

Original citation:

Fletcher, Robert S. G. (2017) Decolonization and the arid world. In: Thomas, Martin and Thompson, Andrew, (eds.) The Oxford handbook of the ends of empire. Oxford Handbooks Online . New York: Oxford University Press. ISBN 9780198713197

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Decolonization and the Arid World

Empires come and empires go, Shelley's *Ozymandias* reminds us, but 'the lone and level sands' endure. From the Sahara in the west to the Gobi in the east, a vast belt of desert and semi-desert environments spans the length of the Afro-Eurasian landmass. This great Arid Zone – larger than all other dry areas of the world combined – passes through more than 35 nation-states, most of which became independent of the European and Soviet empires in the second half of the twentieth century. Here, aridity is a climatic fact, with low annual rainfall affecting the density and growth rates of diverse flora and fauna. We might also consider it an historical fact, presenting distinct opportunities and exerting particular pressures on the human societies that have sought to live within and operate through its boundaries. Imperialism and decolonization transformed political geographies; in many ways, they made the world in which we live. Whether the constraints and possibilities of physical geography could be as readily disregarded is another question altogether.

This chapter explores the comparable and connected histories of the world's desert environments in the era of decolonization. It seeks to offer some initial reflections on how our histories of the ends of empire might change when desert 'margins' take centre-stage. This is hardly a perspective that many decolonization specialists have chosen to stress. In the 1980s the historical geographer Joe Powell undertook a lively 'Cook's tour' of the world's semiarid lands, noting how new nationalisms, imperial networks and scientific expertise were intersecting to change systems of land use between the world wars.¹ Across a longer chronology, Diana K. Davis has made a particular study of changing cultural perceptions of drylands, from the authors of antiquity to development programmes today.² A wider literature has also emerged on the history of scientific and managerial internationalist approaches to deserts in the later twentieth-century; Richard Grove's work on discourses of desiccation

¹ J.M. Powell, 'Abideth Forever? Global Use of Semiarid Lands in the Interwar Years', *Great Plains Quarterly*, Vol. 6 (1986), 151-70.

² D.K. Davis, 'Deserts', in A. Isenberg (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Environmental History* (2014), 108-132. See also her forthcoming *The Arid Lands: history, power, knowledge* (Cambridge, MA, forthcoming: 2016).

remains another important point of reference.³ But it is perhaps scholars of the ancient and the medieval past who have done the most to demonstrate the potential of the Arid Zone as a unit of historical analysis. Thinking in terms of an Arid Zone or 'Saharasia' has stimulated comparative approaches to locations within this 'wider, frequently broken, ecological continuum', suggesting a host of forces and dynamics which have influenced its past.⁴ Nomadic pastoralism in particular has emerged as evidence of human adaptation to dryland environments, with many now arguing for the disproportionate role of nomads and their empires in the histories of wider regions. Students of the modern period, in contrast, seldom address the Arid Zone as such, certainly relative to the amount of writing focused on the nation state. Nomadic pastoralism may be a great example of human responses to desert conditions, but it would be a mistake to assume that it was also the last.

In recent years, however, a number of historians have examined the attempts of particular empires and states to solve the 'problems' of their arid borderlands. (You raise this later on, but perhaps worth inserting a comment here about the tendency among imperial powers and post-colonial regimes to treat desert regions and their inhabitants as problems to be overcome rather than as distinct environments/communities with which to engage.) Often directed at explaining contemporary tensions between a national 'core' and its 'periphery', or on the economic and political fortunes of a particular frontier zone or minority community, their work suggests an exciting set of tensions and responses for further comparative analysis, from frontier delimitation and detribalisation to irrigation and development. This chapter explores this growing body of work (some of the best of which is little known outside of single national historiographies), drawing out the wider historical framework in which these encounters took place. As a survey, it is unfortunately selective; much valuable work has

³ For example: N. Middleton and D.S.G. Thomas, *Desertification: exploding the myth* (Chichester, 1994); E.E. Whitehead (ed.), *Arid Lands Today and Tomorrow* (Boulder, CO, 1988); V.K. Saberwal, 'Science and the Desiccationist Discourse of the 20th Century', *Environment and History*, Vol. 3 (1997), 309-343; R. Grove, *Green Imperialism: colonial expansion, tropical island Edens and the origins of environmentalism, 1600-1860* (Cambridge, 1995).

⁴ See, for example: J. Gommans, 'The Eurasian Frontier after the First Millennium A.D.: reflections along the fringe of time and space', *The Medieval History Journal*, Vol. 1 (1998), 125-143.

had to be left out. But in many ways the modern history of the Arid Zone has heretofore been splintered, frustrating an appreciation of the whole: this chapter presents an opportunity to think more broadly about patterns of state engagement with deserts and their populations across the twentieth-century.

Doing so is not only a chance to unite somewhat disaggregated stories. Thinking in terms of the modern history of the Arid Zone brings a fresh approach to outstanding issues in the history of the ends of empire, prompting us to question the units and chronologies we employ. It supports the wider objective of recovering the pasts of so-called 'empty' spaces, areas often 'marginal' to more nationally-focused histories. It contributes to a new literature on decolonization and the natural world, an area of growing interest given the significance of interventions in the environment to the growth of the capacities of the state in world history.⁵ It will suggest that deserts have been the setting for events and the home of resources integral to the wider histories of decolonization and the Cold War, both contributing to and helping to reveal significant patterns of political, economic and social change. Above all, it will consider how far decolonization and the Cold War took a distinct path in the arid world; ask whether we've given enough weight to the place of arid regions in these wider histories; and reflect on the ways in which these regions still resist being folded into the national stories of imperialism's successor states. [Super introduction.](#)

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At the turn of the twentieth-century many statesmen, commentators and colonial officials expressed anxiety about a world with no more empty spaces to settle, no more frontiers to close. From Frederick Jackson Turner's concern that 'the free lands are gone' to Halford Mackinder's proscriptions for the conduct of imperial politics now that 'the round world has

⁵ A central thread running through the essays in: E. Burke and K. Pomeranz (eds.), *The Environment and World History* (Berkeley, 2009). For our period, see also: J.R. McNeill and C.R. Unger (eds.), *Environmental Histories of the Cold War* (Cambridge, 2010).

become a closed and locked system', closed-space ideas were, as James Malin observed, very much 'in the air'.⁶ By the 1920s, with new lines drawn up across the former Ottoman lands, much of the great Arid Zone had also been partitioned. Yet here, at least, talk of the 'closing' of the world was soon shown up as premature. With their low population densities, poor productivity and mobile and powerful inhabitants, vast desert territories defied straightforward control by national and imperial governments alike for decades. In the era of the two world wars, many states embraced new techniques and technologies in renewed attempts to monopolise authority over desert regions, from the state-building projects of Saudi Arabia and Iran to the empires of Italy, France and Great Britain. Decolonization in the arid world, when it came, did so on the back of a period of heightened state engagement with desert environments.

