

ROUNDTABLE

ECOCRITICAL TERRAINS; RETHINKING TAMAZGHAN AND MIDDLE EASTERN
ENVIRONMENTS

Extractive Saharanism

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I have defined “Saharanism” as a racializing and extractive imaginary that operates across deserts.¹ Saharanism “entails a universalizing idea of deserts as empty and lifeless spaces, providing the conceptual justification for brutal, conscienceless, and life-threatening actions in desert environments.”² Saharanism is informed by an ideology that creates, sustains, and weaponizes the ubiquitous perception of deserts as abnormal environments that are there to accommodate actions and undertakings that would not otherwise be undertaken in places that are considered ordinary. Given its extensive history and trans-desertic nature, Saharanism encompasses a wide array of disciplinary and policy thinking about deserts, which has had dire effects on deserts and arid lands globally.³

Saharanism is embedded in its proponents’ deep disregard for desert environments and their inhabitants. This disregard for both desert humans and nature is also entrenched in the notions of void and emptiness that actively negate their very existence to justify the unjustifiable to unfold in deserts. I derive Saharanism from the same root as *ṣaḥrā’* (Sahara/desert) in Arabic, but I propose *istikhlā’* as a better and more appropriate term to render its meaning in Arabic. *Istikhlā’*, because it implies both wilderness and a desire to make into wilderness, captures the notion of *khalā’* (wilderness) as well as the desertion of moral, ethical, and environmental considerations encapsulated in Saharanism.⁴ *Istikhlā’* also encompasses the notion of *takhallī*, which means abandonment of or willful relinquishment

¹ This essay is a portion from a longer chapter appearing in my book *Desert Imaginations: A History of Saharanism and Its Radical Consequences* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2025). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the French and Arabic are mine.

² Brahim El Guabli, “Desert Futures Collective: A Conversation with Brahim El Guabli, Jill Jarvis, and Francisco E. Robles,” in *Deserts Are Not Empty*, ed. Samia Henni (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 32.

³ Diana K. Davis has traced the concrete implications of the use of notions of “desertification” and “dissection” on people’s livelihoods and mobility in different contexts. She also has explained how several international organizations, particularly UNESCO, drew on colonial desert knowledge to sustain practices that have been detrimental to desert environments. See chapter 5 in Diana K. Davis, *The Arid Lands: History, Power, Knowledge* (Boston: MIT Press, 2016).

⁴ Algerian scholar Hasan Dwwas has used the term “Saharanism” in his work, but he equates it with a form of desert Orientalism. My definition of this concept is different and seeks to apply this critical methodology to all desert environments instead of the Sahara alone. See Hasan Dwwās, “Surat al-mujtama’ al-sahrawi al-Jaza’iri fi al-Qarn al-Tasi’ ‘Ashar min kikhāl al-Rahhala al-Faransiyyin: Muqara Susiutaqafiyya” (MA thesis, Monterey University Constantine, Algeria, 2008).

of morally required dispositions vis-à-vis human and nonhuman subjects. This desertism is undergirded by long-lasting, powerful discursive and actionable practices that have drawn on constructed notions of desert emptiness to desert both moral and environmental duties that may prevent deserts' transformation into mining, military, industrial, and economic "national sacrifice zones."⁵ Coined during the Cold War era, sacrifice zones are towns, forsaken regions, industrial complexes, and extraction areas, located particularly in the Global South or in poor or remote areas in industrialized societies, that are delivered to toxic and deadly projects to enhance national defense or generate prosperity in other areas. They are, in the words of mining author Christopher Pollon, "landscapes destroyed for the sake of benefits delivered somewhere else."⁶ The imbrication of Saharanism with visions of empire, economic hegemony, and militarism is compounded by the desertion of ethical considerations when it comes to environmental and human life in deserts. Whether we call it Saharanism, *istikhlā'*, or desertism, this ideology has been at work, consciously or unconsciously, in the many questionable enterprises that have unfolded and continue to unfold in deserts. Given Saharanism's long history and the breadth of the actions and undertakings its pervasiveness has made possible in deserts across the globe, I dedicate this short article only to its manifestation in French "extractive Saharanism," which played out in the Sahara in the second half of the 20th century.⁷

