

Book Review

***Perilous Desert: Insecurity in the Sahara.* Edited by Frederic Wehrey and Anouar Boukhars. Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013. 224 pp. \$49.95 cloth/\$19.95 paperback.**

Once written off as a wasteland at the fringes of geopolitical relevance, the Sahel—the belt of territory running from Mauritania on the Atlantic Ocean to Somalia on the Indian Ocean and connecting North Africa across the Sahara Desert to tropical Africa (the name is derived from the Arabic term *sāḥil*, literally, “shore” or “coast,” which refers to the vegetation that, like a coastline, demarcates the limits of the Saharan “ocean” of sand)—has asserted its strategic importance with a vengeance in recent years.

That the region has become the focus of militant Islamist activities presenting significant challenges to the security and stability of a number of neighboring countries of importance as well as the potential to cause major political and economic mischief was underscored in early 2013, both by the high-profile terrorist attacks on the natural gas facility at In Amenas, Algeria, and the uranium mine at Airlit, Niger, and by the crisis in Mali. The latter eventually resulted in a French-led military intervention to stop the advance of rebels linked with al-Qaeda’s North African affiliate, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)¹; the establishment of a base for unmanned aerial vehicles operated by the U.S. military in neighboring Niger; and the deployment of what is slated to become the third-largest United Nations peacekeeping mission. The end of the year witnessed further evidence of the ripples emanating from this zone of increasing instability, further taxing the already-stressed capacities of regional states, which in turn led to more demand for the scarce resources which the international community as French troops spearheaded another multinational force which sought to prevent the collapse of government institutions in the Central African Republic from turning into an orgy of communal violence. Against this backdrop, it is no wonder that the United Nations Security Council has gone so far as to describe the Sahel as the center of a new “arc of instability” stretching “from Mauritania to Nigeria and beyond to the Horn of Africa.”²

An ancient space of movement encompassing ancient trade and migration routes, the region is strategically important for several reasons in addition to these security considerations,

¹ See J. Peter Pham, “The Dangerous ‘Pragmatism’ of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb,” *Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 2, no. 1 (January-June 2011): 15-29.

² United Nations Security Council, “‘Arc of Instability’ Across Africa, if Left Unchecked, Could Turn Continent into Launch Pad for Larger-Scale Terrorist Attacks, Security Council Told,” Department of Public Information, 6965th meeting (SC/11004), May 13, 2013, accessed December 31, 2013, at <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2013/sc11004.doc.htm>.

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including its role as a bridge between the Arab (and Berber/Amazigh) Maghreb and black Sub-Saharan Africa. Notwithstanding the fixed territorial perspective introduced during the colonial era, the incredible diversity of populations and environmental conditions it embraces assures the older concept of the Sahel as a continuum for the movement peoples and goods remains incredibly durable. As one veteran scholar of the region put it half a century ago, “the heterogeneous and partially mobile population, the constant political and military interaction between the north, the desert, and the south, the littoral and ‘midstream’ belts of cities...all these have served to tie western Africa together.”³

Moreover, in addition to the Sahel’s longstanding role as a major transportation corridor for the movement, both licit and illicit, of people and goods, the region boasts significant renewable and nonrenewable natural resources. Niger is the world’s fourth-largest producer of uranium, producing 114,000 tons, worth approximately \$500 million, in 2010. With the United States and China, the only two other major producers keeping most of what they mine for domestic use, the Sahel is the biggest source for the international supply of phosphate rock and derivatives used as fertilizer in the rest of the world, with almost 80 percent of the exploitable global reserve found in Morocco and the Western Sahara. Mali, Burkina Faso, Senegal, and Mauritania together account for 15 percent of the gold mined in Africa. Africa’s largest petroleum and natural gas producers, Nigeria and Algeria, respectively, border on the Sahel; the latter supplies more than one-third of the energy consumed by Italy and Spain and roughly 10 percent of the growing demand for gas in Europe as a whole.

Given the burgeoning geopolitical importance of the region for both Africa and the world and the consequent need to better understand the roots of its challenges, the publication of the collection of studies edited by the Carnegie Endowment’s Frederic Wehrey and Anouar Boukhars and entitled *Perilous Desert: Insecurity in the Sahara* could not be more welcome or timely. As Wehrey notes in his introduction, while observers “have been long aware of the witches’ brew of problems the region faces, there have few attempts to unpack the complex interactions of the forces at work” (2). The volume’s chapters undertake to do so and, by and large, succeed as they follow the trail of devastation left across the porous frontiers of the Sahara and the Sahel as weak government capacity, widespread corruption, crushing poverty, and deeply ingrained social and ethnic divisions have combined to produce an environment where Islamist militant groups and transnational criminal networks operate with *élan*.

