

NOREF Report

The reshaping of West Africa after Muammar Qaddafi's fall

Roland Marchal

Executive summary

Muammar Qaddafi's overthrow was interpreted in the West as the removal of a tyranny and an expression of regional democratisation dynamics. Concerned with their own interests, Western powers have not paid attention to key factors affecting political developments in the wider region.

Firstly, the Libyan political process is still chaotic, despite successful parliamentary elections in July. Institution building and the restoration of a monopoly of violence will be tough challenges for a country still split by divisive allegiances. Secondly, Qaddafi played a role in managing and containing regional tensions. The collapse of the regional order he represented has not resulted in a clear alternative and the turmoil in many countries may require more than a mere tactical readjustment.

The (re)assertion of political Islam in the region corresponds to new grievances and to a political intervention by some national and transnational actors who rightly understand that the West is not currently willing to invest in proper solutions to regional social and economic tensions.

It would be dangerous to give too much credit to ideologies at a time when political processes are deeply rooted in national histories and arenas. Greater attention to economic changes beyond concerns over the growth of an illegal regional economy should feed national and international policies aimed at giving internal peace and liberalisation a chance.

Roland Marchal is a senior research fellow at CNRS, based at the CERI/Sciences Po Paris. He has published extensively on conflicts in the Greater Horn of Africa (from Chad to Somalia) and the policy of international actors on the continent, including France. He was the editor of the French academic quarterly *Politique africaine* from 2002 to 2006, and has been a consultant for various European states, the European Union, the United Nations and the World Bank.

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Several geopolitical dynamics are reshaping the Sahel/Sahara region. What is clear is that the region's political landscape in the next two decades will be quite different from the one drawn by the decolonisation process 50 years ago. In fact, we are witnessing the collapse of what could be termed the colonial pact through which allegiance to the state was built for religious and social communities, ethnic groups, and regions. As such, the dynamic that is unfolding is not dissimilar to the "second independence" anthem articulated by many in Ivory Coast throughout the long crisis of the 2000s.

The so-called "Arab Spring" is anything but an homogeneous political movement. In all the countries involved, oppositional upheavals were built on previous social movements and were able to merge sectoral grievances into a national political narrative that opposed ruling elites. In Tunisia, Egypt and Bahrain, and to a large extent in their early stages in Yemen and Syria, these movements were peaceful and refused to militarily engage the regime in power. In Libya and Syria, the opposite choice was made by key sectors of the opposition: resorting to arms was not the only option available. While the virulent violence of these latter regimes cannot be exaggerated, in both cases repression had not gone to extremes when the decision of the opposition to take up arms was made. The Western endorsement of those armed oppositions in terms of the responsibility to protect was ambiguous in many ways, including the desire to downplay warm relations that had been cultivated with contested rulers, even though the brutality of their regimes had been undeniable for years, if not decades. While in Libya people may celebrate the end of a whimsical ruler who did not hesitate to butcher his own opposition in the 1990s, fund terror groups and cultivate instability wherever he got the chance to do so, his overthrow is only the first stage of a longer cycle of unattended consequences, some of which are described below.

The reassertion of political Islam in the region is both contingent and structural. For nearly four decades the Gulf states and South Asia have provided the resources for a growing influence of Wahhabism, Deobandism and other Salafi schools of thought. For years the impact of their proselytism has been increasingly visible and

has contributed to framing a new Islamic public sphere. The reasons for this success are well known: globalisation, individuation and migration supported the adoption of Salafism to an extent that went beyond that encouraged by the activism of rich Islamic NGOs providing education, trading connections and a growing sense of autonomy in the face of secular (but authoritarian) regimes.¹ While this transformation of the religious arena could have merely reshaped the moral sphere, with benign consequences for the political arena, contingent events allowed Islamism to reassert itself. The long civil war in Algeria after the Maitatsine Movement in Nigeria and north Cameroon, and the takeover by the National Islamic Front in Sudan illustrated the relevance of political Islam in the region. The events of 9/11 should have provoked a radical change in the policies of the most secular – and often brutal – regimes (and in the policies of their Western friends toward them) in order to contain radicalisation, but, as after the Iranian Revolution in 1979, repression was the sole response to new ideological challenges. Coercion against would-be terrorists was an argument used to imprison all dissidents and gather them under the same ideological umbrella. In this regard, the end of Qaddafi's regime is also dissipating an interpretation of Islam that was leaning to neither Western secularism nor Gulf Salafism.²

