Disorderly Histories: An Anthropology of Decolonization in Western Sahara

Mark Drury

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DISORDERLY HISTORIES: AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF DECOLONIZATION IN WESTERN SAHARA

by

MARK DRURY

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Anthropology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Anthropology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Date
Gary Wilder
Chair of Examining Committee

Date
Jeff Maskovsky
Executive Officer

Supervisory Committee:

Mandana Limbert
Jonathan Shannon
Susan Buck-Morss

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
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Advisor: Gary Wilder

This dissertation situates the disputed geopolitical territory of Western Sahara in a broader, regional history of decolonization. Eschewing the conceptual framework of methodological nationalism, and pushing beyond the period of Moroccan-Sahrawi political conflict, it examines how decolonization has generated multiple, unresolved political projects in this region of the Sahara, dating back to the 1950s. These formations, encompassing southern Morocco, Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria, and northern Mauritania, include a zone of militarized occupation, a movement for nation-state sovereignty based in refugee camps, and the borderlands in between. By considering the overlapping processes that emerge through these unresolved political projects, this study considers how the “disorderly histories” of decolonization have produced multiple forms of political space, time and subjectivity in the Sahara, from the late 1950s, through the 1970s, and to today. The ongoing effects of these projects in the Sahara bring several tensions underlying post-World War II political formations – between borders and belonging, dependence and autonomy, sovereignty and international law – into particularly sharp relief.
A Note Regarding Transliteration

In a context where different spellings of the same place name (“Laâyoune/El Aaiún”) reflect overlapping and competing political projects, trying to adhere to a single standard of transliteration may be, to a certain extent, futile. However, for ease of reading, this text follows a modified version of IJMES transliteration standards for formal Arabic terms, with minimal diacritical markings. Only those diacritical marks indicating the hamza (‘) and the ‘ayn (‘) are used here.

There are two, significant sets of exceptions to this standard. First, spelling of proper nouns foregoes even these minimal diacritical marks when they are not commonly included in conventional spelling (e.g.: Bucraa). The second exception involves terms from Hassaniya Arabic, or Moroccan Colloquial Arabic (darija). Because Hassaniya Arabic and darija differ from formal Arabic in certain, significant ways, transliteration of terms from these colloquial forms of Arabic reflects norms of pronunciation (e.g.: melga l-‘ahkama), rather than IJMES standards.

Regardless of formal or colloquial use, all Arabic words have been italicized save for those that have entered the English language, such as intifada, or shaykh, and proper nouns. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.
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My gratitude toward those who made this dissertation project possible extends in many directions. One of these trajectories began in the fall of 2001 when, thanks to a study abroad program then run jointly between Vassar College Africana Studies Program and Mohammed V University in Rabat, I spent a semester in Morocco. For several months, I immersed myself in daily life in Rabat, in learning Arabic, and in making sense of the tectonic shifts of American empire in a post-September 11th world. It was during this time that I met two extraordinary people whose generosity of spirit and intellect shaped everything from my ongoing curiosity about northwest Africa, to my pronunciation of the Arabic letter ‘ayn. Dr. Mohamed Ezroua, then Dean of the Faculty of Letters at Mohammed V, organized our studies with memorable energy and unmistakable care, becoming a mentor whose counsel and hospitality I have gratefully sought during subsequent trips to Morocco. Meanwhile, Hannan, whose name I have changed to protect her privacy, welcomed me into her household during my stay in Rabat in a manner that left me in awe of her authority, and with an enduring affinity for her and her family, who are always in my mind.

Given the opportunity to return to Morocco in 2006-07, I took a course on Moroccan Foreign Policy at Al-Akhawayn University in Ifrane, Morocco, with Professor James Sater, which introduced me to Western Sahara as an object of study that moved beyond the propaganda that prevails in the Moroccan public sphere. It was not until beginning doctoral studies at The Graduate Center, CUNY, however, that I began to consider designing a research project around Western Sahara. For this, I have to thank Professor Gary Wilder, whose work on Aimé Césaire, Leopold Senghor and the Négritude movement exemplifies what a rigorous commitment to interdisciplinary thinking and social theory can produce. I consider myself remarkably fortunate
to have learned from someone who pushed me to think capaciously and critically, while at the same time devoting tremendous intellectual labor to help me clarify many of the concepts that comprise this dissertation. If I ever supervise doctoral students, I hope to emulate that same level of commitment and support. I am similarly indebted to my committee members, Professors Susan Buck-Morss, Mandana Limbert and Jonathan Shannon, each of whom contributed to my intellectual formation in important ways while at The Graduate Center, and whose careful readings, suggestions and criticisms fostered this dissertation’s development from beginning to end. And, most recently, I wish to thank Dr. Alice Wilson for her incisive comments and detailed feedback while serving as the outside reader for my dissertation defense. I look forward to continuing the conversation.

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Introduction: Western Sahara, *Western Sahara* (1975) and Decolonization

“But there has also grown up through the vast majority of cases a clear pattern of orderly decolonization through freely conducted elections or plebiscites, often under UN supervision, in which the local population has had the opportunity to choose its own national destiny. It is this pattern which is so dramatically broken in the case of the Spanish Sahara.” Franck, Thomas M. “The Stealing of the Sahara.” *American Journal of International Law* 70, no. 4 (1976): 701.

"…I refer to what Rhodesia rebelled against as the orderly process of decolonization. By orderly I do not mean a political process free of riots and repression, but orderly in terms of the idea of African territories crossing a threshold by which they would become nation-states and take a newly claimed rightful place in the community of nations, the UN, the Commonwealth, and even the Organization of African Unity (OAU).” White, Luise. *Unpopular Sovereignty: Rhodesian Independence and African Decolonization*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015: 22.

Western Sahara and the 1975 International Court of Justice Advisory Opinion: An Introduction

In December 1974, the UN General Assembly solicited a non-binding advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice (the UN’s main judicial arm) concerning the decolonization of Western Sahara. Since 1884 a Spanish colony on the northwest coast of Africa, Western Sahara had, by 1974, already been the subject of UN deliberation for over a decade.¹ But as Spanish withdrawal appeared imminent, Mauritania and Morocco initiated the request for the advisory opinion in an attempt to forestall a potential referendum, and to validate their claim that a decolonized Western Sahara should be divided between the two countries. Driven largely by Morocco’s King Hassan II² – and with clandestine US advice and support³ – this claim was based on the position that Morocco’s and Mauritania’s respective sovereign ties with the people of Western Sahara predated Spanish colonialism and therefore necessitated the restoration of

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² Although Mauritania joined Morocco as claimant to the ICJ Opinion, the political impetus to prevent independence in Western Sahara was driven by King Hassan II. David Seddon, *Morocco at War: Military, Political and Economic Dimensions of Intervention in the Western Sahara* (Norwich, Great Britain: School of Development Studies, University of East Anglia, 1986).

both countries’ territorial integrity. Whereas by 1974 it had become customary for
decolonization to be effected through self-determination under UN oversight, Hassan II sought a
favorable opinion that would pre-empt self-determination and legitimate Moroccan and
Mauritanian annexation. As it turned out, the International Court of Justice Advisory Opinion on
Western Sahara, published October 16, 1975,\(^4\) did not grant legal recognition to either country’s
claim to pre-existing sovereign ties with the region, affirming the right of the people of Western
Sahara to self-determination, instead.

Although *Western Sahara* (1975) affirmed the right to self-determination for the people
of Western Sahara, no sooner was it issued than Morocco and Mauritania disregarded the
Advisory Opinion.\(^5\) Two days after the publication of *Western Sahara* (1975), on October 18,
1975, Morocco announced its intention to send 350,000 unarmed civilians marching into the
Sahara.\(^6\) Morocco’s armed forces, massed at the northern, desert border of Spanish Sahara, had
already infiltrated the territory by the time the civilian march, celebrated in Morocco as the
Green March, took place on November 6, 1975.\(^7\) Under pressure from Morocco’s civilian and
military incursion, and with General Franco on his deathbed, Spain reneged on previous
commitments to self-determination.\(^8\) Instead, Spain agreed to transfer authority over Western
Sahara to Mauritania and Morocco through the tripartite Madrid Agreement. No sooner was this

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\(^4\) Hereafter, *Western Sahara* (1975).\(^5\) Morocco went so far as to misrepresent the decision to its people, and before the UN, as affirming its legitimacy. Jacob Mundy has pointed out that Henry Kissinger, in close contact with Hassan II during this time, similarly misrepresented the decision to President Ford during a White House meeting. Franck, “The Stealing of the Sahara,” 711; Mundy, “Neutrality or Complicity?,” 294–95.\(^6\) Franck, 711. For an analysis of the Green March and its legacies in Morocco, see Emilio Spadola, “‘Our Master’s Call’: Mass Media and the People in Morocco’s 1975 Green March,” in *Anthropology of the Middle East and North Africa: Into the New Millennium*, ed. Sherine Hafez and Susan Slyomovics (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013): 261-283.\(^7\) Mundy, “Neutrality or Complicity?”; Stephen Zunes and Jacob Mundy, *Western Sahara: War, Nationalism, and Conflict Irresolution*, 1st ed. (Syracuse N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2010), 4–9. More on this in Chapter 1.\(^8\) These commitments had been made before the UN, as well as al-Jema’a, the Sahrawi political council set up under Spanish colonial rule, and Polisario, the Sahrawi national liberation front that had been gaining concessions from Spain since beginning its insurgency in 1973. Franck, “The Stealing of the Sahara,” 704–5; Mundy, “Neutrality or Complicity?,” 283.
transfer completed than Morocco began a brutal military campaign in January and February 1976 across the northern region of Western Sahara, known as Saguiet al-Hamra, precipitating the exodus of thousands of Sahrawis to refugee camps in southwest Algeria, where many remain today. 9 Since Spanish withdrawal at the beginning of 1976, the general contours of the Western Sahara conflict have remained largely in place: Morocco continues to claim (and, since the 1980’s, effectively occupies) the region as its own, but lacks international legitimacy; 10 Sahrawi nationalists, led by the Polisario Front and governed by the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, 11 a state-in-exile backed by Algeria, maintain the right to self-determination; and, although the UN Security Council continues to recognize the right of the people of Western Sahara to self-determination, a referendum has never been held and the UN remains peacekeeping steward to a stalled process of decolonization. 12

One international legal scholar distilled the divergence between Western Sahara (1975) and Western Sahara to the following pithy observation:


10 Mauritania’s involvement in the conflict over Western Sahara ended in 1979, when it declared a ceasefire with Polisario, and withdrew from Rio de Oro, the southern strip of Western Sahara. Morocco immediately occupied that territory. Since the ceasefire between Morocco and Polisario in 1991, Morocco has controlled an estimated 75-80% of the territory. Alice Wilson, Sovereignty in Exile: A Saharan Liberation Movement Governs (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 6.

11 Polisario Front is technically the liberation movement for Sahrawi nationalism, and the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) is the state-in-exile that governs the refugee camps in Algeria. As Alice Wilson notes, however, the two operate in “sometimes indistinguishable fusion.” In following Wilson’s usage, I will hereafter refer to them in tandem “Polisario/SADR” unless discussing an activity that solely involves one or the other. Wilson, 2.