The Middle East, for example, witnessed a succession of interwar attempts to project power into arid hinterlands and to curb the autonomy of nomadic groups. In Iran, Reza Shah's campaign to address the country's 'tribal problem' lay at the heart of a sustained drive to transform the state itself. As Stephanie Cronin has shown, from 1921 the regime committed unprecedented resources to controlling rural society, as it set about sedentarising tribes, courting khans and targeting the power of the Bakhtiyari.⁷ Across the Persian Gulf, in Arabia, the work of recruiting, settling and ultimately suppressing the Ajman, Harb and Mutair played a similarly pivotal role in the consolidation of Saudi power.⁸ In Syria the French mandatory regime set up a separate *Contrôle Bedouin* organisation to police its desert zones, drawing freely upon *leçons reçues* in Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco.⁹ [Indeed – a key purpose being to impose taxes on livestock, grazing, and movement across new frontiers.](#) In

⁶ J.C. Malin, 'Space and History: reflections on the closed-space doctrines of Turner and Mackinder and the challenge of those ideas by the air age', *Agricultural History*, Vol. 18, (1944), 65-74; G. Kearns, 'Closed Space and Political Practice: Frederick Jason Turner and Halford Mackinder', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, Vol. 2 (1984), 23-34.

⁷ S. Cronin, *Tribal Politics in Iran: rural conflict and the new state, 1921-1941* (Abingdon, 2007).

⁸ J. Kostiner, *The Making of Saudi Arabia: from chieftaincy to monarchical state* (Oxford, 1993).

⁹ E. Burke, 'A Comparative View of French Native Policy in Morocco and Syria, 1912-1925', *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 9 (1973), 179-186; J. Mizrahi, *Genèse de l'Etat Mandataire: Service des Renseignements et bandes armées en Syrie et au Liban dans les années 1920* (Paris, 2003).

Egypt, Palestine, Trans-Jordan and Iraq, Britain's interwar 'moment' in the Middle East also coincided with fresh attempts to know and control the region's arid borderlands. Between the new generation of 'desert administrators' active on the ground, and the new strategy of 'air policing' from above, British influence appeared to tighten in the region's desert areas even as it retreated from its cities and towns: a reflection of the importance the British attached to developing the new overland routes of their empire.¹⁰

In North Africa, the French Empire had a longer history of attempting to 'pacify' the Sahara, but the interwar years still had a tenor of their own. Dreams of the *transsaharien* had come and gone before, but now, thanks to aircraft and the automobile, they became a reality, with new implications for French military control and tribal policy.¹¹ [True, but perhaps change your choice of words: the *transsaharien* was widely understood in France as a railway project that remained unrealized.](#) In Libya the Italian Empire launched new and ambitious schemes of military occupation and agricultural settlement in the 1920s and 30s.¹² [Did they get very far with these?](#) The Tsarist Russian state had supported peasant emigration into Central Asia since the 1880s, but wholesale revolt from 1916 would prompt a renewed effort to suppress tribal power and extend state authority.¹³ Together with their counterparts in China, Soviet authorities spent much of the interwar years struggling for control of the Kazakh-Xinjiang borderland, a shadow war that would see thousands of nomads and refugees flee one jurisdiction for another.¹⁴ [Again, great stuff, but doesn't this rather suggest that the Soviet regime repressed its desert peoples much as it repressed the wider populations of Soviet Central Asia?](#)

¹⁰ R.S.G Fletcher, *British Imperialism and 'The Tribal Question': desert administration and nomadic societies in the Middle East, 19190-1936* (Oxford, 2015).

¹¹ B.C. Brower, *A Desert Named Peace: the violence of France's empire in the Algerian Sahara, 1844-1902* (New York, 2009); B.E. Thomas, 'Modern Trans-Saharan Routes', *Geographical Review*, Vol. 42 (1952), 267-282.

¹² A.A. Ahmida, *The Making of Modern Libya: state formation, colonization and resistance, 1830-1932* (Albany, 1994); C.G. Segrè, *Fourth Shore: the Italian colonization of Libya* (Chicago, 1974).

¹³ D.R. Brower, *Turkestan and the fate of the Russian Empire* (Abingdon, 2010).

¹⁴ S. Cameron, 'Violence, Flight, and Hunger: the Sino-Kazakh Border and the Kazakh Famine', in T. Snyder and R. Brandon (eds.), *Stalin and Europe: imitation and domination, 1928-1953* (Oxford, 2014), 44-66; J. Jacobs, 'The Many Deaths of a Kazakh Unaligned: Osman Batur, Chinese Decolonization, and the Nationalization of a Nomad', *American Historical Review*, Vol. 115 (2010), 1291-1314.

The circumstances varied, of course, but governments faced common and pressing problems as they attempted to penetrate remote environments, develop natural resources, control nomadic societies and manage desiccation. This would have important repercussions in the era of decolonization, revising our impressions of when it was that those processes were set in motion. Because many desert areas remained difficult to govern in the early twentieth-century, they were already sites of contestation, innovation and experiment – places intricately bound up with wider questions of authority and power – by the time that anti-colonial movements were presenting new claims to the legitimacy of rule. Because it was often inside the great Arid Zone that discrete imperial systems came into contact, governments acted here in an incendiary setting of intensified international rivalry and conflict (tensions made even worse by the existence of a range of competing imperial projects in the Arid Zone to build new communications routes by rail, road and air). In each case, the challenges of managing nomads or transforming environments shifted into a new gear at this time, catalyzing legal, institutional and structural changes to the imperial territories and national states in question, often giving rise to a scale of state intervention and to apparatuses of government quite *distinct* from those at work in more settled, ‘orderly’ jurisdictions. And while interwar technologies such as aircraft, the motorcar and wireless telegraphy allowed states to expand into hinterlands where their authority had long been attenuated, they could not yet act with impunity towards the peoples who called them home.¹⁵ [I agree with you but Priya Satia, as you know, might disagree...](#) Well into the 1920s and 1930s, the desert areas of many a state remained ones in which political identities were highly mutable, and loyalty to central authorities shallow-rooted. Economic, social and political relations may have begun to be realigned by newly international boundaries, but older networks – of trade, grazing or migration, for example – still persisted.¹⁶ [Again, excellent point but perhaps worth amplifying it: these networks and practices had to persist](#)

¹⁵ D. Omissi, *Air Power and Colonial Control: the Royal Air Force, 1919-1939* (Manchester, 1990).