In the West, public opinion (and many politicians) had a very simplistic explanation for the inability of many African countries to join the opposition to Qaddafi: the Libyan dictator had bought their elites off and/or blackmailed them by supporting their opponents. While this argument cannot be rejected, it is minor compared to other motivations presented by many African states. Qaddafi allowed African migrants into his country while the virtuous Europeans were building a fortress to prevent them from reaching Europe. Qaddafi often helped states to pay their civil servants at the end of the month, while the West was sending IMF missions. Qaddafi was also involved in conflicts, sometimes to the extent of creating them to resolve them, sometimes to genuinely contain them, sometimes to help one side

1 Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2004.

2 Dirk Vandewalle, *A History of Modern Libya*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

against the other. But Africans also remembered that he funded liberation movements against former colonial powers and their alleged proxies. Qaddafi's fall in itself creates a vacuum and no state seems willing or able to play the role of possible hegemon that Libya played in the greater region. In that regard, the Malian crisis can be seen as an illustration of the inability of Algiers in particular to play the role it competed for when Qaddafi was alive. This regional indecisiveness sheds some light on how minor groups such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) (with maybe less than 1,000 fighters) or the Malian National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) (with not more than a maximum of 3,000 fighters) are able to acquire such importance so quickly.

Arms trafficking is not new to the region. The many armed conflicts in this part of the continent generated or fed the trade in weapons and ammunitions over the last two decades: those in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast, Sudan and Chad, not to mention Western Sahara, Algeria and Libya's internal wars. The chaos generated by the fall of the Qaddafi regime allowed many operatives – some from the Libyan army, others from the Libyan opposition and some just interested in doing business – to loot the arsenals of the regime. In a matter of weeks, basic military hardware (AK-47s, rocket-propelled grenades) and more sophisticated equipment (surface-to-air missiles, anti-tank ammunition, etc.) found their way to Darfur, northern Chad, Niger, Mali, Tunisia and elsewhere. The inability of Western interventionist countries to contain this side effect of the war in Libya may have dire consequences for the future of the whole region. This risk is even more worrying because many soldiers of the Libyan army were forced to flee Libya after the capture of Bani Walid, since those opposing Qaddafi made clear that these soldiers would be killed for having supported the regime. Many of these ex-Libyan soldiers are of African origin (from Chad, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Senegal, etc.). To a large extent the current crisis in Mali is an illustration of the results of this situation, with some former Libyan soldiers who went to Mali joining the insurgency, while others supported the Malian government.

All these changes could not have taken place without the current economic dynamics that are reshaping the whole region and, to a large extent, deepening the social polarisation already visible in the political arena. The Sahel/Sahara region is currently undergoing dramatic economic changes fed by a high birth rate, rapid urbanisation, and rapidly increasing trade in commodities and people. These dynamics also include the race for minerals (in particular gold and uranium), oil and gas, and a new pipeline network economy that may connect southern Nigeria to the Mediterranean Sea. While conspiracy theories could be used to explain the current turmoil in the region, there should be no doubt that major external and regional actors should determine their behaviour in light of the potential developments that could materialise over the next two decades.

The following section attempts to detail these developments by using Libya's neighbours as examples.

1. The end of Qaddafi's rule

In Libya, unrest began on February 15th 2011, three days after the fall of Hosni Mubarak. But this uprising diverged from the Tunisian and Egyptian experiences in two ways: the rapidity with which it took on a violent aspect, including xenophobic attacks on Egyptians, Serbs, and Koreans, and above all black Africans, and the extent to which the protesters identified their cause with the monarchy that Qaddafi overthrew in September 1969 in a bloodless coup. While these protesters called themselves revolutionaries, they could also have genuinely been named counter-revolutionaries.