A variety of factors made the period between 1920 and 1960 suitable for the rise of the aggressive economic Saharanism that I discuss in this article. Although abundant and excellent, the scholarship that examines this colonial period in the Sahara has not conceptualized the theoretical and discursive phenomenon behind the multilayered and concerted legislative, administrative, and military endeavors to excise the Sahara from the rest of Africa in the post-World War II period. Spearheaded by the top brass of French civilian administrators, French extractive Saharanism conceived of the Sahara as an entirely available space, with wind, sun, oil, labor, and mineral resources that could all be harvested to support the French economy at a global juncture when decolonization was becoming a concrete reality. The protagonists of extractive Saharanism delivered public lectures, wrote books, created and conferred expertise, churned out articles, populated the domestic public arena, and even traveled abroad to convince banks and multinational companies to participate in the Sahara's development. Known in French as the *mise en valeur* (enhancement), the legacy of this practice has been an unlimited trail of "Saharanism-infused archive[s]" that span the four corners of the globe.⁸ Bernard Simiot, a novelist and journalist, best described extractive Saharanism by resorting to a grotesque biological imagery that entailed that the annexation of the Sahara to France would "represent the European head placed on a giant African body for which the Maghreb and Africa would be the limbs."⁹ Accordingly, this dream of an inextricable, organic and continuing relationship of exploitation between the Sahara and Europe was an indication of extractive Saharanism as an ideology that inscribes the exploitation of deserts within an open-ended, vampiric futurity.

⁵ Steve Lerner, *Sacrifice Zones: The Front Lines of Toxic Chemical Exposure in the United States* (Boston: MIT Press, 2010), 2.

⁶ Christopher Pollon, *Pitfall: The Race to Mine the World's Most Vulnerable Place* (Berkeley, CA: Greystone Books, 2023), 9.

⁷ Readers can find a more fleshed out discussion of Saharanism in my book, "*Desert Imaginations*."

⁸ Although this notion was popularized by Albert Sarraut, the French minister of the colonies, who disseminated the concept in his book *La mise en valeur des colonies françaises* (Paris: Payot, 1923), Maurice Dewavrin and Paul Delibert published a book in 1920 entitled *Comment mettre en valeur notre domaine colonial* (Paris: Marcel Rivière et Cie, 1920). Prefaced by André Lebon, a former minister of colonies and trade, this book marked the official backing of this colonial notion, which assumes that value is gained through human intervention.

⁹ Bernard Simiot, "Il faut 'nationaliser' le Sahara," *Hommes et mondes* 60 (1951): 161–64.

Contours of Extractive Saharanism

French Saharanism went through two important phases between the colonization of Algeria in 1830 and the decolonization of most of Africa by Algeria's independence in 1962. The first was an army-led phase, which lasted from 1881 to 1945 and conceived of the Sahara as a security problem. During this period, the Sahara had to be pacified and disciplined, and much of the work went to the now infamous domestication of the Tuareg. The second phase, which started after World War II and came to an end with the independence of Algeria, was civilian-led, marking the entry of civil engineers and their institutions into the desert to implement exploitative projects within its territories. Both military and civilian Saharanisms are extractive, but the articulation of Saharanism as an inherently extractive practice took shape in the hands of the civilian bureaucrats who were in charge of developing schemes for the desert. The discovery of immense oil reserves in the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula, along with the need to reconstruct Europe after the destruction caused by World War II, led to the emergence of a new class of movers and shakers of Saharan affairs. Instead of military Sahariens, who had dominated the French Sahara since the 19th century, the civilian Sahariens who worked crisscrossing the desert and dissecting it were now engineers, graduates of the National School of Administration in Paris, bureaucrats, politicians, and government officials. All of them entered the desert with the mission of exploiting all the resources and undertaking all endeavors, including nuclear testing (1960–67), that would help their country maintain its grandeur among the winners and major players in the world that was born after 1945.