¹⁶ Scholars in the field of border studies might term these ‘adolescent borderlands’. See the discussion in: M. Baud and W. van Schendel, ‘Towards a Comparative History of Borderlands’, *Journal of World History*, Vol. 8 (1997), 211-242.

because seasonal movement and cross-border trade were integral to the survival of desert communities? For many interwar regimes, deserts held out a seductive vision of new resources and greater territory that remained tantalisingly out of reach.

Even after the Second World War, it is striking how often the growth of anti-colonial nationalism appears to have occurred alongside the forward expansion of imperial power into desert territories. Was there more to this than coincidence? In some instances, the rise of organised nationalist movements and the predominantly *urban* nature of the phenomenon may have prompted colonial regimes to double-down on their assets in the desert, out of sight of potential critics, if seldom out of mind. The British experience in the Middle East and North Africa is suggestive in this regard. In 1945 Lord Altringham, British Resident Minister in the Middle East, stood at the foot of the statue of Saad Zaghlul – Egypt’s great nationalist hero – in Cairo, and looked out across the Nile. What he saw troubled him deeply. ‘Cairo’, he wrote,

is an occupied city ... A host of auxiliary organizations...inhabit many of the city’s chief buildings ... on [the] right is one of Cairo’s most charming parks, still a military camp. On [the] left is the Alamein Club... the scene...of formidable parades. Across the Nile the statue faces the Kasr-el-Nil barracks and the Semiramis Hotel, [...] still a military headquarters ... This investment of a nationalist monument is symbolic.¹⁷

The solution, it seemed to Altringham, was to reduce the *visibility* of Britain’s forces in the region by getting them beyond the gaze of populous urban centres.¹⁸ The subsequent development and store set by the Suez Canal base is merely one example of this (even if it ultimately proved too distant from Alexandria and Cairo for some on the British staff, and not distant enough for many Egyptians). Richard Worrall has described the repeated attempts

¹⁷ The National Archives (UK) [TNA], CO 732/88, no 5a, E. Grigg, ‘British policy and organization in the Middle East’ (2 Sept., 1945).

¹⁸ TNA, CAB 66/67, CP (45) 55, E. Grigg, ‘Imperial Security in the Middle East’ (2 July, 1945).

made between 1945 and 1949 to station a British military reserve in the deserts of Cyrenaica – less provocative than in Egypt, more stable than in Palestine.¹⁹ Sir John Glubb also believed in meeting the twin threats of nationalism and the Soviet Union by creating ‘a chain of Gibralters’ – a new network of British bases – in locations across the Libyan, Syrian and Arabian deserts, away from ‘the vicinity of cities and politicians’ and (wherever possible) acquired as Crown Colonies.²⁰ [This, of course, was music to Bevin’s ears but anathema to Attlee.](#) In Southwest Arabia in the 1950s, local British officials responded to the growth of Nasserite influence and Yemeni irredentism by deepening their involvement along the Aden Protectorates’ frontiers, hoping to bind their tribal allies into a tighter system of British control. Later, the ill-fated attempt to incorporate Aden Colony into a wider Federation also sought to offset Britain’s collaborative relationships in the desert against rising urban nationalism.²¹ In Iran in the 1940s the British reactivated their connections among the Bakhtiari and other southern khans, this time as a bulwark against a weakened central government, Soviet infiltration and the rise of the Tudeh Party.²² Proposals for the retention of a British Negev appeared before the Cabinet in 1943, 1946 and 1948; more than once in the 1950s, Parliament discussed the possibility of annexing the Sinai peninsula outright on the grounds of its strategic potential and apparent isolation from anticolonial protest. Many of these schemes proved a disappointment. Collectively, however, they show just how large deserts loomed in the imperial imagination, as local and metropolitan officers alike explored possibilities for the more discrete exercise of influence, and even rule.

The British story reminds us of the unevenness of decolonization: imperial influence could expand into new territories even as it retreated from others. [Nicely put.](#) It was the French, however, who took this logic to its boldest conclusion. Between 1957 and 1963, the

¹⁹ R. Worrall, ‘Britain and Libya: a study of military bases and state creation, 1945-1956’ (D.Phil dissertation: University of Oxford, 2008).

²⁰ TNA, FO 371/91223, no 29, J.B. Glubb, memorandum (23 May, 1951).

²¹ S. Mawby, ‘Britain’s Last Imperial Frontier: the Aden protectorates, 1952-59’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, Vol. 29 (2001), 75-100; S.C. Smith, ‘British Relations with the Aden Protectorate, 1937-59’, *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 31 (1995), 509-523.

²² Cronin, *Tribal Politics*, 194-197.

French government sought to create a new institution – the *Organisation Commune des Régions Sahariennes* – out of the combined desert regions of Algeria, Mauritania, the French Sudan, Niger and Chad. The aim was to try and isolate these relatively pro-French areas from the fallout of the Algerian War (and, later, the impending break-up of the French communauté), to hold on to their oil and natural gas (discovered at Hassi Messaoud and Hassi R'Mel in 1956), and to conduct nuclear tests in their vast hinterland. The scheme was audacious, certainly, but it was also of a type. The distinctly military character of Saharan administration had persisted since the conquest, and in that respect the Organisation was the last in a line of a political schemes for tighter French control of the Sahara.²³ While initial proposals to build an autonomous Saharan *Région* or *Département* failed, the OCSR still effected a partition of sorts, with authority over many areas of economic and social life in nominally distinct jurisdictions being centralised under a new Ministry of the Sahara in Paris.²⁴ It was welcomed by many among the Tuareg elite, whose worlds spanned the administrative boundaries of France's colonies, and who saw in it a means of preserving cultural identity and a degree of political autonomy. But to politicians in Bamako, Niamey and Algiers it was an affront to sovereignty, and did not outlast French defeat in the Algerian war (Arguably, it was in trouble before that, especially after the creation of the Mali Federation in 1959.) That it had ever been thinkable owed much to the growing antipathy between many desert populations and their emerging national elites, a theme to which we shall return.

Historians of the British Empire often refer to a 'second colonial occupation' to describe the renewed, enthusiastic, 'intrusive and often haphazard' involvement of British officials in their colonies after the Second World War, driven by the new imperatives of economic reconstruction and upholding Britain's position on the international stage.²⁵ In the

²³ A. Bourgeot, 'Sahara: espace geostrategique et enjeux politiques (Niger)', *Autrepart*, Vol. 16 (2000), 21-48; B. Sèbe, 'In the Shadow of the Algerian War: the United States and the Common Organisation of Saharan Regions (OCSR), 1957-2', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, Vol. 38 (2010), 303-22. For the military interventions that ran parallel to this organisational innovation, see: J. Guillemin, 'Les campagnes militaires françaises de la décolonisation en Afrique subsaharienne', *Le Mois en Afrique*, No. 198-199 (1982), 124-141.