In 1969 the new regime's leading elites were drawn from a small number of tribes, above all the Gadadfa of central Libya, the Magarha from the Fezzan in the south-west and the Warfalla from south-eastern Tripolitania. This explains why Qaddafi and his associates identified themselves with neither the political and cultural traditions of the Tripoli elites nor those of Benghazi and the other towns of coastal Cyrenaica. These urban traditions offered no recipe for governing Libya to the new regime, which became known as the Jamahiriya and had to innovate definitively.

Differently from many heads of state of that period, Qaddafi stood at the apex not of the pyramid of governing institutions, but of the informal sector of the polity, which enjoyed a degree of hegemony over the formal sector. This meant that the Jamahiriya's formal institutions (including the army) were extremely weak until his fall. To use academic jargon, Libya's state was more a rhizome than an apparatus; or, in more accessible language, it comprised a network of networks where coercive power and wealth were allocated in a strikingly uneven manner.

Thus, politically speaking, after 42 years of Qaddafi's rule the people of Libya had not developed much further than the position they were in on August 31st 1969. The absence of any tradition of non-violent opposition and independent organisation ensured that at the popular level the revolt of 2011 was a raw affair that was incapable of formulating any demands that the regime might be able to negotiate. As a result the revolt became a direct challenge to Qaddafi and the Jamahiriya as a whole.

The length of the civil war in 2011, the huge pro-Qaddafi demonstration in Tripoli on July 1st 2011, the fierce resistance that Qaddafi's forces put up, the month it took the rebels to take Bani Walid and the further month to take Sirte proved that the Qaddafi regime enjoyed as much support as the Transitional National Council (TNC) did.

Currently the new Libyan regime is facing tough challenges. Post-Qaddafi Libya has been changed into a patchwork of semi-autonomous fiefdoms led by militia bosses. The brigades (there are reportedly as many as 200,000 militia members in a country of six million people) formed to fight Qaddafi, together with many others that sprang up after the fighting, have thwarted the consolidation of a new central authority and have become a threat to security, trading deadly gunfire, detaining and torturing suspected Qaddafi loyalists, and in late March 2012 even kidnapping two members of the TNC for two days. The attack on a U.S. compound in Benghazi in September and the killing of four U.S. officials, including Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens, merely proves how serious the situation has become.

According to Joffé, more than 300 militia groups claim to exert some authority, sometimes as independent bodies, sometimes as an expression of the state apparatus (e.g. the army), sometimes as surrogate forces.³ Libya could therefore repeat the experience of Lebanon, where armed militias formed during its civil war became a permanent part of the political landscape. Already, brigades around the country have developed independent sources of revenue, primarily from providing protection and security services.

Of specific concern is the conflict affecting the Fezzan region and involving the Tubu tribe against its Arab neighbours. Bloody incidents took place in the cities of Kufra and Sebha in February and March 2012. The Arab tribes claim that the Tubu supported Qaddafi and that the Tubu are "Africans" and should leave Libya to go back to Chad. The Tubu tribe argues that it actually fought for the TNC and is as Libyan as its opponents. What is at stake seems more substantial than the rewriting of the Libyan upheaval in the Fezzan region.

Over the last 20 years new trading routes have developed connecting the Mediterranean ports and the main Fezzan cities and Sahelian countries. While Fezzan does not produce much oil compared to Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, its economy is rooted in the caravan trade with Sudan, Chad and Niger. Commodities imported by Libya were subsidised and therefore were sold to the southern marches at a profit. African migrants also use these routes to reach the Mediterranean coast, from where they try to cross to Europe. Human trafficking also generates significant profits. Mainly Tubu businessmen controlled this activity under Qaddafi and now feel that they should retain this monopoly after his fall, but Arab tribes that expect some backing from Cyrenaica are challenging them.

