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**The Geographical impact on the political map of the central Maghreb states  
between the 8th and 11th centuries AD**

**L'impact géographique sur la carte politique des États du Maghreb central  
entre le VIIIe ET le XIe siècle apr. J.-C.**

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**Abstract**

During the middle Ages, the central Maghreb (modern-day Algeria) served as a refuge for rebellious movements against Abbasid authority, largely due to its considerable distance from the caliphate's headquarters in Baghdad and its challenging terrain. These factors contributed to the emergence of several independent states in the region between the 8th and 11th centuries AD. Despite the extensive research on the political history of this period, the role of geography in shaping the political boundaries and the development of these states has not received sufficient attention. Geographical elements such as mountains, deserts, and waterways played a significant role in the formation, expansion, and defense of these states, influencing their political stability and territorial control. This paper seeks to explore how the distinctive geography of the central Maghreb impacted the political map, state formation, and the delineation of borders during this time. The study employs a dual methodology: a descriptive approach to detail the region's geographic features and an analytical approach to examine how these features influenced political dynamics, including state establishment, expansion, and boundary demarcation.

**Key words:** central Maghreb, geography, political development, boundaries, state formation.

**Résumé**

Au Moyen Âge, le Maghreb central, correspondant à l'actuelle Algérie, a constitué un refuge pour les mouvements rebelles contre l'autorité abbasside à Bagdad. Cet éloignement, combiné à un relief particulier comprenant montagnes, déserts et zones côtières, a joué un rôle essentiel dans l'émergence de plusieurs entités politiques indépendantes entre le VIIIe et le XIe siècle. Bien que l'histoire politique de cette région ait fait l'objet de nombreuses études, l'influence de la géographie sur la formation et l'évolution des frontières politiques n'a pas été suffisamment étudiée. Or, les caractéristiques géographiques ont largement déterminé la stabilité et l'expansion de ces États, leur offrant à la fois des avantages stratégiques et des contraintes territoriales.

Cet article de recherche vise à analyser le rôle des facteurs géographiques dans la création et la délimitation des états du Maghreb central au cours de cette période. La méthodologie adoptée combine une approche descriptive, qui met en lumière les spécificités géographiques de la région, et une approche analytique, qui cherche à comprendre l'impact de ces éléments naturels sur la dynamique politique, notamment en ce qui concerne la formation, l'expansion et les frontières des états.

**Mots-clés :** Maghreb central, géographie, politique, frontières, formation des états.

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## Introduction

Geographical and natural factors have played a fundamental role in shaping political boundaries and influencing the historical evolution of Algeria, particularly during the medieval era. The central Maghreb, corresponding to modern-day Algeria, served as a strategic refuge for various dissident movements that sought to challenge Abbasid authority in the east. Among these movements were the Khārijite, Shiītes, and other groups aspiring to establish independent political entities. Leveraging the region's geographic remoteness from the Abbasid caliphal center in Baghdad and its diverse natural defenses, these factions managed to establish several formidable states, including the Rustamīd, Fātimīd, and Hammādīd dynasties, between the 8th and 11th centuries AD. Geographical factors not only facilitated the foundation of these states but were also pivotal in shaping their territorial expansion and political boundaries.

Although scholars have extensively documented the political histories of these medieval states, the role of geography in the formation and stabilization of political boundaries remains underexplored. Most existing research prioritizes political, ideological, or military factors while relegating geography to a secondary consideration. For instance, key works like Alī Achchī's "The Mountainous Dimension of the Central Maghreb: Between Fortification, Isolation, and Historical Roles" (2021) and Ahmed Būchāma's "The Sectarian Geography of the central Maghreb from the 8th to the 12th Century AD" (2022) shed light on the importance of the region's mountainous terrain and other geographical features. However, these studies do not delve deeply into how geographical factors directly shaped political boundaries, influenced the emergence of states, and contributed to their stability. Furthermore, the connection between geography and state survival in the face of external threats, environmental challenges, and regional interactions remains insufficiently addressed.

In particular, the central Maghreb's rugged mountainous landscapes, vast desert regions, and coastal plains provided natural barriers and routes that significantly influenced statecraft. These geographical features acted as both fortifications against external invasions and as enablers of internal coherence, allowing dissident groups to establish stable centers of power.

