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The Sahara: Geopolitical Perspectives and Illusions

Yves Lacoste

Regardless of its outcome, the deadly civil war taking place since February 2011 in northern Libya on the shores of the Mediterranean is likely to have major consequences not only for the Libyan Desert but for the whole of the Sahara. As an illustration, scores of mercenaries and volunteers have come to join Colonel Gaddafi's forces from the Southern and Western Sahara to fight (or so they say) against imperialist attacks on Libya. Once the conflict is over, many of these will no doubt leave for other parts of the Sahara with weapons they will have kept. It is therefore useful to look at the Sahara as a whole to arrive at a better understanding of the way circumstances, which have been of concern for many years and which are now likely to worsen rapidly, are likely to develop.

For some years now, the Sahara has been the focus of a great deal of media attention. This is due to developments in the illegal and lucrative trafficking of migrants from Black Africa to North Africa and Europe. The Sahara is also a huge platform for the trafficking of drugs brought illegally into West Africa from Latin America by sea or air and then transported toward the Maghreb and Europe by truck on routes that cross the western and central Sahara.

This trafficking, which is connected to large, international mafia-related organizations, is conducted by organized and armed groups that are able to move across vast distances in the desert without being detected, something they have been doing for centuries. For them, success depends on strategies that combine various levels of spatial analysis, from desert routes stretching over thousands of miles to hideouts in specific neighborhoods in European cities.

The Sahara has also increasingly been in the news since its central and southern regions have become theaters of operations for the Islamic Jihadists of the Salafist Group for Call and Combat (GSPC). In 1998, this group broke with the Armed

Islamic Group (GIA) because - after waging a civil war against the Algerian military since 1992 - the GIA began to negotiate a cease-fire with President Bouteflika. Meanwhile, the GSPC gradually withdrew its men into the Sahara and made new recruits. In 2006, it put itself under the umbrella of Osama Bin Laden and took the name of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQMI).

This group then extended its operations into Mauritania, and in September 2010 organized the kidnapping of hostages (of whom five were French expatriates, with the only woman among them quickly released for health reasons) near the Arlit uranium mines operated by the French company Areva. In January 2011, two young Frenchmen were kidnapped by AQMI from a restaurant in the center of Niamey. It so happened that French Special Forces and helicopters were stationed in Burkina Faso with the aim of locating and freeing the Areva hostages. On the road to Mali, these troops found and intercepted the AQMI fighters' pickup trucks and the two Frenchmen they had just kidnapped. Unfortunately, the two French hostages were killed in the ensuing struggle. The failure of such an operation showed that the situation was even more serious than what had been thought.

Repercussions in Libya and the Sahara of the Arab Spring's Tragic Turn

The ongoing war in Libya, which is getting worse despite aerial intervention by NATO countries, is one of the consequences of what has been called the Arab Spring. These popular uprisings, which began in Tunisia and reached Egypt, have led to major changes in heads of state: in Tunis, Ben Ali and his family clique have gone, as have former military man Marshall Hosni Mubarak and his family in Cairo.

The Tunisian revolution surprised everyone by its speed and ease. In Tunis, it was essentially conducted by the middle classes, as demonstrated by the importance of mobile phones among the demonstrators as well as by their outfits. Infuriated by years of exploitation by members of the president's family (namely the many brothers and cousins of Ben Ali's wife, a former hairdresser, who behaved as a regent), they initially expressed sympathy for the poor from the hinterland who were marching in protest against poverty and the spectacular self-immolation of one of their own. President Ben Ali was put on a plane and sent into exile all the more rapidly once the US embassy made it known that it wished to see him go. Since then, influence on the Tunisian Revolution has been split between the middle and the working classes.

In inner-city neighborhoods of Cairo, the sudden Tunisian revolution, which was widely commented upon by the international media, was immediately imitated by the young middle class, accompanied by the deployment of army tanks in order to prevent police repression. This worked out all the better because the United States,

the provider of billions of dollars a year to the Egyptian military, made it known that the US president was advising the Egyptian president to step down as soon as possible and allow his aids—namely the generals—to take over.

These two Arab Spring revolutions, which have been covered extensively on television, have had significant repercussions in the Arab world and have generated similar movements among young people.

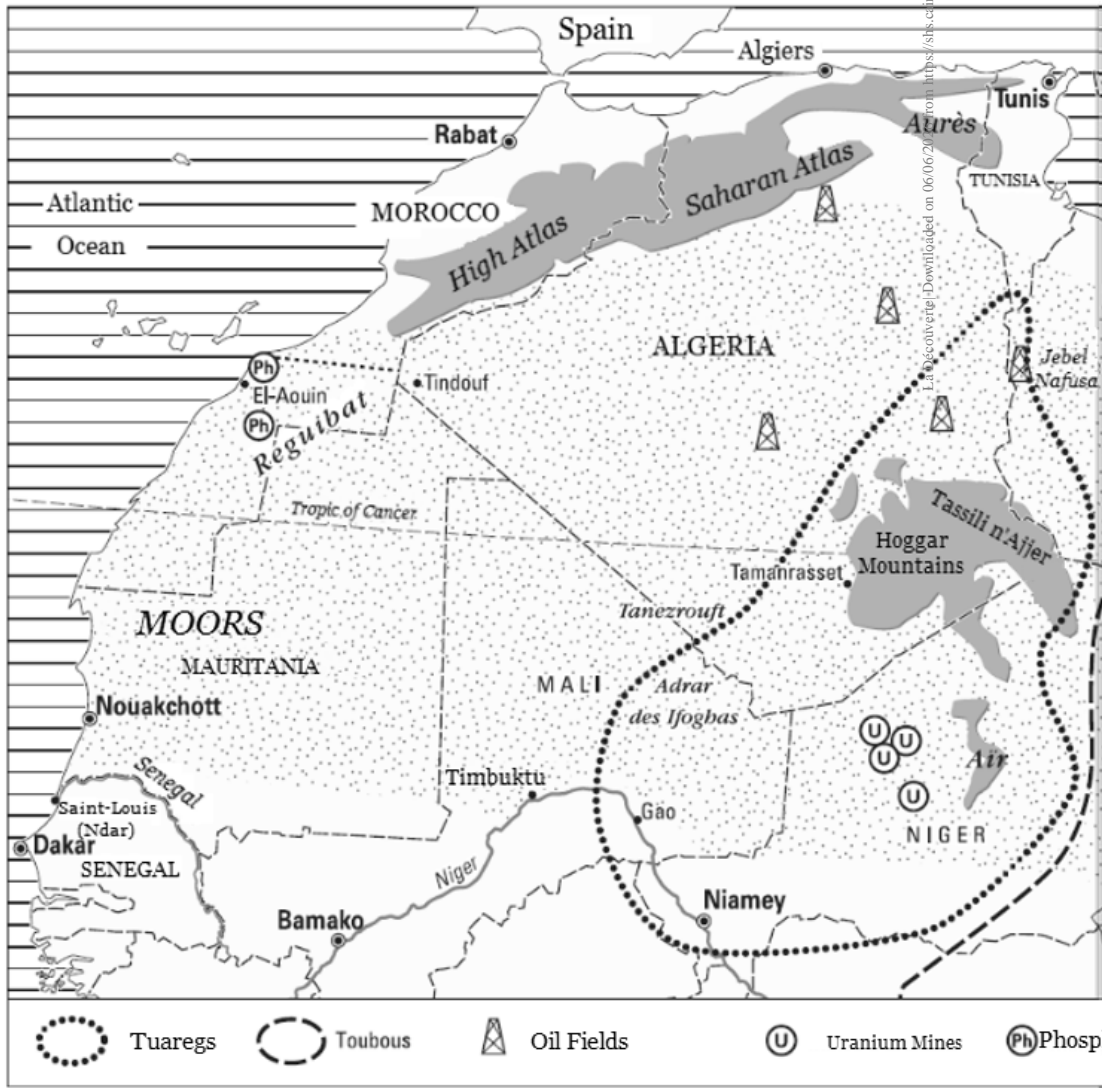
Initially, the police allowed these movements to grow before repressing them. However, in Algeria, the horrendous civil war of the 1990s has not been forgotten, and opposition groups have therefore used caution. The same has been true of the Palestinians.

On the other hand, we have Libya. There, opponents of Colonel Gaddafi's regime believed that he would also fall quickly after major initial riots. These occurred in the east, in Benghazi, where the population considered itself neglected in favor of Tripoli, although most of the oil is extracted in Cyrenaica, which was also where royal power was concentrated before the Gaddafi-led coup of 1969. It is significant that early on in the rioting, the Libyan rebels adopted the former flag of King Idris I, which is very different from Gaddafi's green emblem.

