logistical hardships and maintaining continuous supervision in the heart of the Sahara (*Excelsior*, 1914).

5- Natural Resources and Colonial Studies for Their Exploitation

The railway was not merely a transport facility but a fundamental instrument for exploiting Saharan resources. The Biskra–Touggourt line crossed the oases of Oued Righ, perceived as zones of high agricultural potential by colonial planners (Swingle, 1927).

Whenever groundwater was accessible, vegetation flourished rapidly, reinforcing colonial ambitions to expand exploitation and settlement. This led to the acceleration of administrative control through the establishment of the Saharan Territories Administration (Lutaud, 1914).

Artesian wells enabled intensive agriculture, particularly palm cultivation. Date palms dominated the agricultural landscape, accompanied by citrus trees, figs, and

vegetables comparable to those of southern France (Swingle, 1927).

6- Colonial Economic Vision

The colonial economic strategy aimed to integrate Algeria into global trade networks through systematic exploitation of its natural resources. Despite the desert climate, palm oases between Biskra and Touggourt attracted substantial French investment (Swingle, 1927).

In major oases, the average value of production per palm tree reached five francs, while the Deglet Nour variety could yield up to fifty francs under favorable conditions. Such figures reinforced the perception of the Sahara as a future source of colonial wealth (*La Revue politique et littéraire*, 1914).

Before the railway, trade relied on camel caravans, which were slow and costly. Railway transport reduced both time and expenses, cutting the cost of transporting one ton of goods from 50–60 francs to 27 francs (El Hack, 1912).

7- Toward the Sahel and Timbuktu

The Touggourt line entered service for freight several months before opening to passengers. Despite limited initial traffic, it generated notable annual revenues, suggesting its long-term profitability (*La Revue politique et littéraire*, 1914).

Encouraged by these results, colonial authorities conducted studies to extend the line toward Ouargla and eventually Timbuktu. This extension was seen as essential for unifying French African territories and securing economic independence (Meynier, 1913; Lutaud, 1914).

8- Colonial Rivalries and Cultural Domination

The exploitation of the Sahara raised concerns among rival colonial powers, particularly Britain, which dominated global trade. Railways were viewed as tools capable of opening French Africa to commerce and countering foreign competition (Meynier, 1913).

Colonial ceremonies in Touggourt, attended by tribal leaders and local elites, symbolized domination and submission. Cultural control was reinforced through intellectual discourse produced by colonial writers such as Magali Boisnard, who promoted a gradualist ideology portraying French domination as a civilizing mission (Bayard, 1949).

9- Colonial Wealth and Strategic Objectives

French colonial policy in Algeria sought long-term economic exploitation through trans-Saharan integration. The railway fulfilled both economic and military objectives by facilitating troop movement and securing supply routes toward Ouargla and deeper Saharan regions (Meynier, 1913).

Despite resistance, including the violent events of 1871, colonial authorities imposed control through infrastructure, administration, and economic integration, transforming Touggourt into a strategic colonial center (Lutaud, 1914).

Conclusion

The Biskra–Touggourt railway line exemplifies the integrated nature of French colonial strategy in Algeria, combining economic exploitation, military domination, and cultural control. Although France failed to extend the line to Timbuktu, the project clearly illustrates colonial ambitions to dominate Algeria and use it as a gateway to sub-Saharan Africa (Meynier, 1913; *La Revue politique et littéraire*, 1914).

Appendices



References

- 1- Bayard. (1949, March 20). *Un drame au Sahara*.
- 2- Excelsior. (1914, May 3).
- 3- El Hack. (1912, April 11–20). *Le journal de revendication musulmane*. Oran.
- 4- La Revue politique et littéraire. (1914, July 25).
- 5- Lutaud, C. (1914, February 3, 7, & 9). Discourses at the *Chambre des députés* on indigenous policy in North Africa.
- 6- Meynier, L. (1913, October 28). *Le chemin de fer transsaharien et l'empire africain de la France*. Conference at the Union des Écoles Supérieures de Commerce.
- 7- Swingle, W. T. (1927). *Le domaine du palmier-dattier et ses exigences climatiques*.