Another underexplored aspect is the role of climate and environmental changes in influencing political dynamics in the region. Climatic factors, such as variations in rainfall and temperature, likely played a significant role in the success or failure of agricultural economies, which in turn affected the stability of states. Environmental challenges, such as droughts or resource scarcity, could have contributed to political instability or motivated expansion into new territories. However, research linking climatic and environmental shifts to the political landscape of the central Maghreb is relatively sparse, leaving a critical gap in understanding how these elements influenced medieval state formation and collapse.

This study seeks to bridge this gap by examining the intricate relationship between geography and political development in the central Maghreb from the 8th to the 11th centuries AD. Specifically, it will analyze how natural features such as mountains, deserts, and coastlines influenced the establishment, expansion, and stabilization of states. Moreover, it will investigate how these geographical elements shaped political boundaries, contributing to the distinctive map of states that emerged during this period. By integrating historical and geographical perspectives, this research aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of the role geography played in the political development of medieval North Africa.

Methodologically, this study will employ a descriptive approach to provide a comprehensive account of the region's geographical features. This will involve examining key natural landmarks such as the Atlas Mountains, the Sahara, and the Mediterranean coastline, as well as understanding the environmental conditions that prevailed during the medieval period. An analytical framework will then be applied to elucidate how these geographical features impacted political dynamics, particularly in terms of the emergence, expansion, and demarcation of state boundaries.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the broader scholarly discourse on the interplay between geography and political development in medieval North Africa. By emphasizing the critical role of natural factors in shaping the political landscape of the central Maghreb, it enhances our understanding of state formation processes in the region. Furthermore, it provides insights that are not only relevant to the history of the Maghreb but also to broader discussions of how geography influences political boundaries, governance, and stability in pre-modern societies. In doing so, this research opens new avenues for future studies on the relationship between geography and political history, particularly in regions where natural features played a decisive role in shaping human societies.

### 1. Borders of the central Maghreb

The "central Maghreb" concept began to take shape in the 11th century AD. Al-Bakrī was the first to use this term, describing Tlemcen as "the base of the central Maghreb ... it is the homeland of the kingdom of Zenāta<sup>1</sup> and the centre of the Berber tribes." (Al-Bakrī, *Al-Masālik*, 2003:259) In the following century, Al-Idrīsī (d. 560/1165) also used the same description. However, he considered Bejāia the capital of the central Maghreb when he said: "It is the city of the Central Maghreb and the exact place of the Banū Hamād." (Al-Idrīsī, *Nuzhat al-Mushtāq*, 2002: 260). Al-Idrīsī was also more precise than Al-Bakrī, defining this space not only by mentioning its capital but by listing the cities that make it up. Thus, after listing the Saharan localities, Sous localities, Berber localities, and the cities of Tlemcen, Oran, Tāhārt, Achīr... (Vanz, 2021: 293-341) he specifies: "Among the localities of the central Maghreb are: Ténès, Brechk, Algiers, Dellys, Bejāia ..." (al-Idrīsī, *Nuzhat al-Mushtāq*, 2002: 250-275) Ibn Khaldūn elaborated, saying: "the central Maghreb is mostly the homeland of Zenāta and its capital in this era was Tlemcen which was the home of their kingdom. It is adjacent from the east, the country of Sanhāja from Algeris, Mitīja, Medea and the following to Bejāia." (Ibn Khaldūn, *Al'bar*, 2000: 134) Although there is no reference in sources indicating the reason for using the term "central Maghreb" it can be easily inferred, knowing that the central Maghreb is located between the eastern Maghreb (Tunisia) and the western Maghreb (Morocco).

Geographically, the central Maghreb is delineated by distinct natural features. It stretches from the fertile plains of Būna (Annaba) in the east (Bouchama, 2022: 47) to the mountains of Tāza to the west (Anonymous, *al-Istibsār* 1985, p. 176) and from the Sea of Rum (the Mediterranean) in the north to the Sahara in the south (Hamed, 2020: 25).

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<sup>1</sup> - One of the largest Berber tribes of the "Butr," their original homeland is the interior regions of North Africa. Among their most famous branches in the central Maghreb during the medieval period are the Banū Ifran, Maghrāwa, Hawwāra, Lawata, Mazāta, Banū Rigah, and others. They often practised a nomadic lifestyle (Ibn Khaldūn, *Al-Ibar*, 2000:3-5).