The Western Sahara Advisory Opinion of 1975 did more for the legal fortunes of the right of self-determination of peoples than it did for the political fortunes of the people of the Western Sahara.\textsuperscript{13}

This bitter irony revolves around the gap between legal norms and political realities, a gap that applies to a wide range of political contexts. As such, this observation is as much a commentary on international law as it is about Western Sahara, or \textit{Western Sahara} (1975). Indeed, in reinterpreting or reinforcing legal concepts such as \textit{terra nullius} and self-determination, \textit{Western Sahara} (1975) has subsequently become an important point of reference among scholars of international law. From one perspective, the decision has contributed to the emergence of a more inclusive, multicultural international law characterized by a Rawlsian “overlapping consensus” between European and non-European concepts, thanks to its narrowing of \textit{terra nullius}.\textsuperscript{14}

Conversely, others have contended that, given its very reliance upon \textit{terra nullius}, a concept used to justify colonial occupation throughout the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, \textit{Western Sahara} (1975) participates in reproducing international law’s irrevocable Eurocentrism.\textsuperscript{15} Still others see an “ambivalent compromise” in the case’s reinforcement of self-determination and, by association, normative concepts of territorial sovereignty, even as it engaged with non-Western political formations.\textsuperscript{16}

These approaches all point to how \textit{Western Sahara} (1975) probed the limits of international law, yet none of them capture the paradox between \textit{Western Sahara} (1975) and Western Sahara. Even as the decision established a legal norm and political form for orderly decolonization, \textit{Western Sahara} (1975) – from the operative decision to the Oral Pleadings and


\textsuperscript{16} Michelle L Burgis, “Determining the Limits of Law in the Western Sahara Case,” in \textit{Boundaries of Discourse in the International Court of Justice Mapping Arguments in Arab Territorial Disputes} (Leiden, NL: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2009), 192.
dissenting statements – contains within it all of decolonization’s disorderliness. Western Sahara (1975) grapples with broader questions regarding the relationship between people, territory and political authority, on the one hand, and past, present and future, on the other. In contending with historical, anthropological and sociological information presented by Morocco, Mauritania and Spain, Jurists involved in the case were forced to consider wide-ranging issues surrounding the constitution of sovereign ties, and whether the criteria defining these ties have changed over time. What forms of political authority can be recognized as sovereign? Is sovereignty a matter of control over territory, or a relation between people for control over things? To what extent do claims based on historical ties determine political futures? Do 19th century normative political concepts inform 20th century international law? To what extent does international law determine sovereignty?

The Jurists involved in the case were addressing these questions in order to determine the outlines of a political formation “Western Sahara.” To a certain extent, this dissertation is engaging with a similar problematic. Rather than assuming that Western Sahara is a known entity, geographically, juridically or politically, this dissertation begins with the contemporary political formation by engaging with it as an object of inquiry in need of explanation. Western Sahara (1975) provides an ideal point of departure precisely because, at the very moment when Western Sahara became paradigmatic in defining self-determination as an international legal right, its political history diverged drastically from this formal, orderly process. How could

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Western Sahara (1975) become paradigmatic for defining *de jure* decolonization by self-determination, while Western Sahara has, in fact, become something else entirely? How might this divergence between *de jure* and *de facto* decolonization inform our conceptualization of this transformative process? What if we take Western Sahara as it exists today – in all of its complexity, conflict, disaggregated authority, overlapping sovereignties, and unresolved political projects – as paradigmatic of *de facto* decolonization? How might we be forced to reconceptualize both Western Sahara and decolonization?

I introduce this study of Western Sahara by way of *Western Sahara* (1975), because I find it significant that the geopolitical territory and legal case emerge as pivotal to both the consolidation and disruption of the “pattern of orderly decolonization.” A broader reading of *Western Sahara* (1975), along with a broader contextualization of the history of Western Sahara’s decolonization, raise questions about this “orderly” decolonization. What constituted this “pattern,” or process? And why do the conflict and ICJ decision appear to mark both its consolidation and its end? By questioning the assumed historical complementarity between the end of “orderly decolonization” and the origin of the Western Sahara conflict, this dissertation presents the ongoing political conflict over Western Sahara, and the concept of decolonization, as problematics requiring further explanation. And, despite beginning with the events and legal decisions of 1975, this dissertation – like *Western Sahara* (1975) – looks both to the past and future of this inflection point and moment of crisis, situating the formation of Western Sahara in a broader history of decolonization dating back to the 1950s, while also tracing this process through to – and from – the present. Thus, like *Western Sahara* (1975), this dissertation examines how the terms of decolonization are necessarily a part of the formation of Western

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Sahara. The mutual imbrication of decolonization with the formation of Western Sahara also invites the following question: from the standpoint of western Sahara, “What is decolonization?”

By beginning with the Morocco-Sahrawi conflict in 1975, Western Sahara as an object of struggle is already taken for granted, as is nationalist struggle. The nationalist conflict as framework for analysis begins by assuming the normative form of post-World War II nation-state sovereignty, and the legal framework of national self-determination. It assumes, in other words, the “orderly process of decolonization.” By contrast, I assert that this problematic of “orderly decolonization” is precisely what requires explanation.

The Decolonization of western Sahara, and the Production of Western Sahara as a Geopolitical Space of Contention

Western Sahara as a geopolitical space was carved out of the northwest coast of Africa in 1884 at the Berlin Conference, and granted to Spain as protection for its claims to the nearby Canary Islands. The territories surrounding Western Sahara were colonized by France, although these French colonies were divided administratively between the French Protectorate in Morocco, French Algeria, and French West Africa. Much of this region was only nominally under colonial rule well into the 20th century. This is particularly true of Spanish-controlled Sahara where, at the turn of the century, the shaykh Ma al-Aynayn established the city of Smara, from which he rallied followers to attack French colonial forces. While the French military established its presence by 1934 (an event known colloquially in Hassaniya Arabic as “melga l’ahkama,” or the “meeting of the rulers”), Spanish rule was largely limited to coastal fishing enclaves until after World War II. The central regional trading hubs – Goulmim in southern Morocco, Tindouf

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in southwest Algeria, Atar in northern Mauritania – all lay outside of Spain’s colonial territory. Some of the best seasonal pasturage for pastoralists, however, was found in the southern part of Spanish Sahara known as Tiris, while a number of the most important shrines and affiliated zawaya for certain tribes were concentrated in the northern part of Spanish Sahara, known as Saguiet el-Hamra’. According to interlocutors during fieldwork, it was typical to refer to oneself or one’s kin group during colonialism as “registered with the French” or “registered with the Spanish,” while still moving throughout the region with little regard for colonial borders. The geopolitical form of Western Sahara, in other words, had very little bearing on the socio-cultural space of Saharan life until decolonization emerged as a horizon of expectation in the 1950s.

When the horizon of decolonization emerged during the mid-1950s, it transformed political and social life across western Sahara. And, I argue, these transformations in many respects precipitated Spanish colonialism in the Sahara, rather than the inverse, while also preceding the emergence of Sahrawi national identity. At that time, I contend that the region of western Sahara was not yet structured by national identities, or territorial boundaries, in the same way that it has been since the 1970s. For this reason, the scope of this study exceeds the boundaries of nationalist conflict in spatio-temporal, as well as conceptual, terms. The region of western Sahara, then, is not coterminous with the geopolitical territory of Western Sahara: rather, it encompasses parts of southern Morocco, southwest Algeria, northern Mali and all of Mauritania. My use of the term western Sahara follows from the French “L’ouest saharien,” with an historical, geographical and cultural referent much broader than the political label “Sahara occidental,” or “Western Sahara,” which references the geopolitical territory.21

20 “makatib bifaransa,” “makatib bisbaniya”
21 See, for example, the journal Revue l’Ouest saharien, as well as Mustapha Naimi, La dynamique des alliances ouest-sahariennes: de l’espace géographique à l’espace social (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l’homme, 2004); Mustapha Naimi, L’Ouest saharien: la perception de l’espace dans la pensée politique tribale.
While the terms “Western Sahara” and “western Sahara” are clearly quite similar, my aim is that their proximity and difference as terms will contribute to a sense of the multiple, overlapping registers of identification and belonging which exist for Saharans living throughout this region. In referring to a geography that surpasses geopolitical boundaries, “western Sahara” encompasses a socio-cultural space associated with speakers of the Hassaniya dialect of Arabic, whose seminomadic pastoralism and *bidani* cultural identity distinguish them from neighbors to the north, in the Maghreb, and those to the south, in the Sahel. This is the space that, in the ICJ Opinion *Western Sahara* (1975), Mauritania claims under the historical name of *Bilad Shinguiti*, or what is also commonly referred to as “Land of the Bidan,” [*trab al-bidan*]. In recent literature on Western Sahara, authors often refer to this cultural space as “Hassanophone Sahara,” utilizing the related identity marker, “Hassani.”

Indeed, there are multiple names for this cultural space, but in this dissertation I have focused on the *bidani* cultural identity as its most encompassing marker. Defined in contradistinction to Amazigh/Berber (*chilha*, pl. *chleuh*) and non-Arab Black African identities (*kury*, pl. *l-kwar*), *bidani* identity corresponds to the socio-cultural space of Hassaniya-speaking Saharans described above. As I show in an interpretation of a poem in Chapter 3, however, the *bidani* identity is complex, with genealogical and racial referents that do not simply correspond to bounded concepts of ethnicity. My reasons for using *bidani* over other terms are largely


ethnographic: from the 1950s poem to a variety of fieldwork interactions, the term carried a significance to my interlocutors that encompassed everything from language to pastoral living to the cultivation of moral behaviors and cultural practices. The term named, in short, a form of life. I use *bidani*, then, because it references a form of life historically associated with the socio-cultural space of western Sahara, while also remaining salient in the present as a form of identification that surpasses the border-making processes of decolonization.

This focus on decolonization, and the political formations that it has engendered, has important implications for the framework of this study. In *Disorderly Histories*, I conceptualize decolonization as a horizon of expectation that has generated a series of unresolved political projects. This dissertation examines the decolonization of western Sahara through these political projects, while, conversely, also examining these political projects through the lens of decolonization. From the 1950s to the present, the study looks at several moments of this history, while considering how the afterlives of these multiple, unresolved projects manifest themselves in the political formations that structure the region today. These formations include: Morocco’s militarized occupation of Western Sahara; Polisario/SADR-governed refugee camps in Algeria; the regions at the margins of this conflict, including northern Mauritania and southern Morocco; and human rights advocacy throughout the region. In moving between historical moments and political formations, there will be shifts in emphasis or use between *bidani* or Sahrawi, or between “Western” and “western” Sahara. When writing about 1950s decolonization, for example, I will use the term *bidani* rather than Sahrawi, since this period preceded the emergence of Sahrawi national identity. While there is a historical distinction to using *bidani* or Sahrawi, and a geographical distinction between “Western” and “western” Sahara, there is also an overlapping relation between these terms. Used in the present day, one term does not exclude
the other; rather they overlap while also operating on different registers. Similarly, I suggest that many of the political projects engendered by decolonization overlap across the disaggregated political geography of western Sahara today.

The ambiguity produced by competing political projects is precisely what characterizes the *de facto* decolonization of western Sahara in the present. Many of the political formations that constitute western Sahara today, from occupied territory to refugee camps to contested borderlands, are familiar to a wide range of contemporary situations, and yet their particular features in a region that has never been fully resolved into a nation-state invite further description. Sedimented throughout this political landscape are the histories of political projects – of anticolonial irredentism, of humanitarian nationalism, of human rights activism for self-determination – that point to the overlapping co-presence of colonialism and decolonization, human rights and national self-determination, as well as multiple, competing forms of authority. Placed in tension with “orderly decolonization,” which privileges both a sequential process (colonialism, anticolonial nationalism, decolonization) and a given outcome (territorial nation-state sovereignty), the disorderly histories of western Sahara often stand in disjunctive relation to the nationalist narratives that structure contemporary political conflict. Requiring further examination and explanation, these disorderly histories provide the threads through which this dissertation attempts to unravel, unpack and understand decolonization in Western Sahara.