Starting in 1947, Erik Labonne, a former French ambassador to the Soviet Union (as well as a former general resident in Morocco and Tunisia), would become France's Sahara man. The importance of Labonne's work as a master civilian Saharanist was recognized by Max Lejeune, who led the Ministry of the Sahara, which functioned between 1957 and 1962 to find ways to maintain this territory under French sovereignty regardless of the outcome of the ongoing Algerian war (1954–62). Lejeune referred to Labonne in one of his speeches as "the first to have believed in the Sahara and [the one] who, starting in 1947, attracted the government's attention to its mineral and industrial potential."¹⁰ Although it is not clearly known why Labonne had such an interest in development, his encounter with the Soviet Union's work in Siberia and its industrial *combinats* (Russian *Kombinat* or industrial conglomerates) may have been the source of his inspiration. The respect Labonne enjoyed among French elites gave credence to his ideas about the extractive and industrial development of the Sahara, setting in motion Saharanism's methodical exploitative ideology, something that would dominate French thinking through the end of colonial Algeria in 1962.

Certainly, Saharanism did not just become extractive in the 1940s. In fact, the Sahara has been viewed as a space for extractive enterprises at least since the first cargo loads of slaves were shipped out of Africa. In the past, Saharanism's extractive nature took the form of slavery, whereby people were dislocated from their homes in the desert and sold to enslavers.¹¹ Historians have already shown how the tragedy of slavery displaced hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people from where they lived in the Sahara or its bordering

¹⁰ "Un exposé de M. Max Lejeune sur le fonctionnement du ministère du Sahara," *Le Monde*, 21 June 1957, https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1957/06/21/un-expose-de-m-max-lejeune-sur-le-fonctionnement-du-ministere-du-sahara_2316339_1819218.html.

¹¹ Henri Bissuel, a commandant in the French army and a former head of the Arab Bureau, gave two lectures to his colleagues in the garrison of Medea, later published as *Le Sahara français: Conférence sur les questions sahariennes* (Algiers: Adolphe Jourdan, Librairie-Editeur, 1891), in which he highlighted how the manpower of local people (*les indigènes*) could be exploited. From using them as manual labor for the French in the Sahara to recruiting them to serve in the army, Bissuel, reflecting the spirit of the time, provided a blueprint for the extraction of labor from desert inhabitants.

lands.¹² In a moment of truth, Emile Bélime, the governor of colonies known as the “master of water” in Niger, had no qualms about stating the parallels between slavery and the extraction of resources.¹³ He wrote that the difference was only in what was considered extractable based on the morals of the historical period:

Sword and cross in hand, the Portuguese and the Spanish rushed to the New World. Following their example, we, like them, grabbed sugar- and spice-rich islands, and, in order to develop them, we imported slaves who were duly evangelized. Everything has been said about the slave trade’s calamities and cruelties, but [we have] always omitted the fact that the times lent themselves to it. During this period, serfdom was a common practice in Europe, and slavery was far from being abolished everywhere.¹⁴

For Bélime, France’s exploitative undertakings in the Sahara and other colonies in the 1950s were not any different from what the Portuguese and the Spanish had been doing in America. Slavery was phased out because it was no longer morally acceptable and also because mechanization had replaced manpower. In this way, the extraction of resources replaced the extraction of people. When all the Sahara had to offer was people to be turned to slaves, the dominant powers then—meaning North African traders and their European partners—extracted the people to ship to the New World. Two centuries later, oil and minerals were discovered in other deserts, and the focus shifted to the extraction of material and immaterial resources. Nevertheless, the shift to the exploitation of natural resources involved a great deal of systematic thinking about extracting cheap labor from colonized populations.