²⁴ Bourgeot, 'Sahara', 38-39.

²⁵ The term is from D. Low and J. Lonsdale, 'Introduction', in D. Low and A. Smith (eds.), *History of East Africa*, v.3 (Oxford, 1976), 1-64.

twin contexts of late colonialism and the Cold War, might we talk of a 'second colonial occupation' of the arid world, too? For across the Arid Zone, postwar visions of 'desert development' played an important part in the claims to legitimacy of colonial regimes and the Cold War competition for hearts and minds. In the Middle East, the American Point Four programme built new laboratories and imported agricultural technologies to 'make the desert bloom'; so too, on a more humble scale, did the forestry training courses, irrigation pilot projects and well-drilling programmes advanced by the British Middle East Office.²⁶ French politicians lost no opportunity in promoting the OCSR as a sign of their commitment to improving the lives of the peoples of the Sahara.²⁷ Soviet scientists in Central Asia pointed to the creation of protective forest belts and the fixing of sand dunes to trumpet their achievements in desertification control, another victory for 'the Soviet system of nature management' and the planned economy.²⁸ Today, the Karakum Canal project is best remembered for its role in causing the Aral Sea disaster, but for decades (construction lasted from 1954 to 1988) it served as a showcase of Soviet engineering: the largest and longest irrigation canal in the Soviet Union.²⁹

By the 1950s, Soviet and Western science had even weaponised rainfall, experimenting in weather modification to irrigate the drylands of their allies and desertify those of their enemies. Much of this was fantastical, but that did not stop deserts real and imagined playing a part in Cold War geopolitics, from Cuban and Mexican accusations of American-induced droughts, to President Lyndon Johnson's support for Project GROMET, the 1967 attempt at 'seeding' clouds to break the drought in Bihar Province and 'pull non-aligned India...into the western sphere'.³⁰ Ambitious engineers on both sides of the Iron

²⁶ P. Kingston, *Britain and the Politics of Modernization in the Middle East, 1945-1958* (Cambridge, 1996).

²⁷ Sèbe, 'Shadow'.

²⁸ A.G. Babaev, 'Complex Desert Development and Desertification Control in the USSR', in Whitehead, *Arid Lands*, 825-839.

²⁹ P. Micklin, 'Desiccation of the Aral Sea: a water management disaster in the Soviet Union', *Science*, N.S. Vol. 241 (1988), 1170-1176.

³⁰ R.E. Doel and K.C. Harper, 'Prometheus Unleashed: science as a diplomatic weapon in the Lyndon B. Johnson Administration', *Osiris*, Vol. 21 (2004); J.R. Fleming, *Fixing the Sky: the checkered history of weather and climate control* (New York, 2010).

Curtain now pledged to harness the power of the atom and transform the desert areas of the former colonised world into gigantic irrigation projects and inland seas.³¹ These were new variations on an older theme: dreams of flooding the Sahara had existed since the nineteenth-century. But it was over dams that science fiction and fact came closest together. After the Second World War, the Arid World witnessed an explosion in new dam projects, as the engineers of competing powers scrambled to win over national elites to their visions of the future. These projects were by no means confined to the arid world, but it was here that some of the most ambitious took root – where the seductive image of abolishing the desert matched the confidence of the times; where existing economies were often more limited in scale; and where civilian objections might be more easily brushed aside. In Khuzistan in 1956, for example, American engineers began a new high dam for the Deza River – one of the boldest projects in the world to date – as part of a drive to cement their ties with states bordering the Soviet Union. As R.P. Tucker has shown, the siting of many such dams reflects the geographies of decolonization and the Cold War, so that fiscal and industrial resources were funnelled to many a remote location.³² In turn, national elites looked to dams to expand both economic and political power, advancing the cause of more meaningful independence. The resulting tensions meant that arid world dams and irrigation projects would provide flash-points for some of the most remarkable events in the history of decolonization, not least the politics of funding the Aswan Dam and the road to the Suez Crisis. For Iran's last shah, irrigating the Khuzistan lowlands was not only a means to power economic development: it would deprive the Bakhitiyari and Qashqai of grazing grounds, thereby renewing his father's campaign to control the tribes. [Wonderful paragraph – amazing stuff.](#)

Taken together, the scale of state activity in the world's deserts in the 1930s, 40s and 50s is striking. Behind many new schemes and projects lay the feeling that effective control

³¹ See, for example: N.P. Rosin and L.A. Flit, *Man Versus Climate* (Moscow, 1966).

³² R.P. Tucker, 'Containing Communism by Impounding Rivers: American strategic interests and the global spread of high dams in the early Cold War', in McNeill and Unger, *Environmental Histories*, 139-166.

of a desert's people or resources was vital to the strength of a wider polity and the exercise of broader influence and power. In China in the 1940s, for example, a renewed drive to control the arid far west accompanied the rolling back of colonialism from the coast. In this, the Communist Party proved just as committed to nationalizing the diverse territories bequeathed by the Qing Empire as the Guomindang had been before them.³³ The efforts to hold Xinjiang within the orbit of the state were perhaps the most desperate: here, the 'crisis of Han colonial legitimacy' (the creation of the breakaway East Turkestan Republic in 1943 marked a particular low-point) offered political opportunities for Kazakh nomad autonomy and Soviet intervention alike.³⁴ For Xioyuan Liu, the determination of successive governments to project the centre's authority helps to define twentieth-century China as 'a frontier state', where "peripheral" matters were central to the very vitality of the newly forged Chinese Nation' and remained so across the disjunctures of 1911 and 1949.³⁵ The drylands of the American west were not subject to the same separatist pressures, but still received conspicuous injections of federal capital and military personnel during the twentieth-century, so that many extensive desert areas (and their economic prospects) remain in federal – often military – hands.³⁶ By the 1950s the development of the atomic bomb, the escalation of the Korean War and a new emphasis on air power and missile development had fuelled a boom in bases, test facilities and research stations across the arid West, cementing a broader relationship between regional history, national defence, and the international projection of American power.

Nuclear testing, overseas bases, irrigation schemes and mega-engineering projects reinforced the place of desert areas within wider structures of power. With the renewed

³³ X. Liu, 'Rediscovery of the Frontier in Recent Chinese History', in W. Kirby (ed.), *The People's Republic of China at 60: An International Assessment* (Cambridge, MA, 2011), 306-327.

³⁴ Jacobs, 'Kazakh Unaligned'.

³⁵ Liu, 'Rediscovery', 310.