Serious incidents in Kufra and Sebha provoked the killing of dozens of people in the months preceding October 2012. The new central government claimed to have acted to cool down the situation, but groupings on the ground seem

³ George Joffé, *Balanced on a knife-edge: the future of Libya's new state*, NOREF Report, September 5th 2012, <http://www.peacebuilding.no/Regions/Middle-East-and-North-Africa/Publications/Balanced-on-a-knife-edge-the-future-of-Libya-s-new-state>.

less controllable than at any time previously. This underlines the changing role Libya wants to play in its region and the continuing hostility towards Africans, who are perceived by a majority of the Libyan Arab population as former Qaddafi mercenaries (an allegation that may have some truth, but could also be validly directed at many Libyans).

At this stage it is unlikely that the current conflict will spill over into Chad, although the two conflicting groups have communities there. Beyond N'djamena's attention to contain the damage, two arguments are making fighting improbable at this stage. Firstly, the economy: the resources are in Libya and leaving that country would mean an absolute defeat for the Tubu. Secondly, while tactically militias may cross the border and recruit "Chadian" Tubu fighters with the acquiescence of President Idriss Déby, strategically their influence in Sebha and Kufra is more important and their real guarantee of survival.

The government of Chad may be concerned by the tension in Fezzan, because it impacts the trade in commodities (at a time of a creeping humanitarian crisis due largely to the high cost of basic foodstuffs), but has little interest in openly taking sides. Tubu in Chad were active at one point of the civil war and their leader, Goukouni Weddeye, divides his time today between Algiers and N'djamena, but, alone, they cannot constitute a significant risk to the stability of the regime. Their region is too far north and an earlier Tubu armed front – the Mouvement pour la Démocratie et la Justice au Tchad – was largely irrelevant for most of the years of its existence in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Economic implications are therefore the main worry and may not dissipate for some times.

Beyond indicating that Libya is becoming a militia state, the killing of the U.S. ambassador sheds light on one aspect that was not considered to any significant extent by Western interventionist states in 2011: the growth of radical Islamic groups and the return to their homeland of many Libyans who had been fighting alongside al-Qaeda in Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen and Somalia. The parliamentary elections in Libya seemed first to downplay such a scenario, because the number of seats allocated to Islamist groupings was far less

substantial than in Tunisia, but these groupings had more support among independent MPs than initially thought. Moreover, the growing presence of jihadi movements, although not representative of the overall course of events, raises significant concerns over access to sophisticated weapons, funding and the building of new transnational networks in the Sahel/Sahara region.

2. The reassertion of political Islam

The fall of the Qaddafi regime could also mark the end of a particular period in the Islamic history of the region. Firstly, it marks the end of a quite ambivalent experience of Islamic reformism opposed to both Wahhabism and Sufism in Libya. It also marks the collapse of the last top-down framing of the religious sphere. This dynamic has to be considered in parallel with that in Tunisia, where the original path of defining the religious sphere from the end of the colonial era to 2011 is currently being challenged by new social and political realities.

The Sanussiyya, originally an Islamic revivalist order, was set up in north-eastern Libya by an immigrant sheikh born in Algeria, Sayyid Mohammed ben Ali al-Senussi, who founded his order in Mecca in 1837 and moved it to Libya in 1843. It took root throughout the Eastern Province and spread south along the trade routes that crossed the Sahara into Sudan, Chad, Niger and northern Central African Republic. It had less of a presence in western Libya, which had its own religious and political traditions based on Ottoman connections.

This history explains why the young colonels led by Muammar Qaddafi in 1969 needed to find a new doctrinal source to reinvent Libyan society unconnected to Ottoman or Senussi references. Nasser's pan-Arabism was a first attempt to root a new Arab regime in a modern ideology, but Nasser died soon after the Libyan coup and his successors were not of the same calibre.

To a certain extent, Qaddafi's modernist interpretation of Islam upset many Islamic scholars with his often-peculiar reading of Islamic traditions and legal debates. Yet this vision kept

the religious sphere in the private realm and promoted changes that allowed various sectors of the population (including women) to have access to many positions, which was seen as controversial in neighbouring countries.

A practical consequence of this policy was that sectors of the Libyan opposition used religious discourse as the rallying point for overthrowing the regime. This was the case of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group that attempted to assassinate Qaddafi in 1996 and whose former leader, Abd al-Hakim Belhadj, is the current chair of the Tripoli Military Council, which was instrumental in the final toppling of the Qaddafi regime. Libya provided al-Qaeda with more recruits than any other Arab country in proportion to its population. Rumours of their presence spread for months before the Ansar es-Shar'ia group attacked the U.S. compound in Benghazi, which made clear that Libya's statebuilding process will be seriously hampered by this new threat.