Despite a consensus among historians on the existence of a distinct region known as the central Maghreb, characterized by unique attributes different from the rest of the Islamic Maghreb, there is no unified geographical definition for it. This ambiguity arises primarily from historians and geographers' emphasis on tribal concentrations as the criterion for regional delineation, focusing on the areas inhabited by the Zenāta and Sanhāja tribes.

**Figure 01: A map showing the approximate area of central Maghreb**



## 2. An overview of the central Maghreb geography

The geography of the central Maghreb is marked by significant variations in precipitation and climate, which have profoundly influenced the region's environmental diversity and human settlement patterns. (Capel, 2021: 48) Precipitation increases from the west coast to the east and decreases from north to south (Moussa, 1983: 54). Al-Bakrī noted that Būna on the northern coast is characterized by snow and ice (al-Bakrī, *Al-Masālik*, 2003: 234), whereas Al-Istibsār described the southern region of Zāb<sup>2</sup> as having hot air (Anonymous, *al-Istibsār*, 1985, p. 171). Besides that, this region experienced low and irregular precipitation, leading to frequent droughts and famines during the middle Ages (Capel, 2021: 48)

This variation in precipitation and climate contributed to the region's environmental diversity, significantly affecting population distribution and activities. People concentrated in coastal plains, near mountains, and fertile plains, while they dwindled toward the desert, where water sources were scarce and living conditions were harsh. The evidence for this is that most of the major cities of the central Maghreb during this period, such as Sétif, Constantine, Béjaia, Algiers, Tlemcen, and Tāhārt, were located in the northern areas.

The central Maghreb had a diverse water network crucial for human settlement. Valleys were the prominent water sources. For instance, the Great River, feeding the Zāb region (Anonymous, *al-Istibsār*, 1985: 171), was known as the Seher River, which supported the city of M'sila. Ibn Hawqal described it as "spreading over the land with abundant water, vineyards, and numerous orchards." (Ibn Hawqal, 1992: 85) Another example is the Stīfsef river, originating from

<sup>2</sup> - Zāb: A region located in the eastern central Maghreb, consisting of five cities: Biskra, Tūlga, Nefta, Dousen, and El Bordj. It is bordered to the north by the mountains of the Kingdom of Béjaia, to the west by M'sila, and the east extending across the land of Jarīd. To the south, it extends into the desert (Africanus, 1983: 138-140).

mount Baghl (Elsakhrataīn) in Tlemcen, was mentioned by Al-Idrīsī: "Tlemcen has a river that comes from its mountain called the Elsakhrataīn." (al-Idrīsī, 2002, *Nuzhat al-Mushtāq*: 248) Bejāia, the capital of the Hammādīd state, also sourced its water from the large Soummam valley, described by the author of "Al-Istibsār" as having "a large river about two miles or less from it, with many gardens on its banks and waterwheels built on it." (Anonymous, *al-Istibsār*, 1985:129) To the southeast, the Tahouda region, including the city of Biskra, relied on a river flowing from mount Aurès, as noted by Al-Bakrī (al-Bakrī, *Al-Masālik*, 2003: 231).

It is worth mentioning that historians and travelers of the period did not consistently differentiate between rivers and valleys when naming waterways (Khira, 2014: 36).

Moreover, springs were another water source in the central Maghreb that attracted settlers and shaped their territories and urban developments. Geographers and travelers of this period highlighted the relationship between human settlements and springs. Al-Idrīsī, for example, described Tāhārt, the capital of the Rustamīds, as having "flowing water that enters most of their homes." (al-Idrīsī, *Nuzhat al-Mushtāq* 2002: 256-258) He also noted that the city of Algiers, Benī Mezghana, "has springs by the sea, from which they drink." The author of "Al-Istibsār" also described Tlemcen as having "water brought from springs." (Anonymous, *al-Istibsār*, 1985: 176) It was also noted that Ashīr was established around two water sources known as Ain Suleiman and Ain Talālinīngh (Djelouli, 2009: 214)

This overview of water sources in central Maghreb shows that most cities were established near rivers, valleys, and springs, indicating that water sources played a crucial role in shaping the political map. This is because they considerably influenced population distribution and determined the locations of cities and tribal clusters, which formed the foundation of many political entities.