The Benghazi rebels, who were also from the middle classes, soon created a National Transition Committee and went off to liberate Libya in fine cars, shooting guns in the air. However, after some spectacular successes on the long highway leading to Tripoli, they soon ran into troops who showed they knew how to wage war and held nothing back.

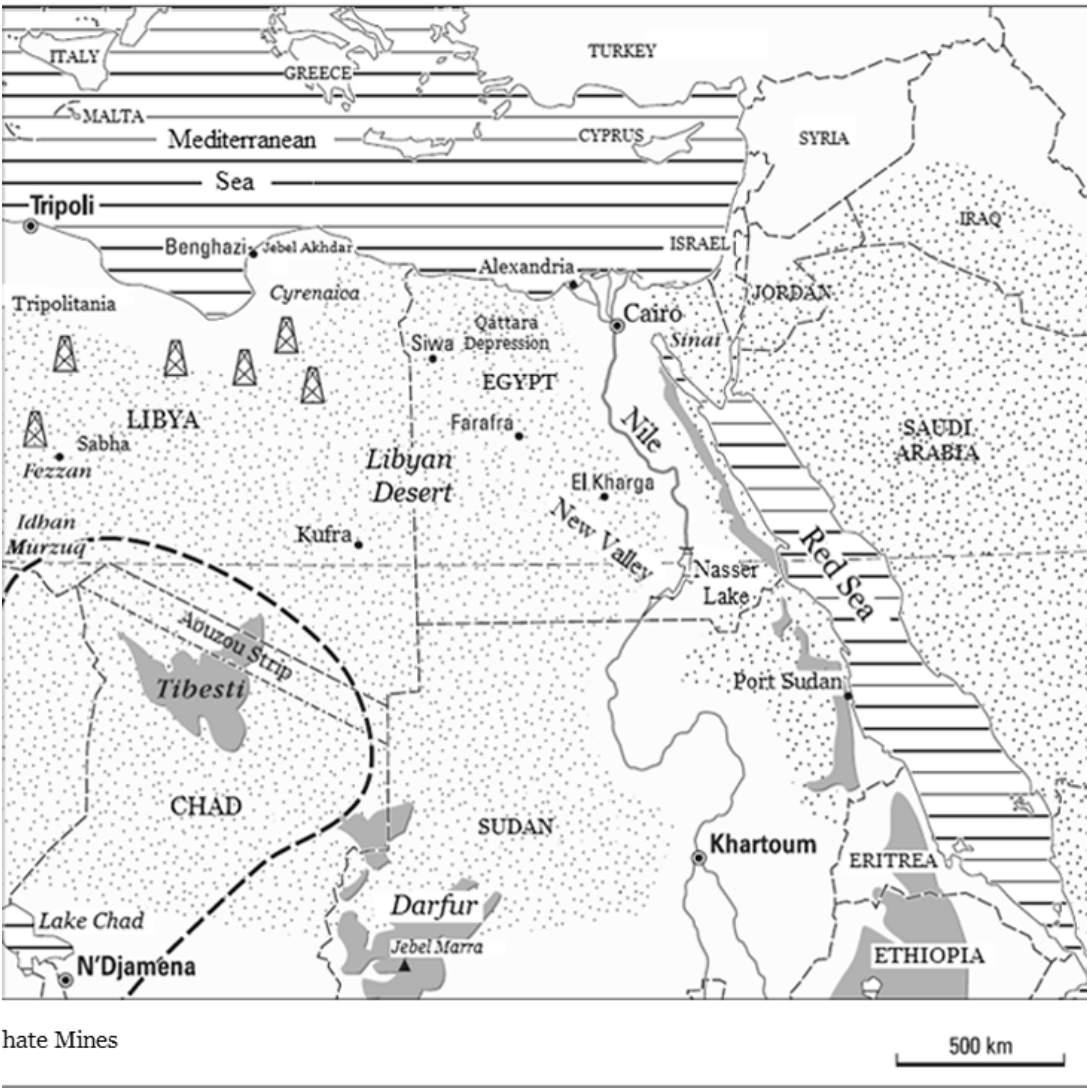
Sharing the general sympathy felt toward the Arab Spring, the French government, followed by that of Great Britain, quickly supported the Libyan rebels and, in view of the violence of the repression, succeeded in getting the United Nations Security Council to authorize air operations to protect the civilian population. These operations, conducted from Italian airports and the French aircraft carrier *Charles-de-Gaulle* and initially aimed at preventing Gaddafi from using his air force against civilians, turned into several months of bombing various military targets, with the fighter-bombers of some NATO countries working together. However, the United States is no longer taking part directly as neither the US Congress nor public opinion want to be sucked into another war, with those in Iraq and Afghanistan still not over.

However, Gaddafi's supporters were able to proclaim that an Arab country was once again being attacked by NATO countries and asked for the United States and France in particular to be condemned. Meanwhile, many "anti-imperialist" volunteers flowed through the Sahara to support Gaddafi's struggle. The Arab League has been concerned about how the situation has been developing, especially since in Syria, demonstrations against Bashar al-Assad's regime have resulted in massive repression despite the fact that this has not managed to stifle protests. At the



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hate Mines

United Nations, Russia, China, Brazil, and India were categorically opposed to an air intervention in Libya supported by ground operations to get rid of Gaddafi. It was conceivable that since the situation in Libya had worsened, the Egyptian military, which tolerated—if not encouraged—the revolution in Cairo, would support the Libyan rebels. However, for the moment, such support has not materialized, unless it is being given extremely discreetly.

Gaddafi's Power Is Less Fragile Than Originally Thought

Although the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions have led to the rapid fall of oppressive regimes, the revolution in Libya has come up against heavy opposition and the Benghazi insurgents suffered crushing defeats on their march on Tripoli, almost 1,000 kilometers away, despite Franco-British air support. Meanwhile, the residents of the large city of Misrata have been under deadly siege for weeks. This is because Gaddafi's regime is stronger than might have been supposed from the extravagant dress and bombast of the man who in 1980 proclaimed himself "Brother Leader of the Great Socialist People's Libyan Arab *Jamahiriyah*."

The term *Jamahiriyah* (literally "state of the masses"), which was used in 1977 to replace the term "republic," implies that the state is no more and that power belongs to the people, the very same device having been used to set up the power of the councils, known as "soviets," in Russia. This is in fact a clever instrument of totalitarian power, which in the past made use of the model provided by the police forces of socialist states. In Libya, this developed into a system of militias, seemingly inspired by the traditional tribal system, each one led by sons or relatives of Muammar Gaddafi. Among the tribes, which pledged allegiance and were egalitarian in principle, Gaddafi chose a small number of men whom he showered with favors and who were responsible for leadership and for keeping an eye on all the others.

Furthermore, Brother Leader Gaddafi has extremely large financial resources available to him. These were granted to him by the oil companies and now allow him to distribute healthy incomes among Libyan citizens (a relatively small number of people, in fact, around eight million) and to have large numbers of poorly paid immigrants working on major projects in their place. These include Tunisians, Egyptians, sub-Saharan Africans, and Asians. Oil revenues also allowed him to recruit a number of mercenaries and especially to finance numerous revolutionary movements in Africa (notably among the Tuaregs) and to conduct major diplomatic operations in the sub-Sahara and in the context of the African Union.

Since he seized power in 1969 (which is also the year when the first major oil find was made in Libya), the slogan of Captain (soon-to-be Colonel) Gaddafi was

the “struggle against imperialism.” In fact, the coup’s perpetrators claimed that the aim of securing the closure of the Wheelus Field airbase justified the overthrow of the fairly popular King Idris. For years afterward, Gaddafi carried out an increasing number of overt as well as covert anti-imperialist activities. For example, it was in retaliation for a terrorist attack on a US commercial airplane that Gaddafi’s residence in Tripoli was bombed by the US Air Force in April 1986. No doubt impressed by the force of the US reaction following the 9/11 attacks in 2001, Gaddafi stopped issuing proclamations against imperialism and skillfully sought to renew ties with the West: first with Italy (after making amends in order to secure major investment), then with the French president who, in the hope of major contracts, had intervened to free a number of Bulgarian nurses accused of having infected people with AIDS in a hospital in Benghazi. It should be pointed out that the judge who sentenced the nurses to death—and who was later appointed Minister of Justice—is now among the leaders of the Libyan rebels.