As in Tunisia and Egypt, Islamists in Libya were smart enough not to appear too publicly and thus allowed the popular opposition to appear to fit the way in which it was perceived in the West (democratic and secular, despite the charged past of many TNC leaders). Only very late in the upheaval did Western countries (especially the U.S. and France) make public their concern that Qatari special forces (backed by Sudanese special forces) were training mostly Islamist fighters and not the normal rank and file of the numerous militia gangs.

While in many aspects the current political competition in northern Libya will keep religious debates with Salafi groups at bay, since tribal and regionalist arguments have greater resonance, the significant role played by Qaddafi in challenging Salafi organisations by offering alternatives in terms of training and education in Sahelian countries is a thing of the past. The vacuum created by Qaddafi's death will primarily benefit Salafi and jihadi supporters, not secular groups.

One can witness the dynamics of these changes playing out in a country like Chad. Up to the mid-1990s the Chadian Muslim ruling and administrative elites shared a common path in terms of education: often primary and part of

secondary education were received in Libya or Sudan, and higher education in East Germany and the Soviet Union. Over the last ten years, and more so after the normalisation of relations with Khartoum in February 2010, most of the new appointees received their entire education in Gulf countries.

To them, Sudan appears today as some sort of model and Salafi teachings are gaining ground among economic elites, although as yet without concrete impact at the political level. This dynamic is also fostered by the expansion of Salafism in sectors of the Muslim population that have hitherto been little exposed to this school of thought. Events in the region, such as the activities of Boko Haram and the Western intervention to overthrow Qaddafi, have also had some impact on some sectors of the youth.

While often (as in Mali) people refer to the Sufi tradition as a countervailing force to all sorts of extremism in the religious, social and political spheres, the argument should be used with care and not always taken for granted. For instance, in Chad, Sufi Islam is prominent, but Sufi orders developed only in the 19th century, just before colonisation. Contrary to theological dogma, in real life there is no clear border between Salafi and Sufi Muslims: accommodation often eases differences and practical convenience diffuses conflicts. The current cohabitation in northern Mali offers further support for this argument: armed groups with quite different ideologies can cohabit because their agendas are not (yet) in competition.

In other countries, Islamic organisations provide humanitarian aid and basic education while promoting a more Salafi form of Islam. Teenagers can get scholarships to receive higher Islamic education in *zawiya* that promote Wahhabism in northern Nigeria. By itself, this reality does not imply drastic changes, but increasingly both state security services in the region and heads of households will have to pay more attention to the content of the teaching, because regional events could also influence the beliefs of young people.

On occasion the claims made by Salafi groups have a strong resonance among Muslims educated in a Sufi environment. For example,

the call for a genuine enforcement of sharia in (northern?) Nigeria by Boko Haram militants sounds like a desire to restore the 19th-century Sokoto Caliphate led by Uthman dan Fodio, which was destroyed by the British and made irrelevant by corrupt post-independence politicians. In this sense, the difference between the religious and political spheres may play into the hands of the most militant Islamists.

The political dynamics in Tunisia and Egypt (and Libya) are pushing toward a reassertion of political Islam in the region. While many Western observers focus on the impact of Boko Haram and AQIM, one should pay more attention to what may happen in northern Africa in terms of reshaping Islamism and making for a demonstration effect. Maybe the best way to challenge the jihadi project would be to prove that political Islam is no longer framed by an authoritarian and coercive reading of Salafism. Supporting successful political and economic processes in North Africa (especially in Tunisia) would be the best answer to extremism.

3. A region in search of a hegemon?

With Nasser as a model, it was unsurprising that Qaddafi developed a call for unity within the Arab world and later within Africa. Most observers mocked the ability of Qaddafi's regime to enter into some kind of improbable union with Egypt (1972), Tunisia (1974) and Morocco (1984). Had Houari Boumedienne not died in 1978, they would have reacted differently to the alliance between Tripoli and Algiers.