From a topographical perspective, the central Maghreb is known for its diverse terrain, including mountains, plateaus, plains, and deserts. Mountains had the most significant impact on the inhabitants of central Maghreb. The most important of these mountains are the Tell Atlas and the Saharan Atlas ranges, which stretch from the northeast to the southwest, increasing in height as they extend eastward until reaching their peak in the Aurès. Between these two mountain ranges lie unconnected internal plains and plateaus through which valleys, rivers, and springs flow (Moussa, 1983: 51). To the south lies the desert, with its sands, oases, and distinctive geography, forming another crucial factor in influencing the political map of the central Maghreb.

### 3. Terrain Impact on the establishment of states and their borders

Mountains have played a pivotal role in the political development of central Maghreb, particularly in the establishment of states. Rich in natural resources and offering impregnable fortresses, mountains became focal points for human settlement and state formation. For instance, Abd al-Rahmān ibn Rustam<sup>3</sup> initiated the Rustamīd state by taking refuge in mount Sūfajaj in 761 AD (Ali Achchi, 2021: 132). Known for its abundant water resources and fertile soil, Sūfajaj was a secure location surrounded by the Lemāya, Lawata, and Hawwāra Zenāta tribes, which formed the

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<sup>3</sup> - A Persian who was born in Iraq and then migrated to the Maghreb where he embraced the Ibādī doctrine. He spread it widely among the Zenāta tribes, who pledged allegiance to him and supported him in establishing the Rustamīd state (Ibrahim, 2021: 03-12)

pillar of the Ibādī<sup>4</sup> sect that founded the Rustamīd state. This can lead to the idea that mountains served also as an important factor in safeguarding emerging religious movements in the region. (Staëvel, 2014:36).

When the Abbasid commander Muhammad ibn al-Ash'ath in Kairouan heard about these events, he assembled an army and marched towards Sūfajaj where he camped at its foothill and dug a trench around his camp. He remained besieging the mountain for a long time, attempting several times to storm it, but failed. Ultimately, he was forced to lift the siege and return to Kairouān after a widespread outbreak of fever and smallpox among his soldiers, which caused the death of many. Upon his return. He reportedly said: "Only shield-bearer can enter Sūfajaj." (Ali Achchi, 2021:131) Sūfajaj undeniably played a decisive role in rescuing the project of establishing the Rustamīd state from early destruction. Additionally, even when the Rustamīds established their capital, they built it on an elevated area known as Mount Ghūzūl, at an altitude of approximately 1,131 meters. (Aillet, 2011:50). This means that the security and the strategic factors were taken into consideration.

Similarly, the initial stage of Fātimīd's state establishment began in 899 AD when Abu Abdullah al-Shi'ī<sup>5</sup> settled in the valley of the Al'khyār at mount IkJān. The rugged terrain of the Bābūr mountains and Tāzrūt rocks provided a strategic and defensible location far from the Aghlabid ruling center. Furthermore, this region was the homeland of the Kutāma tribe<sup>6</sup>, which served as a critical human resource and became the striking force behind the Fātimīd state. Surrounded by rugged mountains higher than the surrounding regions, mount IkJān offered a strategic for enemy surveillance and defense. Therefore, despite several military campaigns sent by Ibrahim II al-Aghlabī against Abu Abdullah al-Shi'ī, he failed to defeat him, ultimately leading to the establishment of the Fātimīd state.

The mountain also played a crucial role in establishing the Hammādīd<sup>7</sup> and Zīrid states. In 984 AD, Zīrī ibn Menād<sup>8</sup> built Ashīr, the capital of the Zīrids in a fortified geographical area rich in water at the foot of mount Tīterī to protect it from enemies. Similarly, in 1008 AD, Hammādī built their capital, Qal'at, in a fortified and strategic location on the foothills of Mount Takrabūs on the northern borders of the Hudna plains (Ali Achchi, 2021:137). Additionally, Hammādī constructed Bejāia, their second capital, in a mountainous fortified area around mount Maysūn to safeguard their ruling center from Banū Hillāl tribes<sup>9</sup> that had invaded the region. Al-Abdarī described Bejāia as: "a large, fortified, and well-known city, both by land and sea, with strong, well-crafted

<sup>4</sup> - A political and religious Islamic sect that branched off from the Kharijite movement, attributed to Abdullah ibn Ibād (who lived in the 1st century AH/7th century CE). It spread in the Islamic Maghreb in the 2nd century AH (8th century CE), and its followers established the Rustamīd state in the central Maghreb in the 8th century CE (Razzaq, 1985: 51).

