

“Knowledge in the Service of the Cause”: Education and the Sahrawi Struggle for Self-Determination

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Abstract

This article examines the education strategy of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), the state-in-exile with partial sovereignty on “borrowed territory” in Algeria. The article, which opens with a historical glance at the conflict, argues that SADR’s education program not only succeeded in fostering self-reliance by developing skilled human resources, but was forward looking, using education as a vehicle to instill “new traditions of citizenship” and a new imagined national community, in preparation for future repatriation. In managing refugee camps as provinces of a state, the boundaries between the “refugee” as status and the “citizen” as a political identity were blurred. However, the stalled decolonization process and prolonged exile produced new challenges and consequences. Rather than using the skilled human resources in an independent state of Western Sahara, the state-in-limbo forced SADR and the refugees to adapt to a deadlocked conflict, but not necessarily with negative outcomes to the national project.

Résumé

Cet article examine la stratégie pour l’éducation de la République arabe sahraouie démocratique (RASD), l’État en exil ayant une souveraineté partielle sur du « territoire emprunté » à l’Algérie. L’article, qui débute par un survol historique du conflit, avance que le programme d’éducation de la RASD non seulement a réussi à favoriser l’autonomie en assurant la formation d’une main-d’œuvre qualifiée, mais a aussi, grâce à une vision orientée vers l’avenir, utilisé l’éducation pour instaurer de « nouvelles traditions de citoyenneté » et la notion d’une communauté nationale renouvelée, en vue d’un futur rapatriement. Par sa gestion de camps de réfugiés comme des provinces d’un État, les

limites entre le statut de « réfugié » et l’identité politique du « citoyen » ont été estompées. Toutefois, le processus de décolonisation arrêté et l’exil prolongé ont suscité de nouveaux défis et diverses conséquences. Plutôt que d’utiliser les ressources humaines qualifiées dans un État indépendant du Sahara occidental, l’entre-deux a forcé la RASD et les réfugiés à s’adapter en raison d’un conflit arrivé à une impasse, mais qui n’a pas nécessairement eu des répercussions négatives sur le projet national.

The prolonged and unresolved conflict in Western Sahara from 1975 to 1991 left thousands of Sahrawi refugees in a barren desert, with little resources and few supporters in the region. Remarkably, however, this did not hinder them from establishing the institutions of a nation-state-in-exile, which they called the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). Education has played a critical role in building the new polity and society, which is the main focus of this article.

The first and second sections provide a brief historical sketch, while the third and fourth deal specifically with education, its history, and its key role in building human resources, new “traditions of citizenship,”¹ and national identity. The last two sections address the changing environment that followed the ceasefire in 1991, including the Intifada (uprising) in the Moroccan-occupied territories, and the effects these had on SADR and the educated generations. This article argues that SADR’s education strategy succeeded in producing skilled professionals and in infusing education with a nationalist purpose: educated refugees could better serve the causes of liberation and nation building. However, there were unavoidable impediments, not least the dire conditions of exile, which stymied the development of educational institutions in the camps beyond the elementary levels, forcing SADR to outsource education. More crucially,

the education strategy did not take into account the possibility of a protracted exile and political stalemate. Thus, new generations of educated youth returned to the camps unable to fight at the battle front, or to use their skills as citizens engaged in building an independent Western Sahara. Instead, for many refugees, education became a means to improve their socio-economic status and to obtain paid employment outside the camps. However, these changes did not threaten the national project, or indicate that refugees abandoned their aspirations for liberation and return.

Most of the information in this article is based on field research in the Sahrawi camps and Spain beginning in 2003. During my visits, which occurred during holidays and a sabbatical leave in 2007, I stayed for different periods of time with families in all the camps, as well as in Rabouni. The methodology included participant-observation, life-histories, interviews, archival research, and a visit to the liberated areas of Western Sahara.

Historical Background

Western Sahara, the last African colony, is listed by the United Nations as a Non-Self-Governing Territory.² It lies in the northwest corner of the African continent and is bordered by Morocco, Algeria, and Mauritania. Its inhabitants speak a dialect of Arabic known as Hassaniyya and, until the middle of the twentieth century, they relied mainly on pastoral-nomadism, seasonal cultivation, trade, and some fishing. Day-to-day activities revolved around the *freeg*, or Bedouin camp, a small socio-economic unit that provided for the basic needs of its members: shelter, food, education, health (traditional medicine).³ Boundaries and political identities were redrawn when the Territory became "Spanish Sahara" at the Berlin Conference in 1884–85. It remained a Spanish colony until February 1976.

Hodges traces the genesis of contemporary Sahrawi national consciousness to the latter half of the twentieth century. Building on a long history of struggle against colonial incursions, and inspired by the national liberation movements that swept the colonial world, a number of Sahrawi revolutionaries met clandestinely on the 10 May 1973 and held their first Congress to establish the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el Hamra and Rio de Oro (known as the Polisario Front).⁴ The Front rapidly harnessed large-scale support among the indigenous population around its strategic objective of national liberation and independence. The Polisario aimed to create a *new* polity and not recreate a pre-colonial society; thus it rejected all forms of kinship loyalty and caste status, and it called for the fair distribution of resources and a commitment to women's emancipation.⁵

In 1974, Spain, still ruled by the ailing dictator Francisco Franco, signaled that its withdrawal from Spanish Sahara was imminent and agreed to the principle of self-determination as the United Nations had been demanding. The following year, a UN Mission of Inquiry visited the Territory between 12 and 19 May, and reported back to the UN that the indigenous population overwhelmingly supported the Polisario and called for independence. The Mission "found almost no Saharawis [sic] who favored joining Morocco."⁶ Thus, the Sahrawis thought they were on the verge of celebrating their freedom and would soon be voting on their political future. However, both Morocco and Mauritania made claims of historic pre-colonial sovereignty over the Territory and, through the United Nations, requested that the International Court of Justice (ICJ) provide an Advisory Opinion on the matter. On 16 October 1975, the ICJ unequivocally concluded it had "not found legal ties of such a nature as might affect the application of General Assembly Resolution 1514 (XV) in the decolonization of Western Sahara and, in particular, of the principle of self-determination through the free and genuine expression of the will of the peoples of the Territory."⁷