³⁶ G. Nash, *The American West in the Twentieth-Century: a short history of an urban oasis* (Albuquerque, 1977). The connections between the aridity of the West and its subordination were one of the themes of the New Western History, especially D. Worster, *Rivers of Empire: water, aridity, and the growth of the American West* (New York, 1992). For reflections on the 'New Western History', see: M. Walsh, *The American West: visions and revisions* (Cambridge, 2005).

emphasis on secrecy of the early Cold War, deserts became home to some of the largest military installations on earth: the environment of choice, perhaps, for the military-industrial complex. Lovely turn of phrase. 'Emptiness' and 'remoteness' were valued assets now. Where uncomfortable evidence of productive desert communities was found, discourses dismissing 'barren wastelands' and insisting on their 'sterility' helped to brush aside objections to military occupation and environmental destruction. Perhaps provide a specific example here? The first American nuclear tests were conducted, as is well-known, in the deserts of New Mexico. Shut out from participation in the American programme after 1946, the British conducted their own tests in the deserts of Australia – a vital series of trials, not only to British prestige, but to convincing the United States to resume joint tests in Nevada. France conducted nuclear tests at Reggane in the Sahara; China at Lop Nor on the edge of the Taklamakan; the USSR at Semipalatinsk on the Kazakh steppe; India in the Thar desert; Pakistan in the Ras Koh Hills. At its most brilliant, the connection between deserts, decolonization and the Cold War was fused at temperatures ten thousand times hotter than the surface of the sun; it was the 'trinitite' left smouldering in the Jornada del Muerto. In the coming age, you needed a desert to be a world power. Another lovely turn of phrase.

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For the European empires after 1945, close engagement with the peoples and places of the great arid zone was not without its costs. The expense incurred by some desert schemes was simply prohibitive: it was the Treasury that balked at the staggering costs of 'transforming barren deserts into fledgling military bases' in Cyrenaica, putting to rest British Perhaps be more specific here because I thought there was quite a bit of Whitehall argument about this – whose enthusiasm? enthusiasm for a Libyan strategic reserve.³⁷ But the political costs were no less significant. There were always statesmen who warned of the risks of

³⁷ Worrall, 'Britain and Libya', 2.

being seen to pay too much attention to deserts, nomads and their leaders, not enough to the cities and the literate classes; that imperial influence depended on backing the right sort of people; and that the future belonged – the watchword of Britain’s postwar foreign secretary, Ernest Bevin – to ‘peasants, not pashas’.

That accusation – that empires had leaned too much on the support of desert populations and tribal elites – would feature prominently in anticolonial movements in many states around the great Arid Zone. Nationalist opinion in Iran, for example, considered the Bakhtiyari khans to have been fatally compromised by their association with Britain and the Anglo-Persian Oil Company. The archival record points to a more nuanced relationship, but Reza Shah nonetheless derived considerable popularity from the forcefulness with which he was seen to tackle both tribal power and colonialism in settling the tribes.³⁸ In the Sahel, similar perceptions of the Tuareg as French puppets made them a target of the new national regimes; they also help explain why the proposed OCRS had met with such protest. In Modibo Keita’s Mali, where the idea of a Malian nation took time to take root, casting the Kel Adagh as ‘neo-colonial’ and ‘feudal’ helped in rallying a new sense of national identity and in ‘decolonizing the mind’. A concerted effort to break the Tuareg’s French privileges – new taxes on their livestock, new demands on their labour, and the rhetoric (if not yet the reality) of forced settlement – provoked rebellion in 1963. The frustration of that movement, and of another in 1990, left many Tuareg feeling that, by comparison, French rule had been a ‘golden age’.³⁹

That view may well have been rose-tinted, but it reminds us that for all the similarities between how imperial states and national states have approached their desert territories, there were also important differences. Because it was often in desert environments that colonial power had been most attenuated, because colonial treasuries were seldom overflowing, and because colonial officers could be less invested in nation-building than their

³⁸ Cronin, *Tribal Politics*.

³⁹ J.E. Lecocq, ‘“That Desert Is Our Country”: Tuareg rebellions and competing nationalisms in contemporary Mali (1946-1996)’ (Ph.D. dissertation: Universiteit Gent, 2002).

successors, many regimes had come to a working arrangement with key nomadic groups: exempting them from tax or conscription, making allowance for forms of 'customary law', even governing indirectly through their 'headmen' and 'chiefs'. After the Second World War, it wasn't simply a question of a new capacity to project state power into the arid world: there were new imperatives at work, too. At an ideological level, the national modernism of many decolonizing projects injected a fresh urgency into governments' resolve to contain tribal autonomy and to remake their rural hinterlands. Doing so became an anti-colonial act, a cause around which popular nationalism could coalesce, or way for new regimes to distinguish themselves from their predecessors: the Syrian Constitution of 1950, for example, pointedly renounced all the privileges heretofore enjoyed by the Bedouin.

Across the Middle East a succession of governments instituted new programmes of sedentarisation and detribalisation to bind desert populations to the fate of the nation. Success owed much to factors common to many areas of the postwar arid world, including periods of drought and the growing pull of wage labour. But these programmes also tended to outstrip those attempted by the colonial powers in comprehensiveness, ambition and speed. In the late 1950s, for example, the enhanced capacity of the Saudi state to purchase the latest technical equipment led to the development of two prominent sedentarisation projects, the Wadi Sirhan Settlement Scheme (from 1959), and the Pasture Improvement Project (from 1961). Both stumbled in the face of ecological constraints and a lack of prior consultation with nomadic groups, but ultimately worked to limit the choices of desert populations who wished to remain migratory. Often it was national oil wealth which fuelled the sustained effort that sedentarisation seemed to demand: again, in the Saudi case, sedentarisation was advanced considerably more by the credit supplied through the Saudi Agricultural Bank from 1964, the animal subsidy program (which shifted herd composition away from camels towards sheep and goats), and the Real Estate Development Fund from 1975, than by the earlier, more eye-catching engineering projects.⁴⁰ [Very interesting material](#)

⁴⁰ K. Al-Radihan, 'Adaptation of Bedouin in Saudi Arabia to the 21st Century: mobility and stasis among the Shararat', in D. Chatty (ed.), *Nomadic Societies in the Middle East and North Africa: entering the 21st century*