In the 1950s, extractive Saharanism channeled its ideology through various discursive, legal, economic, and even social initiatives that all sought to facilitate the exploitation of Saharan resources, including, but not limited to, oil reserves, minerals, wind, solar energy, arable land, and manpower. The concept of *mise en valeur* became a linchpin of the domestic and transnational conversations focused on the Sahara. Starting in the 1930s, Albert Sarraut, the then French minister of the colonies, deployed the concept of *la mise en valeur coloniale* (colonial investment or enhancement for extractive purposes) to optimize the use of resources from the colonies for the benefit of both the colonies and the “motherland.”¹⁵ Later French officials and technocrats who oversaw desert-focused schemes drew religiously on Sarraut’s *mise en valeur* to maximize the utilization of anything exploitable in the Sahara. Extractive Saharanism had both ancestors and heirs. Already in 1890, French inventor Charles Louis Abel Tellier made a case for the use of Saharan solar energy.¹⁶ More than half a century later, his compatriot Pierre Cornet cataloged the Sahara’s riches in his book *Sahara: Terre de demain*, while his other compatriot, the physician Edmond Sergent, used surgical precision to determine who could bear the extreme weather conditions in the desert and how labor could be extracted from them.¹⁷ The Sahara’s colonial development became a key concept through which Saharanism as an extractive ideology infiltrated almost every aspect of French designs for and discussions about the Sahara in the 1950s.

¹² The scholarship on slavery has expanded a great deal in the past few decades, and readers can check out these works: Allan George Barnard Fisher and Humphrey J. Fisher, *Slavery and Muslim Society in Africa: The Institution in Saharan and Sudanic Africa, and the Trans-Saharan Trade* (London: Hurst, 1970); Paul E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

¹³ Georges R. Manue, “Fondateur de l’Office du Niger: Émile Bélime, le maître de l’eau,” *Le Monde*, 31 July 1969.

¹⁴ Émile Bélime, “Avenir de l’Union française,” *Hommes et mondes* 58 (1951): 677.

¹⁵ Albert Sarraut, *La mise en valeur des colonies françaises, avec onze cartes en noir et en couleurs* (Paris: Payot, 1923).

¹⁶ Charles Louis Abel Tellier, *La conquête pacifique de l’Afrique occidentale par le soleil* (Paris: Librairie Centrales des Sciences Mathématiques, 1890).

¹⁷ Edmond Sergent, *Le Peuplement humain du Sahara* (Algiers: Institut Pasteur d’Algérie, 1953); Pierre Cornet, *Sahara: Terre de demain* (Paris: Nouvelles Éditions Latines, 1956).

Saharanism as colonial development required the French government to pass Sahara-specific business laws, remap its cartography, and create new administrative entities to develop what Louis Armand called a *pays neuf* (a virgin land).¹⁸ Sahariens, particularly those with political and economic positions within the French polity, engaged in massive public relations campaigns in the US and the UK to attract well-resourced companies in an effort to establish investments in the extraction of desert resources in exchange for favorable business arrangements. Furthermore, official proponents of extractive Saharanism did everything they could to link American and British petroleum interests to France's continued domination of the Sahara in order to stave off support from the UK or the US for Algerian independence. Although energy was the linchpin of this extractive endeavor, French technocrats also developed plans for a "desert industrial complex" that was designed to further facilitate the efficiency of extraction and further deepen the integration of the Sahara into the French economy, within what has become known as the Eurafrique. In this ongoing process, the United Nations, as geographer Diana Davis has demonstrated, played a major role in "facilitating the transfer of most colonial policies for managing the drylands to governments in the arid zone during and after decolonization."¹⁹ This has made UN bodies proponents of Saharanism, which informed and continues to inform some of its policies.

Farewell Camels, Welcome Oil Derricks

The lawyer and judge Pierre Escoube, in an obituary he wrote for his friend, the aforementioned ambassador Erik Labonne, indicated that the diplomat's major legacy had been to replace the Sahara of caravans with one of oil derricks, as well as his emphasis on the various synergies that its exploitation entailed.²⁰ Escoube's idea that one man had been able to shift the perception of the Sahara away from the cliché of a place traversed by caravans and inhabited by nomads to one populated by oil and mineral prospectors is certainly edifying. The natural Sahara had to be replaced discursively and institutionally by the mechanizable and exploitable Sahara to become something new and different for the sake of extraction. The power of Escoube's description of his friend's achievement lies precisely in his recognition of the imagination's ability to produce lasting and impactful ideas about a place. As such, Labonne's extractive ideology was geared toward making the Sahara look and sound exactly like what France needed it to be, regardless of what its history and its Indigenous inhabitants had already actually made it. Saharanism is exactly this ability to reimage a place and try to mold it to fit the imagination of the powerful proponents of this imaginary.