**Sovereignty and the Sahara**

As George Joffê noted in a brief essay, “the attribution of sovereignty” is “the basic theoretical problem posed by the Western Sahara dispute.”

23 Danilyn Rutherford suggests that

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the relation through which sovereignty may be granted is often unstable and shifting. Drawing
upon the context of West Papua, another political formation that, like Western Sahara, has
struggled for the right to self-determination since decolonization, Rutherford notes that:

would-be sovereigns…are often caught off balance when the power they seek
suddenly appears as dispersed across a shifting political terrain.24

Rutherford’s notion of multiple audiences “dispersed across a shifting political terrain” evokes
both the increased role of international law in granting or attributing sovereignty after World
War II, as well as an increasingly dispersed “international community” after the Cold War. In a
global political context where the power associated with gaining and granting membership to the
community of sovereign nation-states may be disaggregated, rather than centralized, the struggle
for self-determination emerges over the longue durée as a “shifting political terrain.”

Joffé’s observation points to the limitations of any analysis of the Western Sahara dispute
that begins and ends with the competing parties’ interests and power relations: rather, the
political terrain which constitutes this dispute must first be understood. Rutherford’s attention to
the elusive pursuit of the attribution of sovereignty suggests that, if the audience for granting
sovereignty is ever-changing, so, too, is this political terrain. But how, and in what ways? Joffé
suggested that sovereignty as a principle of political control had, since the 1975 ICJ decision,
diminished significantly. Joffé’s perspective on sovereignty follows a vast swath of literature in
political theory, international relations, and beyond, that analyzes the widening gap between
“classic” sovereignty and its contemporary practice. In conceptualizing these changes, this
literature historicizes these departures from classic sovereignty variously, locating the origins of
this shift in neoliberalism, shifting norms post-Cold War, increasing mechanisms for intervention

24 Danilyn Rutherford, Laughing at Leviathan: Sovereignty and Audience in West Papua (Chicago, IL: University of
in the name of international order, and/or the deterritorializing effects of the War on Terror.\textsuperscript{25} Without specifically singling out any of these changes, Joffé asserted that post-Cold War sovereignty had been “hollowed out.” By this view, the dispute over Western Sahara “seems part of a distant past, a relic from a realist world” from when sovereignty was still something worth fighting for.\textsuperscript{26} 

In his study \textit{Quasi-States: Sovereignty, International Relations and the Third World}, Robert H. Jackson provides an alternative perspective. Suggesting that decolonization and the post-World War II political order constituted a fundamental shift in “international outlook,” Jackson notes that the change was less a transfer of power from the Global North to the postcolonial South, than an expansion in the application of a moral and legal framework to support nation-states. Where state sovereignty had previously manifested through the \textit{de facto} capacity for occupation and self-defense, postcolonial sovereignty (or what Jackson terms “Third World sovereignty”) ended up “consisting not of self-standing structures with domestic foundations – like separate buildings – but of territorial jurisdictions (supported from above) by international law and material aid – a kind of international safety net.”\textsuperscript{27} Jackson, like Schmitt, believes that the European state system was premised on unitary, equal sovereigns that operated “like separate buildings.” This positivist view considers international law antithetical to the inviolable basis of state sovereignty. Where Schmitt noted how a moral, legal regime of international governance first punctured the European system of sovereignty in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century, Jackson expands upon Schmitt’s perspective by showing that decolonization effectively

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\textsuperscript{26} Joffé, “Sovereignty and the Western Sahara,” 382.
\end{flushleft}
deflated this system, inverting the basis of sovereignty from a state supported from “below” (i.e., domestically) into a juridical form supported from “above” by an international moral-legal framework. In place of inviolable state sovereignty, the states emerging from decolonization enjoyed what Jackson terms “negative sovereignty,” a formal right to membership in the international community, supported by aid in lieu of substantive power.28

Jackson’s realist perspective is useful for reconceptualizing decolonization not as a shift in power between the Global North and South (or, between the West and the Third World), but as a shift in the constitution of nation-state sovereigns from empirical to juridical entities. The “orderly process of decolonization” mentioned previously was based on a certain temporal perspective that viewed this shift as complete with Western Sahara (1975). And yet, the ICJ decision and the Western Sahara political conflict together reflect the unresolved nature of this shift. Joffé recognized this in pointing to sovereignty as the fundamental issue underlying the conflict. Morocco’s occupation of Western Sahara is an expression of “classic” sovereignty, but one constrained by the recognition of rights to the expression of popular sovereignty on behalf of Sahrawi nationalists. In contradistinction to Joffé’s historicization, however, Jackson shows that decolonization was integral to the 20th century transformation of sovereignty. In the chapters below, I show how Western Sahara has been the site of multiple political projects engendered by this transformative process. Far from resulting in the expected outcome of the territorial nation-state, however, the political projects of decolonization in Western Sahara have defied resolution. In doing so, these projects bring the unresolved tensions and contradictions of post-World War II political formations – between borders and belonging, dependence and autonomy, sovereignty and international law – into sharp relief. Neither part of a prior “realist world,” nor of a subsequent world of “simulated sovereignty,” Western Sahara – like Western Sahara (1975) – is

a manifestation of the unresolved contradictions in territorial nation-state sovereignty produced by decolonization itself.

Jackson’s Schmittian perspective suggests that, far from resolving the issue of sovereignty, decolonization replicated the juridical form of nation-state sovereignty throughout the postcolonial world, while simultaneously hollowing out the capacities underpinning positive sovereignty. In this sense, he serves to resituate decolonization as constitutive of the dilemma of sovereignty identified by Joffé. However, as political theorists and scholars of international relations, Jackson, Schmitt and Joffé all assume the state as the normative form of sovereign power. This assumption misses an important dimension to the dilemma of sovereignty, which is at the center of *Western Sahara* (1975), wherein the Jurists grapple with applying this normative form of state sovereignty to the nonconforming social and political formations of the Sahara.

In this respect, anthropological approaches to sovereignty provide a useful antidote through a more elastic, and less normative, approach to understanding relations of authority. Emerging concurrent with the previously mentioned wave of efforts to re-evaluate state sovereignty after the end of the Cold War, recent and contemporary anthropological contributions on the subject have been characterized as critiques of “formal and legal notions of sovereignty.”

Many of these works, inspired by Foucauldian biopolitics and Agamben’s theory of the exception, seek to demonstrate that sovereignty is not simply an achieved fact, but a process involving ongoing and emergent instantiations of violence. Alternatively, working in the vein of postcolonial theory, anthropological approaches often seek to provincialize the

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concept sovereignty as “a category of Western political thought.”31 Perhaps most importantly, anthropological studies have shown how multiple forms of sovereignty often existed within colonial territories where “the reach and efficacy of colonial states was uneven and often severely limited.”32

This last observation is particularly relevant to Alice Wilson’s study of the Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria, governed by Polisario/SADR. In a deeply insightful approach that echoes many of the questions raised by Western Sahara (1975), Wilson develops a definition of sovereignty that foregrounds social relations:

The approach taken in this book, prompted by the ethnographic context of Sahrawi refugees, is thus to conceptualize sovereignty as social relations between governing authorities and governed constituencies played out in relation to resources, not necessarily in territorial form. A social relations approach to sovereignty allows us to make such connections between extraordinary and ordinary projects of sovereignty.33

By analytically foregrounding social relations, Wilson’s definition avoids a preoccupation with legal definitions and abstract institutional forms – in Western Sahara (1975), the question of an “entity” – from overtaking her framework. Rather than taking recourse to normative definitions based on “kingship” or the state, Wilson’s definition remains open to conceptualizing forms of authority as they are constituted “on the ground,” so to speak.

One of the strengths of Wilson’s social relations approach is that it remains open to recognizing different forms of sovereignty. In contrast with many other anthropological approaches to sovereignty, her definition “decenters state power from discussions of sovereignty.”34 Just as impressively, Wilson’s approach displaces the direct relation between

33 Wilson, Sovereignty in Exile, 7.
34 Wilson, 9.
sovereign and territory that underpins normative conceptions of modern nation-state sovereignty. In doing so, Wilson appears to draw inspiration from Katherine Verdery, who defines property as a social relation between persons by means of things.\textsuperscript{35} Situated first among social relations, sovereignty is made operative through control over “things” that may, or may not, be territorial in nature. Wilson’s understanding of sovereignty as constituted by social relations and effected “in relation to resources, not necessarily in territorial form” presents a framework particularly apposite to the context of the Sahara where what is often at stake in matters of authority “is not landownership in itself but control over people and labour that is its indispensable precondition.”\textsuperscript{36} Here, the knot that confronts the Jurists of Western Sahara (1975) between legal ties, in relation to persons, and sovereignty, defined by international law in relation to territory, is untied.

This approach allows Wilson to examine a spatiotemporal context of multiple, coexisting projects of sovereignty. Specifically, in \textit{Sovereignty in Exile}, Wilson examines competing tribal and what she terms “state-movement” forms of authority within the Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria. Moving beyond the question of whether there are one or multiple forms of sovereignty, she carefully traces the dynamic between both projects as they have been constituted – sometimes mutually, sometimes antithetically – throughout the history of the Sahrawi nationalist movement’s governance of refugee camps in Algeria starting in 1975. Perhaps most convincingly, Wilson shows how Polisario/SADR transformed the site through which political subjects were produced from households to political committees beginning in the late 1970s with

\textsuperscript{35} Wilson, 7; Katherine Verdery, “Property and Power in Transylvania’s Decollectivization,” in Property Relations: Renewing the Anthropological Tradition / Edited by C.M. Hann, ed. C.M. Hann (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

the formation of the refugee camps under their governance. Here she connects the shifts in sovereignty during the Polisario/SADR’s governance to the production of new political subjects.

As useful as Wilson’s definition is, this dissertation will attempt to build upon and expand her approach beyond the tribe-nation nexus of the refugee camps, which is the focus of her work. Whereas Wilson’s ethnographic approach focuses on competing political rationalities within a specific site – the refugee camps established in the wake of Moroccan invasion in the mid-1970s – I argue that the contemporary landscape of disaggregated authority across western Sahara encompasses multiple, competing projects and claims. These claims to authority are often overlapping and therefore defy reduction to a single site, or specific relational dyad (whether colonizer-colonized, Moroccan-Sahrawi or nation-tribe). For precisely this reason, I introduce Western Sahara by way of *Western Sahara* (1975). Contending with multiple, competing claims, the case must engage with Moroccan, Mauritanian, Sahrawi – and, to some extent, Algerian – claims to Western Sahara, as well as evidence of multiple, changing forms of social and political authority.

**Time and Temporality**

Joffé’s analysis of Western Sahara is telling in another respect, beyond his observation that sovereignty lies at the heart of the conflict. In noting that the Western Sahara dispute “seems part of a distant past, a relic from a realist world,” Joffé makes an observation that is not uncommon to depictions of Western Sahara. The documentary film *Territoire Perdu* portrays the Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria as a place outside of history, populated by refugees and soldiers.

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37 Wilson, *Sovereignty in Exile*, 69–73.
engaged in a Godot-like state of existential waiting. Journalistic depictions often accentuate the features of Western Saharan politics that appear anomalous, or even alien to our times: video reportage, for example, that features the military exercises of a national liberation movement that still exists decades after the “end” of decolonization. There are, of course, a wide range of documentary and journalistic depictions that focus less on the peculiar, but these examples show how the sense of Western Sahara being “out of step” with world politics serves as an easy point of reference. Although Joffé uses the phrase as part of a broader, insightful argument about sovereignty and Western Sahara, it is nonetheless symptomatic of a chronotope for representations of Western Sahara.