Defiantly, King Hassan II of Morocco dismissed the ICJ's Advisory Opinion and provoked a crisis when, on 6 November 1975, he rallied some 350,000 Moroccan volunteers for a "Green March" to converge on the Territory. Thousands of unarmed Moroccan civilians carrying Korans and banners, choreographed for dramatic effect, gathered in Tarfaya, a southwest Moroccan border town.⁸ The Green March, however, was a smokescreen; a week earlier on 31 October, units from the Moroccan Royal Armed Forces had quietly moved into the Territory from the northeast to occupy posts evacuated by the Spanish troops.⁹

According to Mundy, the crisis in October and November of that year meant that Madrid abandoned Western (Spanish) Sahara without holding the referendum¹⁰ and without resisting the military invasion. Instead, on 14 November 1975 Spain surreptitiously negotiated the Madrid Accords, which partitioned administrative control of the Territory between Morocco and Mauritania.¹¹ The Accords were not recognized by the United Nations as granting either Morocco or Mauritania sovereignty rights over Western Sahara.¹² On 27 February 1976, a day after Spanish withdrawal, a Provisional Sahrawi National Council formed by the Polisario declared the birth of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) in Bir Lehlu, a small town in an area reclaimed by the Sahrawi Popular Liberation Army (SPLA) during the war.¹³

The Moroccan and Mauritanian invasion led to an armed conflict with the Polisario, which lasted for sixteen years, until 1991. By the end of the war, Morocco occupied most

of Western Sahara, including the area rich in phosphate, minerals, and potential deposits of oil and gas; the major towns; and the vibrant fishing industry of the Atlantic coast. Mauritania, the weaker of the two occupying countries, renounced its claims in Western Sahara in 1979, but Morocco extended its control to the areas previously occupied by Mauritania. The Polisario fighters were able to keep about a fifth of the Territory.

In 1988 Morocco formally signed the Settlement Plan brokered by the United Nations and the Organization of African Unity (African Union). Thus, a ceasefire came into effect in 1991 and a UN force, the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (known as MINURSO, the acronym formed from its name in French), was established to oversee the repatriation of Sahrawi refugees who were to vote in a referendum on their political future.¹⁴ The referendum was scheduled for 1992, only to be postponed several times, (including 1992, 1996, 1998 and 2000) and, today, Morocco adamantly refuses to recognize any referendum that includes the option of independence, still claiming Western Sahara falls under its sovereignty.¹⁵ The Western Sahara conflict glaringly attests to the subjection of international law to the will of powerful states, even though as Smith observed the right of self-determination for colonized peoples, a legal norm binding on all states to support, is now “something *sui generis*, with Palestine and Western Sahara being the last, and egregiously stalled, examples.”¹⁶

The interests of powerful states illuminate the underlying causes of the unresolved conflict.¹⁷ Countries like Spain and France have thriving economic transactions in Morocco, not to mention the co-operation in the domains of migration and security. Importantly, Morocco is one of the oldest and staunchest allies of the US in the region, and more so today in its “war against terror.”

In recent years, the conflict in Western Sahara, which the UN recognized as a colonized territory, and its inhabitants as deserving self-determination, has been recast as a conflict in which both parties are presumed to have equally legitimate negotiable claims.¹⁸ For example, Christopher Ross, the current UN envoy to Western Sahara, has been espousing “negotiations without preconditions.” This strategy has left on the negotiating table two irreconcilable stances: Morocco’s sovereignty claims and the Polisario’s position that the right to self-determination, including the option of independence, is a non-negotiable principle. The conflict thus remains deadlocked.

Building the Institutions of a Nation-State in Refugee Camps

When the war broke out, Sahrawis initially sought safety within Western Sahara in makeshift camps, but these were

vulnerable to military attacks. In Umm Dreiga, for example, the Moroccan Royal Air Force hurled napalm from the skies on the civilians gathered there for safety, causing hundreds of deaths and mutilations by burning white phosphorous.¹⁹ Sahrawis were thus compelled to cross the border into Algeria. The destination was the area around Tindouf, a small Algerian town that was a safe haven for refugees and guerrilla fighters.

The number of Sahrawi refugees by the end of 1975 is estimated to have been between 40,000 and 70,000.²⁰ By the end of the war approximately 40 per cent of the population of Western Sahara had become refugees. Today, the Sahrawi refugees in the camps are estimated at close to 170,000 people; the rest of the population is distributed in the areas of Western Sahara under Moroccan occupation, Mauritania, the Canary Islands, Morocco (mostly in Tarfaya in the south of Morocco), and European countries, mainly Spain. SPLA soldiers are stationed in the liberated area of Western Sahara, along with a few Bedouin families and people in transit.²¹

Four major camps emerged near Tindouf, and a smaller fifth camp developed around a skills-training centre for women. Four of the camps are quite close to Tindouf, the distance ranging from 20 to 35 kilometres. Al-Dakhla camp is the furthest, around 140 kilometres southwest of Rabouni, the site for SADR’s political and administrative operations, itself about 30 kilometres southeast of Tindouf. However, the camps are not a fertile sanctuary, but are located in a stretch of unforgiving arid desert known as Lehmada, where temperatures hover around 50 degrees Celsius in the summer, and it becomes bitterly cold during winter nights. Howling winds and sandstorms arrive unpredictably, whipping at tents and mud-brick shelters, causing material damage and health problems. As if this were not enough, in some years, heavy torrential rains turn the camps into disaster areas, dissolving the flimsy mud-brick structures and knocking down the tent poles.

International humanitarian aid on a large scale did not begin until 1977 and refugees struggled to survive the harsh environment with scant resources.²² Since most men were fighting with the SPLA, women carried the burden of coping with domestic tasks as well as administering programs in the camps. With no electricity and without sufficient food, medicine, or water, diseases and malnourishment were widespread.²³

Despite the harsh environment and scant resources, SADR wasted no time building for the future in Western Sahara, envisioned as a polity radically distinct from the tribal society and ideology of the past. In these camps, the national leadership fostered self-management and modern conceptions of the nation-state, including equal citizenship.²⁴

National belonging was promoted, while tribal allegiances were seen as fetters to progress and development.