The advent of this state Saharanism put an end to individual adventurers and treasure hunters, shifting the focus to giant capitalistic, state-backed projects that were synonymous with extractive Saharanism. This development required a different legal and administrative framework to accelerate the desert's *mise en valeur*. The Sahara of business, oil deals, and derricks demanded a new regime of governance that would accommodate the smooth and efficient establishment of an extractive superstructure.²¹ Therefore, it was not only camels and caravans that became irrelevant in this new desert, but also the old, arbitrary division of

¹⁸ For Armand, France had to create this new category of land. He writes that "in order to prospect and exploit virgin lands, we have first and foremost to give them the status of a virgin country, which does not exist in the French Union." See Louis Armand, "Vers un Sahara moderne," *Hommes et mondes* 99 (1954): 322.

¹⁹ Davis, *Arid Lands*, 142.

²⁰ Pierre Escoube, "Erik Labonne: Diplomate hors-série," *Revue des deux mondes*, December 1971, 739–41.

²¹ From the "code of the petrol prospector" to the nature of companies investing in the Sahara, extractive Saharanism offered creative solutions that sought to align the legal and administrative structure of the Sahara with Saharanism's proponents' vision for the implantation of extractive and industrial activities.

the territory into three administrative areas that survived under different regimes. This older structure, it dawned on these leaders of extractive Saharanism, was a hindrance for business and an obstacle for the successful French bureaucrats' exploitative endeavors in the Sahara.

The obsolescence of the Sahara's political and administrative structure triggered a passionate debate about its nationalization. Emile Bélime, the aforementioned colonial administrator in Niger, called for the nationalization of the Sahara to make it part of France. In an article he published in May 1951, Bélime took issue with the autonomy of the colonies granted in the Constitution of 1946 because it would deprive the colonial system of the labor it needed to build and maintain the colonial infrastructure, such as train tracks and routes.²² However, the main issue Bélime took up in this essay was the position of a weakened France in the post-World War II context, specifically voicing his concern about France's "criminal" acceptance of the disbandment of its colonial domain.²³ Bélime lamented the fact that France overlooked the Sahara as a result of having "for a long time considered [these desolate areas] as wastelands, sterile shreds of the earth's crust, wrapping valuable fragments of our possessions in their troublesome gangue." Oblivious to the fact that Algerian nationalism was contesting France's sovereignty over their country, Bélime could still compare France's negligence of the Sahara to the United States' and the Soviet Union's investment in their "depopulated spaces."²⁴ Accordingly, for Bélime, France was fifty years behind the Americans and the Russians, who were both able to exploit the resources concealed under the Alaskan and the Siberian desertic territories.²⁵

The discovery of the desert's resources increased the demands for nationalization to ensure that the desert's wealth stayed forever in French hands. An unapologetic colonialist, Bélime asserted his belief that everything that nature, specifically deserts, offered was up for grabs. Mixing a strong understanding of global technical developments with a shameless conviction that natural resources should be used for human progress, Bélime drew on different examples from deserts and forests to make his case for the exploitation of the Sahara. Notably, he remarked that the Sahara was already being exploited in nonextractive ways, which included being used by trains and passenger planes.²⁶ Yet material extraction, in particular the exploitation of coal and minerals, most likely in reference to Labonne's ideas about the Sahara's industrialization, was the focus of his intervention. In Bélime's final analysis, the "Sahara [was] bursting with resources," which was both good and bad news.²⁷ Although good news for France, the discovery of Saharan resources brought greater visibility to the territory, which would in turn lead to economic competition that could bolster the questioning of France's ownership of the Sahara. Given the larger geopolitical context of decolonization and ongoing discovery of its mineral and oil resources, Bélime advocated for the annexation of the Sahara to France to bar the road for any future claims of ownership of the territory by the gradually independent neighboring nations.

The Saharan Industrial Complex

The discovery of petrol in the Sahara in 1957 marked a new phase in the life of extractive Saharanism. French economic historian Charles-Robert Ageron critically called 1957 "the

²² Émile Bélime, "Avenir de l'Union française," *Hommes et mondes* 14, no. 58 (1951): 673.