<sup>5</sup> - The greatest Ismaili Shiite missionary in the Maghreb (280-297 AH), he was crucial in spreading the Shiite doctrine in this region. His proselytizing efforts culminated in the decline of many states at the end of the 3rd century AH (the Aghlabid, Rustamīd, and Sufīrī states) and the establishment of the Fatimid state (Tamer, 1991:215-217)

<sup>6</sup> - A Berber tribe from the Sanhāja branch settled in the northeastern part of the Central Maghreb, between Constantine and the land of the Zwāwa, to the north of Setīf city. (Lekbal, 1975: 48)

<sup>7</sup> - A Berber state that emerged in the central Maghreb under the leadership of Hammād ibn Bulūghīn from 1007 to 1152 CE. It included the tribes of the Sanhāja Banū Zīrī (Ouais, 1991: 43)

<sup>8</sup> - The leader of the Sanhāja Banū Zīrī tribe, he was a prominent military commander for the Fātimīds and contributed to consolidating their rule in the Islamic Maghreb. They appointed him as their governor over the Maghreb when they had relocated their capital to Egypt. However, he declared independence and established the Banū Zīrī state. He died in 971 CE (Hady Roger Idris, 1992: 39)

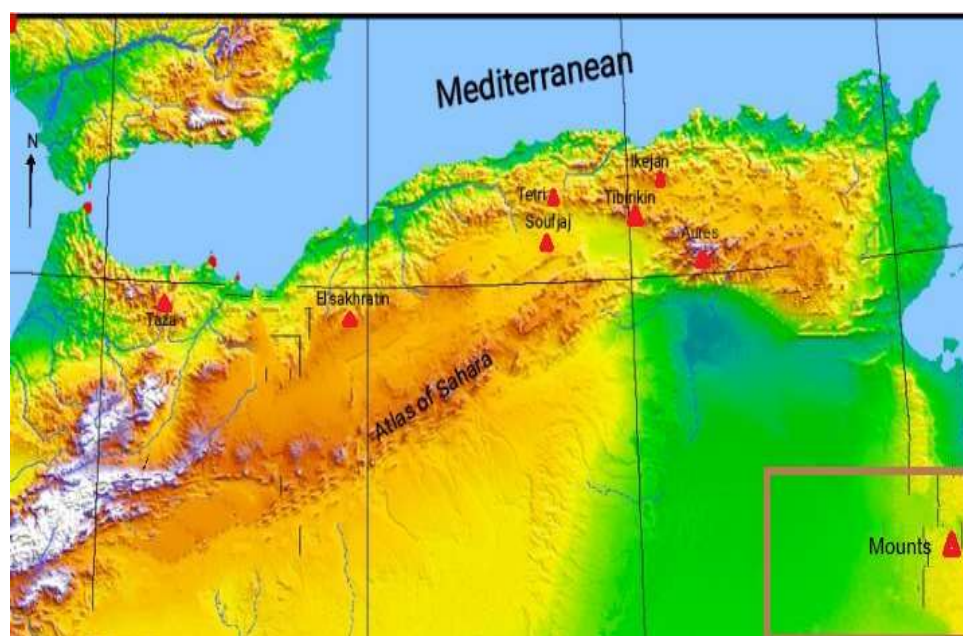
<sup>9</sup> - A Mudharite Arab tribe originates from Najd. This tribe currently constitutes the majority of Arabs in Algeria. They entered the Maghreb in 1052 at the behest of the Fatimīds as revenge against the Zīrids, who had declared their independence. Among their most famous branches are the Zghba, Riyāh, Athej, Qurra, and Banū Uday (Ibn Khaldūn , *Al'bar*, 2000:18).

## The geographical impact on the political map of the central Maghreb states between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries AD

buildings, high structures, situated at the base of a rugged mountain... It is not a target for any invader nor spacious enough for any attacker" (Ibn Hawqal, *Al-Rihla*: 49).