It is important to note, however, that this sense of Western Sahara’s anomalous temporality in world history depends upon a concept of the global political community as a collection of nation-states. From this perceived totality, Western Sahara appears out of step either because its political status remains unresolved, or because, as in Joffé’s example, nation-state sovereignty would hardly seem worth fighting over in an ostensibly globalized world. This view of the past in the present itself depends upon an “orderly” history of decolonization, which assumes a sequential transition, from colony to anticolonial nationalism to nation-state. A particularly seductive aspect of this “orderly” historiography of decolonization involves the assumption of synchronism, or the idea that anticolonial struggle coincided with the achievement of national consciousness, culminating in a wave of newly independent nation states.

A number of recent scholars have turned their critical attention to decolonization in order to question this orderly process. Gary Wilder suggests that “to presuppose that national

40 See, for example, VICE News, Escaping Moroccan Occupation: The Sahara’s Forgotten War (Part 1), 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Y8w-ACs7Bw.
independence is the necessary form of colonial emancipation is to mistake a product of
decolonization for an optic through which to study it.”41 From the context of the Caribbean,
Yarimar Bonilla writes:

I argue that we need to examine how the postwar project of decolonization
operated similarly to other projects of political modernity, such as modernization
and secularization. Like secularization – which as a project of government
produced the idea of religions as discrete and transhistorical spheres of life – I
argue that decolonization also operated as part of a larger project that sought to
naturalize the idea of nation-states as discrete and necessary units of political and
economic organization, while silencing and foreclosing other forms and
alignments.42

In arguing against methodological nationalism, both Bonilla and Wilder are also making a call to
historicize the concept decolonization, in order to excavate the futures past that animated a
variety of anticolonial projects in the postwar era. As I will argue throughout this dissertation,
western Sahara defies this assumed synchronism when it comes to the relationship between
decolonization, colonialism and nationalism. Precisely because of its “nonsynchronous” relation
to decolonization, this region provides a context particularly well-suited to historicize the
concept of decolonization.

In recent literature, historical materialism as a philosophy of history has been used to
show that naturalized concepts of modernity contain within them the sedimentation of multiple
temporalities. The resulting geological metaphor suggests that “historical forms do not follow a
linear model of past and present, but they become ‘geological formations’ in which the already-
been coexists with the now, allowing us to think the co-presence of temporalities on a surface
and not according to a linear vector.”43 The sedimented layering of past social and political forms

42 Yarimar Bonilla, Non-Sovereign Futures: French Caribbean Politics in the Wake of Disenchantment (Chicago:
43 Massimiliano Tomba, Marx’s Temporalities, trans. Peter D Thomas and Sara R Farris (Boston: Brill Academic
Publishers, 2013), 175. See also Harry D Harootunian, Marx after Marx: History and Time in the Expansion of
provides a concept-metaphor, and methodology, for practicing a history of the present that accounts for the co-presence of multiple historical processes. In the context of western Sahara, the co-presence of multiple relations to authority along with competing projects of national sovereignty have defied resolution into the nation-state form. This region, then, holds nation-state sovereignty – often presumed to be the universal political formation of a modern, decolonized world – in abeyance.\textsuperscript{44} I practice this kind of history of the present in Chapter 1 by exploring how past projects of decolonization remain sedimented in the nomenclature and built environment of Laâyoune/El Aaiún, the largest city in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara and the epicenter of political conflict, in Chapter 1.

Drawing upon this concept-metaphor of a vertically stratified past-in-the-present, I suggest that the history of decolonization in the Sahara during the 1950s, involving the Moroccan Liberation Army in the Sahara, appears as a “nonsynchronous contradiction,” to borrow Ernst Bloch’s term, in relation to the present nationalist conflict in Western Sahara. I use Bloch’s term advisedly, because he describes a “real nonsynchronism” as an “unsettled past” that is “alien to the times” of the present.\textsuperscript{45} In Chapter 3 of this dissertation, I explore how the MLA’s past can neither be buried nor resolved under the present conditions in Western Sahara, precisely because the conditions which gave rise to this political project remain in disjunctive relation to Moroccan and Sahrawi nationalist histories. The mobilization of Sahrawis and Moroccans around the MLA involved a set of complex relations of autonomy and dependence that belie notions of either sovereign unity, or two independent, separate peoples. As a result, the history of

\textit{Capitalism} (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), who notes "a history derived from the present inclines toward verticality and its appearance is always changeable, brought to the surface by excavating and digging into the layered depths of different historical times…” (23).


the MLA generates ongoing controversies in the Moroccan context, which nonetheless fail to confront the underlying conditions of this anticolonial armed movement, while this history is largely ignored in the Sahrawi context. This “unsettled past” of western Sahara’s decolonization sits in disjunctive, or nonsynchronous, relation to both Moroccan and Sahrawi nationalist narratives that otherwise structure understandings of the past in the present context of ongoing political dispute.

If 1950s decolonization in the Sahara illustrates how the appearance of “unsettled pasts” may appear out of step in the present only in relation to nationalist historical narratives, decolonization has also shaped the experience of time, or temporality, as a political terrain in the Sahara through a dynamic relationship between present and future. The emergence of political possibility at a specific historical conjuncture assumes a changing relationship between present and future. Understanding the significance of these changing temporal horizons entails a broader understanding of time itself as a political terrain. This approach incorporates insights from critical theory relative to the multiple temporalities of historical change that exist in tension with progress-oriented modern historical time. Drawing upon Reinhardt Koselleck’s concepts of horizon of expectation and space of experience, Chapter 4 notes how the expectation for imminent change animated a constellation of political movements from Mauritania to Western Sahara to Morocco a generation following the MLA.46 In this chapter, oral histories with members and former members of national liberation and anti-imperial movements in Mauritania and Western Sahara in the 1970s reveal how a horizon of imminent change shaped the temporality of political action throughout the region during that period. This expectation for change, which structured a temporal sense of culmination for a generation of Sahrawis,

Moroccans and Mauritanians, stood in tension with a major shift in global politics during the 1970s from Third World national liberation, to a global ethic of humanitarianism.\textsuperscript{47}

These disorderly histories evince three kinds of “nonsynchronism.” The first nonsynchronism challenges the stagist conceptualization of “orderly” decolonization: first colonialism, then anticolonial nationalism resulting in, finally, postcolonial nation-state sovereignty. That this sequential ordering is inapplicable to western Sahara has already been discussed in terms of the overlap between colonialism and decolonization across the region. This kind of nonsynchronism becomes most evident in the the Moroccan Liberation Army of the 1950s, which could be described in terms of “anticolonial irredentism.” The second nonsynchronism exists in the relation between anticolonial political projects across western Sahara and the prevailing global conditions of possibility for realizing these projects. This appears most starkly through the emergence of Sahrawi nationalism during the 1970s, precisely as the political imperative for anticolonial self-determination was displaced by a global ethic of humanitarianism. This nonsynchronism remains evident today in the contemporary form of Sahrawi nationalism, which becomes legible simultaneously as a project of both national sovereignty and humanitarianism, or a “nation of refugees.” And, finally, the third aspect of nonsynchronism can be found in the coexistence of multiple political projects in the present.

Without denying its global impact, decolonization, from the vantage point of the Sahara, has engendered political processes that have not resolved into the nation-state form and that disrupt an “orderly” or sequential understanding of its events. Moreover, a number of these Saharan political formations overlap with multiple political processes at once: colonization and

\textsuperscript{47} This sense of culmination compares to David Scott’s account of the Granadan revolution, which “was generationally historic in the sense that, for the generation who made it or who recognized their identity in it…the revolution was the vindication and culmination of a certain organization of temporal expectation and political longing.” David Scott, \textit{Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice} (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2014), 20.
decolonization, national liberation and humanitarianism, sovereignty as material occupation and as legal attribution. Captured by the terms “anticolonial irredentism” to describe the Moroccan Liberation Army (MLA) in the 1950s, and later “humanitarian nationalism” to describe Polisario/SADR’s national liberation project based out of refugee camps in Algeria, several political formations that emerged from the Sahara straddle multiple political terrains at once. Even the prolonged death of General Francisco Franco, which played a key role in Morocco’s ability negotiate the backdoor Madrid Agreement with Mauritania and Spain and to pre-empt the application of Western Sahara (1975), can be seen as bridging a kind of transition between two forms of sovereignty. As Michel Foucault notes in Society Must Be Defended, the management Franco’s death by keeping him alive “symbolizes the clash between two systems of power: that of sovereignty over death, and that of the regularization of life.” This suspension between forms of sovereignty also inaugurated the much longer, suspended status of Western Sahara, which has continued since Franco’s death. Brought together, these overlapping processes point to the need for a framework that contends with decolonization in Western Sahara in all of its complexity and disorder.

**Pursuing New Analytical Frameworks for Western Sahara**

The limitations to a nationalist conflict framework manifests itself in recent literature on Western Sahara. Representing some of the first studies to conduct research in the region after the ceasefire in 1991, this literature has been based upon research carried out primarily in the Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria. With its attention to life on the ground in these camps (some


of these studies are based on longterm, intensive fieldwork) this literature has pushed scholarship on Western Sahara well beyond the institutional analysis of national and international actors which characterized earlier studies on the topic. In one of the most compelling products of this research, Jacob Mundy wrote:

Since 1975, the analysis of Western Sahara, with a few notable exceptions, has been dominated by macro-level political analysis. Just as the conflict remains stalemated, the discourse on the subject remains fairly monolithic, preoccupied by one question: Who will win the Western Sahara? One of the goals of this paper is to re-locate the Western Sahara problem in a variety of disciplines and a number of analytical frames.

The political significance of the work by Mundy and others, which included important contributions to understanding the roles of the United States and France in the history of the conflict, cannot be understated. By focusing on the emergence and resilience of Sahrawi nationalism as a social fact, this scholarship also plays an important role in the face of Morocco’s refusal to acknowledge Sahrawi nationalism as either a popular movement or the project of an institutional state-in-exile. And yet, it also emphasizes the supposed autonomy of the Sahrawi people as reflected in the form of the refugee camps. Studies situated entirely in the camps

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52 Mundy, in particular, has shed light on the role of the United States and France in perpetuating the historical and ongoing injustices of Morocco’s occupation of Western Sahara. See Jacob Mundy, “‘Seized of the Matter’: The UN and the Western Sahara Dispute,” Mediterranean Quarterly 15, no. 3 (October 1, 2004): 130–48; Zunes and Mundy, Western Sahara.
reproduce the normative fictions of bounded national sovereignty, rather than examining the complications involved in forging an autonomous territorial political entity in the Sahara. Therefore, in following up on Mundy’s call for “a number of analytical frames” for understanding the situation in Western Sahara, I ask: Why has the opening created by this intervention produced scholarship that remains oriented almost entirely by methodological nationalism?

A new edited volume on the Western Sahara conflict, entitled *Global, Regional and Local Dimensions of Western Sahara’s Protracted Decolonization: When a Conflict Gets Old*, adeptly illustrates how the conflict’s oft-noted intractability entails not only continuity over time, but also the emergence of new dynamics. Bringing together a range of perspectives, the collection provides a broad and comprehensive view of recent developments in this prolonged and ongoing political conflict. Through a collection of articles that reflect multifaceted analysis among scholars from across disciplines and countries, this collection demonstrates that, although the conflict remains unresolved, it does not remain unchanged, with contributions that show how the complexities of the Western Sahara conflict intersect with and have been shaped by a range of developments, institutions, and forces, including the Arab Spring, the European Union, the post-Qaddafi security politics in the Sahel, and even United States hegemony. In showing how the conflict continues to change, the volume’s introduction foregrounds the question of time, noting how the conflict’s intractability invites further inquiry into “the actual traces of the passage of time” on the conflict itself. And yet, the vast majority of articles for the edited volume are weighted toward the recent past, with little attention to how this past has been

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historicized, leaving questions of time and temporality by the wayside. This appears to be a curious omission, if only because a conflict as long-lasting as the Western Sahara conflict is bound to produce a wide range of narratives, counternarratives, conjunctures, generational perspectives, archives and temporalities. This preoccupation with scale, to the exclusion of time, is perhaps oriented by the conflict resolution framework, which focuses on comprehensively identifying the factors that may be preventing resolution of this political dispute.