Comparable tensions played out in campaigns to abolish the exceptional legal orders which colonialism had established for many desert territories, and to fully incorporate them into the national polity: we might call this the struggle over 'desert law'. Around the Syrian and North Arabian deserts, colonial regimes had bolstered so-called 'customary law' to strengthen the hand of likely collaborators and to secure a degree of popular consent. I'm not sure whether, in North Africa at least, this wasn't more of an urban-rural split (and sometimes an Arab-Berber one) than a specifically desert phenomenon. That was the case regarding the applicability of certain Moroccan *dahirs* for instance, but that doesn't invalidate the point you're making. For nationalists, in contrast, they belied claims to national unity and presented a target of opportunity for wider critiques of colonialism. Yet they could often only be removed in the face of opposition from desert populations themselves. In Egypt and Trans-Jordan in the 1930s, attempts to apply regular legal codes to designated 'desert areas' were successfully seen off.⁴¹ It was not until 1976 that many forms of 'tribal' law were abrogated in Jordan, ending the legal separateness of the Bedouin. Even here, however, as in many other parts of the Arab world, customary law continues to hold an attraction for Bedouin communities, with plentiful evidence of its ongoing adaptation and use.⁴²

Bids to engineer desert places and peoples, and the new certainties that drove them on, played out in a kaleidoscope of contexts. In Xinjiang, the Chinese Communist Party responded to the various challengers to its rule by inundating them. It sent thousands of state-sponsored Han settlers into the province each year, drastically altering its demography, transforming its environment, restructuring its economy around the paramilitary Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, and overpowering the many acts of resistance this

(Leiden, 2006), 840-864; U. Fabietti, 'Facing Change in Arabia: the Bedouin Community and the Notion of Development', in Chatty, *Nomadic Societies*, 573-598; A. Al-Gain, 'Integrated Resource Survey in Support of Nomads in Saudi Arabia', in Whitehead, *Arid Lands*, 1213-1221. It is worth remembering that, contrary to popular opinion, sedentarisation is one of many strategies of adaptation pursued ordinarily by nomadic groups worldwide. Nomads do not need governments to 'teach' them how to settle.

⁴¹ Fletcher, *British Imperialism*.

⁴² F.H. Stewart, 'Customary Law Among the Bedouin of the Middle East and North Africa', in Chatty, *Nomadic Societies*, 239-279; J.A. Massad, *Colonial Effects: the Making of National Identity in Jordan* (New York, 2001); C. Bailey, *Bedouin Law from Sinai and the Negev - Justice Without Government* (New Haven, 2009).

provoked.⁴³ This was, as Justin Jacobs has noted, a ‘fundamentally different’ approach to the pressures of decolonization to promoting ethnic ‘self-determination’ (as in Soviet Central Asia) or ending formal political rule (as in many European possessions), but reflected ‘the political capital that the metropole attributed to the retention of its colony’.⁴⁴ Fascinating contrast. In the Sahel, the collapse of the OCS and the end of formal French rule left independent regimes facing comparable ‘tribal problems’ in their northern territories. After putting down the Tuareg rebellion of 1963, the Malian government accelerated its sedentarisation schemes. Many Tuareg responded with trans-border flight to Niger, where the land purchases and environmental damage caused by mining uranium became another source of conflict.⁴⁵ In some ways, these national ‘tribal problems’ are best understood from the perspective of a frustrated nationalism – Tuareg nationalism – operating between multiple states.⁴⁶ As in other parts of the arid world (such as the Sinai peninsula, or the Sino-Kazakh borderland) it was only really when the end of colonial rule substituted national boundaries for administrative frontiers that border regimes began to bite, disrupting wider zones of migration and exchange. But from our vantage point at the start of the twenty-first century, when deserts provide corridors for the movements of hundreds of thousands of people, it would be as well not to exaggerate the capacity of even the most determined regime to hermetically seal a desert border.⁴⁷

Swirling behind these official interventions were multiple visions of the desert itself. ‘Desert’ is an evocative word, and in the twentieth-century it was often deployed instrumentally to render a variety of complex landscapes simple, and to facilitate otherwise unthinkable forms of intervention. Two broad environmental imaginaries of the desert stand

⁴³ J.A. Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads: a history of Xinjiang* (London, 2007).

⁴⁴ Jacobs, ‘Kazakh Unaligned’.

⁴⁵ Lecocq, ‘That Desert’, 83-4; J. Keenan, ‘Resisting Imperialism: Tuareg threaten US, Chinese and other foreign interests’, in: A. Fischer and I. Kohl (eds.) *Tuareg Society within a Globalized World: Saharan Life in Transition* (London, 2010), 209-230.

⁴⁶ B. Sèbe, ‘A fragmented and forgotten decolonization: the end of European empires in the Sahara and their legacy’, in Chafer and Keese, *Francophone Africa*, 204-218. Calls for a united Tuareg territory grew in the 1970s, 80s and 90s, and revived again following the Arab Spring, but there remains widespread disagreement over the nature and even desirability of a sovereign Tuareg state.

⁴⁷ R. Andersson, *Illegality, Inc.: clandestine migration and the business of bordering Europe* (Berkeley, 2014).

out, both with deep roots. On the one hand was the image of the desert as wasteland: static, unproductive and empty. Some made a point of insisting upon this: only a true 'wasteland' could be legitimately irradiated, scorched and bombed. Another response was to deny it altogether: well into the twentieth-century, 'boosters' in Australia and the United States talked up the habitability of their semi-arid lands while hounding anyone who dared bring up the 'd'-word.⁴⁸ A third response was to view the desert as a place in need of total transformation. Deserts could help the former decolonized world 'catch up'; they could fix the problems colonialism had left behind; they could even assist in the task of building the new citizen; but only if they were made into something else. This was the desert as showcase of national modernity, and its enduring attraction is well-illustrated in the history of Egypt. Here, where 96% ninety-six per cent of the people live on 4% four per cent of the land, every administration since the 1952 Revolution has announced its intention to radically transform the country's desert expanses, whether reclaiming desert land for agriculture or constructing all-new desert cities. In more than sixty years, few such projects have even come close to meeting their targets. Their achievements lie instead in the realm of politics, with successive regimes unable to resist the propaganda potential of announcing new projects, and where the allocation of desert land has helped lubricate the patronage networks on which political authority relies.⁴⁹

An alternate image recast the desert as a national resource, making vital contributions to the economic life and energy needs of the country. Desert resources from guano to diamonds have long been prized, of course, and empires have played a considerable part in their exploitation and circulation. But decolonization in the arid world also coincided with the take-off in oil exports and the hunt for uranium, so that deserts would play an integral role in that distinctly twentieth-century story: the abundance of 'cheap

⁴⁸ W.P. Webb, 'The West and the Desert', *Montana: the Magazine of Western history*, Vol. 8 (1958), 2-12; J.M. Powell, 'Taylor, Stefansson and the Arid Centre: an historic encounter of 'environmentalism' and 'possibilism'', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society* (Dec., 1980).