Mountains did not only provide fertile ground for nascent political movements; they also shaped state borders. For example, The Rustamīd state's boundaries extended from mount Nafūsa in the east to mount Medioūna south of Wajda in the west (Bouchama, 2022: 81-83). Bulūggīn ibn Zīrī also expanded the Zīrīd state by driving the Zenāta tribes beyond the Moulouya valley, using the Atlas mountains as a natural boundary (Hady Roger Idris, 1992: 69). Additionally, The Hammādīd state's eastern borders were at the Aurès mountains (Anonymous, *al-Istibsār*:165). This relation between mountains and borders can be explained by the fact that these states used them as natural barriers to avoid attacks from their enemies and those coveting their land.

**Figure 01: A map showing the most important mountains that played a political role from the 8th to the 10th century AD**



While the mountains served as the cradle of the central Maghreb states during the medieval period, the plains acted as the lifeline ensuring their continuity. The plains were the primary target for the expansion of these states once they surpassed the foundational stage, as they were essential for agricultural and pastoral activities and a crucial source of sustenance. Additionally, the plains held significant fiscal importance. Furthermore, over time, the mountain regions became inadequate to contain the burgeoning state, which sought to expand and incorporate tribe branches loyal to its political project in the neighboring areas. For instance, the Rustamīd state emerged on the foothill of mount Sūfajaj, but once they established their state, they extended into the plains adjacent to their capital, Tāhārt. Then, they moved northward to include the fertile Sersū Plain, followed by the Mendās (Ahmed Bouchama, 2022, p. 692). The Rustamīd state also expanded eastward to include vast parts of the Zāb region. (Amara, 2012, pp. 119-120) Similarly, the Fātimīd state emerged on mount Ickjān, and when they consolidated power, they expanded their territory to Būna, Hudna, Chelif, and Tlemcen, in addition to the plains previously under the control of the Rustamīds. The same pattern applies to the Hammādīd state, which originated from mount Takrārt overlooking vast fertile plains and then expanded to encompass other extensive plains areas. Based on the delineation

of this state's borders, the Hammādīd state extended at the expense of the plains of Annaba, Tāhārt, Mitīdja, and Chlef (Ouais, 1991: 78).

To conclude, the plains provided an uncomplicated area to extend for tribal groups aspiring to establish a state at the expense of rival tribes. These groups encountered relatively little difficulty when they took control of plain regions compared to rugged areas. For example, when the Fātimīd leader Abū al-Qāsim was expanding the territory of Fātimīd at the expense of Zenāta, he was able to control the plains of Wansherīs and Mendās north of Tāhārt in 927AD without significant difficulty, subjugating most of the Zenāta branches, such as the Matmāta, Lamāya, Meknāssa, Hawāra, and others (Bouchama A. a., 2020: 139).

On the other hand, the desert formed a natural barrier against the expansion of states that emerged in the central Maghreb between the 8th and 11th centuries AD. Comparing the southern borders of these states reveals that they do not penetrate deep into the desert areas, except for the city of Wargla, located on the northern edge of the desert, known for its abundant water and commercial importance. The southern borders of the Rustamīd (Bouchama A , 2022:80) and Hammādīd (Ouais, 1991: 80) states did not extend beyond this city, while the Fātimīd state did not expand southward beyond Tāhārt except for briefly exerting influence over Sījilmāssa during their expansion into the western Maghreb (Al-Dashrawī, 1994: 194). The scarcity of water, difficult climatic conditions, and terrain dominated by sand were crucial factors in confining these states to the northern edges of the desert.

#### 4. The water influence on the political map of the central Maghreb

Water played a pivotal role in shaping the political map of central Maghreb. It was the primary factor behind the population clustering creation, facilitating the formation of political entities in the region. For example, The Zenāta tribes, who contributed to the establishment of Rustamīd state, were known to settling in the geographical area extending from Zāb through Tāhārt to Tlemcen (Ibn Khaldūn , *Al 'bar* 2000: 03). This area included numerous valleys and springs, such as the large valley that ran through Tahouda, originating from the Aurès mountains, which irrigated its palms and crops (al-Bakrī, *Al-Masālik*, 2003: 231). In addition, Al-Himyarī, in his description of Tāhārt, noted that it had "flowing waters and abundant springs that enter most homes, with gardens irrigated by them." (Al-Himyarī, 1980: 126). Similarly, the region extending from the Chelf valley to Tlemcen was renowned for its numerous springs, valleys, and water resources.

