

## *The France's Interest in Southern Algeria and Attempts to Separate the Sahara: A Critical Study*

**Nassira Nouacer**

Ghardaia university, heritage and memory

nouacer:nassira@ univ-ghardaia.edu.dz

Received: 06-05-2025

Accepted: 21-05-2026

Published: 01-06-2026

---

### **Abstract:**

This article explores France's colonial interest in the Algerian Sahara, driven by its strategic location and resources. Beginning in the late 18th century, European powers, including France, sought control over trade routes and natural wealth. After occupying Algeria in 1830, France expanded into the Sahara through military, economic, and cultural means, including alliances with local tribes and Christian missionary activities. Following the discovery of oil and gas, France attempted to separate the Sahara from Algeria to maintain control over these resources. However, Algeria's unity and resistance ultimately prevented the success of these colonial efforts.

**Keywords:** Algerian Sahara, Separation Project, France, Colonial project. Southern Algeria .

### **The Beginning of French Interest in Southern Algeria**

#### **Introduction:**

The French interest in southern Algeria was not a sudden development in France's colonial policy following the fall of Algiers in 1830, but rather tied to deeper roots that date back to Europe's general interest in Africa and the desert since the late 18th century (Ben Mhidi, 1983,P45). Southern Algeria, with its strategic location and potential resources, became a key element in France's expansionist plans towards the heart of the African continent, making its control a long-term goal pursued through various means—military, economic, and

cultural (Ben Mhidi, 1983,P45). This article analyzes the motivations behind France's expansion into the Sahara and later attempts to separate it from Algeria.

## **Geographical Location of the Algerian Sahara**

The Algerian Sahara is part of the larger Sahara Desert that stretches across many countries in North Africa. It covers approximately 80% of Algeria's total land area and is located in the southern part of the country (Al-Salabi, 2005,P55). The Sahara extends from the western borders with Morocco to the eastern borders with Tunisia and Libya, and from the southern borders with Niger and Mali. The Algerian Sahara includes several key provinces such as Ouargla, Adrar, Tindouf, B  char, Illizi, and Gharda  a (Cailli  , 1830,P120).

## **Topography of the Algerian Sahara**

The topography of the Algerian Sahara is varied, consisting of vast desert plains, mountain ranges, valleys, and oases. The main features include:

1. **Sandy Plains (Hammada):** Large areas of sandy deserts, known as ergs or sand dunes, are found in the Algerian Sahara. These dunes, stretching for miles, are a hallmark of the desert landscape, creating vast expanses of empty, shifting sands (Vatin, 1984.P45).
2. **Mountains and Plateaus:** The Sahara also contains significant mountain ranges and plateaus, such as the Tassili n'Ajjer, located in southeastern Algeria, known for its rich archaeological findings. These mountains are made of ancient sedimentary rocks, providing a rugged terrain that was difficult for colonists to navigate (Bjaoui, 1991, P13).
3. **Valleys:** Dry valleys and seasonal rivers also traverse the Algerian desert, which become vital during periods of rainfall, bringing water to the otherwise arid region. The M'Zab Valley and Tassili N'Ajjer are notable examples of these valley

- systems, vital both for agriculture and settlement (Merad, 1967,P22).
4. **Oases:** Oases are essential for life in the desert, acting as critical water sources. Notable oases in the Algerian Sahara include Touggourt and Ain Salah, which historically served as crucial stops for trade and caravan routes (Foucauld, 1916,P15).
  5. **Salt Flats (Sebkhas):** These areas, characterized by vast stretches of salty terrain, are prevalent in parts of the desert and contribute to the region's unique and harsh landscape (Said, 1993,P31).

### **The Strategic Importance of the Algerian Sahara**

The geographical and topographical features of the Sahara made it both a challenge and a strategic asset for the French colonial authorities. The vast expanses of sand and rugged mountains posed obstacles to military conquest, but they also made the desert a prime target for trade routes and natural resource extraction. The oases and valleys were crucial for French control, serving as military outposts and commercial hubs for the flow of resources such as gold, ivory, and slaves (Vatin, 1984.P45).