⁴⁹ D.E. Sims, *Egypt's Desert Dreams: development or disaster?* (Cairo, 2014); E. Deputy, 'Let's do it for the Kids: Toshka, children's literature and political propaganda' (2011 APSA paper online).

energy'.⁵⁰ With this came the hope among many national elites that desert resources might underwrite a more meaningful independence. The 'oil shock' of 1973, for example, represented the desire of a number of states, including some long within the orbit of Britain's informal empire, to assert their independence as sovereign states. Where deserts offered the means to wealth and power they were now worth defending (and their boundaries worth defining), even at the risk of international tension.⁵¹ Yet the road from desert riches to national autonomy has seldom run true. Whether as the 'mediators' in desert border disputes (as at Buraimi in 1952), or as the originators of political intrigue or armed intervention to protect desert assets (as in Iran in 1953), outside powers have remained deeply involved in the exploitation of these resources.

Visions of redeeming the desert were buoyed by the international currency that the language of desert development had acquired by the 1950s and 60s. The Arab League, for example, convened a series of conferences on the development of the Bedouin in the late 1940s and 50s; similar pronouncements on 'the problem' of nomadism were made by the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organisation, the International Labour Organisation and the World Health Organisation.⁵² Above all, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) placed the investigation and transformation of the Arid Zone at the heart of some of its earliest efforts at international scientific collaboration. This pioneering international research program began as the 'Advisory Committee on Arid Zone Research' in 1951, raised to the status of UNESCO's very first "Major Project" from 1957-64. Throughout, it acted as a hub for scientific examinations of desert geology and hydrology; but it also adopted an holistic view of what it called 'the challenge of the desert', supporting interventions in sedentarisation and desert agriculture in the belief that desert transformations offered solutions to broader problems of food insecurity, political instability,

⁵⁰ J.R. McNeill, *Something New Under the Sun: an environmental history of the twentieth-century world* (New York, 2001).

⁵¹ A. Melamid, 'Political Boundaries and Nomadic Grazing', *Geographical Review*, Vol. 55 (1965), 282-293.

⁵² R. Bocco, 'The Settlement of Pastoral Nomads in the Arab Middle East: International Organizations and Trends in Development Policies, 1950-1990', in Chatty, *Nomadic Societies*, 302-330.

and 'the process of decolonization' itself.⁵³ With hindsight, too many of its projects prioritised the state's interests ahead of those of desert populations to achieve lasting success. They privileged the physical sciences and the pursuit of productivity, and could lose sight of the human dimension.⁵⁴ But the programme did promote the idea of the Arid Zone as a problem in itself, and a global one at that, for which lessons learned in one desert could well apply elsewhere. New definitions of aridity itself, as well as Peveril Meigs' iconic map of the Arid Zone's extent, contiguity and apparent similarity, were both produced under the auspices of the programme. [Another superb passage.](#)

In the process, international organisations helped to nourish a network of institutions, which would influence how many desert places and peoples were managed, such as the Central Arid Zone Research Institute at Jodphur and the Sahara research station at Beni Abbès, Algeria. As sources of authority located within the Arid Zone itself, these centres sometimes built on colonial foundations, but they also presented opportunities to demonstrate new forms of leadership in a decolonized arid world. When the Egyptian Desert Institute opened in Cairo in 1951, for example, it struck at least one former British officer and guest as 'an international public relations exercise', while Modibo Keita's visions for the deserts of Mali were at least partly inspired by a 1958 tour of agricultural experiments in Israel. As such, deserts were being bound together through transnational flows of science and expertise, so that modern desert histories were not merely comparable, but connected. Protest movements from below, meanwhile – over rights to access land, concerns for environmental pollution, and hostility to the legal regimes surrounding military bases – formed transnational connections of their own, linking, for example, activists around the Nevada Test Site with those in southern Algeria, Semipalatinsk and Maralinga in Australia.⁵⁵ Given the secretive nature of much that went on here, and the steady drip feed of

⁵³ M. Batisse, 'Progress and Perspectives: a look back at UNESCO Arid Zone activities', in Whitehead, *Arid Lands*, 21-30.

⁵⁴ For example: G.F. White, *The Future of Arid Lands: papers and recommendations from the International Arid Lands Meetings* (Washington, 1956). For critical perspectives on the programme, see: C.F. Hutchinson and S.M. Herrmann, *The Future of Arid Lands—Revisited: a review of 50 years of drylands research* (Dordrecht, 2008).

⁵⁵ R. Solnit, *Savage Dreams: a journey into the landscape wars of the American West* (San Francisco, 1994).

revelations, the political fallout emanating from some desert test sites is set to continue for years.

Across the twentieth-century, national governments, colonial powers, international organisations and desert inhabitants all put forward visions for the future of the arid lands. But many of these actions occurred against a common backdrop of growing alarm over the nature, seriousness and speed of the outward 'march' of the world's deserts, a phenomenon that came to be referred to as 'desertification'. The idea had origins that long predated decolonization (scientific discourses connecting deforestation and desiccation were well-established by the eighteenth-century), but was revived in the interwar period amidst international fascination with the Dust Bowl disaster and the transnational circulation of dryland management 'experts'.⁵⁶ The sense of crisis reached ever greater heights after 1945, as colonial foresters, development 'experts' and UN agencies helped to recast the problem as truly global in extent, amplified by the upsurge global population growth. As David Thomas and Nick Middleton have shown, desertification fed off these uncertainties to become a major issue of political as much as environmental import, axiomatically linked to the stability of 'fragile' independent states, issues of global inequality, development, humanitarianism and the legacy of colonial stewardship of the natural world. With billions of dollars of aid at stake, thousands of publications repeating the term, and an apparent link to drought, poverty and famine, desertification became 'a big business'. By the 1970s and 80s, regimes across the arid zone had become adept at invoking the concept to channel development aid into national development projects, and even to pursue long-standing policies towards 'marginal' desert populations: routinely blaming desertification on feckless

⁵⁶ Grove, *Green Imperialism*. For the Dust Bowl, see: D. Anderson, 'Depression, Dust Bowl, Demography and Drought: the colonial state and soil conservation in East Africa during the 1930s', *African Affairs*, Vol. 83 (1984), 321-343; Saberwal, 'Science'. The tone of some of the most passionate writing on desiccation at the time can be unnervingly familiar: see British colonial forester E.P. Stebbing, 'The Encroaching Sahara: the threat to the West African colonies', *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 85 (1935), 506-519; P. Sears, *Deserts on the March* (Norman, OK, 1935); G.V. Jacks and R.O. Whyte, *The Rape of the Earth: a survey of world soil erosion* (London, 1939).

nomads, for example, who seemed incapable of heeding the lessons of ‘the tragedy of the commons’.