The focus on Africa that took shape in the late 1990s was not only linked to the impact of international sanctions against Qaddafi's regime and the need to challenge them. All North African states have had some kind of African policy since independence because all except Tunisia have strategic hinterlands in the Sahel/Sahara region. All therefore were competing with one another (Algeria-Morocco, Algeria-Libya, Libya-Egypt), but were also in competition with Western powers eager to preserve their often-unbalanced bilateral relations with African states. What made Libya different is that for ideological reasons at first and motivated by absolute realism later, it

invested massively in this "southern strategy", which eventually became the central point of its diplomatic activity.

From John Garang to Idi Amin, from the African National Congress to Charles Taylor, Tripoli intervened in most African crises, often, but not always, on the most unsavoury side. What seemed often irrational from outside was a logical attempt by a small country deprived of any significant military might (as proved by its defeat in Chad in 1987) to exercise international influence. The principle of this "popular diplomacy" was to build a network of networks that could allow Qaddafi to talk to any regime and its more radical opposition (as in Somalia, when Qaddafi entertained both Abdullaahi Yuusuf and al-Shabaab, or Sudan, where he funded both then-prime minister Sadeq al-Mahdi and John Garang, the leader of the southern Sudanese insurgency).

Libya was also instrumental in the creation of the African Union, and year after year paid the contributions of many poor African countries to the continental organisation, not to mention helping to balance state budgets during difficult times. Yet an assessment of Libya's impact on continental politics is difficult to make.

The Tuareg question is certainly a very good illustration of the difficulty one faces in any attempt to judge Libya's intervention in its southern marches. At different moments, Tripoli's stance seemed to have been dictated by hostility to regimes in Niger and Mali that were perceived to be too close to France, or by competition with Algeria in order to play the gatekeeper in any negotiations and the genuine will to provide a solution to the crisis in that country. This background explains why many Tuareg found their way to the Libyan army under Qaddafi and had to leave Libya when he was defeated and executed. Western countries that decided to intervene in Libya knew from the start that, because of the TNC's hatred of "Africans", the Tuareg question would have new significance in Mali and Niger. For independent analysts, what appears the most surprising is that so little was done from the very beginning to contain this potentially destabilising situation.

Another striking development is the inability of Algeria to occupy the position of regional hegemon after (and even before) the fall of Qaddafi. Algeria is the richest country in the region, while its military budget is six times higher than that of all the other Sahelian countries put together. Algiers also claims a specific expertise in dealing with insurgencies after the long civil war in the 1990s. Yet most Sahelian countries do not enthusiastically accept its leadership on regional issues. These countries continue to underline that fact that AQIM is an offspring of a yet unresolved civil war in Algeria, and that Algeria should pay the price for its ambitions, as Qaddafi did.

Several other reasons explain this failure. The first is Algiers's hostility towards any co-operation with Western countries, as if Algeria wanted to keep full control of events. While one can discuss Western interests in intervening in the region, for their own reasons Sahelian states have developed a much more co-operative relationship with Western states (despite a clear distrust of French policy). The second motive is the Algerian over-centralist approach to any kind of possible co-operation, as if the Algerian rulers confuse process and outcome: being a hegemon does not mean controlling everything that vassal states do. A third reason is that many African diplomats in the Sahel are convinced that the Algerian security services tend to manipulate AQIM *katiba* (brigades) – and sections of the Tuareg insurgency – as they did throughout the civil war with Islamist insurgents. Although AQIM recruitment is currently more regional, the core group and leadership are still made up of Algerian jihadists. This fact is often used as further proof that Algiers needs tensions in the Sahel to develop its own influence.⁴

The current developments in northern Mali are an illustration of Algeria's failure to act as regional hegemon. Many observers question the long-standing relationship between the leader of a Salafi Tuareg organisation, Ansar ed-Din, and the Algerian security services. Shady connections may also explain some curious events such as the kidnapping of Algerian diplomats by an AQIM splinter group that pretends to be "African". Algiers's management of the Tuareg revolt in

Mali seems consistent more with its own internal interests than with its alleged regional solidarity. This behaviour is in actuality congruent with the fact that for nearly two decades politics in Algeria has been almost entirely internal, framed as it is in terms of sharp factionalist struggles with only very minor interest in the region, so long as no external power was trying to interfere.