A constitution was drafted as early as 1976, and it declared that SADR's temporary base was in the refugee camps situated in Algerian territory ceded to it by the Algerian state and in the liberated areas of Western Sahara. SADR established ministries, government departments, security and police, and an army, the SPLA. It named the camps and the administrative subdivisions within them after towns and areas in Western Sahara. For example, al-Ayoun, the capital of Western Sahara, is further divided into al-Dshayra, al-Doura, al-Hagouniyyeh, Guelta, Bucraa, and Amgala. Similar divisions apply to the camps of Smara, a historical city in Western Sahara; Dakhla, a seaport; and Auserd, an interior town.

Mirroring the administrative units of sovereign nation-states,²⁵ the camps are treated as provinces or *wilayaat* (*wilaya* in the singular), each with its own governor or *wali*. These are subdivided into six or seven districts or *dawa'er* (*da'ira*, singular) and *ahyia'* (*haya*, singular), that is, neighbourhoods or municipalities. A museum housing artefacts attesting to a nomadic history and traditions crowns SADR's public display as a nation-state.

Each *wilaya* has an informal market and a number of public buildings, including a hospital, local health clinics, six or seven elementary schools, and preschool facilities. During the war, almost every refugee was active in one committee or another at local, regional, and national levels. Local committees oversee matters relating to education, health, food (distribution), justice, and production/artisan projects. At the national level, there are two boarding secondary schools named 12 October and 9 June, while 27 February²⁶ is the name of a women's skills-training centre (and of the camp that developed near it). The centre, initially restricted to married women, offered housing and daycare facilities to enable women to live with their families while studying. In time, many families settled nearby, forming the nucleus of what became the 27 February camp. There are also national unions for women, workers, and youth. The administrative terms such as *wilaya* (instead of camp) are used in everyday conversations and in official statements and documents. Describing the early years in the *wilayaat*, Aminatu, a woman in her mid-fifties, recalled:

There were campaigns of all kinds. I belonged to the health committee ... Our job was to check the standards of cleanliness in the tents ... Then there was the Education committee. Women would go around the tents, to make sure that the children were doing their homework ... Every woman was organized in a committee.²⁷

SADR does not have a formal economy, or the finances to dispense salaries or wages; those who staff the various positions are usually Sahrawi volunteers. Although the growth of informal markets and the flow of remittances into the camps over the past two decades has helped sustain the livelihoods of many refugee households, Algerian support and international aid remain critical and in fact lacking in the areas of nutrition, health, and education.

In addition to Algeria, aid now comes from various sources, including the European Commission Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection (ECHO), the World Food Programme (WFP), and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Education has been subsidized and/or scholarships offered by Algeria, Cuba, Syria, Libya (in the case of Libya, the number of students and scholarships has dwindled since the mid-1980s), and more recently Venezuela. In addition, some Sahrawi students receive scholarships to support their education from non-profit organizations, especially at the university level. Such odd scholarships were granted by organizations in Spain, Italy, Germany, Russia, Poland, Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Hungary, and France.²⁸

However, the relationship between Sahrawi refugees and international humanitarian organizations is distinguished from classical models, where refugees are treated as powerless “beneficiaries.” In the Sahrawi case, SADR acts as a buffer zone or checkpoint: it requires all representatives of such organizations to “check in” with the relevant Ministry or Department and obtain formal approval for projects and aid designated for Sahrawi refugees. In addition, food or other aid items are distributed by local Sahrawi refugee committees according to Sahrawi guidelines. Self-management is also buttressed by Algeria, which refrains from intervening within SADR's areas of jurisdiction. SADR issues its own passports, which are politically significant, although practically useless beyond Algeria and a few other countries.

Although the conditions of dispersal resulted in diverse contexts and experiences, for example, between the refugees in camps and those under Moroccan occupation, the Polisario/SADR is a central unifying political framework, notwithstanding defectors and those who support Morocco's autonomy plan. For example, in November 2003, *al-Sahra' al Hurra* (The Free Sahara) the main Sahrawi monthly publication, included many letters of solidarity and support: from “political prisoners in Moroccan prisons,” from “Sahrawi women in the occupied towns of Western Sahara,” from the “Sahrawi youth and students in the occupied territories,” and from “male and female activists in the occupied territories and south of Morocco,” saluting the Polisario's eleventh General Popular Congress held

in Tifariti in the liberated zone of Western Sahara, attesting to the influence of SADR beyond the camps.²⁹

The *wilayaat* are not bounded or isolated; in addition to the vibrant Tindouf airport which brings visitors, relatives, and officials, refugees travel back and forth within and outside the *wilayaat* to the liberated strip of Western Sahara,³⁰ Mauritania, Canary Islands, Spain, and other countries, enabling connections and relationships beyond the boundaries of camps.

Building an Educational System in the Desert Camps

“University Students: Knowledge in the Service of the Cause,”³¹ the title of a two-page article in *al-Sahra’ al-Hurra*, summarizes SADR’s perspective on education. Indeed, education occupies a substantial part of *Barnamej al Amal al Watani* (the Program of National Action), the implementation of which initiated fundamental changes, so that many functions in areas such as education, health, and shelter, previously the responsibility of the *freeg*, were passed on to SADR.

SADR, perceiving education as necessary to build the modern society, declared education mandatory for males and females at the elementary, preparatory, and secondary levels.³² The short- and long-term objectives are aimed at developing human resources to encourage self-reliance in the present and future, to foster national belonging, and to instill the idea of citizenship as the bases of the new polity. With similar expressions to those I had heard in Palestinian refugee camps,³³ education was viewed as the means to redeem families from poverty and the nation from occupation. The former has gained more value since the ceasefire in the early nineties, while the latter took precedence during the war (1975–1991).

Historically, education was achieved through an oral tradition transmitted through stories, poetry, and everyday conversations about history, religion, and cultural values. Children also could acquire what Sahrawis call a “traditional education,” usually from an elderly man in the *freeg* who had mastered the Arabic language (reading, grammar, poetry) and the Koran.³⁴

Under Spanish colonialism, few Sahrawis enrolled in schools,³⁵ which were built mostly to cater to Spanish settlers, whose number increased in the 1960s when the discovery of phosphate led to a booming industry. As late as 1975 over 95 per cent of the population was illiterate. The language of instruction in the colonial schools was Spanish, and the curriculum was void of anything relating to Sahrawi society, so some Sahrawis attended *al-katateeb* (informal circles of learning) at mosques where they could acquire basic knowledge in their language and religion.