Gaddafi’s Geopolitical Projects for the Sahara Are More Serious Than Originally Thought

Soon after he seized power, Gaddafi went to Cairo to seek a union with Egypt from Colonel Nasser. Nasser politely declined. Then from the early 1980s, Gaddafi sent groups of volunteers through the Algerian Sahara to support POLISARIO militants against the Moroccan army in the Western Sahara. However, these Libyan groups were quietly killed by the Algerian army in the Sahara.

Leading a country that was now a major oil producer, Gaddafi sought to consolidate his power by promoting the idea of a United States of the Sahara. This was radically opposed by the Algerians, who clearly did not wish to give up a large piece of the Sahara. This territory was conquered at the end of the nineteenth century by the French, or more specifically French army officers, the rest, an even larger section of the “French Sahara” being conquered by navy officers. In practice, the navy did not like the army, but we shall come back to this.

With his western-bound projects thus thwarted, Gaddafi turned his ambitions south toward tropical Africa, initially toward Chad, which would have provided him with access to the vast Lake Chad. This lake has long been considered by European geographers and strategists (and especially by the Germans before 1914) to be the very heart of the continent. Gaddafi turned an old border claim over the Aouzou strip, along the Libyan border, into a way of playing a dominant role in Chad’s affairs. At the end of the nineteenth century, the Turks had established a few military posts along this long strip of land, which the French military had occupied

during the 1914–1918 war and which the Italians claimed after conquering Libya. To appease Mussolini and to prevent him from turning to Hitler, the French government signed a treaty recognizing Italy's claim to the Aouzou strip. However, when Mussolini allied himself with Hitler, the French parliament refused to ratify the treaty. Following the war, when Libya became independent in 1951, the question remained undecided. In 1968, the government of Chad, which became independent in 1960, was faced with a series of revolts by its Saharan populations, and in particular by Toubou nomads from the Tibesti region. Gaddafi provided support to these remarkable warriors in exchange for a promise from their chieftain to hand over the Aouzou strip—a promise that was forgotten as soon as the rebels from the north conquered the capital in 1979. Gaddafi, in return for the same promise concerning the Aouzou strip, then instigated a new revolt among other Toubou clans, whose chieftains, once victorious, immediately broke with the Libyan leader, and so on until 1987, when Gaddafi decided to commit Libyan army tanks directly in northern Chad. However, the Libyans were roundly defeated by well-armed Toubou fighters led by French advisers. Following this fiasco, which was well publicized in the international press, Gaddafi shelved his great projects for the future.

On reflection, Libya setting its sights on a very large portion of the Sahara did not start with Gaddafi but began in the nineteenth century with the major development of the Grand Senussi order. From its conception, the Grand Senussi was anti-imperialist before its time, and its networks extended throughout the Sahara. It was founded in 1840 by Muhammad Senussi, an Algerian Sufi mystic from Mostaganem, who immediately rejected French domination in Algeria and warned of the dangers of European influence in neighboring countries. However, he was not well received in Egypt, which under Muhammad Ali and his French advisers, was undergoing full modernization, with much the same thing happening in Tunisia. However, Senussi ran into fewer obstacles in the territories forming present-day Libya. Although these were former dependencies of the Ottoman Empire, the Sublime Porte was at the time burdened with problems in the Balkans. Tripoli, an active port in the Straits of Sicily, was in fact ruled—as was Algiers before 1830—by the heirs of the Barbary pirates and slave traffickers. The Bey of Benghazi, who remained aloof from politics, allowed Senussi to establish his order in the Jebel Akhdar, the “green mountain” that overlooks the sea and the desert east of Benghazi. The Grand Senussi, as he was later called, built his first *zawias* (or fortified monasteries) in 1843, and these grew in number. In 1894, he was forced by the Ottoman authorities, whose interest in modern ways he condemned, to establish his capital in Kufra, an oasis deep in the desert from which the Senussi order, with support from the Sultan of Ouaddai (to the east of present-day Chad), extended to almost all regions of the Sahara and beyond. Some Senussi chieftains went into the slave trade. For example, a Senussi

was linked to the great slave-trader Rabah, who laid waste to lands between the Upper Nile and Lake Chad. In 1900, Rabah's army was defeated by the forces commanded by Foureau and Lamy coming from Algiers and by forces from the Congo and Niger, with the name "Fort-Lamy" given to the capital of Chad, later to be renamed "N'Djamena." It was also the Senussi, allied to the Turks, who in 1916 killed Father Charles de Foucauld at Tamanrasset in the Hoggar Mountains and who also instigated a large Tuareg revolt.

The members of this order fought against the Italians as early as 1911 as well as during the interwar period, then against the Afrika Korps in the desert battles of World War II. At the time, help from the Senussi was invaluable to the British, who occupied Libya from 1943 to 1951. In fact, it was with their support that Idris I was proclaimed King of Libya. The political center of the kingdom became Cyrenaica rather than Tripoli, and it was there that the Senussi *zawias*, which had been destroyed by the Italians, were rebuilt in the Jebel Akhdar.

Gaddafi's coup, which took place when King Idris was abroad, did not push the Libyan Senussi into extreme opposition. Later, an Abdullah Senussi married Gaddafi's sister (he is the uncle of Saif al-Islam, the apparent heir to Gaddafi and the head of the *Jamahiriyah's* secret services). In most regions of the Sahara as well as the Sahel, the extensive Senussi network has promoted these relationships as well as the projects nurtured by Gaddafi. In 2002, he presided over the creation of a Community of Sahel-Saharan States (the CEN-SAD), which has 28 members. In April 2006 in Timbuktu, he announced the creation of the "Popular and Social League of the Great Sahara Tribes." In fact, Gaddafi considers all the borders dividing Saharan land as completely spurious. At the same time, he is pushing the Tuaregs of Algeria, Mali, and Niger to unite, and he is supporting their revolt. In some of his speeches, Gaddafi extends this Great Sahara from Mauritania to Iraq and even includes Arabia, clearly not to the Saudi king's liking.

AQMI jihadist networks are equally active in the Sahara and the Sahel. Of course, Gaddafi has been denouncing the Muslim Brotherhood as imperialist agents for years (the Muslim Brotherhood having incited revolt in Cyrenaica), and attributes the revolt to Al-Qaeda. Generally, the Islamists do not get along with the Sufis, especially because the latter recognize the popular cult of saints. Although the Senussi is Sufi in origin, the Grand Senussi was essentially anti-imperialist, as his disciples still largely are. In fact, the current NATO intervention over Libya could bring the two closer together.

The idea behind the *jihad* is not only the desire to impose Koranic Law but also the struggle to unite the Muslim world by attacking those states that seek to divide it. The fact that the Sahara is a huge landmass and that the borders of the states that share it are largely spurious no doubt incites intellectual jihadists to seek Saharan unity once (very limited) Western influence has been driven away. Might the Sahara become the great starting point for rebuilding a united Muslim world?

The Mobilizing Illusion of a Saharan Heartland

Among those taking a growing interest in geopolitics (and Islamists are coming around to it), there is talk of a “heartland,” with the term appearing at the start of most works of popularization on international relations. For example we learn that in 1904, Halford Mackinder, an Englishman (or rather a Scotsman), delivered a lecture at the Royal Geographical Society in London, the text of which was subsequently published as a short paper entitled “The Geographical Pivot of History.” At the time, admirers made him the founder of geopolitics (although he never used the term) on the basis, they argued, of the basic notion that the entire history of the world—including America’s in the twentieth century—gravitated around a huge natural territory that became the Russian Empire. Mackinder (very fleetingly and in brackets in the original text) called this territory the “heartland,” corresponding to the plains and plateaus of Siberia and Central Asia.

The “heartland” could be expressed as “heart of the world” or “central country,” and is nowadays used as such, along with the slogan: “Whoever controls the heartland becomes master of the world.” In his 1904 article, to support the idea, Mackinder gave a lengthy description of the great Mongol invasions of the fourteenth century, especially those of the horsemen of Genghis Khan, whose empire stretched from the countries of the Danube in Europe to the whole of China. However, he did not devote any time to the fact that this huge empire did not last long or that from the sixteenth century onward, it was the Russian Empire that stretched east of the Urals, first into Siberia, then in the nineteenth century into Central Asia.

Although Mackinder’s paper did not have much success before World War I, his readership grew following the Bolshevik Revolution. In particular, German geopoliticians made a great deal of heartland theory by extending it to the Atlantic as well as the Pacific and Japan, making, they argued, world domination even more likely. It was mainly following World War II as a result of concerns over the global ambitions of the Soviet Union that White House strategists used heartland theory as a starting point for their models. According to them, because the USSR controlled the heartland, it was necessary in response to hold the “rimland” (a term used in 1941 by one of Mackinder’s successors), that is, the coastal periphery of Eurasia. In fact, Soviet strategists, though they condemned geopolitics as imperialist, thought along similar lines, and following the breakup of the USSR, Russian geopoliticians have continued to do so.