Similarly, the political domain of the Fātimīd state was initially established in the region inhabited by the Kutāma tribes, which extended from the city of Būna (Annaba) in the east to Jijel in the west (Al-Nu'man, 1986: 37). This area was characterized by abundant rainfall and numerous valleys. For instance, Ibn Sa'id mentioned that "Būna has a moderate-sized river that flows into the sea from the west." (Ali ibn Mūsā ibn Sa'id, *Al-Jughrafiya*, 1980: 142) Al-Idrīsī also noted that a valley flowed into Mila from the south had many springs, the most important being a spring called Ain Abū Al-Siba' in the city center (al-Idrīsī, *Nuzhat al-Mushtāq*, 2002:132). These water sources played a crucial role in sustaining the population and fostering agricultural activity. In addition, the control of water sources and their locations was also considered a decisive factor in wars, as thirst and hunger were weapons in achieving victories or causing failures in military campaigns. For this reason, settlements were often established around water, not directly next to it, to avoid the possibility of water shortages during sieges. (Djelouli, 2009: 214)

Furthermore, the Hammādīd state established its first capital, Al-Qal'a, near the Jarāwa valley. Even when they later relocated their capital northward, they chose Bejāia, a city renowned



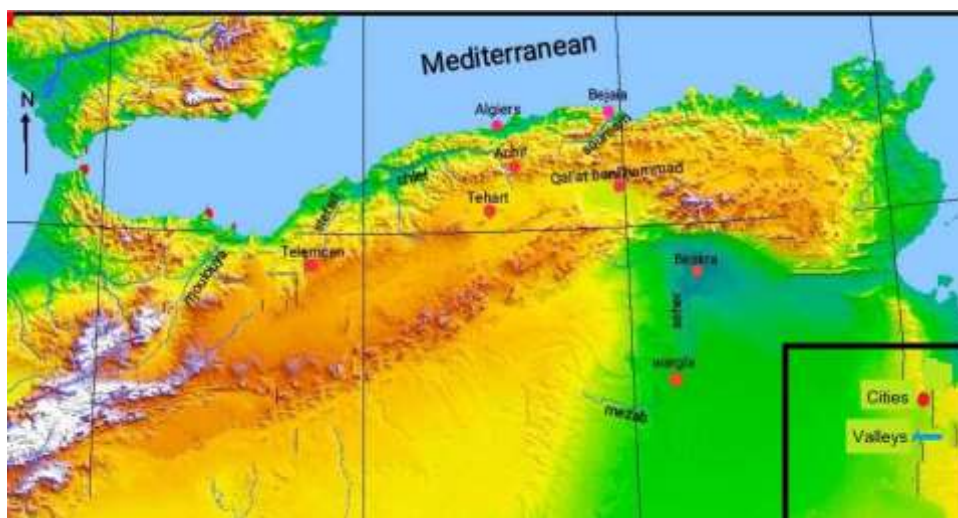
# The geographical impact on the political map of the central Maghreb states between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries AD

for the Soummam valley. The abundance of water in these regions not only supported agriculture but also played a strategic role in the Hammādīd state's political and economic strength.

This connection between water sources and human communities in central Maghreb highlights the importance of water sources as a fundamental factor for sustaining life in the region and as a significant reason for creating the settlements that will establish the political entities that arose in the area.

Furthermore, water also played a crucial role as a boundary marker and landmark in defining the borders of the central Maghreb states during this period. For instance, the Moulouya river was often considered the westernmost limit of these states (Anonymous, *al-Istibsâr*, 1985: 176). Additionally, the Mediterranean sea served as the common northern boundary for these entities (Hamed, 2020: 25). In the south, the selection of Wargla as the southernmost boundary was not arbitrary; the city was known for its abundant groundwater and numerous valleys, including the Maya valley, the M'Zāb valley, and the Nsā valley. These natural features contributed to the strategic positioning of the regions (Dhikar, 2010: 05).