Appropriate enough, since long-simmering tensions in the Sahel were brought to a boil by the fighters and weapons which spilled out Libya following the overthrow of Muammar Qaddafi, *Perilous Desert* opens with an examination of the deteriorating security situation in the eastern region of Cyrenaica (Barqa) by Wehrey and of the chaos in the increasingly ungoverned—and possibly ungovernable—areas along the country’s 4,300-kilometer land borders by Peter Cole, who served as a special consultant with the UN Support Mission in Libya

³ I. William Zartman, “The Sahara: Bridge or Barrier,” *International Conciliation* 541 (January 1963): 12.

(UNSMIL). Both analysts concur that the crisis of governance following the fall of the dictator has forced local authorities, armed groups, and even informal actors to assume many state functions, a stopgap “solution” that has exacerbated longstanding tribal and other grievances.

In the face of the legal, social, and economic marginalization which non-Arab minorities like the Tuareg and the Tubu have been subjected to in Libya and the Tuareg have faced in Mali, it is no wonder that these groups with cross-border populations have become restive, but that the areas they control have been noted for their prominent role in the contraband trafficking of goods both licit and illicit.

Cigarette smuggling in particular has greatly contributed to the emergence of the practices and networks that subsequently facilitated the current flourishing drug traffic. In 2009, for example, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimated that cigarette smuggling along these routes accounted for 60 percent of the Libyan tobacco market (or \$240 million in proceeds at the retail level) and 18 percent of the Algerian market (or \$228 million). This system has helped to erode the customs services because of corruption and collusion between the smugglers and state officials. In fact, for most of the journey, the merchandise is transported on large trucks operating on main roads, with at least the tacit approval of security officials, especially in Mali and Nigeria. In Libya, the cigarette smuggling was controlled by members of the Qadhadhfa tribe with ties to their fellow tribesmen who dominated the security services. To the west, Sahrawi networks, often with direct involvement of Polisario Front officials, moved subsidized Algerian goods and internationally-supplied humanitarian aid southward and cigarettes northward. Mokhtar Belmokhtar, one of the pioneers in AQIM’s operations in the Sahel, first established himself in the region with a cigarette-smuggling racket that was so successful that he became known as “Mr. Marlboro.” Moreover, hubs in the cigarette traffic evolved into centers of human smuggling as this business grew beginning in the early 1990s, with Gao in Mali and Agadez in Niger being cases in point.

Over the course of the last decade, the smuggling of licit goods based on price differentials between countries and the avoidance of taxes has been superseded by the smuggling of illicit drugs. Since about 2005, driven by growing demand in Europe and the Mashriq as well as tightened controls along the Moroccan-Algerian border, off the coasts of Spain, and at European airports, two distinct flows have expanded across the poorly controlled Sahara: that of South American cocaine destined for Europe and that of Moroccan cannabis resin bound for Libya, Egypt, and the Arabian Peninsula. The cocaine smuggling expanded rapidly from 2005 to 2007—although there appears to have been a contraction after 2008, notwithstanding some spectacular incidents like the 2009 “Air Cocaine” incident—and involves transshipment through coastal states overland across the Sahel and Sahara to Europe.

In his contribution to this volume, Wolfram Lacher, a researcher at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik) who has been responsible for some of the most insightful studies of organized crime and conflict in the region, is unsparing in his critique of conventional “wisdom” about all this:

External observers and Malian government officials readily acknowledge the importance of drug trafficking, but focused above all on the involvement of AQIM while ignoring or downplaying the links of state officials and political leaders to criminal networks. Moreover, Western policymakers primarily perceived the regional al-Qaeda franchise as a terrorist group, despite the fact that its most notorious activity consisted of abducting foreign nations to extort ransoms... Rivalries over the control of smuggling and state officials' tolerance of criminal activity by allies allowed extremist groups to flourish. The complicity and involvement of Malian officials and the willingness of Western governments to pay ransoms also caused the kidnapping industry to thrive. Moreover, these factors were key to the dynamics that cause the eruption of renewed conflict in northern Mali in 2012. (61-62)