4. A new political economy in the Sahel/Sahara region

Although often described as a desert, the region is currently being explored for energy.⁵ Without entering into technical details, there is a new impulse for energy exploration, especially in south-western Libya (in the Murzuq basin), south-western Algeria (near Timimoun in an area that has historically been a trans-Saharan route from Mali to the Moroccan border) and north-eastern Mauritania (in the Taoudeni basin near the Malian and Algerian borders). The main rationale for new exploration is EU countries' need to lessen their dependence for energy on Russia.

The most ambitious pipeline project is the proposed trans-Sahara gas pipeline that would transport Nigerian gas across the Sahara to the Algerian border, where it would link up to that country's infrastructure and head north to Europe. The gas would travel about 5,000 km and, although the pipeline's feasibility (because of the insecurity prevailing in the region) and profitability are still an issue, it seems unlikely that the project will be disregarded for long, and at worst will only be delayed.

The Sahelian and Saharan states' populations are booming and have more than doubled in 50 years. By 2025 nearly 45% of the Sahel's population will be settled in cities. While figures are scarce, the growth rate of urban settlements in the Sahel region is increasing. Kidal in Mali had a population of 13,000 in 1998; in 2007 it reached 24,000. The uranium city of Arlit had 35,000 inhabitants in 1988, more than 69,000 in 2001 and nearly 80,000 in 2007. In the same way, demographic developments in northern Nigeria could show dramatic changes. In this area,

⁴ This point is made by British academic Jeremy Keenan; e.g. see *The Dark Sahara: America's War on Terror in Africa*, London, Pluto Press, 2009.

⁵ Geoff D. Porter, "AQIM and the growth of international investment in North Africa", *CTC Sentinel*, November 2009.

urbanisation is clearly rooted in the lack of any investment in the countryside and is more a way to get better access (if any) to the resources and social services paid for by oil revenues.

The economic implications of this rapid urbanisation process are dire. There is no likelihood that the formal economy will be able to provide the new residents with jobs, which means that illegal activities and trafficking will be seen as the only options by most young people entering the employment market. Urban services will not be able to meet the demands imposed on them, even in terms of basic services such as access to food and drinkable water. Because of this, social tensions and unrest are the most likely expectations for the years to come.

5. Conclusion

To a large extent this report reflects the growing discrepancies in assessing regional developments in the Sahel. Western powers framed their policy in terms of the Mediterranean countries and expected that Sahelian crises would only marginally affect their interests. Qaddafi, Ben Ali and Mubarak were the chosen allies in that project. The collapse of the order these dictators represented is not currently offering a clear alternative and the turmoil we are witnessing in many countries may mean more than a tactical readjustment.

The most visible change is the assertion of political Islam and the reshaping of the public

sphere in ways that will contradict the Western way of life. The new regimes share fragility and authoritarian reflexes. However, all the processes currently under way are different and it would be dangerous to believe that the same ideology defines the same interests and behaviours in different countries. What happened over the summer in Sinai is a clear signal that state logics are still stronger than ideological commonalities.

Western states were quick and decisive in challenging the regional order that was fed in great part by Libyan policies and resources. They seem much more reluctant to propose an alternative regional project or at least consolidate a regional political economy that would guarantee peace and mitigate social tensions.

The importance given to the regional criminal economy and the involvement of Islamist and jihadi movements in its development should not be considered as neutral in such a context. Foreign observers have rightly focused on the kidnapping industry that has proliferated thanks to AQIM. Freeing hostages raises difficult questions for Western politicians. But one should be aware that other activities, such as the smuggling of cigarettes, generate more profits and structure networks that could trade many other commodities through the Sahara and Sahel. While Western media focus on the criminalisation of jihadi or militant armed groups, the key question is more rooted in the criminalisation of the region's states and their growing illegitimacy in the face of popular grievances left unanswered.