The French interest in southern Algeria was not a sudden development in France's colonial policy following the fall of Algiers in 1830, but rather tied to deeper roots that date back to Europe's general interest in Africa and the desert since the late 18th century. Southern Algeria, with its strategic location and potential resources, became a key element in France's expansionist plans towards the heart of the African continent, making its control a long-term goal pursued through various means—military, economic, and cultural. This article aims to expand on the analysis of France's motivations toward the south and the stages of its implementation, highlighting the geographic, economic, and political factors that shaped this approach (De Gaulle, 1970,P102).

## **The European Context Before the French Occupation of Algeria**

Since the late 18th century, European interest in Africa grew, driven by trade, scientific exploration, and colonial ambitions. In 1788, Britain established the "African Interior Society," encouraging exploratory expeditions into the continent. This led to the emergence of notable explorers such as John Ledyard, Lucas, and Major Houghton, who contributed to the accurate mapping of the Sahara desert (Houghton, 1797,P78). These efforts revealed the desert's potential as a vital route linking North Africa with the rich Sudan region, abundant in gold, ivory, and slaves, making it a prime target for colonial powers (Merad, 1967,P38).

## **The Beginning of French Field Interest in Southern Algeria**

France took advantage of the vast amount of information provided by European explorers. Following the occupation of Algeria, southern Algeria became part of a broader colonial project aimed at ensuring:

- Protection for coastal areas, especially Constantine, from threats posed by desert tribes.
- Control over trade routes extending into Africa. French officers were among the first to conduct exploratory campaigns into the south, supported by the French government, which sponsored scientific missions like René Caillié's expedition between 1824 and 1828 (Caillié, 1830,P120).

## **Initial Practical Steps to Expand into the Desert**

During the 1840s, French policies toward the Sahara began to take concrete form:

- On July 13, 1844, the French administration allowed two convoys to depart from Biskra, one heading toward Touggourt and the other toward Ain Salah, marking the first organized

attempt to penetrate the desert commercially and militarily (Bjaoui, 1991,P 13).

- French trade activity was promoted through private initiatives like those of the caravan merchant "Garcin."
- Scientific missions were also sent to document trade routes, such as the 1849 mission that published its findings in the book *The Trade of Africa with Mecca and Sudan* (Garcin, 1849,P80).

### **French Strategy in Dealing with Desert Tribes**

French authorities realized that conquering the south by force alone was not feasible, so they turned to a policy of alliances with certain tribal leaders:

- Supporting Bouaziz Ben Qana, who was appointed by the French as "Sheikh of the Arabs" in the Ziban region in 1839 (Merad, 1967,P38).
- Collaborating with Si Hamza, who helped subdue the Ouargla region in 1853 (Bjaoui, 1991,P15).
- Working with local scholars, most notably Moorish scholar Ahmed Mustafa Ould Tawir Al-Janna, who provided accurate information about the desert's geography and routes (Said, 1993,P43).

Additionally, the French built small military and administrative centers along trade routes and dug wells in oases to stabilize French convoys and trade (Vatin, 1984,).

### **France's Strategic Plan to Isolate the Sahara**

The French colonial administration's efforts to separate the Algerian Sahara began in the early 1950s. Gradually, this idea evolved into a fully-fledged strategic project, particularly after 1956, when the leadership of the Algerian Revolution addressed the threat in the

Soummam Congress Document (1956), emphasizing the necessity of territorial integrity as a precondition for any political settlement (Ben Mhidi, 1983,P67). Despite the revolutionaries' awareness, France accelerated its plans in 1957, especially after General Charles de Gaulle's return to power. De Gaulle, in his *Memoirs of Hope*, stated:

"We have recently discovered oil and gas fields that are crucial for fulfilling our vital industrial energy needs. Therefore, keeping Algeria is both beneficial and deserved" (De Gaulle, 1970,P104).

To implement its agenda, the French government:

- Reinforced administrative control from Paris.
- Developed industrial and communication infrastructure in the Sahara.
- Established major chemical and metallurgical industries.
- Launched gas pipeline projects linking the Sahara to northern ports.
- Negotiated selectively with revolutionary leaders to weaken national unity (Merad, 1967,P40).