If Western governments “have been playing an overwhelmingly negative role by paying for ransoms and supplying what is most likely AQIM’s and [the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa’s] most important source of financing” (81), distrust between the Malian leadership overthrown in 2012 and the Mauritanian government—to say nothing of the decades-old discord between Morocco and Algeria—have proven to be a nearly insurmountable obstacle to much-needed regional security cooperation. In his chapter on “The Paranoid Neighbor: Algeria and the Conflict in Mali,” Boukhars argues that the Malian crisis is “a test case of whether Algeria can reconcile its domestic priorities with its foreign goals” (105)—referring to the significant number of murky links between some of the armed groups in northern Mali and Algerian security services—and points to some encouraging signs that a more pragmatic approach is being adopted, including the opening of its airspace to French military flights and its self-interest after the attack on In Amenas in preventing further disruptions within its borders. Only time, of course, will tell if the shift will be sustained.

Mauritania, the subject of separate contributions by Boukhars and by Alex Thurston, a doctoral student at Northwestern University and prolific writer on the Sahel, likewise faces a difficult balancing act, in this case managing its Islamic identity and societal divisions amid an exceptionally precarious geopolitical position.

Another long-simmering dispute that has at least indirectly—and, recently, also directly—contributed to heightened threat in the Sahel is the “frozen” conflict over the Western Sahara.⁴ The origins and evolution of this conflict are beyond the scope of this review, but its lack of resolution has for some four decades poisoned relations between two regional

⁴ See J. Peter Pham, “Not Another Failed State: Towards a Realistic Solution of the Western Sahara,” *Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 1-24. Also see Terence McNamee, Greg Mills, and J. Peter Pham, *Morocco and the African Union: Prospects for Re-engagement and Progress on the Western Sahara*, Brenthurst Discussion Paper 1/2013 (Johannesburg: Brenthurst Foundation, 2013); and Anouar Boukhars and Jacques Roussellier, eds., *Perspectives on Western Sahara: Myths, Nationalisms, and Geopolitics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013).

powers, Morocco, which claims the territory as an integral part of national territory, and Algeria, which backs the self-styled “national liberation” movement, the *Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguía el Hamra y Río de Oro* (Popular Front for the Liberation of Saqiet al-Hamra and Río del Oro, or the Polisario Front). Polisario-linked figures have played more than cameo roles in recent troubles throughout the region, ranging from recruiting mercenaries to defend Qaddafi to providing AQIM’s allies in northern Mali with both fighters and, in one notorious case, Western hostages to trade for ransom. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, among others, has been increasingly vocal that “the rise of instability and insecurity in and around the Sahel” and the risk of “spillover” from the fighting in Mali requires “an urgent settlement” of the “ticking time bomb” of the Western Sahara issue.⁵ In fact, if *the* “ticking time bomb” has thus far not gone off, there have nevertheless already been other explosions, as Boukhars notes in the final study in *Perilous Desert*:

The destabilizing consequences of the potential spread of organized crime and militancy in the camps of Tindouf is of great concern to the countries of the region... The last two years have seen a number of skirmishes between rival Malian and Sahrawi drug traffickers... Mali accuses the Polisario of being a major player in the region’s drug-trafficking industry...

Sahrawi smuggling networks have also used their influence in northern Mauritania, especially in the regions of Adrar and Tiris Zemmour, which border the Western Sahara, to expand their illegal trafficking and make a country a major hub of cigarette, drugs, arms, fuel, and human trafficking. To be sure, this illegal activity has existed for decades... The problem today, however, is that these illicit activities occur in the context of the expansion of AQIM, growing interdependence of organized criminal networks and state officials, and rising social and ethnic conflict. The combination of these developments can be dangerously destabilizing not only for the fragile states of Mauritania and Mali, but also for the stronger ones, namely Algeria and Morocco. (169-171).

One major limitation of the otherwise incredibly useful primer that *Perilous Desert* represents for policymakers and analysts is the lack of attention paid to the religious dimension factor aside from Thurston’s excellent study of political Islamism in Mauritania. What is really not accorded the consideration it warrants is the role which the religious revival in the Sahel has created a point of entry for extremists. The Islam historically present in the region is heavily influenced by the moderate Mālikī school of Sunni jurisprudence (*madhhab*) and its practice often dominated by Sufi brotherhoods (*tariqa*; plural, *turuq*), especially the Qadiriyya, Tijaniyya, and, in the case of Senegal, the Mouridiyya. Thus, both the legal scholarship and the popular piety in the Sahel were characterized by a tradition of tolerance, although this was often