In 1975, the educational and literacy levels were dismal: there were only two teachers who had acquired their education in Spain, about a dozen trained in the colony for three months, one doctor, two male nurses, and thirty-five university undergraduates.³⁶ Thus, SADR had few options. In the first stage, roughly between 1976 and 1979, the priority was to launch adult literacy campaigns to teach Arabic, the mother tongue of Sahrawis (not taught in the colonial schools) and to train Sahrawi teachers. This was made possible by Algeria, which offered to provide short teacher-training courses in 1976. SADR also sent children to countries willing to subsidize their education, which in the first few years included education at the elementary levels. Algeria became the primary sponsor, but there were others, including Libya, Syria, and Cuba, and a smaller number of students went elsewhere. Parents were at first reluctant to part with their children; however, education free of costs, assurances of protection and guidance by SADR, and the framing of education as necessary for the national struggle eventually convinced them that the sacrifice of separation would reap future benefits. Al-Salka, a mother of five living in al-Ayoun (*wilaya*), remembered:

I was very young when they sent us to Libya, maybe I was in grade 2 ... I cried a lot ... With time, things got easier and I got used to it ... We used to come back in the summer, once a year. But education was more important for us.³⁷

In the second stage, between 1976 and 1986, a relatively effective education system took shape, and a national committee was mandated to develop a Sahrawi curriculum. SADR’s Ministry of Education declared Arabic as the official language, with Spanish as the second, understandably so, considering the century-long Spanish rule in Western Sahara. Moreover, declaring Spanish as a second language advanced SADR’s view that Western Sahara had a *distinctive history*, different from that of either Morocco or Mauritania, where French colonialism had left its traces on the language.

As trained teachers began to return to the camps, the three national schools were built, namely, the two secondary schools (9 June and 12 October) and the women’s training centre. The reference to “national” indicates that these educational institutions are accessible to the national body, or to students from all the *wilayaat*, and not restricted to a particular camp or *wilaya*. During this period, the number of elementary schools, preschool facilities, and nurseries in the *wilayaat* and *dawa’er* increased.

However, two secondary schools have limited capacity; therefore, SADR took the decision to send the vast majority of students to complete their secondary and/or tertiary

education in other countries, a practice that continues to this day. In the meantime, adult literacy campaigns were developed and became the responsibility of students who completed the preparatory and secondary levels and returned to the *wilayaat* for their summer holidays. The reasons behind involving the youth in the literacy programs were detailed in the Program of National Action, and expressed SADR’s nationalist ideology; these included fostering self-reliance, granting the youth a role in raising consciousness in society, and promoting national identity. Thus, by the middle of the 1980s, almost all Sahrawi children living within SADR’s sovereign territory were attending pre-school or elementary schools in their *wilayaat* and *dawa’er*.

By the third stage, roughly starting in the mid 1980s, graduates began to return to the camps to volunteer their knowledge and skills in the various political and social institutions. They contributed significantly to the principle of self-reliance espoused by the Polisario, replacing many international practitioners and professionals. Until the ceasefire came into effect in 1991, some graduates joined the SPLA and fought some of the last battles in the war with Morocco. However, as we shall see later, the ceasefire presented challenges for both SADR and the graduates.

In hindsight, it is evident that SADR and the refugees made qualitative leaps in the field of education. However, these achievements are relative and a number of problems persist, most of them resulting from the dire conditions in the camps and the protracted exile. In the camps, the obvious obstacles to education are related to the climate, poverty, and lack of teaching resources. The desert heat, sand, and strong winds, not to mention the absence of electricity, make it difficult to teach or to learn. There are always shortages of books, which students often have to share, as they do desks in crowded classrooms. Schools lack basic facilities, such as libraries, computers, labs, and playgrounds.

Other problems pertain to the outsourcing of education, that is, when students in grade six or seven have to leave the camps to study elsewhere, where they often are confronted with new curricula, academic standards, and language of instruction. For example, in Algeria, the academic standards are higher, and French is the second language taught in schools, so many Sahrawi students fail the language subject and anything else taught in French. Describing some of the problems, Bueta, a teacher for some years in SADR’s elementary schools, observed:

Most (teachers) do not have the necessary skills ... and are themselves graduates maybe of only grade nine ... also ... here students begin studying Spanish from grade three to six, then they are sent to Algeria, where the program is mainly French ... For example,

I studied ... in Libya where ... they taught us some English. Then we were sent to Algeria, there it was French, which we did not know.³⁸

However, in Arab countries, students find it easier to adapt than in Cuba, as they share language and religion (Islam) with the host society. In Cuba, where thousands of Sahrawis have been educated, the problems are different and are mainly about adapting to a different cultural environment and being unable to afford travel costs to return to the camps during summer holidays. Therefore, students have to adjust when they first arrive in Cuba, and upon their return to the camps following a long absence.³⁹ The situation for Sahrawi students, who were poor to begin with, was exacerbated when the Soviet Union collapsed, resulting in austerity measures and economic hardships for Sahrawis and Cubans in general.

Despite the difficulties, SADR’s successes in the area of education are exceptional: the illiteracy rate prior to 1975 was over 95 per cent, whereas today over 95 per cent are literate, advancing the cause of self-reliance. There are thousands of Sahrawi graduates today with diverse skills and professions, including doctors, nurses, engineers, teachers, social scientists, geologists, etc. In addition, SADR’s education program played a fundamental role in consolidating national belonging and the new “traditions of citizenship.”