²³ *Ibid.*, 676–77.

²⁴ Bélime, "Avenir de l'Union française," 680.

²⁵ Bélime engages in comparative work that situates the Sahara within larger extractive practices. He even compares the production of gold in Siberia to that of South Africa. See *ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

year of petrol,” which promised “a new El Dorado” in the desert.²⁸ This also was the year that marked the triumph of extractive Saharanism. After long and arduous deliberations about the best way to exploit Saharan resources, the Organisation commune des régions sahariennes (O CRS) was created, followed soon after by the establishment of a Ministry of the Sahara in 1957. Although these materialized six years after the publication of Bélimé’s call for nationalization—along with the plethora of responses it triggered in *Hommes et mondes* as well as the establishment of the Les amis du Sahara group under Bélimé’s leadership, and the mobilization of state venues that the proponents of Saharanism were involved in—the O CRS was the extraction-friendly administrative structure that the French government created to manage the Sahara outside the oversight of the French of Algeria and the Algerian Indigenous populations. These changes not only institutionalized the Sahara as its own desertic entity in response to the lobbying of extractive Saharanists, but also brought in bureaucrats to occupy key positions and oversee the implementation of the Sahara’s *mise en valeur* through extraction.

The creation of the O CRS and the Ministry of the Sahara (two supraregional institutions) to administer the exploitation of the desert was preceded by the establishment of the Zones d’Organisation industrielle Africaine (ZOIA) and the Bureau d’organisation des ensembles industriels africains (BIA) in 1950 and 1953, respectively.²⁹ The aim of these institutional arrangements was the “creat[ion] of an important common market for the entirety of the Saharan territories, which would allow for the organization of investments, the creation of the conditions for exploitation, and the conception of the Sahara’s entire future under the control and political responsibility of the French state.”³⁰ The inauguration of these institutions was the clearest indication of the special Saharanism-infused governance that was being developed to manage the Sahara and exploit its resources at a time when independence was in vogue globally.

Eric Labonne’s earliest interest in the Sahara as an extractable space earned him the position of the ZOIA’s founder. Formed in 1950, ZOIA was a structure of “conception and coordination” that brought together members of the army, public figures, and individuals interested in developing the Sahara.³¹ The ZOIA was, in fact, the conceptual powerhouse of extractive Saharanism. This institution was in charge of “defining orientations and the outlines of [desert development] programs.” Labonne’s own definition of his priorities stressed the importance of starting from the concrete reality of the Sahara in order to come up with integrative economic and industrial projects for the totality of the Union française, which had been established as a result of the constitutional reform of 1946 to circumvent de/colonial terminology.³² Most importantly, however, Labonne insisted on the transadministrative border of his organization’s mandate because it could conceptualize all sorts of projects independently of the administrative frontiers that separated the different parts of the Union française. Labonne, in fact, spoke to the thorny issue of the Sahara’s administrative and jurisdictional division between different and disagreeing authorities within the French colonial administration, and he created a supracolonial entity that placed the territory within a larger colonial dominion. The ZOIA had divided the labor of development among the different parts of Africa, including projects in the

²⁸ Charles-Robert Ageron, “L’Algérie dernière chance,” 124.

²⁹ Louis Armand defines the mission of the BIA as follows “1. Proposing to the government measures of administrative order which the work of prospection necessitates in a first stage; 2. Drawing up the catalogue of the underground riches; 3. Establishing what the anglophones call the ‘technical planning of an industrial complex.’” Armand, “Vers un Sahara moderne,” *Hommes et mondes* 99 (1954): 322.

³⁰ “Ne trahissons pas le Sahara,” *L’Entreprise* (May 1957), 59.

³¹ Marc-Robert Thomas, *Sahara et communauté* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1960), 175.

³² Daniel Strasser, *Réalités et promesses sahariennes: Aspects juridiques et économiques de la mise en valeur industrielle du Sahara français* (Paris: Encyclopédie d’Outre-mer, 1956), 36.