In all of this discourse, we are dealing with partisan representations that do not take account of the real geographical and historical data, all protagonists selecting what suits them and ignoring their rivals’ perspectives. Obviously, I do not share this way of seeing things at all.

Following the breakup of the USSR and the end of communism, there has been a kind of media infatuation in many countries (including France and for various reasons) with what has been called “geopolitics.” This has led to the success of various works that from the outset have made much of Mackinder’s “heartland.” For example, the well-known US journalist Robert D. Kaplan, an expert on international relations, makes a point of quoting Mackinder to dramatize and map out a number of problems. We should also note that in the United States, the heartland concept has also become a marketing term (see Google) and has been used as the title of a television series to describe the combination of feeling (heart) and natural territory (land), especially on horseback-riding expeditions.

However, when in major newspapers and magazines (in addition to a dozen best-sellers in the United States) Kaplan refers to the concept of heartland, it is in the Mackinder sense of the word: that is, a huge natural springboard from which one can leap off and rule the world. Thus, it is conceivable that the idea has spread among jihadists (many of whom have spent time in European and US intellectual circles). Some also make a point of linking the concept to Gaddafi’s current projects for Saharan union and point out the resemblance between the vast geological unit that is the Sahara and Siberia, which up to now has corresponded to Mackinder’s heartland. I am therefore making the assumption that this geopolitical representation has been taken up by intellectual jihadist groups because it is useful to their own geopolitical project. According to the completely illusory and overused slogan associated with the term *heartland*, “whoever holds the heartland holds the world.”

Kaplan is perhaps not far from doing the same thing himself. After highlighting the dangerous consequences of the extraordinary demographic growth of Black Africa, from 200 million people in 1950 to one billion today and two billion in 2050 (whereas fertility rates are falling everywhere else), he describes the Sahara as a barrier that could be used against huge migrations toward the north. However, he also acknowledges that this barrier cannot play such a role because there are so few people living there and because state instruments are too weak in the region, which stretches over exceedingly large territories. Kaplan thus puts forward the idea that the Sahara could become an axis of power from which it would become possible to absorb the demographic push of tropical Africa.

Astonishingly, the idea that the Sahara could be a future axis of power has recently been in the news, with the revelation by a consortium of large German businesses (following the German decision to give up nuclear power) of an extremely ambitious plan to produce solar power in the Sahara.

In fact, this idea is not very far from Gaddafi’s project of Saharan union. Why seek Saharan union if not to turn it into an enormous power? Although Gaddafi will probably lose power, some of his kin will succeed him and the jihadists who

today are fighting alongside him will not disappear. Also, the Arab forces providing financial support to NATO's operation in Libya—notably Qatar (which promotes Islam's modernization in all areas)—will not forget the concept of a Saharan union or the idea of a heartland.

For the expression “Saharan heartland” not to be a mere play on words and to give it greater verisimilitude, it is useful to compare the Sahara with the territory that corresponds to the heartland, as represented by Mackinder. Clearly, they are both about the same size, measured in thousands of kilometers. They have broadly the same topography, and they are both sparsely populated. However, the Siberian plains and plateaus, which extend to the icy Arctic Ocean, are not a desert (with apologies for stating the obvious) since they are mostly covered by forest. In summer, they are even flooded by waters from the south, from lands where the grasslands of the great steppes replace the forests. This is where the famous Mongol invasions of the Middle Ages originated, invasions to which Mackinder gives an excessively fundamental importance in his concept of heartland relative to the gradual expansion of the Russian Empire from the forests and clearings of the Moscow region.

By contrast, the Saharan desert, which is bordered by the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, does not turn into grassland in the south but to an area of stunted trees, then of savanna with tall grasses. These are still traveled by tribes that went from being cattle herders to cattle farmers and who cannot therefore venture into the Sahara as they did long ago, when the climate was different and the Garamantes of antiquity led their cattle-drawn chariots to Tripoli.

No doubt, like Mackinder's heartland, which he believed was significantly influenced by the Mongol invasions, most of the Sahara has been invaded and conquered by nomadic tribes from Arabia.

The comparison shows the extent to which the geographical characteristics of Mackinder's heartland differ from those of the Sahara, even though today we should mention the existence of large hydrocarbon deposits in both places.

The Sahara and the Other Great Desert Landmass

The fact that the Saharan expanse is now covered by the *jihad*, a strategy of Muslim fighters in the Old World (since Islam does not have as major a presence in the New World) means that the Sahara needs to be studied as a geographer would and in the long term. This means looking at it not only as a single entity but also in comparison to another large desert landmass, one that crosses the whole of Asia and represents a large part of the Muslim world. This other large desert landmass is also populated by cattle herders, with large Muslim populations, especially in the

big oases. In comparison, the Sahara is clearly less populated, unless the Nile Valley is included in the data even though it cuts across the Sahara as a very different unit.

From Arabia, where it originated, Islam historically spread over a large number of arid zones. These include northern Africa and the two Mediterranean coasts as well as the Middle East and its deserts, extending to the southern Urals and western China. In rain-fed, monsoon Asia, Islam does not have the same importance in terms of its representation of the world despite its importance demographically.

By highlighting the differences between these two large desert landmasses—the Sahara and the Asian deserts—we can better understand the landmass we are interested in, if only because of the importance that will no doubt be given to it by those who would be our adversaries.

The Sahara is only the main portion of a long strip of desert stretching in the Old World (in Africa and Asia) from the Atlantic to the Red Sea, and on the Asian continent from Arabia to the Gobi desert in northern China. In this very large and arid landmass, we should distinguish two very different sub-masses, both in terms of temperature and general topography. Whereas in the west, the Sahara and Arabia are warm deserts (without a cold winter) and are mainly vast expanses of plains and plateaus, in the east, the deserts of Iran and especially of Central Asia are cold winter deserts dominated and traversed by important mountain chains that are in oblique relation to the Himalayas. Perhaps Tibet, with the exception of its valleys, could also be considered a high-altitude desert?

The other major difference between these two desert landmasses is that the Sahara, which is bordered in the north by the Mediterranean, in the south becomes open forest and savanna, the main plant formation of the tropics, whereas in Asia, the arid landmass ends in the south, in the region watered in the summer by the monsoons. In fact, the areas of India at the same latitudes as the Sahara hold the world records for precipitation.

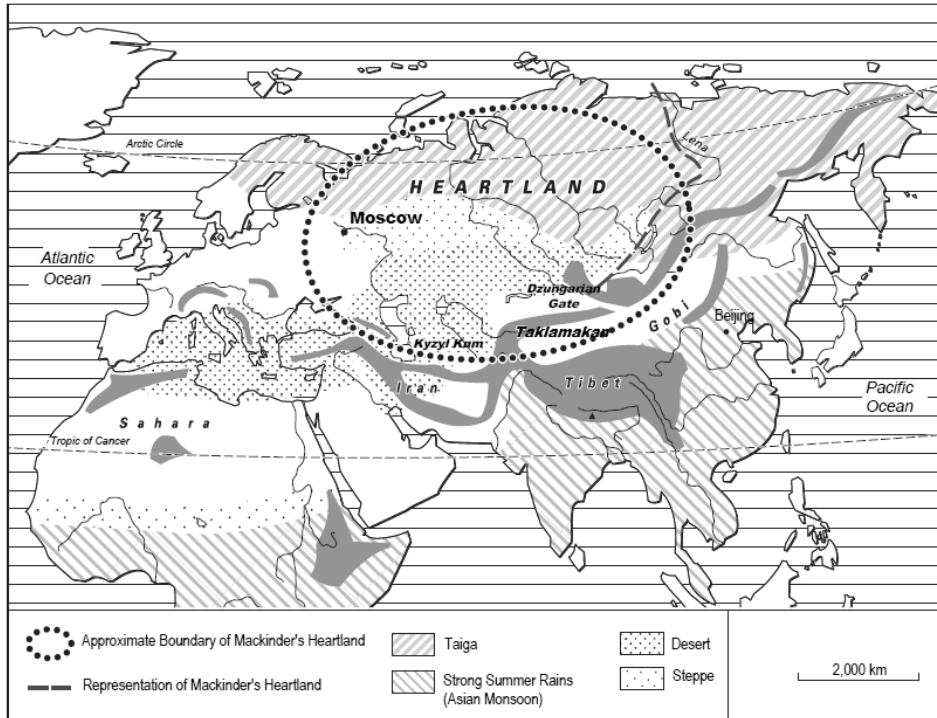
The Sahara's relative flatness is due to the fact that it constitutes the northern part—and the largest from west to east—of the large African plate stretching north and south of both tropics. As it is pushed north by the deep currents of the viscous asthenosphere under the earth's crust (what the world's physicists used to call the "sima"), the African Plate pushes back the tectonic surround of the western Mediterranean, which forms the mountainous regions of North Africa. It should be noted that except on the edge of the Atlantic, this plate, which used to be seen as a granite bedrock, is covered by sedimentary deposits, continental sandstone, and marine limestone that form vast plateaus beneath which there are hydrocarbon deposits and fossil water.