Education, Citizenship, and National Belonging

SADR’s Program of National Action expressed its ideology and social philosophy for the new imagined community. This is how Abdati, a Sahrawi in his late forties, explained the changes:

The new basis of association was belonging to Western Sahara ... The *freeg* acquired a political and national definition encouraged by the efforts of the Polisario to raise a new national consciousness and ways of relating to society.⁴⁰

Administrative divisions, institutions and institutional laws and regulations, registration procedures and passports, the demarcation of public spaces, national celebrations and commemorations, etc. rendered concrete an abstract concept of citizenship in daily life. In time, Sahrawi refugees could imagine what their rights and responsibilities would be like upon repatriation, and they yearned for an independent nation-state or *dawlah mustaqellah*. The everyday interactions among Sahrawis in the *wilayaat* and between the citizens and the state, which Sharma and Gupta describe as the mundane everyday activities and routines,⁴¹ generated what Khatri Addu, the governor of Smara, dubbed “new traditions of citizenship,” which are:

Something concrete practiced in the field; citizenship is in the way a person's life is organized, so they (Sahrawi refugees) deal with activities and concerns within the framework of well-known and specific administrative ways. For example, education: a child goes to school at a certain age ... there are rules, directives and systems ... We are citizens who are born in Algerian territory, but we are independent of the Algerian administrative institutions. We have our own institutions, we are a distinctive state.⁴²

In the sphere of education, the modernist vision is reflected in school textbooks, discipline, daily schedules, and standards for failure or success, representing a radical departure from the *katateeb* and the oral tradition. Moreover, the Sahrawi Ministry of Education introduced a number of textbooks, which represent the embryo of the written national history and new ways of remembering and forgetting. As Edward Said rightly observed, "what one remembers of the past and how one remembers it ... determines how one sees the future."⁴³ The school textbooks encourage loyalty to the nation; praise the revolution, its martyrs, and heroes; and suppress the memory of tribes and especially old tribal feuds. One such text assigned to grade six exposes students to their history as one of anti-colonial struggle. The book concludes with lessons learned, such as the lesson that Sahrawis must rely on themselves, and quotes a Koranic verse that says, "God helps those who help themselves."⁴⁴ The grade six history book interestingly uses two non-Sahrawi sources and importantly does not refer to tribes.

The processes entrenching Sahrawi citizenship have blurred the boundaries between the "refugee" and the "citizen." More specifically, the Sahrawi practices of citizenship constantly dislodge the "refugee" status, especially because dependency on humanitarian aid is contingent on SADR's mediation. It is perhaps more appropriate to talk of the citizen-refugees and not the refugee-citizens. Deferring the category "refugee" signals the intentional precedence of citizenship and political identity by Sahrawis over the "refugee" in their lives. Thus, despite their marginality, in their "zones of unpredictability"—to adapt the phrase from Tsing's work—Sahrawis rearticulate, enliven, and rearrange the social, legal, and political categories that peripheralize their existence.⁴⁵ The consequences of implementing the Sahrawi national project at the very least have rendered it difficult to conceptualize the citizen and the refugee as binary opposites.

Gramsci's notion that the state rules not only by coercion, but also by harnessing consent in civil society, including educational institutions,⁴⁶ applies in the Sahrawi case, but with some qualifications. First and foremost, SADR does not have the institutional power of sovereign states, but has an

ambiguous status: it is a state-in-the-making awaiting transportation to national territory, and remains trapped in the national liberation stage. Thus, SADR's existence, aims, and practices, as reflected in its education strategy, programs, and curriculum, all imbued with the ideals of national liberation and sacrifice for the collective cause, challenge or are "counter-hegemonic" to Moroccan domination and its rejection of the Sahrawi right to self-determination.

Secondly, education at higher levels is outsourced and SADR does not control the curriculum in other countries. Nonetheless, students abroad do not fall completely outside its purview. SADR sends adult "guides" or *mushrifeen* to accompany each group of students for the duration of their studies (this does not apply to students enrolled in universities). The *mushrifeen* stand for parent, academic coach, and political activist, ensuring students respect the laws and regulations of the host state and those of SADR. They meet with students regularly, and with varying degrees of success teach them the Hassaniyya dialect, Islam, and the history of the Sahrawi struggle, including SADR's Program of National Action. Al-Mamoun, in his mid-thirties, explained the role of the *mushrifeen* when he was in school in Libya:

We as Sahrawi had our own local committees and learning circles where we studied ... the Program of National Action, we learned these principles ... such as sacrifice, revolutionary work, our history, traditions ... etc. Thus, we were always attached to our identity.⁴⁷

Notwithstanding what the *mushrifeen* and students actually did or how they behaved, the idea that they should act properly because they are representatives of the whole (the nation) was deeply engrained.⁴⁸

Upon graduation most students return to the camps. During the war period, their paramount purpose was to volunteer in SADR's programs or to join the fighters at the front. They did not regard education as a private investment, rather, as a tool to serve the collective endeavour. In the years following the ceasefire, however, the balance tilted the other way, whereby individuals sought education as an asset or cultural capital to facilitate upward social mobility. Exemplifying the spirit that dominated during the war period, Aminatu, a Sahrawi woman I met in 2005 in Madrid, explained:

While in Russia [where she studied], I did not speak the Hassaniyya dialect ... When I returned to the camps [in the late 1980s] it was ... shocking having lived some eleven years away ... However, my difficulty had more to do with the misery that I saw around me, the suffering of my family and the Sahrawi refugees.

This reinforced my political beliefs and my Sahrawi identity ... I re-learned Hassaniyya.⁴⁹

Upon first returning, peers maintain their close friendships, but they quickly discover they are being "re-socialized" into "Sahrawi ways," a process involving "shedding" what are viewed as acquired customs and mannerisms. Returnees are expected to relearn Hassaniyya, to marry a Sahrawi, to wear the *melhafa* (a cloth wrapped around the body) if female, to respect elders, and a host of other customs considered specifically Sahrawi. The "Cubanos"—as those who study in Cuba are sometimes called—are considered the most in need of such resocialization.⁵⁰ But the open spatial arrangements in the camps where people constantly "drop in" to visit different Khaimas (tents/families) and dynamic daily interactions are conducive to attune returnees to the rhythm and fabric of camp life, and at least help them to publicly avoid transgressing sensibilities. Over time, the networks of peers entwine with others, a process which constantly injects new ideas and ways of being, enriching cultural reproduction and changing debates as to what constitutes "Sahrawi culture."

However, neither SADR nor the graduates had expected their exile to turn into a lethargic hiatus and prolonged state of exile. During one of my early visits, I met a Sahrawi man in his late thirties who had graduated as a captain for merchant vessels. I found this a bit odd when all around us was a sea of sand rather than water. When I inquired into his choice, he noted that he had mistakenly assumed Sahrawis would be returning soon and that he had hoped to use his skills in the Atlantic Ocean. But he never voted, returned, or sailed.