Sahara, Gabon, and Madagascar.³³ Specifically, the Sahara, given its mineral resources and proximity to France, was central to the ZOIA's *combinats* or industrial complexes. With the aim of implementing Labonne's belief that a special effort should be placed on "the Sahara's mineral, energetic, industrial, and strategic development," proposals were made to establish two Saharan industrial complexes (SICs) on the Moroccan-Algerian and Tunisian-Algerian borders.³⁴ These plans for inter-Saharan economic integration were strategies for creating a different administrative reality for the Sahara, whose borders were intentionally left undefined during the period of conquest, which at this juncture proved to be challenging for the extractive endeavor.

The SICs were the brainchild of Erik Labonne. However, it was Louis Armand who propagated the possibility of their creation throughout the 1950s. People listened to bureaucrats like Armand, and their talks drew crowds to the extent that someone said that "the Sahara fills up lecture halls in France these days." Lectures and public-facing scholarship kept the issue of the Sahara vivid in French people's minds, bringing society into the realm of extractive Saharanism and updating them about its desires. It also served as a bridge between hypertechnical knowledge, represented by polytechnicians who graduated from the prestigious École Polytechnique, like Armand, and its pedagogical and business uses. Armand wrote a slew of articles and gave a series of talks in which he explained his ideas for the SICs. Rather than considering these ideas Armand's alone, it is important to see them as part of a larger Saharanism-undergirded institutional way of thinking that placed extraction and transformation of desert resources at the very core of French economic prosperity. For five years, Armand argued that setting up integrated factories in the desert was not only possible, but in fact necessary to prove France's ownership of its Sahara.³⁵

What is striking about extractive Saharanism is its awareness of the uses of other deserts across the globe. In the discussions published in the journal *Hommes et mondes*, the American endeavors to exploit Alaska and the Soviet efforts to develop Siberia received particular attention from contributors. Rather than positing France as the inventor of extractive Saharanism, the references the contributors to the discussions about the Sahara made to Russia's and the United States' advanced extractive successes in their cold deserts showed that France had a long way to go before it could benefit from the Saharan resources under its authority. In 1955, Armand, the director of the Société Nationale des Chemins de Fer and the BIA's president, also highlighted Russia's construction of railways in East Siberia, which permitted the country to develop an area that was larger than France itself.³⁶ This did not mean that French Saharanists did not figure among the pioneers of Saharanism as a transdesert ideology, but rather that for a long time France's focus was not on exploiting the desert but on policing it. As a result of the predominance of this securitizing and conquest-based approach in their country's treatment of the Sahara for almost a hundred years, French policy makers realized that they were far behind Russia and Anglophone countries, which had optimized the extractive activities in their arid lands. French extractive Saharanists highlighted how Russian and American extractivism had a more cutting-edge infrastructure for exploiting their arid lands that surpassed what France did in the Sahara.

³³ "Le 'Combinat' de Colomb-Béchar," *Encyclopédie mensuelle d'outre-mer* 30 (1954): 2.

³⁴ Strasser, *Réalités et promesses*, 36.

³⁵ Louis Armand, "Pourquoi un ensemble industriel au Sahara?" *Revue économique franco-suisse* 33 (1953): 284.

³⁶ Louis Armand, "Les techniques à la conquête économique des déserts" in *Le Sahara français* (Paris: Cahiers Charles de Foucauld, 1955), 277.