In contrast, the large Eurasian plate, which is at much higher latitudes reaching beyond the polar circle, slides toward the northern part of the Indian (or Deccan) Plate at the level of the tropic. This pressure pushes up the Himalayas but also creates fractures in the Asian plate, in effect parallel chains, between which there are collapsed

blocks. In summer, the rains blown north by the monsoons hardly affect these areas at all since they always fall on the Himalayas. In winter, Central Asia is subjected to the cold and dry air of the Siberian anticyclone coming down from the polar circle.

The mountain chains dominating the deserts of Central Asia, which do not exist in the Sahara, play a vital role for the populations living in this arid landmass, especially in summer. In summer, the populations that have settled in the large piedmont oases can irrigate their crops with the melting snows while the nomads take their herds up to higher-altitude pastures. For centuries, these piedmont oases used to be staging posts for the caravans traveling along the Silk Road from China to the borders of Europe. Their camels were great pack animals that could travel through thick snow in the high passes. The mountain forests provided herders and the oases with wood for heating in the cold season. Moreover, the lowlands had the advantage of being dry in winter because snowfall was light and herds could still feed on the relatively plentiful—though stunted—vegetation by scratching off the snow.

MAP 2: THE SAHARA AND THE DESERTS OF ASIA



La Découverte, Paris, 2011, p. 142. <https://doi.org/10.3910/odp.2011.142>

Hérodote, n° 142, La Découverte, 3rd Quarter 2011.

In the Sahara, the natural asset of great mountain chains does not exist. The desert consists mainly of vast stretches of land at relatively low altitude, from which here and there rise a few isolated mountains (mostly extinct volcanoes) that are not high enough to stimulate significant rainfall. From these mountains run deep valleys created by what used to be fairly powerful watercourses but that have disappeared as a result of the desert climate setting in. The sands ripped by erosion from the granite mountains and sandstone plateaus (the Tassilis) collect in the endorheic depressions (which do not flow into the sea) and form the ergs, the great dune landforms.

In the Sahara therefore, because there are no large mountain chains, there are no high-altitude pastures or piedmont oases except on the southern flank of the High Atlas Mountains, which border the desert for only a few hundred kilometers. Instead, most Saharan oases strive to capitalize on irregularly deep aquifers.

The Geopolitical Power of Nomadic Tribes in the Steppes and the Geopolitical Weakness of Tribes in the Sahara

Contrary to current representations, before their decline in recent decades, the Saharan nomads and their herds were not really found in the true Saharan desert (except along the Atlantic) but in the steppes on its northern and southern borders, where the vegetation allowed them to feed their herds, the size of which was in fact quite small in comparison with those of Central Asia. As a result, there were never as many nomadic tribespeople in the steppes surrounding the Sahara as in Central Asia, where their geopolitical role was considerable. Clearly, there was Genghis Khan's empire, the most important of the Turkic-Mongol empires, also called the "Empires of the Steppes" (notably by René Grousset). In fact, the term "steppe" deserves some attention. For Russians, including their bio-geographers, the word (*step* in Russian) describes a grassy formation that is either enclosed (unbroken) or open (broken), that is, formed by clumps divided by large and mostly empty expanses of land. In Eurasia therefore, going from north to south, the steppe plain (the Russian steppe) turns into the sub-desert steppe. One of the characteristics of the vast Central Asian deserts is a gradual progression into unbroken grassy steppes to the north. This is particularly the case in Mongolia, where, from north to south, one goes from steppe plains to the Gobi Desert. Historically, these steppes were the domain of powerful tribes of horsemen, both in terms of numbers and military prowess. Mackinder made much of these. However, he made no mention of China's political influence; nor was he aware that the horses of the Turkic-Mongolian armies were the first to be fitted with iron horseshoes (invented by Turkish metalworkers, who were great charcoal

producers in the forests near Lake Baikal). This enabled them to cover far greater distances than cavalries with shoeless horses, whose hooves wore down quickly.

For a better understanding of the Turkic-Mongolian incursions into Europe, we should mention one more geographical fact, namely a corridor leading to the west through the mountains surrounding Mongolia, the well-known “Dzungarian Gate.”

The empire of Tamerlane (Timur), the Seljuq Empire, and the Ottoman Empire also came out of these Central Asian deserts and the steppes bordering them. The empire of the Turkish Ottomans stretched from Anatolia over all of southeastern Europe and North Africa and endured into the early twentieth century (despite tribal rivalries) because it was able to retain the Byzantine administration’s Greek officials following the fall of Constantinople.

I have provided this geo-historical description of the Asian deserts to allow for a better understanding of what could be called the relatively weak geopolitical role of the Sahara, due mainly to its low population and despite its geological unity and vastness. The Sahara did not experience the equivalent of the Asian empires of the steppes, stretching to the north of the desert steppes to the steppe plains, which could feed large amounts of livestock and horses for war.

Even though there are steppes in the north of the Sahara, these only extend to the Maghreb because of mountains that are subject to aridity in the summer and that for the most part do not receive any snowfall in winter because they are not very high. To the east, there is no real coastal steppe since the desert goes up to the sea over a distance of 2,000 kilometers, from south Tunisia to Egypt, with the exception of Libya’s Jebel Akhdar, the “Green Mountain.” In the west of the Sahara along the Atlantic coast, there is a coastal desert where the condensation of humidity from the sea air feeds a steppe. As a result, the Reguibat people were able to maintain a fairly large number of camels.

South of the Sahara, there are also steppes. However, whereas in Asia, the desert and its sparse vegetation turns into grassy steppes in the north, in Africa, the vegetation in the south of the Sahara becomes thin bushes and sparse trees (phyto-geographers talk of shrub and tree steppes) and then savanna with tall, hard grasses. In the past, these grasses would be burned every dry season in winter so that the peasant population could cultivate the soil. South of the Sahara, in the Sahel region, there are groups of herders (such as the Fula people), raising mainly cattle, though horses are relatively rare here mainly because of trypanosomiasis. In fact, the Fula people have played an important historical role. Although it was they who spread Islam, the empires they once built did not have the magnitude of those conquered and organized by the Turkic-Mongols. Rather, the forms of power found in the countries of tropical Africa expressed themselves over centuries (well before Arab or European interventions) less through the size of the areas they controlled than in the trading

of slaves transported and sold far from where they were captured (so that they could not escape and return home).

Whereas in Asia the deserts, steppes, large oases, and even countries with peasant populations such as Iran and those in Eastern Europe lived through several Turkic-Mongol empires founded on the power of their cavalries, the Sahara and the countries of the Maghreb did not in my view experience similar empires from conquest by nomadic tribes, even if the Arab conquest, what some call the “Arab invasions,” could obviously be used as a counter-argument to this personal perspective.

The Partial Arabization of the Maghreb and the Sahara

It is true that the Maghreb, populated as it was by the Berbers, who depending on the area were effectively Romanized in the second half of the seventh century, experienced the expansion of Islam from fairly small groups of Muslim Arabs from Arabia (note, however, that the so-called “Arabs” who crossed the strait of Gibraltar in the early eighth century were mainly Berbers). A little earlier, other groups of Muslim Arabs conquered Syria, then the Persian Empire. In the Maghreb, the success of the Muslims was mainly due to their wish to abolish slavery, introduced by the Romans and continued by the Byzantines. However, in the middle of the eighth century, the governors of the Umayyad Caliphate in Damascus wanted to reestablish slavery among the Berbers. This led to the Great Berber Revolt (sometimes called the “Kharijite Rebellion” following a Middle-Eastern egalitarian heresy from the time Shia Islam emerged), which established the independence of the Maghreb nations from the Arab empires in 730–740. Independence lasted until the sixteenth century, when the powerful privateer cities of Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli sought protection from the Ottoman Empire against a major Spanish offensive. While Morocco remained completely independent until the early twentieth century, Egypt, which had been conquered by the Muslims in 642, was to pass under the authority of several successive Turkic-Mongol empires, the last of which being the Ottoman Empire. Ottoman domination over Cairo would cease once Muhammad Ali seized power in 1804 following Napoleon Bonaparte’s expedition to Egypt.