Education and the "State in/of Limbo" in an Era of Infitah and Intifada

Dr. Sid is a successful Sahrawi dentist based in Madrid. He was about seven years old when he fled the war with his family to Algeria. He completed elementary and preparatory levels in Libya and was about to start secondary education when the Libyan government changed its policy, forcing him to complete his education in Algeria. In 1986, he travelled to the Soviet Union, where he acquired a university degree in dentistry. He returned to the camps in 1992 and volunteered in SADR's Public Health department for four years, still hoping that the referendum would take place. When it didn't he left the camps. When asked why he left, he explained:

I did not leave the camps in any final way. In the camps, I still have my mother, my sisters, relatives, etc., they live in 27 February. In any case, I owe my education and all what I have now to the

camps and the Sahrawi state ... I hope Western Sahara will get its independence ... but the only solution now is to go back to war. The negotiations have failed.⁵¹

In contrast, Ahmad, in his mid-thirties, did not complete his education in order to join the SPLA during the war. Following the ceasefire he returned from the frontlines to the camps, and when I interviewed him, it was clear he regretted not completing his education, as he noted:

Sometimes I do (regret it), especially now in a situation of "neither war, nor peace", and at a time when I need to make a living, sometimes I regret not completing my education.⁵²

Dr. Sid's trajectory and Ahmad's reflections on his past capture the changes and views that have unfolded since the ceasefire. As was the case with Palestinian refugees, Sahrawi who fled the war did not initially imagine that their temporary situation would in time acquire features of a permanent exile. The referendum became like a desert mirage, looming in the distance but never reached. As their hopes to return swung high and low, and the months turned into years and decades, new generations with different experiences and educational levels were born and raised in the camps. Al-Salek, a Sahrawi who had participated in the war, described the generational differences as follows:

The older 'authentic' generation *al-jeel al-aseel* faced ... discrimination under Spanish rule ... *jeel al-thawra*, the second generation of the revolution ... carried out the armed struggle ... we felt what is the use of education without a Homeland? As for the third generation, they also suffer, mainly from waiting and waiting—they are frustrated. But there is a factor that all generations agree upon ... We all are ready to leave everything for our homeland.⁵³

The strategic objective to utilize the skilled human resources in an independent Western Sahara remained unfulfilled. Yet, the number of educated graduates and returnees continued to increase, many without an avenue for applying what they had learned and without gainful employment. They complained that their lives were suspended and as many expressed it, wasted "drinking tea" or *ntayyu*. The political impasse exacerbated the situation and frustration led to growing criticism against SADR's policy to continue the "peaceful" diplomatic track to resolve the conflict. The mounting tensions placed SADR in an unenviable position: how to deal with the social and economic needs of a growing educated population with little resources, and maintain collective national mobilization in the context of a ceasefire and an uncertain political future.⁵⁴

Both refugees and SADR had to adapt to a changing world and the political deadlock. Many graduates, of whom there was now a surplus, turned their attention to their livelihood needs and aspired for upward social mobility. A number of them put away their degrees and set up a profitable venture, such as a shop in the informal market. For others the option was to leave the camps to seek paid employment in Spain or elsewhere. These changes were also prompted by the return of many men from the battlefield to the *wilayaat*, which in many cases provoked gender tensions. Women who were willing to carry responsibilities within the domestic and public spheres, usually quietly, single-handedly, and with little resources, when their men were fighting were not willing to put up with men hanging around drinking tea during the ceasefire.⁵⁵

Following the ceasefire, small shops selling food, clothes, household items, and mechanics and repair shops sprouted rapidly in camps. The growth was exponential, hand-in-hand with the expansion of transnational political, social, and economic networks. Merchandise from Algeria, Mauritania, and countries like China and Korea filled the markets.⁵⁶ Television sets, mobile phones, second-hand vehicles, and the use of the Internet and video cameras became harbingers of what older generations of Sahrawis labelled with a touch of irony as the symbols of *al-infatih* or *perestroika*, referring to the invasion of commodities, new consumption habits, and the slow departure from revolutionary principles.

SADR was compelled to adapt. Bending with the changes, it relaxed its strict centralized policies and operations, handing back to families some of the decision-making powers relating to education, marriage, and health, which it had monopolized during the war years. For example, SADR discontinued the imposition of a standard amount of dowry/bride price paid to the newlyweds,⁵⁷ and turned a blind eye in cases when students dropped out of school. Explaining the changes, Ibrahim, a Sahrawi official working in Rabouni, observed:

In my view this is a natural development of society. First ... the Polisario played a ... role in convincing people that education is important ... In the next stage, the families insisted that their children acquire education. Secondly, in the beginning most people needed economic assistance ... When people became a bit more economically independent, they felt that maybe they should be able to make more independent decisions.⁵⁸

The global shifts and political context reconfigured the relationship between the public and private domains, and SADR's areas of authority and intervention. However, these changes did not necessarily threaten SADR's national

project; the informal economic sector, for example, helped alleviate some of its responsibility to secure livelihood needs. However, the transformations also meant an increase in socio-economic inequalities in the camps, away from the revolutionary ideals of "equal distribution." Mundy proposes that these changes did not imperil the national project, but "normalized society": markets, he opines, produce citizens no less than popular committees.⁵⁹ Similarly, my research in Palestinian refugee camps showed that in the context of national liberation, upward socio-economic mobility and attention to livelihood needs do not necessarily lead to political compromise.

SADR also used technological developments helped by its educated generations, to publicize its political program and garner support. In the summer of 2009 during my visit, SADR inaugurated the first Sahrawi television broadcasting service. It also developed its institutions and relationships with a number of countries, obtaining recognition from Kenya, for example, and during my visit it hosted a Venezuelan delegation, an indication that bilateral relations were being developed.