Saharanism Is Not behind Us

As these discussions reveal, Saharanism consolidated a community made up of a coterie of influential and like-minded people. Its influence was such that, from the outside, it would be difficult to distinguish their ideas from each other. They all shared the same conviction that the desert was empty of Indigenous populations, which allowed them to achieve two crucial and interconnected goals. First, the focus on the emptiness of the desert was in and of itself proof that it was unpopulated and ultimately unowned. The recycling of French and Latin phrases like *grandes solitudes*, *grand vide saharien*, and *solitudines*, among others, kept resurfacing in the literature to remind readers and audiences of the desert's desolation.³⁷ Second, the construction of the Sahara as a source of endless wealth occurred in lockstep with the rise of global capitalism. Petrol trusts and strong American and British banks set the economic agenda for other resource-rich regions, and the Sahara was no exception. Their interests required accommodations that were reflected in the French state's willingness to reterritorialize the Saharan space to encourage foreign businesses and their investments. However, French stakeholders in extractive Saharanism were divided over this invitation of foreign investment despite their agreement over France's ownership of the Sahara. This disagreement reflected an even deeper discord over the development models that best suited their vision for this arid land's colonial development. There were those who took no issue with the presence of foreign investors, on the one hand, and those who espoused traditional ideas of sovereignty on the other. The latter trend was represented by the aforementioned Bélimé who expressed his disagreement with any notion of *mise en valeur* that would relinquish even the smallest degree of French sovereignty over the Sahara to global finance, whereas the former was represented by Armand who criticized those French individuals who "were against the entrance of foreign capitals into French Africa," whereby he meant the Sahara.³⁸ Their disagreements never questioned France's right to colonize and exploit the Sahara. They rather had divergences over the most efficient way extractive Saharanism might sustain the durability of France's presence in the Sahara and the transference of its resources to aid European development at a time when Algerian nationalists were claiming the Sahara as part and parcel of an independent Algeria.

It is crucial to stress that Saharanism is not solely practiced by foreigners and colonizers. In fact, it also has homegrown versions. The focus should always be on the manifestations of Saharanism-infused ideas and behaviors rather than who engages in its practice. Today, decades after the end of direct colonialism, national governments in different parts of the world have been reproducing and entrenching Saharanism in the way they approach their deserts, grant oil and mineral prospection permits, and even, in recent years, encourage a transnational rush toward their transformation into globalized solar farms for green energy without any concern for the lives of their dispossessed Indigenous inhabitants who are subjected to homelessness and strenuous regimes of control. Mohammed bin Salman's construction of a multibillion-dollar mega-line city (Neom) in the southwestern part of Saudi Arabia is the clearest embodiment of all the wrongs of this homegrown Saharanism. As I have written elsewhere, local Saharanism is exacerbated by authoritarianism and autocratic rule, particularly when its proponents are endowed with financial clout and assured of total unaccountability, which create the

³⁷ Bernard Simiot et al., "Il faut 'nationaliser' le Sahara," *Hommes et mondes* 62 (1951): 547.

³⁸ Louis Armand, "France et Afrique à l'ère des grandes entreprises," *Hommes et mondes* 120 (1956): 484.

hubristic illusion of the possibility to “eliminate and ‘undesert’ the ecological nature of [a desert] homeland.”³⁹ Beyond its extractive manifestations, Saharanism has informed and continues to undergird projects that disenfranchise, dispossess, and displace myriad desert peoples across the globe. Whether the issue is the desertification of a livable desert, as Israel has done in Gaza by ordering soldiers to “deliberately, methodically, and systematically annihilate” everything, “including entire residential neighbourhoods, public buildings, educational institutions, mosques, and cemeteries, with very few exceptions,” or the extraction of lithium and other minerals as in the Atacama Desert, Saharanism, once the sheen of each particular context is removed, is the ideational structure that shines in the background of all desert-centered enterprises.^{40,41}

³⁹ Brahim El Guabli, “Saharanism in the Sonoran,” *Avery Review* 58 (2022): 10.

⁴⁰ Quique Kierszenbaum and Oliver Holmes, “Israel Military Razed Gaza Perimeter Land to Create ‘Kill Zone,’ Soldiers Say,” *The Guardian*, 7 April 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/apr/07/israel-military-gaza-perimeter-land-testimony-report>. Archaeologist Gonzalo Pimentel has declared that “the Atacama is a great attractor: a natural and social laboratory for almost any field. Here are the largest extractive mining interests in the world, for its copper, lithium, iodine, potassium, iron, gold, silver, or molybdenum—for all the already known minerals and those other ones that will be known.” See Ersela Kripa et. al., “In Conversation with Gonzalo Pimentel,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 77, no. 2 (2023): 429.

⁴¹ Charles-Robert Ageron, “‘L’Algérie dernière chance de la puissance française’. Etude d’un mythe politique (1954–1962)”, *Relations Internationales*, 57 (1989), 124.

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