However, despite its long independence, the Berber Maghreb became Muslim and, over the centuries and for the most part, gradually became Arabized linguistically. The same is true of most peoples in the Sahara, who are also mainly Berbers. Yet a number of French authors argue that the Maghreb experienced a whole series of Arab invasions not only in the twelfth but especially in the eleventh century, when it is claimed that there was a surge of supposedly terrifying tribes of Banu Hilal from Arabia, which were like “the hordes of Genghis Khan.” These nomadic tribes, it is said, committed

Arab tribes spoke Hassaniya Arabic, which is of Middle-Eastern origin and quite different from Maghreb Arabic. They established relationships of domination or association with settled Berbers in the large oases of the northern Sahara. Some, as in Mزاب, still speak Berber and practice Kharijite Islam, whereas following the Great Maghreb Revolt in the thirteenth century, Sunni Islam established itself all over the north.

Thus the whole Sahara speaks Arabic. There is, however, the notable exception of the Berber Tuaregs in the Hoggar Range and surrounding plateaus. The various Tuareg groups, depending on the region where they live, form a kind of great federation, with each group being highly hierarchical, particularly in the past, in contrast to other Berber groups. Despite their fame, the Tuaregs are not great nomads. They travel across fairly limited territory and do not use the *khaima*, the nomadic Arabs' great woven tent but rather much smaller tents made of hides sewn together. An anthropological idiosyncrasy is that although all Arabs and Berbers (without exception) are bound by the rules of patrilinearity, thus leaving very little power to women, the Tuaregs are matrilinear. Women have more power, for example owning the tent. Relations between Tuareg and Arab tribes in the northern Sahara have long been tense. The Arabs of the great Chaamba tribe supported the French when they conquered the Hoggar in 1902; later on it was from among the Chaamba that the Meharists of the famous Sahara Corps led by French officers were recruited.

The other exception to Arabic-speaking peoples in the Sahara is the much-less-well-known case of the Toubou (or Teda) people in the Tibesti Mountains in northern Chad and southeastern Libya. These are nomads who came to Islam late and are mountain travelers of extraordinary endurance. Their language is considered Nilo-Saharan and also covers part of Sudan. They are related to the Darfur Zaghawa, who are concentrated in the great volcanic mountains of Jebel Marra (such as the Tibesti). Like the Zaghawa, the Toubous are not divided into great tribes but into a very large number of clans with highly complex family and political relationships. Toubous and Zaghawas have long been known as formidable warriors.

The geopolitical ups and downs in Chad have led them to handle modern weapons, and as a result in 1987, they won a spectacular victory (helped by French advisers) against the tanks sent by Gaddafi to take possession of the Aouzou Strip. This victory allowed Idriss Déby, a Zaghawan, to subsequently take power in N'Djamena.

The Power of the Tribes and the Egyptian Exception

Whether organized into several small clans or large tribes, the people of the Sahara retain a tradition of having weapons and taking pride in using them collectively when they believe this to be legitimate. Herders and mountain people are still

warriors, moving alone over very large expanses, and must therefore be capable of defending themselves on their own against potential threats as well as fight together against rival groups to defend the tribe's territory, pastures, and wells. Risks are lower for those living in oases as they live closer together, in many cases behind mud walls.

In the past, the tribal structures of the countries of the Maghreb were equally fundamental, and most men from the *bled* (hinterland) were armed and could fight. Since colonization and the advent of stronger postcolonial governments, many of these weapons were confiscated. Each tribe referenced a so-called common ancestor and the family relationships resulting from it; this involved a gathering (*jema'a*) of all men, with land held communally, although family ownership of land was not excluded. However, the tribe was also an instrument of war, in which each man had weapons and could take part in communal operations against a rival tribe or against those who had gone over into the service of the *makhzen* (the State), which was attempting to force them to pay tax. All of this has enormous historical and geopolitical importance and is not forgotten in popular representations.

The reason these points need emphasizing is that in Egypt, matters were quite different for millennia and remain so today. In the Nile Valley, the term "tribe" does not have the political significance it has in the countries of the Maghreb or the Middle East. Egyptian farmers are not armed and were not skilled fighters. Nowadays, they are dependent on an official or a large landowner, as they were in the past on a notable person (before Muhammad Ali, this was a *mamluk*, or "warrior") representing central government, with inherited, age-old pharaonic powers. In the past, a bureaucracy was imposed on farmers through an army consisting of soldiers who were in effect slaves, or through Libyan tribes from the nearby desert responsible for quelling potential revolts, setting tasks, and collecting taxes. Today, the situation remains broadly the same, with a top-heavy administrative force consisting of police officers instead of Libyan horsemen.

For these sociological, historical, and geopolitical reasons, Egypt is quite exceptional in North Africa and especially in the Sahara. The desert stretches out over ninety-four percent of its territory as a result of borders drawn at the end of the nineteenth century. As is commonly known, most of the Egyptian population of 80 million people lives in the narrow Nile Valley. Let us not forget Herodotus, our spiritual father after all, who was the first to use the word "delta," and more specifically was the only person for two millennia to believe that the Nile originated a long way away, from lands where it rained in summer, since the river peaked during the dry season, when all watercourses in regions near the Mediterranean were dry.

A major question for the geopolitical future of the Saharan landmass is whether Egypt is in fact part of it. In geo-historical terms, it could be said that the Pharaohs

and the leaders that succeeded them concerned themselves with what was happening to the east of the Suez isthmus, from where invasions came. However, they took much less interest in what was going on to the west of the Nile Valley. Of course, there was one of the great temples of Amon in the Siwa Oasis, 560 kilometers away from the delta, near the present-day Libyan border, as well as other very large oases in the west, isolated in great tectonic depressions and almost as far from the valley, such as Qattara at 75 meters below sea level, Farafra, and Kharga. Although there has been talk of connecting these to Lake Nasser and creating a new valley, the work does not seem to be progressing much. It was also from the west that in the tenth century, the Fatimid Maghreb conquerors (the Kabyle) came over land and sea and founded Cairo (*Al Qahira*, the victorious) in 969. However, in the middle of the eleventh century, when Kabylie and Ifriqiya (Tunisia) broke with the Fatimid Caliph in Cairo, the latter simply sent the Banu Hilal tribe into the Maghreb.

Nor were the pharaohs and their successors tempted to extend their power to the south, beyond the second cataract, despite the fact that upriver, the narrow Nile Valley widens gradually. It was only in 1821 that Muhammad Ali undertook to conquer Sudan, which forty years later led to the Mahdi's huge Islamist rebellion and the British takeover of what was to become the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. Since Sudan's independence in 1956, Egyptian leaders have taken great interest in what happens to the south. Their main concern has been the advent of large-scale hydraulic works upriver, which could reduce the level of the Nile downriver and thus affect Egypt badly.

As we saw, it could have been argued that since the worsening of the situation in Libya, the military, which has tolerated if not encouraged the Egyptian revolution, would have supported the Libyan rebels. However, for the time being, this does not seem to be the case, unless they are being extremely discreet.

This traditional indifference on the part of Egypt's leaders to what goes on in the Sahara west of the Nile Valley encourages us to take another look at general thinking on the Sahara as a whole and especially at the comparison with the desert landmass of Central Asia. Whereas the Central Asian deserts are separated from each other by mountain chains, the geographical unity of the Sahara is clear, both in terms of its climate and of its major topographical forms. The Sahara's true dimensions are 2,000 kilometers from north to south and 6,000 kilometers east to west, provided we assume that it extends from the Atlantic to the Red Sea. Yet we need to recognize that the Nile Valley creates a clear break within the spatial entity of the Sahara. This results in a set of deep faults largely parallel to the Red Sea Rift and bordered by the mountains of the Arabian Desert. Although it would be reasonable to argue that the Nile Valley and the mountainous regions that separate it from the Red Sea are not part of the Sahara, even then, it would still extend over more than 5,000 kilometers from west to east.

Delineation of the Borders of the Sahara

The delineation of current borders within the Sahara is also the result of geopolitical rivalries outside of the vast desert landmass. This is the case with the border between Egypt and Libya, the result of what we could describe as a game of billiards between imperialists. After pinching most of the shares in the Suez Canal Company from the French in 1875, the British government took power in Egypt in 1882 while maintaining the appearance that power remained with the Khedive, grandson of the great Muhammad Ali. Not only did the modernization of Egypt (with French support and despite British opposition) take place with the building of the Suez Canal in 1869 (as well as with high-quality cotton plantations), but the British takeover in Egypt in 1882 angered many French people, who attempted in various ways to support Egyptian nationalism against the British.