Thus, we have two frameworks: one of methodological nationalism, and another of conflict resolution. But what if we take the Western Sahara not to be an incomplete political formation, or an unrealized process, but a full manifestation of decolonization – in all of its complexity and unresolved contradictions? Beginning from this framework, I suggest, helps to raise a different set of questions about both Western Sahara and decolonization. What if the decolonization of Western Sahara weren’t approached as a “failed,” “interrupted” or “unrealized” process of decolonization, but an exemplary political formation of decolonization? This would force us to ask, what is decolonization? What forms of political space, time and subjectivity do we find here? What do these heightened tensions reveal about the conceptual grammar underpinning a concept of “orderly decolonization”? And how might the complexity of this formation in the Sahara inform our understanding of the tensions underpinning post-World War II political formations more broadly?

Chapter Summaries

Set in the contested territory of Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, Chapter 1 examines how the poles of loyalty and betrayal structure everyday life in a city where competing sovereignties operate within a single space. As the largest city in the disputed territory of
Western Sahara, Laâyoune/El Aaiún is located at the nexus of conflict and epitomizes the polarizing effects of contested sovereignty. Through reflexive ethnographic writing that accounts for the conditions of widespread surveillance and suspicion in which I conducted research, I suggest that competing Moroccan and Sahrawi sovereignties affect residents’ subjectivities through the very names used to designate the spaces in which they move. The composite spelling of Laâyoune/El Aaiún foregrounds this dichotomy: the dual spellings denote the same name in Arabic [el-ʻayun] but, in the context of the dispute between Morocco and Polisario, connote two different political regimes. My use of both names is a redundancy and exaggeration. But I hold onto this split nomenclature to show how competing sovereignties have for decades divided the attention, allegiances and subjectivities among people sharing the same absolute space of the city.

In Chapter 2, “Subjectivity in Abeyance,” I move from the nexus of Moroccan-Sahrawi conflict to its margins. While national identities such as “Sahrawi,” “Moroccan,” “Algerian” and “Mauritanian” are frequently taken for granted in literature on Western Sahara, this chapter critiques methodological nationalism for assuming a homology between territory, nation and identity in a region long characterized by many borders, and much mobility. In order to counter the use of categories that analytically “fix” the political subjectivities of people in this region of northwest Africa, this chapter foregrounds multiplicity, movement and overlapping identities. Beginning from Nouadhibou, a Mauritanian coastal enclave that attracts people from across western Sahara during the summer, I present a geography of movement and mobility in a context of political fragmentation and confinement, focusing on the figure of the ‘ai’d, or “returnee.” The “returnee” is a subject position produced by the conflict between Morocco and Polisario that is defined by movement, or “defection,” between the parties to the conflict. Despite the cynicism
and stigma of betrayal frequently associated with this figure, I suggest that the “returnee”
provides an example of a subject that occasionally escapes the nationalist political epistemology
upon which the conflict is based, thereby illustrating the tension between ambivalence and
commitment underlying seemingly fixed political identities in this region.

Chapter 3, “Home Is Knocking on the Mind,” follows another figure in the contemporary
political landscape of northwest Africa, the veteran of the Moroccan Liberation Army of the
Sahara, to explore how and why this little-known anticolonial movement of the 1950s remains
politicized today. Though led by Moroccans, many of them young, nationalist and socialist, the
armed movement was composed largely of Saharan. The subsequent conflict between young
Moroccan freedom fighters and Saharan combatants mobilized by genealogical structures of
authority and jihad contributed to the demise of this fleeting movement, and is the focus of this
chapter’s analysis. I suggest that the MLA as an anticolonial armed movement captures how
1950s decolonization in the Sahara constituted a historical moment involving the convergence of
several political projects – of nationalism and jihad, for example – subtended by a single horizon
of expectation. I also note that the history of this moment sits in disjunctive, or nonsynchronous,
relation to competing Moroccan and Sahrawi national histories in the present, both of which
attempt to erase important aspects of this 1950s moment of decolonization. I suggest that this
erasure indicates how national narratives fail to capture the complex dynamics of autonomy and
dependence that characterize longstanding relations between people of the Sahara and their
neighbors to the north.

If the 1950s highlight a disjuncture between the Sahara and surrounding regions, the
1970s foreground how the emergence of Sahrawi nationalism was shaped by contemporaneous
regional and global politics. Chapter 4, entitled “Open Horizons of Change, Narrow Spaces of
Dissent” traces how Sahrawi nationalism, in the form of the Polisario Front, emerged in the early 1970s contemporaneously with a constellation of rising anti-imperial movements from across northwest Africa. Through oral histories gathered from across the region, I show how this open but contested horizon of expectation rendered Western Sahara an object upon which multiple futures, shaped by competing political ideologies, were projected. Furthermore, I show how the tensions underlying Western Sahara’s future were resolved only after Morocco’s invasion of the territory in 1975, which forced many Sahrawis to flee to refugee camps in Algeria, where Polisario, a state-in-exile, remains in place today. In the process, I suggest that this violent rupture transformed Sahrawi nationalism from an anticolonial project into a humanitarian one. This transformation constitutes another “nonsynchronous” aspect of Saharan decolonization, I argue, since Sahrawi national liberation emerged as the prevailing moral framework of global politics was shifting from anticolonial self-determination to human rights and humanitarianism.

Chapter 5 returns to the present to examine how human rights discourse has emerged as a political terrain across Western Sahara. This chapter traces the proliferation of human rights activists, or huquqiyyin, representing parties on all sides of the conflict since a ceasefire in the early 1990s. Examining the emergence, deployment and proliferation of human rights discourse in the Western Sahara conflict since the 1990s, the chapter then moves across multiple sites to consider the uses and effects of human rights practice throughout the region’s disaggregated political geography. In New York City, I reflect on the media, narrative and enframing devices used in an attempt for the documentation of human rights violations in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara to find publicity and audience. In Marrakesh, I describe the spectacle of an international human rights forum and how it reveals the ways in which the Moroccan state utilizes human rights discourse to serve its own security agenda. In the refugee camps in Algeria,
I consider the intersection between human rights activism and the gendered politics of Polisario/SADR. And, finally, in Laâyoune/El Aaiún, I consider the *huquqiyin* as both avatars of Sahrawi resistance, and prone to being judged by those who view human rights in the context of nationalist conflict in cynical and instrumental terms. Across these different contexts, I consider the manifold versions of human rights activism operating as a tactic embedded within a broader political struggle. Depicting the practice of human rights in a context of political conflict where sovereignty and self-determination remain the ultimate aims, I show how human rights discourse has become an extension of political conflict, or war, itself.

This returns the study to *Western Sahara* (1975), which is discussed in greater detail in an Appendix. A sustained analysis of *Western Sahara* (1975) engages with the forms of reasoning and regimes of evidence presented in the operative decision, oral pleadings, as well as dissenting opinions. In contrast to much of the existing legal scholarship on the decision, which situates this decision in relation international law and its Eurocentrism, I argue that the decision foregrounds the tensions inherent in fashioning a formal legal process of decolonization around the realization of territorial nation-state sovereignty. Despite consolidating the legal right to self-determination, *Western Sahara* (1975) paradoxically expresses the limits to “orderly decolonization.”
Chapter 1 – Sedimented Histories and the Competing Sovereignties of Laâyoune/El Aaiún, Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara

Tonight I am dining in occupied territory. In a simple apartment on the second floor of one of the cavernous concrete edifices known as “Batmat” (from the French bâtiment, or building), off a main thoroughfare in Laâyoune/El Aaiún, the largest city in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, I am hosted by a young man and his mother. The mother is telling me about the heavily mythologized Green March of November 6, 1975, when, as a state-sponsored act of protest, some 350,000 Moroccan civilians crossed en masse into Spanish Sahara from the southern Moroccan region of Wed Nun. But far from celebrating this event as it is memorialized in Moroccan nationalist doctrine, she is recounting the arrival of Moroccan soldiers into Laâyoune/El Aaiún ahead of the much-publicized civilian march. In an attempt to annex the territory and preempt the flight of Saharan people who had been anticipating a vote on self-determination, Moroccan soldiers began encroaching on the territory from the east, beginning in October 1975. After the tripartite Madrid Agreement was signed on November 12, finalizing Spanish withdrawal and handing de facto authority to Morocco and Mauritania, many Sahrawi men serving in the Spanish colonial army fled the city to join the Polisario Front, the armed national liberation movement that had emerged two years earlier to fight Spanish colonialism. Residents who stayed behind moved their livestock from the pens surrounding their homes up to

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54 On dining in the Saharawi refugee camps, some 3000 km east from Laâyoune/El Aaiún near Tindouf, Algeria, see Robin Kahn and Federico Guzmán, Dining in Refugee Camps: The Art of Sahrawi Cooking = Cenando En Los Campamentos de Refugiados: Un Libro de Cocina Saharaui (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2010).
55 Tony Hodges, Western Sahara: The Roots of a Desert War (Westport Conn.: L. Hill, 1983), 221–225.
57 Hereafter, Polisario. The acronym Polisario, also referred to as the Polisario Front, is derived from the Front’s Spanish name: Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguia el-Hamra y Rio de Oro. Saguia el-Hamra, in the north, and Rio de Oro (sometimes Wadi Dahhab, or, less frequently, Tiris Gharbiya) in the south, are the two main regions that constitute Western Sahara.
the roof. When this woman, then six or seven years old, accompanied her grandmother to the 
roof of her family’s house, they encountered a Moroccan soldier. Upon seeing them, the soldier 
promptly knocked this woman’s grandmother over with his rifle, spilling a kerosene lamp she 
was carrying and burning the young girl in the process. This, for her, was how decolonization 
took place, and how the Moroccan occupation began.

As we talk, propping ourselves up with pillows on the carpet-covered apartment floor, the 
son makes round after round of tea. Eventually, he begins recounting the litany of beatings, 
arrests and torture that pro-independence Sahrawi presently suffer at the hands of the Moroccan 
security forces. His reports of abuse are interspersed with the mother’s narrative when she joins 
us between trips to the kitchen preparing dinner. Her interjections take us back in time, recalling 
the conditions of living in Laâyoune/El Aaiún in the early years of the military occupation, when 
the Moroccan Army and Polisario were fighting in the surrounding desert countryside, or badiya. 
For five years, she says, no one was allowed to leave the city and go to the desert, an inversion of 
the norm for many Sahrawis for whom city life represented little more than a pause from pastoral 
or nomadic life in the badiya. She recounts the horrors of people disappearing, the rumors of 
odies being thrown into the ocean from helicopters and of being buried in mass graves, and the 
terror that “If you say ‘Polisario,’ tomorrow you’ll end up in M’gouna.”

The mother’s sister, who joins us in the sparsely furnished room as the son prepares tea, 
begin recounting the chaos and uncertainty endured by people who fled east during this time, 
embarking on a journey that, for some, involved Moroccan aircraft strafing them with napalm.