### **Objectives Behind the Sahara Separation Project**

France's plan aimed to impose new colonial structures on a future independent Algeria. De Gaulle openly admitted that France intended to maintain control over the oil and gas resources it had "invested" in (De Gaulle, 1970,P105). The Sahara, rich in hydrocarbons and minerals, represented a crucial economic foundation for Algeria's future. Its loss would have severely hindered national development efforts. Additionally, the Sahara served as a bridge for African solidarity movements between North and Sub-Saharan Africa—a threat perceived by colonial powers as critical (Vatin, 1984).

Western economic interests further fueled the separation project. French authorities involved foreign companies such as Shell, British

Petroleum, and Esso Standard to secure international backing in exchange for access to Saharan wealth (Said, 1993,P39). Meanwhile, France sought to instigate border conflicts among African nations to prevent unified resistance. These plans were undermined by decisions made at the Black Africa Conference, which advocated for African unity before engagement with European powers (Bjaoui, 1991,P19).

### **The Policy of Christianization and Cultural Westernization in the Sahara**

Colonial domination was not solely material; it also sought to penetrate the spiritual and cultural spheres. France's policies aimed at erasing Islamic identity and promoting Western-Christian values involved:

- Imposing French legal codes over Islamic courts (since the decree of October 1830).
- Exiling Islamic scholars and compelling religious leaders to pray for the French Empire (Ali Merad, 1967,P40).
- Confiscating Islamic endowments (waqf) and dismantling traditional economic structures.
- Marginalizing Arabic language and Islamic education while encouraging local dialects and French culture.
- Converting mosques into churches and religious centers (Lavigerie, 1881,P56).

In southern Algeria, missionary activity expanded under figures like Cardinal Charles Lavigerie, who coordinated closely with General Bugeaud. Lavigerie's organizations, such as the White Fathers and Armed Brothers of the Sahara, intertwined missionary work with colonial intelligence operations (Foucauld, 1916). Another notable figure, Charles de Foucauld, conducted missionary and espionage missions among the Tuareg tribes, exploiting conditions of poverty

and famine. His activities were cut short by his assassination during a Sanusi-led attack in 1916 (Foucauld, 1916,P16).

France's flimsy justification, as articulated by the then-Minister of Saharan Affairs, Max Lejeune, was that the Sahara was uninhabited and, therefore, ripe for the picking. This was, to put it mildly, a ludicrous assertion. After all, if Lejeune was minister over a vacant land, wouldn't that be a bit... odd? And the very act of creating administrative divisions strongly suggested a resident population. The whole thing was a bit of a farce, really.

Realizing the hollowness of their initial argument, the French concocted a more audacious plan: declaring the Sahara a kind of inland sea, shared by all neighboring nations – a geopolitical sleight of hand. This cunning strategy, however, was already brewing as early as 1956, a fact underscored by the Soummam Conference's emphatic affirmation of Algeria's territorial integrity, including the Sahara.

The partition project even hit the floor of the French National Assembly on June 28th and 29th, 1958, presented by Louis Joxe. The wheels began turning in earnest in 1959, with France deploying Hamza Boubaker, a key operative, to cultivate local leaders and garner support for the scheme. An initial meeting in Ouargla that year aimed to subtly introduce the idea to influential figures, gauging their receptiveness.

According to Sheikh Biyouid, Boubaker engaged in a series of one-on-one meetings with notables and deputies from the Ouargla prefecture, attempting to win them over. Another clandestine meeting, a lavish luncheon in Saint-Eugène (Algiers), furthered this insidious campaign. These surreptitious gatherings between French officials and local power brokers became increasingly frequent. One such encounter involved Olivier Giscard d'Estaing, a De Gaulle advisor tasked with the Sahara file, who tried – and failed – to persuade Sheikh Biyouid during a visit to Ghardaïa in June 1959.

Michel Debré's October 1959 visit to Ghardaïa, involving mayors from the seven oases of Wadi Mzab, the Mzab deputy in the Algerian Assembly, and regional deputies in Ouargla, similarly met with staunch resistance to the secession plan. Undeterred, Debré traveled to Tamanrasset in 1960, bringing Tuareg representatives from Chad, Mali, and Niger. He spent seven days attempting to convince the influential Hajj Bay Akhmouk to become a kind of sultan of a separate Sahara, a proposal that was promptly rejected.