In 1881, the French, who were already present in Algiers, took Tunisia, enraging the Italians who had intended to conquer it since their own national unity had now been established (with support from Napoleon III). Thereafter, having missed out on Tunisia, Italian business interests would increasingly turn their attention to the Beyliks of Tripoli and Benghazi (later to be called “Libya”), where after losing power in Egypt, Greece, Serbia, and Tunisia, the Sublime Porte was attempting to establish some sort of authority and a resumption of control supported by British diplomatic efforts. The British wanted to avoid new setbacks for the Ottoman Empire since the Russian Empire would take advantage of these to reach Constantinople and gain access to the Mediterranean. Under the auspices of the British, an agreement was signed with the Ottoman Empire to set Egypt’s western border and to draw it on a map following the 25th meridian east. In order to extend their control south of Cyrenaica, the Turks established a few military posts in the Aouzou area north of Tibesti, and when the division of Africa was discussed at the Congress of Berlin (1885), they even expressed interest in Lake Chad. At the congress, Spain easily gained recognition of its right to the coast of the Western Sahara, across from the Canary Islands, a Spanish possession since the fifteenth century.

A secret agreement between France and Britain then set the western border of “Tripolitania.” The French promised not to seek to extend their possession in Algeria beyond the 10th meridian east and therefore not to attempt to take the great Ghat-Ghadames route south of Tunisia, which to the north leads to Tripoli. In exchange, the British agreed not to object to French designs on Morocco despite the fact that British interests there were significant (British merchants had introduced Indian tea and “Made in England” teapots into Morocco). Thus the French let the British have free rein in Egypt.

South of the Sahara, once the British became aware of the limited economic interest provided by the hinterland of coastal territories, where they had established themselves in the Gulf of Guinea at the time of the great slave trade before they had slavery banned in 1815, there were fewer geopolitical rivalries. However, we should note that British colonial conquests were due to the activities of private companies, not of royal armies, since chartered companies such as the East India Company had their own army, formed mainly from native mercenaries. These only attempted conquest if this seemed likely to generate large financial profits. Therefore, British diplomacy judged that “it was better to let the French cockerel scratch the desert sand.” This explains the large expanse of French Sahara. Thus, for the prestige of France, French army troops and marine infantry left Senegal, Guinea, Ivory Coast, and Dahomey, and after “pacifying” the vast Sudan (as it was then called), went on into the Sahara, venturing deeper and deeper without meeting much opposition. The stretch of territory they controlled was twice as large as the Algerian Sahara, which extended to the south of the Hoggar, a set of southern territories that came under the military command of Algiers.

However, in the middle of the desert, an old rivalry was renewed between army officers, who had led the North African conquests, and navy officers, who had led the other colonial conquests in Black Africa and Indochina. Although their political views differed little, the army was proud of the prowess of its cavalry, while the navy, operating in the middle of the desert, took pride in its ability to calculate longitudes and latitudes as it did at sea, which most army officers could not do.

This rivalry meant that in the context of French Africa, political and administrative responsibility in specific Saharan territories remained territorially divided depending on whether the area had first been “pacified” and then mapped by army or navy officers, with navy officers not wanting their successors to be *biffins* (a pejorative term for the infantry).

As a result, with the exception of the Hoggar, which was conquered by army officers, the territories of French Sahara, stretching 4,500 kilometers from west to east and extending to the south of the Tropic of Cancer, came under colonial authorities based hundreds of kilometers further south, which were administratively divided into the four “colonies” of Mauritania, French Sudan (which became Mali), Niger, and Chad. The first three came under French West Africa (with its capital in Saint-Louis, then Dakar), and Chad under French Equatorial Africa (with its capital in Brazzaville, south of the equator).

Since 1960, each of these four Saharan regions, with extremely theoretical borders separating them, has been part of new, officially French-speaking states, which became independent overnight by sudden decision of the colonial power. The population of each area was located mainly in the very south, and the ethnicity of the local

farmers was very different from that of the nomadic herders in the Saharan areas. However, Mauritania is a special case since the settlements of Moorish farmers extend from the very south in the Senegal Valley all the way to the northern tip of the territory, 1,200 kilometers away. It should also be noted that the oases, which are large and well known and located in the northern Sahara from southern Morocco to Fezzan in Libya, are much less numerous and much smaller south of the tropic without any obvious explanation for this contrast.

The Saharan expanses of the former colonies of French West Africa and French Equatorial Africa, between which the borders are always rectilinear on the map yet fluid on the ground, are now theoretically administered and controlled by civilians and soldiers who have mainly come from the south (except in Chad) and who are almost the only ones to use the official language of French. Yet they must manage movements of herds, conflicts between herders, and the rising number of farmers, which all increase tensions.

It is important to note that the delineation of borders in the deserts of Central Asia was carried out very differently by the Russian Empire. The areas conquered in the nineteenth century were mainly populated by speakers of Turkic languages and were regrouped under the name of “Russian Turkestan,” with a command center in Tashkent, while the same thing occurred in western China under the name of “Chinese Turkestan.” Following the 1917 revolution and the establishment of the Soviet Union’s federal structure, it seemed that Russian Turkestan was too large an entity and that it might seek to merge with Chinese Turkestan, especially since the Chinese government was disintegrating at the time. The nationalities policy under Stalin thus aimed to dismantle Russian Turkestan into several federated republics, each corresponding to a specific nationality. Soviet linguists and ethnologists then distinguished linguistic nuances and differences in historical narratives within the Turkic-speaking entity and traced a border map separating the territories of these various nationalities. These Kazakh, Uzbek, Kirghiz, Turkmen, Tajik republics (the latter not mainly Turkic-speaking) then became independent in 1991 after the disintegration of the USSR.

Although this nationalities policy was applied brutally and highly undemocratically, it probably informs the various Saharan peoples today. Despite their clan rivalries, the Tuaregs are now claiming to be a nation and claim independence. The problem is that when they are severely affected by drought and sometimes using this as an excuse, they increasingly move beyond the Sahara into the Sahel and come into conflict with the farming populations, whose numbers are growing considerably. Although the Tuaregs would like to work increasingly in the mines, they complain of discrimination. Those who have remained in their traditional territories are often in revolt against what can hardly be called “government” due to the limited administrative resources at their disposal in these vast desert areas.

Nowadays, these chronic tensions promote the infiltration of revolutionary jihadists, particularly into the southern Sahara, who have been trained in the great religious colleges of Egypt and Arabia or in the Afghanistan wars. These newcomers would like to connect with the nomadic tribes in order to recruit converts who could carry out secret acts of war in the vast desert areas. Due to a lack of resources and because police forces are unfamiliar with the desert, government control becomes diluted in the vastness while those who know its topography can hide there.

The Expansion of the Libyan Conflict and the Concept of a “Great Sahara”

For now, the Libyan civil war is taking place mainly in coastal areas, where most of the population is concentrated. However, it is likely that the Libyan conflict will have repercussions as far away as two or three thousand kilometers away in vast regions of the Sahara or near it. This is all the more likely since for a long time there have been armed movements in these regions, which will probably benefit from the circulation of weapons resulting from the Libyan civil war, especially since they have long had contacts with Gaddafi. For decades, Gaddafi led major geopolitical activities—in Chad, for example, as far as its capital—by making use of ethnic and clan rivalries between peoples of the Sahara, and he has fueled rebel movements among the Tuaregs against the states they come under. Recently, Gaddafi’s agents recruited volunteers and apparently extremely well-paid mercenaries from among the Tuaregs and the Toubous in Chad.

Meanwhile, Sahrawi militants in the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Rio de Oro (POLISARIO – *Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguia el Hamra y Río de Oro*) have also come from the Western Sahara to Libya to fight as part of Gaddafi’s forces. Even though they are probably not many of them, their participation in the conflict is interesting. Their arrival shows that connections between two sections of the Sahara, which are far away from each other and have no historical relationship, can be established rapidly. Furthermore, the current Libyan conflict risks rekindling this old conflict in the Western Sahara and extends it much further than before.

This would be a new chapter in a more than 35-year-old postcolonial conflict between Morocco and Algeria concerning the future of Saharan territories abandoned by the Spanish colonial government in 1975. Morocco had previously declared its historical rights over the Saguia el-Hamra and the Rio de Oro as the route along which in the eleventh century, the founders of Marrakesh and the Almoravid dynasty established the great Gold Road between the banks of the Senegal River, Morocco, and the entire Mediterranean. However, when this route stopped being used in the

fourteenth century, relations between Morocco and the Rio de Oro weakened and the latter fell under Spanish control in the nineteenth century.