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58 Kela’a M’gouna is a fortress in southern Morocco that was converted into a jail and housed political prisoners, 
including leftists and Sahrawi nationalists, throughout the 1980s and 90s. Estimates of the numbers of disappeared 
Sahrawi civilians vary, but Abdesslam Omar, director of AFAPREDESA, the Association of Families of Sahrawi 
Prisoners and Disappeared based in the refugee camps, claims that there are “over 400.” [Interview, Jan 24 2016, 
Rabouni, Sahrawi refugee camps.] Omar provided a similar figure to the New York Times in Carlotta Gall, 
This epic of violence, displacement, deprivation and loss has itself become foundational to the national narrative of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), a state-in-exile established in 1976, based out of refugee camps in Algeria, and run by Polisario with humanitarian and Algerian support. Before the aunt can finish, however, the sound of pattering footsteps from outside the building interrupts her story. The voiceless, arrhythmic syncopation of small feet hitting the ground reaches us with the suddenness of unexpected rainfall as a group of kids try to escape the police van’s headlights, running along one of the dirt paths that connect the buildings of this apartment complex. Testimonials of the past, recounting the violent origins of Morocco’s occupation, are interrupted by its ongoing presence. The dynamic exchange between mother and son, a contrapuntal narrative weaving a history of injustice with today’s ongoing resistance, gives way to a silent pause. “Stay down,” the mother tells everyone. “Stay down.”

From this point on, I try to speak very little and we all converse in hushed tones, except for the son at whose invitation I had come to dinner. He has too many arrests, confiscations, beatings and confrontations with the police to recount, and whatever fear he may have doesn’t seem to modulate the anger and excitement in his voice. He tells me about Sahrawi students at university in Moroccan cities who had been attacked and then jailed in the aftermath of celebrating Algeria’s success in a World Cup match last month. He names the leader of an activist/media crew in Laâyoune/El Aaiún who was arrested just last night, a fellow videographer whose equipment was taken and destroyed. Just before Ramadan, he says, two women were treated roughly by the police, which, he suggests with foreboding but also not without excitement, portends an upcoming “hot month,” fraught with the potential for escalating rock-throwing confrontations between young folk and the security forces. He shows me a sheet of paper that lists, day-by-day, the locations where protests are set to take place in the coming
weeks. The kids running in and around Batimat in their game of cat-and-mouse with the police vans have become a nightly presence, and their footfalls pass beneath the apartment several more times before the evening is over.

Chapter Overview: History, Geography and Subjectivity in Laâyoune/El Aaiún

Laâyoune/El Aaiún, the capital of a Non-Self-Governing Territory, a politically isolated urban space at the epicenter of an international conflict, a city populated largely as a consequence of coercion and necessity, is, above all, a place of competing sovereignties. These sovereign forces concentrated within the single absolute space of the city produce a highly structured political field. The machinery of the Moroccan military state – soldiers and police in riot gear, undercover mukhabarat of Moroccan state intelligence services, and informants embedded in every neighborhood – represses any sign of visible support for Sahrawi nationalism. Unsurprisingly, the tight control begins before entering the city limits. Two military checkpoints stationed north of the Saguie al-Hamra river greet travelers coming overland from Morocco. Security coming through the Laâyoune airport can be similarly, and selectively, tight, as Morocco restricts foreign journalists from traveling to the city in an effort to maintain a media blackout.59 Much of the territory to the east of Laâyoune/El Aaiún, toward the sand berm where most of the estimated 100,000 Moroccan soldiers are stationed60 and the refugee camps beyond, remains off-limits to civilian travel.

Pro-independence Sahrawis find spaces within the crevices of this machinery – the inside

of a cab, the interior or rooftop of a home – to carve out shared spaces of resistance to Moroccan occupation and to affirm their commitment to the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic. The barely hidden presence of this affiliation exists everywhere: people’s homes may be tuned to SADR television and radio broadcasts from the refugee camps in Algeria, or even decorated with SADR flags for Sahrawi national holidays. A cab driver with like-minded passengers may play songs or poems that are explicitly pro-independence (“Every day we will rise up under the feet of the invader…”61). At the same time, pro-independence activists devise tactics to confront the coercion of Moroccan rule and make it visible by staging a street protest and videotaping it from a nearby rooftop or apartment window. The refugee camps where Polisario’s state-in-exile maintains television and radio broadcasts give the protesters an outlet and an audience, and Polisario’s Ministry for the Occupied Territories coordinates political strategy between the camps and the city, including money transfers that reportedly pass through expatriate Sahrawis living in the nearby Canary Islands.62 Gaining international attention remains the ever-present, if elusive, goal.

The conflict’s polarization seeps into daily life and overdetermines public activity. Even public gatherings that, on the surface, may not involve protest of any kind get drawn into the field of political conflict. Soccer matches that draw the largest crowds to the cafés (Barcelona-Real Madrid, in particular) sometimes end in clashes where flags for Morocco, SADR or Algeria (Polisario’s main backer) are raised. Police and soldiers are also quick to descend upon unemployed college graduates demanding work under the pretense that their protest might “become political.” This threat of “the political” is so pervasive that residents sometimes refer to

61 Kul nhar al-intifāda taht ’aqdam al-ghuza…
62 Fieldnote Dec 5, 2014. The Canary Islands are an archipelago off the coast of northwest Africa and an autonomous community of Spain. The island nearest mainland Africa, Fuertaventura, lies 62 miles from Tarfaya, in southern Morocco. The “Tarfaya Strip” was a part of Spanish Sahara until 1958.
Laâyoune/El Aaiún in dark, even foreboding terms: “the belly of the beast” (kersh al-duba’) or “the mouth of the volcano” (fuhat al-burkan). Sahrawi activists have compared it to being trapped inside a box wrapped in darkness, such that no one can see in from the outside.  

Even Moroccan officials have complained that being assigned there is akin to punishment, despite a wage bonus (reportedly fifty percent, for public functionaries).

The structuring effects of competing sovereignties within a single urban space evoke the confusion, suspicion and disciplining of subjects described in China Miéville’s *The City & the City*. In Miéville’s fictional account, an historical rupture has produced a political formation in which two, politically separate cities exist on top of one another. Everyday life for the residents is carried out on the same streets and in the same built environment, but the citizens of the two cities must discipline themselves to “unsee” the people, signs and architecture of the “other” city. When the borders between these two cities are transgressed, a shadowy, interstitial force asserts itself, known as the “Breach.” Miéville’s masterfully rendered fictional world evokes what Gil Hochberg has called, in reference to the Israeli occupation of Palestine, “parallel geopolitical realities invisible to each other.” For Hochberg and Miéville, a political field structured by competing sovereignties produces subjects disciplined by distinct “ways of seeing,” where the salient boundaries are less geographical than social, concerning what can be seen and who can see it. This conceptualization of the political field draws from Jacques Rancière’s formulation of the distribution of the sensible through which politics revolves around “what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of space and the possibilities of time.”

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only be discerned through an examination of how competing sovereignties shape and structure political subjectivity in a given political field.

The first half of this chapter explores some of the effects of contested political authority on everyday life in the city. The competing sovereignties of Morocco and Polisario/SADR structure this disaggregated political space into a polarized political field characterized by intense surveillance and pervasive suspicion. In addressing the challenges that this surveillance and suspicion presented for conducting ethnographic research, this section frames the methodological situation of being subjected to surveillance in terms of “observed participation.” In examining the pervasiveness of surveillance and suspicion in everyday urban life in Laâyoune/El Aaiún, I describe how this longstanding, polarizing national conflict destabilizes epistemological hierarchies of truth both at the level of subjectivity, but also by destabilizing discursive fields of memory. Despite these methodological challenges, I suggest that this condition of “observed participation” can contribute ethnographically to conceptualizing how surveillance shapes political subjectivity in what Ilana Feldman terms “security society.”

The second half of this chapter will examine the structuring effects of competing sovereignties in Laâyoune/El Aaiún through the sedimentation of the city’s history, tracing this history back to the 1950s and the emergence of decolonization as a horizon of political possibility. This history involves a series of contested, unrealized political projects that include: joint Moroccan-Saharan anticolonial armed struggle in the 1950s; Spanish counterinsurgency and colonialism in the 1960s and 70s; the emergence of Sahrawi nationalism led by the Polisario Front in the 1970s; and the shifting terrain of Moroccan-Saharan conflict since the 1970s.

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66 Ilana Feldman, Police Encounters: Security and Surveillance in Gaza under Egyptian Rule (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 17. In addition to civil society and Partha Chatterjee’s formulation of a “political society,” Feldman suggests that “Security society is a space defined by practices of surveillance and informing, by the forwarding of claims through expressions of suspicion, and by networks of relations that are defined by hesitancy as much as comfortable connection.”
Attending to this history is important, I suggest, for several reasons. First, I suggest that the prolonged and ongoing history of Laâyoune/El Aaiún’s decolonization is also the history of the city’s formation. In this way, attending to the city’s history points to urbanization as a nexus through which postcolonial sovereignty has transformed the relationship between people, authority and territory in this region of the Sahara. Rather than a unitary political entity, however, the formation and history of Laâyoune/El Aaiún epitomizes the unresolved contradictions inherent in post-World War II sovereignty under the United Nations: is sovereignty itself legitimate occupation, or a matter of legal recognition? And, finally, the afterlives of these unresolved political projects are referenced through a variety of place-names still in use throughout Laâyoune/El Aaiún. Together, I suggest, the different political projects referenced through a concatenation of names in Laâyoune/El Aaiún describe a layered history of unresolved political projects sedimented in the city’s built environment and nomenclature.

Section I – “Observed Participation”: some notes on participant observation in a “security society”

Note A – The Immediacy of Surveillance: a knock on the door, a call from police

Early in my fieldwork, I came to know several different ‘a’idin (sing. ‘a’id), or “returnees,” many of whom grew up under Spanish colonialism, joined the Polisario Front in the 1970s, and fought against Morocco throughout the 80s, only to return to Moroccan-occupied territory after the ceasefire in 1991. The designation of ‘a’id refers to former members of the Polisario Front who left the refugee camps to live, with Moroccan state support, in either Moroccan-occupied territory or Morocco proper. Though ‘a’idin and their changing position within the field of contemporary political conflict will be discussed more in Chapter 2, for the purposes of this example it should be noted that they are typically assumed to be “defectors” from Polisario and therefore loyal to Morocco.
The subject position of the ‘a’id lent itself to a particular narrative of Western Sahara’s history, which many ‘a’idin were eager to share in their own cautious way. As a result, I found myself visiting their homes several times.\textsuperscript{67} In order to refer to these experiences without singling out an individual ‘a’id, I will refer to a composite figure throughout this chapter as Lahcen. It should be noted, however, that ‘a’idin are not exclusively men; women and families, including children, have followed this trajectory of “return.” On one occasion, Lahcen and I were reviewing my written account of his historical narrative when there was a knock on his door. He went downstairs to answer and, following a brief conversation that I did not overhear, he returned and peeked his head out through the shuttered, second-story window overlooking the street. Once he was satisfied that the unexpected visitor had left, we resumed proof-reading Lahcen’s historical narrative. When we were done, he mentioned that the person at the door had been a clerk from the qa’id’s office, which serves as the most local jurisdiction for government administration. The clerk, he mentioned, had reported that the office had been made aware of an Arabic-speaking foreigner visiting Lahcen’s house and was checking to see if the visitor was still present. Lahcen said that he had covered for me, telling this low-level government official that we had met one another through a friend, but that I was not at Lahcen’s house at that time. For the rest of my visit that evening, we left our historical review aside, and instead Lahcen provided cautionary advice for how to stay safe and look after my belongings. Some of this advice seemed curious (“Address anyone questioning you firmly and confidently”), while other suggestions seemed utterly necessary (“Don’t carry your notes with you – put them somewhere secure, like under a bed mattress”). At the same time, Lahcen tried to reassure me that government

\textsuperscript{67} This narrative, particular in some ways to a generation of ‘a’idin, asserts the historical independence of certain tribes of the Sahara (implicitly distinguishing the territory from “Moroccan” land). Unlike pro-Polisario Sahrawis, however, ‘a’idin historical narratives frequently foreground the authoritarian nature of Polisario rule prior to a popular uprising that took place in 1988.
surveillance was unusually tight at that moment, given the pending visit of the Princess of Morocco, Lalla Meriem, to Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara. After we wrapped things up, rather than walking to the nearby mosque to catch a cab as I had done previously after visiting his house, Lahcen called for a friend to take me home by car, and came along for the ride as his friend took a roundabout route through dark, side streets.