In May 2005 an Intifada or uprising erupted in the Moroccan-occupied territories, invigorating nationalist sentiments and reinforcing links between the Sahrawi population within and outside Western Sahara. This has some parallels with the Palestinian case, where the Palestinian Intifada in 1989 shifted the focus of the struggle to the occupied territories. Similarly, the Sahrawi Intifada turned attention to the Moroccan-occupied territories. Significantly, the May demonstrations in the city of al-Ayoun were dubbed the "independence protests," symbolized by raising the SADR flag and by the slogan "*la badeel la badeel, 'an taqreer al maseer*," meaning "no alternative to self-determination." On 8 November 2010 another Sahrawi protest was violently dismantled by the Moroccan security forces in the Gdeim Izik camp consisting of thousands of tents erected by Sahrawis in al-Ayoun.⁶⁰ Instantaneously, Internet links to video recordings of mass demonstrations and photographs of victims of Moroccan repression spread across cyberspace. The violence in the occupied territories provoked the young educated youth in the *wilayaat* to stage what was described as "almost a rebellion" against SADR's strategy of peaceful negotiations, urging their leaders to resume the fighting.⁶¹

Conclusion

In contemporary theories, the refugee has emerged as a metaphor for the post-modern condition, providing models of dispersed senses of personhood, in opposition to the models of fixity and orders of modern society.⁶² However, the historical and political contexts remain critical when

applying theoretical concepts. The case of the Western Sahara refugees is that of incomplete decolonization, wherein SADR is a manifestation of a nationalism with a trajectory in the anti-colonial struggles of the twentieth century. Therefore, SADR’s aim to achieve sovereignty in Western Sahara is not *sui generis* reactionary politics or a conservative agenda, especially in the current global structures and relations of power, in which Morocco sits comfortably on the side of the US, the largest imperial power. In contrast, SADR is an incomplete and vulnerable polity with unstable formations. Thus, we should be cautious in practicing our skills in deconstruction of “identity politics” and the nation-state, lest we play into the hands of powerful actors against the claims of the oppressed.⁶³

Thus there are many analytical challenges and political considerations that bear on this particular case, not simply in writing about it, but also in tracing the processes involved in the contemporary context of shifting social and economic formations, global political alliances, and new forms of struggle expressed in the practices and language of the age.

SADR’s national institutions provide a model which could be showcased not only to its refugee-constituents, but also to the international community. For SADR, the achievements brought about through education show not only that they are deserving of self-determination, but that their educated human resources could run the operations and institutions of an independent Western Sahara. The argument, as Khatri Addu explained when I interviewed him in the *wilaya* of Smara is: “if we could administer a nation-state in the harsh desert environment with very little resources, we can manage even more effectively with resources and in our own territory.”⁶⁴ SADR succeeded in creating an educated population in exile and thus far has adapted to changing global configurations, but the ceasefire has become increasingly fragile. It is difficult to predict the future, but the shifting sands of the Sahara might unexpectedly draw students and graduates back to the battle fronts.⁶⁵

NOTES

1. Khatri Addu, SADR official, interview, May, 2009.
2. “The United Nations and Decolonization,” accessed July 29, 2011, <http://www.un.org/en/decolonization/nonselvgovterritories.shtml>. I use “Western Sahara” and “Territory” interchangeably in this article.
3. Mustafa Al-Kuttab and Muhammad Badi, *Al-Niza’ ala Al-Sahra’ al-ghabiyyah: Bayna Haqq Alquwwa Wa Quwwata Al-Haq* [The Struggle in Western Sahara: Between the Power of Right and the Right of Power] (Damascus: Dar al-Mukhtar, 1998), 17.
4. “Polisario” is an acronym formed from the name in Spanish, Frente Popular para la Liberacion de Saguia el Hamra y Rio de Oro; the name refers to the two regions that constitute Western Sahara.
5. Tony Hodges, *Western Sahara: The Roots of a Desert War* (Westport: Lawrence Hill & Company, 1983), 163–64.
6. *Ibid.*, 201
7. International Court of Justice, “Western Sahara, Advisory Opinion of 16 October 1975,” accessed July 29, 2011, <http://www.icj-cij.org/docket/files/61/6195.pdf>.
8. Hodges notes that the King portrayed the March as a “holy crusade”; see Hodges, *Western Sahara*, 213.
9. Muhammad al Mami al Tamek, SADR, Minister of Information, interview, May 24, 2009.
10. Jacob Mundy, “Neutrality or Complicity?” *Journal of North African Studies* 11, no. 3 (2006): 276.
11. Hodges, *Western Sahara*, 210–28.
12. Yahia H. Zoubir, “The Geopolitics of the Western Sahara Conflict,” in *North Africa, in Transition: State, Society, and Economic Transformation in the 1990s*, ed. William B. Quandt and Yahia H. Zoubir (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999), 196.
13. Pablo San Martin, *Western Sahara: The Refugee Nation* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2010), 112.
14. Michael Bhatia, “Repatriation under a Peace Process: Mandated Return in the Western Sahara,” *International Journal of Refugee Law* 15, no. 4 (2003): 786.
15. On Morocco’s role in obstructing the referendum, see Human Rights Watch, “Keeping it Secret: The United Nations Operations in Western Sahara” (October 1995), accessed February 17, 2011, <http://www.hrw.org/legacy/reports/1995/Wsahara.htm>.
16. Jeffrey J. Smith, “State of Self-Determination: The Claim to Saharawi Statehood” (unpublished manuscript, copy on file with the author), 2.
17. On Spanish-Moroccan relations and interests, see Isaias Barrenada, “Spain and Morocco: Good Partners and Badly Matched Neighbors,” *IPRIS Maghreb Review* 5 (2010): 6–10. On US and European interests and policies in North Africa and their effects on Western Sahara, see Ahmed Aghrout and Yahia H. Zoubir, “Introduction: Europe and North Africa: A Multi-Faceted Relationship,” *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 17, no. 3 (2009): 321–323.
18. See, for example, Anna Theofilopoulou, “Western Sahara: The Failure of ‘Negotiations Without Preconditions,’” *United States Institute of Peace* 22 (April 23, 2010). The report reveals the shift in approach, where the aim has become reconciliation and not compliance with the UN Charter.
19. In all life-histories and interviews I conducted, Umm Dreiga appears as a horrifying experience and turning point in the course of the war.
20. Martin, *Western Sahara*, 109.
21. The UN estimates the total population as over half a million. However, it is difficult to provide accurate statistics,