Herein lies a paradox, for ‘desertification’ was described far more than it was understood; exactly what it involves remains uncertain even today. The popular notion of the physical expansion of a desert – of a contiguous band of Saharan sands seeping ever south – is particularly misleading: insofar as generalisations allow, desertification ‘is more like a sporadic rash than an advancing tide’.⁵⁷ The persistence of these desert images reflects the success with which they were mobilised in the twentieth-century; their enduring place in our imaginations is an echo of those national, imperial and international struggles to shape the futures of the arid world. Ultimately, they remind us of the benefits of bringing the ideal and the material into dialogue in any environmentally-informed work of history. The histories of these fictive deserts, these ‘deserts of the imagination’, are just as much a part of our subject.

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Whatever decolonization has meant for the states bordering the great arid zone, their governments have seldom had their own way in the desert. Time and again, the activities of a host of sub-state and supra-national actors have worked to frustrate their intentions. Ultimately, events at the beginning of our present century further illustrate the incompleteness of many desert regions’ incorporation into the nation-state.

Since 2011 Egyptian military control of the Sinai has atrophied, despite the thousands of troops despatched to bolster the state’s authority. In southern and eastern Syria, Bashar al-Assad’s mismanagement of steppe resources during a time of drought fuelled Bedouin involvement in the uprising; in turn, the Bedouin’s trans-border kinship ties helped to give the conflict a regional dimension.⁵⁸ Paris and Washington were quick to frame

⁵⁷ Middleton and Thomas, *Desertification*, p. 6.

⁵⁸ H. Dukhan, ‘Tribes and Tribalism in the Syrian Uprising’, *Syria Studies*, Vol. 6 (2014), 1-28.

the 2012 Tuareg uprising in Mali within the struggle against international jihad, but is best understood as part of the long-standing tension between Bamako and its desert frontiers. Maybe a shade optimistic – the emergence of the MNLA might suggest so, but the more militant Islamists of Ansar Dine, Mojwa, and, above all, Al-Mourabitoun are, at least partly, offshoots of AQIM. From Waziristan and Shabwa to the Syrian Desert and the Sahel, many desert areas have afforded and continue to afford terrains into which forces independent of and antagonistic to the state could retreat and re-form. Where deserts have been transit zones for hundreds of thousands of people, as between West Africa and the Mediterranean, the operations of transnational clandestine networks (and of the European border regimes being projected overseas to stop them) have both eroded national sovereignty further.⁵⁹ Even the exceptional legal measures to which many states have resorted – the recourse to martial law or customary law to which mid-twentieth century nationalists objected so vocally – is proof that the challenges deserts present are not easily overcome. For some, it has been a shock to learn that such ‘friction of terrain’ survives in the age of the satellite and the drone.⁶⁰

Writing in the middle of the United Nations ‘Decade for Deserts and the Fight Against Desertification’ (2010-2020), the interest of international and non-governmental organisations in the world’s desert environments shows no sign of abating. Nor are these the only forms of transnational intervention to which today’s deserts are subjected. Deserts remain favoured locations for overseas bases, where they can project power and influence while relying on their ‘remoteness’ to be ‘less blatantly violative of nationalist sensibilities’.⁶¹ France’s military presence in Chad has offered its forces extensive desert training which it has not been shy in putting to use. (And there’s now a special forces ‘rapid reaction force’ based there) American drone bases have proliferated in the arid world since 2001, where their distance from civilian centres (but proximity to potential targets) has helped to mask the

⁵⁹ Andersson, *Illegality, Inc.*

⁶⁰ P. Porter, *The Global Village Myth: distance, war, and the limits of power* (Washington, 2015).

⁶¹ R.E. Harvaky, *Great Power Competition for Overseas Bases: the geopolitics of access diplomacy* (New York, 1982), 33.

growth of a 'secret empire'.⁶² Through the auspices of the Trans Sahara Counter Terrorism Partnership (and the Pan-Sahel Initiative before it), the United States has found a means to rotate military hardware and personnel around the Sahel and Maghreb. Discourses of 'ungoverned spaces' and 'safe havens' help to justify all this, but governing regimes from Algiers to Beijing have also played their part, echoing the vocabulary of the 'war on terror' to draw external resources into their long-standing efforts to control their desert possessions.

Looking back across the modern history of the arid zone, many broad continuities stand out. There is a fundamental similarity to how empires and their successor states have approached their desert territories which can diminish the significance of the formal end of empire. Many post-independence campaigns to sedentarise nomads, transplant settlers, advance communications, spread irrigation and transform desert environments built on colonial – often interwar – foundations. And yet similarity is not sameness, and there are important discontinuities to be drawn out further, not least in the scale, ambition and haste with which independent governments first resolved to meet 'the challenge of their desert'. Differences in extent could become differences in kind, as when the sheer weight of new settlers altered the demographic balance of a territory, or where irrigation schemes and military tests had a catastrophic impact on the land. These specifics matter, and warrant further investigation. But adopting this broader perspective does more than offer a basis for comparison across time. It prompts us to seek out the policies and patterns which have most deeply affected the relationship between state structures and their desert territories, questioning the relevance of specific changes of regime – and even the most eye-catching initiatives – to the desert histories that have unfolded.

Ultimately, are historians of decolonization justified, like our colleagues working on earlier periods, in taking the arid zone as a unit of analysis? After all, the breath-taking diversity of ecologies, land forms and biota in the world's deserts gives reason to pause

⁶² D. Styan, 'Chad's political violence at 50: bullets, ballots and bases', in T. Chafer and A. Keese, *Francophone Africa at Fifty* (Manchester, 2013), 233-248; N. Turse and T. Engelhardt, *Terminator Planet: the first history of drone warfare, 2001-2050* (Lexington, KY, 2012).

before treating the arid world as one. But there are real opportunities to be gained from recognising the commonalities between the modern histories of states around the great Arid Zone. The diversity of arid and semi-arid environments may defy easy generalisation, but the broad similarities of human responses to them are striking, so that the very act of imagining a common 'arid world' was considerably advanced by the twentieth-century histories of colonialism, internationalism, decolonization and the Cold War. Because deserts have long harboured forces which cross boundaries, they have much to add to our understanding of the development of nationalism and its limits. The movements of pastoralists and refugees, the circulations of colonial dryland 'experts', the rotations of military and scientific personnel and the reach of international aid and development programmes have all helped to ensure that the modern histories of many disparate desert sites are not merely comparable, but connected. This ought to unsettle our units of decolonization just as it does our chronologies. For thinking in terms of an arid world may be a more helpful way of understanding continuity and change than privileging the nation, or the continents, or former imperial blocs. Deserts have played a significant part in some of the big stories of the twentieth-century; we stand to lose much by neglecting their pasts. [Great conclusion, great chapter!](#)

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