On another occasion, the police called me after I had returned from conducting an interview with officials from MINURSO, the UN mission tasked since 1991 with monitoring the cease-fire established between Morocco and Polisario. A security perimeter lines MINURSO’s headquarters in lower Laâyoune/El Aaiún, a modest campus converted from a school. Dark blue, Moroccan police vans park across the street from MINURSO’s headquarters, monitoring the monitors at all times. Despite the constant police presence, I was caught by surprise when I received a call the day following my visit. The caller, speaking carefully in English, sought to remind me that we had met previously at the city’s wilaya, or central administration. I had gone to the wilaya several months prior to register in an attempt to procure my research authorization but, instead, ended up in a room for over an hour while different security officials cycled through repeating the same questions, presumably to get a good look at my face. While the caller remembered me, I could not seem to put a face to his name. After dispensing with the chit-chat, he asked if I had been to MINURSO the previous day and wanted to know my reasons for the visit. I told him that I had been to MINURSO to learn about its role in regional governance, and that I had taken the opportunity to go because daytime appointments were otherwise hard to

come by during Ramadan. He asked if I had changed my research topic, expanding into other matters “such as the Green March,” he suggested, but I told him no. He asked how long I was planning to conduct research (I told him until the end of the year) and whether I had received my research authorization (I was still waiting).

These occasions when I interfaced directly with the Moroccan state security apparatus were infrequent and always unanticipated. In the case of the knock at Lahcen’s door, my first thought was to suspend contact with all of my interlocutors, for fear that state security agents would be following up with whomever I met. With the phone call following my visit to MINURSO, I realized that, no matter how many unsolicited warnings that I received to avoid certain people or neighborhoods, the trip wires that put the state on alert were difficult, if not impossible, to know in advance. Though irregular in their occurrence, the moments when state surveillance became manifest – a knock on the door, a phone call from a government official – were significant. In confirming that the state was, indeed, following me, these interventions provided empirical proof to validate the warnings and rumors of state surveillance that were so pervasive to daily life in Laâyoune/El Aaiún.

In this sense, such events constituted moments of clarity: here is when the klieg lights became bright enough to pierce the fog of suspicion. Although they punctuated the everyday rumors and warnings with more immediate forms of contact with the state security forces, the confirmation that these moments of direct contact provided was anything but reassuring. As I wrote in my fieldnotes following the phone call from the government official:

I’m beginning to think that my participant-observation activity might just involve “being observed.” Nevermind the countless police vans and quwwat al-musa’ida69 trucks that I walk past everyday on Avenues Tan-Tan and Smara. It’s the second-hand joking response to a question (“What are you, mukhabarat?”),

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69 Auxiliary Forces, or the equivalent of National Guard in the U.S. Armed Forces. Where the police are outfitted in dark blue, quwwat al-musa’ida soldiers manning these vehicles wear military green pantsuits.
unsolicited advice from a friend (“don’t talk to people you don’t know; eyes are on you”) and/or statement of the obvious to everyone involved (“you know they know exactly where you are right now…”)

But the really unnerving thing about it all is not knowing what they really know and what sets them off. I know that the organized groups around hr [human rights] activism (CODESA, Agdim Izig Coord Committee, etc.) are under close surveillance, and so too are these “Media” groups. But I wouldn’t have guessed that going to see MINURSO would set them off. But not knowing has been what’s made me nervous…

The other aspect is not knowing just how sophisticated and thorough their oversight really is. Do they basically know everywhere I am at all times, which is the impression given by most people’s comments, like, “They know that you’re here, right now, for sure.” But if that’s the case, then is going to MINURSO really more telling or controversial than some of the other people I’ve been meeting with over the last months?  

In its diffuse prevalence, the panopticon has a felt presence in Laâyoune/El Aaiún: a constitutive element of the city’s social fabric, built environment, and communications infrastructure. State surveillance creeps into the walls, the phones, the air. The resulting suspicion is everywhere, too. This fieldnote conveys how the invisible aspects of the militarized state are more unsettling than its readily apparent presence in the form of, for example, armored vehicles (“police vans and quwwat al-musa’ida trucks”) stationed throughout the city. Coming several months into my fieldwork experience in Laâyoune/El Aaiún, this note also reflects how the state’s occasional manifestation only served to amplify my sense of suspicion rather than clarifying the outlines of its presence.

There are several dimensions to being observed in this manner and, as in many ethnographic situations, the implications are both subjective and methodological. The first involves the immediacy of those moments when the state contacted me directly. I found that the immediacy of fear, uncertainty and disorientation produced in these moments defied rationalization. This includes the self-analysis intended by reflexive anthropology, which foregrounds the relational experience between anthropologist and interlocutor at the heart of

70 Fieldnote, July 9, 2014.
ethnographic research. These well-meaning approaches help to deconstruct colonial forms of knowledge and power, which underpin much of the anthropologist’s authority when writing ethnography. However, a reflexive analysis assumes that this dynamic can be resolved by attending to the dialogic encounter between anthropologist and interlocutor.\footnote{Kevin Dwyer, \textit{Moroccan Dialogues: Anthropology in Question} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).} The crisis of authority engendered by conducting ethnographic research under close state surveillance, however, does not lend itself to the same reflexive analysis based on dialogic encounter. As the examples above illustrate, in the moments of hearing a knock on the door, or receiving a phone call, I experienced a sense of both disintegration, and an impulse toward self-preservation. These encounters were neither dialogic, nor between individuals \textit{per se}; rather, they entailed the interpellation of a subject by institutional agents. While these moments are not productive in a dialogic manner, in the ethnographic sense of reflexive anthropology, they may be productive of a relation to authority – an experience, in other words, of subjection.

Being made aware of the presence of surveillance is not strictly dependent upon these moments of direct contact with security and intelligence forces. On the contrary, the pervasive suspicion and occasional manifestation of surveillance work in complementary ways to amplify the state’s seemingly all-encompassing presence and arbitrary interventions. Constantly being made aware of state surveillance is generative not simply of fear, but paranoia. Early in my fieldwork, I was walking along a street during a busy part of the evening when a car slowed alongside me, tinted windows rolled down, and a young guy in the passenger seat asked me for directions. I pointed in the opposite direction and, in somewhat broken Arabic answered “another direction” (“\textit{tija l-akhur}”). The passenger corrected me in mock seriousness - “\textit{tijah al-mu’akis, you mean?”} – rolled up the window and drove off. There was no particularly good reason why I
should have interpreted this interaction as anything other than some young guys exploiting an easy target for amusement during their drive around the city at night. But in the aftermath of that brief encounter, I was sure that someone was sending me a message. For the rest of that walk home, I somehow convinced myself that, rather than asking me for directions, these were agents of police or intelligence or security, letting me know that they knew exactly where to find me.

Months later, as much as I would have liked to say that I had developed a more reliable sense of equanimity, I remained susceptible to this paranoia. One fine afternoon, seated at a café on Avenue Mekka in an area not far from the Moroccan-dominated lower part of the city, I became acutely aware of security personnel on all sides of me. I remember sensing a stillness to the scene, even as the afternoon wind was gaining its usual strength. A couple of National Security vehicles – one jeep and one van – pulled up onto the sidewalk down the street from where I was sitting. A man standing in the doorway behind me was checking his phone. A BMW and a black Renault minivan - the kind the undercover ride around in – then parked in front of the National Security vehicles. An official-looking man stepped out of his BMW and walked over with a big Samsung smart phone, greeting his friends a couple tables over from me. He sat down, sunglasses on, facing my direction. I looked up: a man in a hotel room across the street was surveying the scene from his hotel window. Fifteen minutes later it would seem absurd, but at that moment I thought: this is it, they’re going to arrest me. Would I call the US Embassy first? Would that be shameful? If not, who would I call? What is worse, I had just run out of minutes on my phone.

The two National Security vehicles pulled out onto the street and drove away, up Avenue Mekka. The black Renault van pulled up the street and only then I saw it had civilian plates: just a father and his son, who had possibly made a stop at the patisserie nearby. The man in
sunglasses was still facing me, but he and his friends were engrossed in conversation. At that point, I could reinterpret my whole frame of reference as a misguided conspiracy theory. Reframed in this way, the acute pang of anxiety I had felt also became an embarrassing moment of narcissism: I was not nearly as central to the plot as my mind would have had me believe. And yet, repeated over weeks and months, this constant need to check my frame of reference only compounded the subjective sense of instability: whether before or after the reinterpretation, I could no longer trust myself to know what to think – nor who to trust. And in this way, a kind of paranoia takes root and engenders a need both for constant vigilance to reassert my own sense of reality, and a constant sense that the hierarchies of truth could be shifted by a single, punctuating event that could decisively rearrange my own position within this field of suspicion and surveillance.

In his account of losing his wife unexpectedly during ethnographic fieldwork, Renato Rosaldo describes how the personal experience of loss within his own family profoundly shaped his subsequent ability to relate to his interlocutors’ expressions of anger, grief and rage. While Rosaldo’s experience of loss was not directly related to the “dialogic encounter” of ethnographic research, it was an emotional and deeply personal experience that, in shaping his subjectivity, provided him with insight into the experience of rage. While he would never claim to fully grasp his interlocutors’ experiences based on his own, Rosaldo noted that through his own subjective experience he was able to recognize that “Ilongot anger and my own overlap, rather like two circles, partially overlaid and partially separate. They are not identical.”

Similarly, I suggest that the immediacy of state interventions was significant to my ongoing analysis because it imparted an emotional, subjective experience through which I could relate – however provisionally – to some of the stories that Sahrawis relayed about Moroccan

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police, soldiers, or intelligence officers appearing at their homes. Sometimes, these stories were 
framed in terms of finding one’s agency and pushing back against different forms of state 
imimidation. In one case a Sahrawi man living in Mauritania was visiting family in Laâyoune/El 
Aaiún when he answered the door at his relatives’ house and encountered a Moroccan security 
officer demanding identification. Refusing to capitulate, this man confronted the officer and 
demanded that he leave him and his relatives alone. Whereas certain encounters engender the 
space for political action, other memories demonstrate how contact with the police lead to the 
imprisonment and even disappearance of family members. One media activist recounted his 
vivid memory of an early morning raid in the early 1990s when Moroccan police broke into his 
family’s home and hauled off his older brother, allegedly for spray-painting pro-Polisario graffiti 
on a public wall. While I want to be clear that my life never in any way felt endangered in the 
way many Sahrawis experienced, the anxiety and loss of perspective that I felt in the moments 
where I directly encountered state surveillance punctuated the regularly occurring narratives and 
warnings of surveillance and suspicion with the immediacy of subjective experience. In these 
moments, I could relate, however provisionally, to certain shared, subjective effects of living 
under state surveillance – of “observed participation” in a political field shaped by contested 
sovereignty. 73

As it shaped my partial understanding of certain aspects of my interlocutors’ subjective 
experiences, “observed participation” also provides a framework for unpacking the relationship 
between individual experience and historical process. Where Renato Rosaldo draws upon 
personal experience to mediate between the particularity of his interlocutors’ experience and a

73 In developing Ilana Feldman’s concept of “security society,” understood as a technology of governance that opens 
a particular space of political action, one might say that “observed participation” is a condition of possibility for 
joining Morocco’s “security society.” Ilana Feldman, Police Encounters: Security and Surveillance in Gaza under 
broader, anthropological interpretation, Theodor Adorno draws upon the immediacy of personal experience to consider the relationship between history and the individual. Writing about the experience of having his house searched by Nazi police officers, Adorno notes that subjective immediacy supersedes political or historical analysis:

A fact like a house search in which you do not know whether you will be taken off somewhere or whether you will escape with your life has a greater immediacy for the knowing subject than any amount of political information, itself on the level of the facts, to say nothing of the so-called larger historical context to which only reflection and, ultimately, theory can give us access.  