- which are also politically charged. The issue of statistics is discussed in Stephen Zunes and Jacob Mundy, *Western Sahara War Nationalism and Conflict Irresolution*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2010), 127–28.
22. For details on the early years see also James Firebrace, “Lessons and Prospects,” in *War and Refugees: The Western Sahara Conflict*, ed. Richard Lawless and Laila Monahan (London and New York: Pinter Publishers, 1987), 167–69.
 23. Ann Lippert, “The Sahrawi Refugees: Origins and Organization, 1975–85,” in *War and Refugees: The Western Sahara Conflict*, ed. Richard Lawless and Laila Monahan (London and New York: Pinter Publishers, 1987), 152.
 24. Barbara Harrell-Bond, “The Struggle for the Western Sahara, Part III: The Sahrawi People,” *Africa* 39 (1981): 12.
 25. For more information on the Constitution and government structure, see the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic website, <http://sahrawi-arab-democratic-republic.co.tv/>.
 26. Pablo San Martin discusses the names of schools as reflecting the national “time” and narrative; see Martin, *Western Sahara*, 138.
 27. Aminatu, interview, May 25, 2009.
 28. Ali Mohamed Ahmed, email communication, July 18, 2011.
 29. Sahrawi Ministry of Information, *Al-Sahra’ al-Hurra* (Free Sahara) 389 (November 2003) [author’s translation].
 30. When I visited the area a few years ago, there were a few Bedouin families living there, or people in transit. There was hardly any infrastructure or mined areas. Since then, however, many of SADR’s events, including general congresses and celebrations, have taken place in Tifariti, a small town in the area.
 31. Eldeda Muhammad Mhamedna, “Al-Talaba al-Jami’iyoun: al-Ma’rifa fi Khidmat al-Qadiyyah” [University Students: Knowledge in the Service of the Cause], *Al-Sahra’ al-Hurra* 388 (September 2003): 12–13 [author’s translation].
 32. Martin, *Western Sahara*, 136–45.
 33. For a comparative study see Randa Farah, “Refugee in the Palestinian and Sahrawi National Liberation Movements: A Comparative Perspective,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* (Winter 2008): 76–93.
 34. I obtained this document while in the camps from the Ministry of Education, Rabouni, SADR, May 27, 2009.
 35. Hodges, *Western Sahara*, 145.
 36. Agustin Velloso de Santisteban, “Education and War in the Western Sahara” (unpublished draft, Universidad Nacional de Educacion a Distancia). The author gave me this draft during an interview in Madrid in 2003. Dr. Velloso is a lecturer in Comparative Education at the Spanish Distance Learning University, and focuses on education in Palestine, Western Sahara, and education for refugees.
 37. Al-Salka, interview, February 19, 2005.
 38. Bueta, a former teacher in the Sahrawi camps, interview, February 17, 2005.
 39. Martin, *Western Sahara*, 148.
 40. Abdati, a Sahrawi refugee and Polisario/SADR official, interview, February 18, 2005.
 41. Aradhana Sharma and Akhil Gupta, “Introduction: Rethinking the Theories of the State in an Age of Globalization,” in *The Anthropology of the State: A Reader*, ed. Aradhana Sharma and Akhil Gupta (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 9.
 42. Khatri Addu, SADR official, interview, May, 2009.
 43. Edward Said, “Introduction,” in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, ed. Edward Said (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), xxxv.
 44. SADR, al-Jumhuriyyah al-Arabiyya al-Sahrawiyyah al-Demoqrattiyah, *Al-Tareekh Lisana Al-Saadisa* [History for Grade Six] (Rome: Periscopio Editoria y Comunicazione—CISP/ SUCKS, 1994), 32.
 45. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, “From the Margins,” *Cultural Anthropology* 9, no. 3 (August 1994): 279.
 46. Robert Bocock, *Hegemony* (London and New York: Tavistock Publications, 1986), 33–34.
 47. Al-Ma’moun, interview, February 20, 2005.
 48. Akhil Gupta, “Song of the Non-Aligned World,” in *Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology*, ed. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), 192.
 49. Aminatu, a Sahrawi student, interview, July 2007.
 50. On the socialization of Cubanos or Cubrauis see also Martin, *Western Sahara*, 151.
 51. Dr. Sid, interview, October 26, 2007.
 52. Ahmad, interview, February 20, 2005.
 53. Al-Salek, interview, February 23, 2005.
 54. Randa Farah, “Western Sahara and Palestine: Shared Refugee Experiences,” *Forced Migration Review* 16 (2003): 20–23.
 55. Shakrouda, interview, July 3, 2009.
 56. When I visited the camps in 2009, even older men and women were using mobile phones and watching various channels on their battery-run television sets.
 57. During my last visit in 2009, a number of young Sahrawi men complained that they cannot afford to get married, because now brides-to-be and/or their families expect a substantial bride-price, such as a built house, furniture, money, etc.
 58. Ibrahim, a SADR official, interview, February 2005.
 59. Jacob A. Mundy, “Performing the Nation, Pre-Figuring the State: The Western Sahara Refugees, Thirty Years Later,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 45, no. 2 (2007): 276.
 60. Human Rights Watch, “Western Sahara: Beatings, Abuse by Moroccan Security Forces” (2010), accessed February 17, 2011, <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2010/11/26/western-sahara-beatings-abuse-moroccan-security-forces>.
 61. Personal communication with Sahrawi acquaintances, January 2011.
 62. John L. Comaroff, “Politics of Difference in an Age of Revolution,” in *The Politics of Difference: Ethnic Premises in a World of Power*, ed. Edwin N. Wilmsen and Patrick McAllister (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 162–83.

63. Richard Handler, "Is 'Identity' a Useful Cross-Cultural Concept?," in *Commemorations*, ed. John R. Gillis (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), 27–40; John Sharp, "Ethnogenesis and Ethnic Mobilization," in *The Politics of Difference: Ethnic Premises in a World of Power*, ed. Edwin N. Wilmsen and Patrick McAllister (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 85–103.
64. Khatri Addu, the governor of Smara, interview, June 2007.
65. For more details on the Sahrawi conflict, see also Randa Farah, "A View from the Sahrawi Refugee Camps: Sovereignty on Borrowed Territory," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* (Summer/Fall 2010): 59–66.

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