Meanwhile, Boubaker, acting as a self-proclaimed representative of the southern population and championing the partition, gained a powerful ally in Max Lejeune. He even instructed French authorities to suppress dissent, leading to the arrest of a member of the Tijaniyya Sufi order who vehemently opposed the plan.

As 1960 progressed, the French intensified their efforts, anticipating an announcement during the autumnal session of the prefecture council. Sheikh Biyouk, anticipating trouble, forged an alliance with Commander Eid (representing Ouargla) and the Sheikh of the Tijaniyya Zawiya in Tamanrasset. This unlikely trio vowed to thwart the separatist machinations, even at the cost of their lives.

During the autumn 1960 session in Ouargla, Boubaker declared a surprise closed-door session to discuss the partition, attended by both Muslim and French deputies. He presented a lengthy speech detailing his conversations with De Gaulle and the merits of secession, then requested their opinions. The deputies, caught off guard, hesitated. After much deliberation, they concluded that their role was budgetary and developmental, not deciding the fate of the nation. The meeting, intended to showcase local support, spectacularly backfired.

Despite this setback, De Gaulle issued a decree on December 7th, 1960, officially separating the Sahara from Algeria and directly linking it to France. The French administration immediately swung into action, pressuring local dignitaries to send telegrams of support to Paris – a campaign that largely fell flat.

Undeterred by the repeated failures, Boubaker attempted another gambit, aiming for a seemingly spontaneous meeting in the home of an Ouargla notable to mask the coercion. This too failed. A meeting was eventually held at the Ouargla prefecture in April 1961, with 54 attendees, many brought under duress by police and gendarmes. Even with this heavy-handed approach, several local leaders openly rejected the partition.

In July 1961, France attempted to involve the Tuareg once more, inviting Hajj Bay Akhmouk to the Bastille Day celebrations. De Gaulle himself met with Akhmouk the following day, presenting the secession plan. Akhmouk's response was succinct and powerful: "I may not demand Algerian independence, but what I do demand is not to be independent \*from\* Algeria".

Faced with unwavering resistance, France resorted to economic pressure, targeting Saharan merchants in the north. The Bank of Algeria, under threat of bankruptcy, applied intense financial pressure. This was further exacerbated by a mysterious organization that bombed 90 shops owned by southerners in Algiers. In the oil fields, over 1500 workers were forcibly relocated to northern camps. In Ouargla, an attempt to incite sectarian conflict between Ibadi and Maliki Muslims was thwarted by local peacemakers after a mosque was desecrated.

The French employed both threats and enticements. They warned the Mزاب people of what the "Arabs" would do after independence, painting a grim picture of persecution, while simultaneously promising a prosperous, French-protected Saharan republic with air bridges to Paris. However, repression remained their preferred tactic, creating a climate of fear and collective punishment. Even some pro-French figures were not spared, with the mayor of Ouargla confiscating property from those opposing the plan.

Despite consistent failure, France persisted, seeking diplomatic support. A delegation including Boubaker, ex-Minister Lejeune, a former police prefect, and a lawyer visited Niger on December 4th,

1961, attempting to secure President Hamani Diori's support. Diori's response was a categorical "no," famously stating that he would not help create a "Saharan Katanga" (referencing the secessionist Katanga province in the Congo).

The French delegation, however, continued their charade, misleading French negotiators into believing the project was still viable. A final meeting was planned in Ouargla on February 27th, 1962, with Louis Joxe in attendance, to showcase (however falsely) popular support. The Algerian Revolution, however, intervened, putting a decisive end to France's machination

## **Conclusion**

France's attempt to separate the Algerian Sahara was a multidimensional project combining military, economic, political, and cultural strategies. Several conclusions emerge:

- The strategic and economic value of the Sahara was a decisive factor in France's colonial policies.
- The separation plan aimed to fragment Algeria's territorial and national integrity.
- Christianization and Westernization served as tools for deeper cultural colonization.
- The project gained urgency after the discovery of oil and was backed by both legal manipulations and international corporate alliances.
- Despite these efforts, the unity of the Algerian people and regional solidarity movements ultimately thwarted France's plans.

Ultimately, the Algerian Sahara stands today as a symbol of resilience against colonial fragmentation and an affirmation of national sovereignty.