**Figure 03: A map showing the most important valleys and cities in central Maghreb from the 08 to the 10<sup>th</sup> century CE**



## Conclusion

In conclusion, the historical analysis of the central Maghreb's borders from the 8th to the 10th centuries reveals a complex interaction between geography, politics, and tribal dynamics. One of the most salient points is the inherent instability of these borders, largely dictated by the fluctuating military capabilities of the various states that governed the region. The political boundaries of the central Maghreb were never entirely fixed, primarily due to the region's fragmented nature and the continual shifts in power between different tribal alliances and dynasties. Nevertheless, a general territorial extent can be discerned, spanning from Būna (Annaba) in the east to the Moulouya valley in the west, with the Mediterranean Sea forming the northern boundary and the desert to the south. This broad geographical delineation, while subject to change, provides a framework for understanding the historical expanse of the central Maghreb states.

One of the fundamental ways historians and geographers have defined the borders of the central Maghreb is through the lens of tribal distribution. The region's political entities were closely tied to tribal identities, with the formation of states often reflecting the alliances, conflicts, and movements of various Berber tribes. These tribes, in turn, were shaped by the geographical environment they inhabited, particularly the presence of mountains, rivers, and other natural features that influenced their settlement patterns and mobility. The significance of these geographical factors becomes even more evident when examining how they facilitated the rise and consolidation of power for major dynasties in the region, such as the Rustamīds, Fātimīds, and Zīrīds (later Hammādīds).

The role of mountains in this context is particularly noteworthy. As natural fortresses, mountains provided both protection and strategic advantages for emerging political movements. The Rustamīds, Fātimīds, and Hammādīds all relied heavily on mountainous regions to establish their authority and safeguard their territories. Mountains not only offered physical protection but also provided access to vital natural resources, such as timber, pastureland, and water sources, which were crucial for sustaining populations and economies.

In contrast to the mountains, the plains served a different but equally essential function in the formation and sustenance of the central Maghreb states. Plains were more accessible for settlement, agriculture, and expansion, allowing states to extend their control over larger swaths of land. The fertile plains, particularly those near river systems, were invaluable economic resources, providing agricultural surplus that could be taxed to support the state's infrastructure and military. Control of these areas often shifted depending on the success of military campaigns or the forging of alliances, underscoring the dynamic nature of the political map during this period.

Water resources also played a pivotal role in defining the territorial boundaries of the central Maghreb. Access to water was a key determinant in the location of capitals, settlements, and trade routes. The Moulouya River, for instance, not only marked a significant western boundary for several states but also served as a critical resource for agriculture and trade. In the north, the Mediterranean Sea formed a natural border, shaping the interactions of the central Maghreb states with maritime powers and facilitating trade and cultural exchange across the region. The availability and control of water were thus not merely practical concerns but also factors that influenced the political and economic stability of the states.

The desert, while often seen as a boundary marker, also played a more nuanced role in shaping the southern limits of the central Maghreb states. The desert represented both a physical and environmental barrier, halting the expansion of these states to the south. Unlike the northern regions, which benefitted from moderate climates conducive to large populations and agricultural production, the southern desert was sparsely populated and resource-poor. This environmental reality constrained the central Maghreb states to the north, where they could take advantage of more favorable climatic conditions. The harsh desert climate not only limited expansion but also influenced the social and economic development of the region, with much of the population concentrated in areas with more temperate weather and reliable water sources.

The borders of the central Maghreb during this period were thus shaped by a combination of military, geographical, and environmental factors. The mountains, plains, water sources, and deserts each played a critical role in the establishment, maintenance, and fluctuation of these borders. The geographic diversity of the region, combined with the political complexities of tribal alliances and dynastic rule, resulted in a dynamic and often unstable political landscape. Furthermore, the influence of climate, particularly the distinction between the temperate north and the arid south,

further reinforced the limitations of state expansion and the concentration of political power in specific geographical areas.

Overall, the central Maghreb's borders from the 8th to the 10th centuries reflect the deep interconnections between the region's geography and its political history. The influence of natural features such as mountains and rivers, combined with the strategic importance of water and agricultural resources, shaped the rise and fall of states in the region. These historical insights not only enhance our understanding of the central Maghreb during this period but also offer broader lessons about the role of geography in shaping political entities throughout history.

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