⁵ UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, quoted in Tim Witcher, “Ban says Western Sahara risks being drawn into Mali war,” Agence France-Presse, April 9, 2013, accessed December 31, 2013, at http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5iOnupKvBuc8I_WTR3J5BnNCFnmEw?docId=CNG.566cbe22180951c72bc8d9c6ad6fd9d1.d1.

punctuated in historic times with occasional jihads aimed at “pagan” states neighboring the region or Muslim polities viewed as wanting in their fervor. In more recent times, however, the Sahel has been targeted by Islamist missionaries and nongovernmental organizations—hailing primarily from Sudan in the case of Chad and South Asia and the Middle East in that of other countries—espousing *Salafiyya* doctrines calling for a return to the correct path of “founding fathers” of Islam from what adherents view as the deviation (*bid’a*) or heresy (*shirk*) of contemporary practice. The ideological program of this “renewal,” which comes in both “scholarly” (*‘ilmiyya*) as well as “fighting” (*jihadiyya*) variants and enjoys not inconsiderable external financial backing, have made inroads in recent years in direct competition with the older, more moderate, currents, in part because it responds to a growing demand for some stability in a rapidly changing world, especially among segments of the population that have not previously been especially steeped in traditional religious practice.

While the southernmost edges of the Sahel are not really covered in the volume under consideration, in Nigeria, where the Boko Haram sect has proven to be more and more of a threat to the security and stability of Africa’s most populous nation, religious revivalism is certainly a significant factor.⁶ There is growing evidence of not only tactical and ideological linkages between the Nigerian militants and AQIM, but also operational ties, including shared training and personnel. Although it is rather unlikely that Boko Haram, even with its newfound external support, can pose an existential threat to the Nigerian state, the struggle against it has nevertheless consumed much of the resources which might have otherwise been allocated to long-neglected development priorities and largely distracted the federal government’s attention from its own agenda, further undermining an already fragile polity. Ironically, it appears that the denial of their safe haven in northern Mali, including at least two training facilities, by the relative success of the French-led Opération Serval has led to a return on a number of militants to Nigeria, where they have both reinforced Boko Haram in the northeastern part of the country and contributed to the emergence of a distinct offshoot in its northwest, *Jama’atu Ansarul Muslimina fi Biladis Sudan* (Vanguards for the Protection of Muslims in Black Africa, commonly referred to as Ansaru).

While it would be hard to argue that Boko Haram and other extremist groups operating at the edges of the Sahel in northern Nigeria are in any way representative of their communities, the failure of that country’s federal government to better address the many legitimate grievances which have rendered meaningful segments of the population in the North amenable to the message of the militants groups about overturning the status quo. Frustrations with living conditions are keenly felt in northern Nigeria, where the proportion of the population living below the poverty level is between two and three times the rate in the southern part of the country. Absent dramatic action to end corruption; build a more inclusive government; alleviate poverty; provide access to healthcare and education; and create a transportation, utilities, and communications infrastructure capable of sustaining economic

⁶ See J. Peter Pham, *Boko Haram’s Evolving Threat*, Africa Security Brief 20 (Washington: National Defense University, 2012).

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growth for Nigeria's 170 million people, ham-fisted security operations like those that occurred during state of emergency proclaimed in three northern states during May 2013 accomplish little other than to further inflame public opinion against Abuja.

Instability in the Sahel has made the once marginal region a mounting concern, not only for the African states bordering it, but, increasingly, for both Europe and the United States. Western governments are especially worried that the weakness of state control in an area with a superabundance of "ungoverned spaces" will allow AQIM and other extremist entities to expand their influence and even establish safe havens—fears which the takeover of northern Mali during the first half of 2012 by Islamist militants and their various allies underscored. In fact, by the end of 2013, the U.S. State Department was declaring that the merger of Mokhtar Belmokhtar's AQIM splinter group, the *al-Mulathamun* (Those Who Sign in Blood) Battalion, with MUJAO to form a new group, *al-Murabitoun* (People of the Garrison), constituted "the greatest near-term threat to U.S. and Western interests."⁷ Such analyses will undoubtedly result, even in a period of fiscal austerity, in at least some additional resources to build the capacity of the security sector in the region. But if these efforts are to have lasting positive effects, they cannot afford to ignore the underlying institutional and social roots of insecurity in the Sahel. To that end, *Perilous Desert* will be an invaluable primer to the challenges—and opportunities—on the horizon.

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⁷ U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, "Terrorist Designation of the al-Mulathamun Battalion," December 18, 2013, accessed December 31, 2013, at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/218880.htm>.