Simply stated, when in 1976 the Moroccans wanted to reclaim possession of the territory, they came up against the Reguibat, a great nomadic tribe, as well as Moroccan anti-colonialist militants who, to escape French police, had sought refuge in the Rif, the protectorate's Spanish zone, following which Franco exiled them to the Rio de Oro. These old anti-colonialist militants thus had a score to settle with the Royal Moroccan Army, which after independence in 1956 had crushed a revolt of Rif tribes, reclaiming lands lost to colonization. These former exiles in the Rio de Oro and the Reguibat then created the POLISARIO with Algerian support. Since its independence in 1962, Algeria has been in conflict with Morocco over almost all of its entire eastern border. In 1963, a "sand war" pitted the new Algerian army against the Moroccan army, and in 1976, an Algerian-Moroccan war over the Western Sahara question was only just avoided. The POLISARIO fighters and several Reguibat groups withdrew into camps in Tindouf in the Algerian Sahara where a Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (RASD) was proclaimed, a somewhat hyperbolic name used by the Sahrawis to describe a few hundred thousand residents these camps.

Ever since, tension has endured between Morocco and Algeria, the latter of which continues to support the RASD both militarily and financially. Although the United Nations has suggested a referendum, the argument revolves around the number of real Sahrawis. The POLISARIO accuses Morocco of having encouraged Moroccans from other regions of the country to settle there, while Morocco is contesting the number put forward by the POLISARIO, which has inflated the numbers of those who left the Rio de Oro and Saguia el-Hamra in 1976.

To stop the POLISARIO from launching operations in its desert territories, the Moroccan army and some large corporations have built a sand wall over 2,000 kilometers long, comprising two parallel, fairly steep slopes studded with land mines and a large number of watchtowers. To take the topography into account, there is a long corridor several dozen kilometers wide between this wall and the theoretical delineation of the border drawn in 1934, which the POLISARIO considers to be RASD territory it has liberated. This type of sand wall could no doubt be built in other parts of the Sahara should the Libyan or any other conflict spread there.

To enable it to carry on operating, the POLISARIO has for years been recruiting paid volunteers with Algerian financing. These are former nomads who have come from all over the southern Sahara, from Mauritania to Sudan. These people then return to the area from which they came or become mercenaries in other conflict areas or scenes of riots as provocateurs or combatants, sometimes hundreds of kilometers away from the Sahel. This has been particularly true in Nigeria. POLISARIO

combatants and former volunteers flew from Tindouf to Tripoli or came to Fezzan to support Gaddafi, apparently with the help of Algeria, which until then was careful to ensure that its support for RASD was exclusive. This shows that for a large part of the Sahara, the consequences of Western intervention in the Libyan civil war are extremely complex.

Driven away ten years earlier from northern Algeria, Jihadist rebels, who turned down government amnesty, are claiming to belong to AQMI. They operate thousands of kilometers from Algiers in the vast Saharan areas of the former French West African colonies and seek to paralyze the activities of French mining groups (as in the Arlit site), to the particular benefit of Chinese groups, which are well established in Sudan.

These various large-scale operations are carried out clandestinely by small groups of combatants over huge areas with no vegetation and sparse population. Their leaders make minimum use of satellite telephony since even coded exchanges are tracked and decrypted by US listening posts. Their small groups of combatants avoid using roads, which are in any case scarce, or even tracks, yet they cover great distances in light, all-terrain vehicles. The use of these vehicles, which they inherited from the tourist fad for the Sahara before insecurity set in, provides them with access to a large range away from water sources but requires secret fueling networks. Sometimes they use camels, whose tracks are less visible from the sky.

Small armed groups moving over large distances with leaders from mostly urban backgrounds require the collaboration of Saharans with precise knowledge of the topography, which can be particularly limiting since these groups usually travel far from the main tracks. In the various herder populations that used to travel over vast territories, the precise knowledge of the topography over huge areas was not so much knowledge held by men generally but by the chiefs of leading clans and especially by their guides. Their geographical skills were astonishing, and even more so their ability to find their bearings by the stars at night over great distances, with their spatial computations sometimes covering several hundred kilometers, if not thousands.

We should note that it was to these people that some French officers, a few years after the start of the Algerian conquest, no doubt owed their own geographical vision of territories into which the French army had not yet ventured. The name "Sahara" (as related by General Daumas in his 1845 book *Le Sahara algérien*) comes from the difference observed by the guides of nomadic tribes who came from the south in summer, between the *bled Tell*, where farming is possible without irrigation, and the *bled Sahara*, a land with fawn-colored soil where farming without irrigation is impossible. At the time, the high plateaus and high plains less than 100 kilometers from Algiers and Oran and south of the mountains of what would become known as the Tell Atlas were considered part of the *bled Sahara*, even if Daumas and even

Eugène Fromentin, the author of *Un été dans le Sahara* (1854), noted that this was not the real desert, and the terms “erg,” “reg,” “hamada,” and “tassili” gradually began to appear in the geographical writings of the period.

Captain Carette even thought that a Practical School of Native Explorers—a paradoxical though not unreasonable name—should be created to glean more precise information. Henri Duveyrier, who was the first great expert on the Tuaregs, had already given a fairly precise account of the Hoggar before even going there. The fact that guides or notables from Saharan tribes provided oral geographical descriptions to French officers as the former drove their herds northward did not preclude violent confrontations when these French officers attempted to venture south and establish colonial government, the best-known case being that of Colonel Flatters' mission, which was massacred in the Hoggar in 1881.

In the future, the forms war may take in the Sahara will combine highly sophisticated technology with guerrilla tactics. The major difference will be that notorious guerrilla wars (in Vietnam, for example) took place in relatively contained environments, in which abundant vegetation concealed the fighters. By contrast, the struggles in the Sahara will no doubt take place over very large open spaces, where specific formations such as caves and shelters beneath rocks will allow for concealment from air or satellite observation.

Given this context, are the concepts of a Great Sahara and therefore of a Saharan heartland simply illusions? The concept is essential because of the requirements of the “war on terror,” as shown by the information and listening services established by the United States, which seeks collaboration from resource-poor local government structures. The war in the Sahara will probably force those African states that already have some intellectual and technical resources, including Morocco, Algeria, and Egypt, to equip themselves with better resources not only in research centers but also on the ground so as to be in contact with the populations of the Sahara.

Developments in the Libyan conflict will also depend on the Egyptian army's geopolitical awareness. For the time being, its role in Libya is highly discreet, if not nonexistent. Expansion of the war into the Sahara is a real threat to Egypt since its cities, which are located in the narrow valley beneath the desert plateaus, including Cairo, could easily be attacked by highly mobile groups. To protect itself, Egypt must pay more attention to what is happening to the west. It is of course worried about large hydraulic projects soon to be implemented in the south—in the Nile Basin, Sudan, Ethiopia, and around Lake Victoria—for these will no doubt reduce the volume of water reaching the Aswan Dam at Lake Nasser. However, a large part of Sudan's territory just upriver is part of the Sahara, and the conflict over Darfur is also connected, at least to a degree.

With a total population equivalent to Egypt's, the Maghreb states are clearly concerned about what is going on in the Sahara as a whole. It remains important for Algeria and Morocco to stop opposing each other on the sly. South of the great desert, government structures are far too weak to face up to the consequences of the huge demographic growth in tropical Africa. Only Nigeria has the demographic and financial resources to build a strong state so long as it can escape federalist fragmentation and generalized corruption. There are also plans for large electrical projects and gas pipelines to the Mediterranean, linking up with those in Algeria.

To control the periphery, a presumed Saharan heartland does not need to be populated, nor does there need to be a power structure with the long-term geopolitical objective of controlling an increasingly large periphery. Although the Russian heartland, with Siberia at its core, was not populated, it came under a conquering empire, whether under the czars or the communists, with its center, Moscow, on the periphery of the heartland.

Egypt, despite its peripheral position, seems to me to be the only state that can fulfill this function in the long term. Accomplishing this huge project requires the conviction that it is achievable. The memory of an illustrious past under the pharaohs may help, and control of the Suez Canal, a strategic position of global importance, and proximity to the Gulf States may complement this. A geopolitical Saharan entity, whether or not called a "heartland," which corresponds to an extremely large natural unit, is clearly a representation and is no doubt an illusion. However, some major geopolitical projects that were achieved gradually were for a time powerful illusions too.