At the same time, Adorno writes that the house search posed such a threat precisely because of the historical context of National Socialism in which it took place:

If all that had happened was that two relatively harmless officials belonging to the old police force had turned up on my doorstep, and if I had had no knowledge of the complete change in the political system, my experience would have been quite different from what it was. And, in the same way, no one can appreciate the terrors of a totalitarian regime if he has not personally experienced that ominous knock at the door and opened it to find the police waiting outside.

Nothing that I experienced approached the level of threat or terror that confronted a Jew living under National Socialism, or even a Sahrawi nationalist living in Moroccan-occupied territory.

But I reference Adorno because he draws upon personal experience to illustrate that the immediacy of subjective experience is still mediated by historical context and, likewise, that context is itself constituted by the immediacy of subjective experience. One of the tasks of this dissertation is to unpack the dialectic between individual experience and historical context. In an effort to understand the structures that mediate between the two – between the experience of the knock on Lahcen’s door, and the circumstances that produced this knock – this anthropology of decolonization is also, then, a history of the present.

While my direct interactions with Moroccan state surveillance proved to be significant in

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75 Adorno, 20.
shaping my experience of “observed participation,” these moments were relatively few and far between. Though they may have had the effect of amplifying suspicion and fear through the occasional, punctuating event, the vast majority of my time spent in “observed participation” was refracted through others. This includes the constant warnings mentioned above, which served as a kind of fog machine for state surveillance, producing effects of this surveillance while at the same time obscuring the “real” presence of the state by making it seem like the state was everywhere, all of the time. Like the punctuating events of direct contact, the refracted experience of state surveillance served to amplify its effects, ultimately producing a pervasive suspicion to which I became more vulnerable the longer I stayed in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara. In what follows, I will provide some examples of the different figures through which this suspicion is refracted.

Note B – Refracted Surveillance and Three Figures of the Moroccan Security State

Today, I am meeting Salih and an acquaintance of his at a café. The resumption of construction, welding and auto repair activities, along with foot- and car-traffic filling the markets and streets, has brought the stillness of the afternoon gayl, or nap, to a clattering end. By the time I arrive, my friend and his acquaintance are sitting out front of a large, four-story building, known as Agjijimat, which houses a couple of popular cafés on the outskirts of Laâyoune/El Aaiún. Today the weather is unusually serene: the blustery wind hasn’t kept its usual, late-afternoon appointment, leaving the day’s heat to dissipate slowly as the sun goes down. This lends a more relaxed feel to the daily welter of activity that emerges out of the afternoon prayer and crescendos at sundown. On a clear, placid day like this, men fill café sidewalk seating across the city. Here at Agjijimat, recorded music of a woman’s voice and electric guitar – with the patented distortion that, to an outsider, gives the music of the Sahara, or azawan, its psychedelic
sound – emanates from inside the building. We are far from the Moroccan-dominated lower city. Across the wide avenue that heads east to Smara, older men dressed in light blue robes, or dra’a, gather in groups of 15 to 20, sitting on the ground outside of apartment buildings to play cards and other games. At its eastern reaches where the expanse of the desert countryside appears through gaps of undeveloped building lots and wide avenues, the urban landscape is foreshortened. Here, where (and when) the city exhales, the setting would seem to be perfect for chatting over tea.

The ambiance is so pleasant that Salih’s apology (he had planned to host us at his family’s house, but relatives were visiting) barely registers. The man who has accompanied Salih appears at ease in a way that I have come to recognize as the disposition of someone who has nothing to hide from the authorities. No glancing around, no hunching over to speak: he has no affiliations with, nor any leanings toward, Sahrawi independence. As soon as Salih finishes introducing us, his acquaintance, who is at least twenty-five years older than either of us, wastes no time in cutting to the chase. Pausing only to retrieve and light a narrow metal pipe from his leather pouch, the older man begins narrating his experience working as a policeman under Spanish colonialism, speaking eagerly about all of the history he has lived through, and how happy he is to tell me all about it. The ease with which he begins sharing his personal history catches me off-guard and, as if to regain my bearings so that he might start from the beginning and go through his biography chronologically, I pose an innocuous question:

“When were you born, and where?” I ask.

“Sidi Ifni,” he says, “then I moved to Laâyoune/El Aaiún in 1961.”

“Where did you live in Laâyoune/El Aaiún?”

Khasriatou? The Spanish name from colonial times for the neighborhood al-Massira? This is not something I had heard of before. Gingerly, I reach for something to jot that down, pulling out a rectangular, legal notebook. The gesture itself feels strange – typically, I would use a pocket-sized pad for casual conversation in public space – but since we are far from the lower city, or even the center of town (where the visible presence of state functionaries and members of the Moroccan state security apparatus overdetermine what can be said), I overcome my hesitation. Besides, after this man’s willingness to talk caught me by surprise, I am scrambling to keep up.

My notebook is out just long enough for me to jot down “Khasriatou” when I observe a shift in Salih’s and his acquaintance’s demeanor: it comes over them like a shadow, suddenly and in concert, as they lean back in their seats, eyes widening. The man stops talking, moving with measured understatement as our collective attention shifts away from his narrative and toward the notebook in my hands. There is no sudden start, no reflexive command to “put that away,” but the looks on their faces indicate clearly enough that something going on behind me altered the space. The bright white of my notepad now feels like it is screaming, so I put it away and ask about Salih’s houseguests. The music goes on, but for us, the conversational ease of our interaction has dissipated, and the late afternoon ambiance has been interrupted. We agree to move somewhere else to do the interview, taking a taxi to my apartment.

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The Moroccan state makes its presence felt in Laâyoune/El Aaiún in multiple ways. The combined presence of the police and auxiliary forces make the politics of control visible throughout the city: dark blue police vans, sheathed in protective grating and sometimes pock-marked from numerous past encounters with rock-throwing protesters, patrol the neighborhoods. Auxiliary forces’ bulbous white vans sit parked at sensitive intersections, grouped by the half-
dozen and ready for rapid deployment. These vans and the riot-helmeted security forces they transport mark the most visible elements of a militarized state governing without consent. They manifest the overbearing presence of the state in its struggle to establish its sovereignty and quell dissent. Their purpose is to repress the visible manifestation of pro-independence protest, and therefore their targets are fairly clear. Indeed, from the moment I arrived in Laâyoune/El Aaiún, interlocutors told me to avoid certain types of people (human rights activists, known as *huquqiyyin*), neighborhoods (Hay Mu‘atalla), and situations (organized protests). In this respect, the conflict made certain lines very bright.

But state surveillance reached far beyond the sites of regular political protest and specific hubs of activism. This became clear to me one day as I was walking on a busy commercial street in the direction of Avenue Smara, the central artery bisecting the city’s eastward expansion. A relatively high-profile protest had been planned that day, one coordinated by pro-independence Sahrawi groups such as CODESA and ASVDH. After stopping at a bookstore, I walked to the corner of Avenue Smara. Young women were walking in my direction, some looking back over their shoulders toward a band of helmeted officers on the next block. From the confused air and lingering crowd, it appeared as though I had reached a protest at mid-dispersal. I did not see any batons raised, nor anyone on the ground, but some kind of confrontation had just taken place and, in the aftermath, some people milled around, watching, while others were running. I turned off

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76 For protests, I was told that the police spared no foreigners from their batons when intervening to put down a protest.


78 CODESA (Collectif des défenseurs Sahraouis des droits de l’homme) and ASVDH (the Sahrawi Association of Victims of Grave Human Rights Violations) are two leading Sahrawi human rights organizations operating in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara. Morocco refused recognition to them for years, finally granting ASVDH recognition in 2015 (reportedly to fulfill a demand by the US Department of State in exchange for not pushing for UN oversight of human rights in Western Sahara before the UN Security Council). More on these organizations in Chapter 5.
onto the first side street I could find, behind a supermarket, and checked my phone. When I looked up, two plainclothes men were standing before me. I had not seen them arrive, but one of them had his hand extended and was already introducing himself. He had a thick mustache. Behind them was parked a late-model, black Citroën minivan. The mustachioed man began peppering me with questions in formal Arabic: he said that the police had reported my whereabouts, asked how I was doing, demanded to know where I was going, and what, exactly, I was doing with my phone. I told them I was going to shop at a supermarket, and that I had a missed call. They told me to go inside the supermarket, already, and escorted me to its entrance.

These are the mukhabarat, members of Morocco’s bevy of intelligence agencies. They may accompany police and soldiers to protests, in plainclothes, for the purposes of singling out specific, known activists for arrest or beating. For reasons evident from the experience above, I rarely witnessed protests first-hand unless they took place directly outside my apartment. However, Sahrawi activist media teams such as Equipe Media and others often record protests from the rooftop of a building or an apartment window, and their videos frequently show plainclothes officers at the frontlines of protest interventions. Their presence carries more sinister implications since, unlike the police and soldiers who simply use force to repress and arrest protesters, the mukhabarat are responsible for interrogating and torturing activists arrested for their political activities. As one Sahrawi activist whom I met in the Moroccan capital of Rabat told me, anytime he went to certain city government offices to take care of an administrative issue for his family, he would recognize the men who had tortured him from a previous arrest. Thus, the mukhabarat occupy a position within the coercive state apparatus that, though ostensibly unmarked, remains only partially concealed.

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79 See Witness Media Labs for archived footage: https://lab.witness.org/tag/western-sahara/.
80 Fieldnote November 26, 2014.
The sheer size and intensity of the intelligence-gathering state apparatus manifests itself in peculiar ways, as well. One day, while chatting with a friend at a neighborhood café, a black Citroën minivan pulled out of a side street across from us. The minivan had been parked at a neighborhood branch for the Party of Justice and Development (PJD), the ruling party at the national level of Moroccan politics since 2011. Shortly thereafter, the Citroën minivan returned, accompanied by a black Mercedes, and swept by the party offices again where a meeting was being held. My friend interrupted our conversation and shook his head, unable to overlook the banality and absurdity of what we had just witnessed. In keeping tabs on a local meeting of the national ruling party, the intelligence officers, as agents of the state, were spying on the state.

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At Agjjimat, sitting with my back to the café, I could not see what Salih and his acquaintance had seen. But their looks captured, and reflected, the emergence or manifestation of yet another, still more submerged layer of Moroccan state surveillance, one that was constantly referenced but rarely defined. Unlike the ever-present police and soldiers, and my encounters with the shadowy mukhabarat, I had only experienced this least visible layer of surveillance refracted through my interlocutors’ warnings, suggestions, and advice. But when Salih turns to the older man and says something about bergag (pl. braguig; the word comes from Moroccan

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81 Despite a constitutional amendment in 2012, the monarchy maintains direct control over certain ministries: defense, foreign affairs, and the interior. This part of the Moroccan state is referred to as the makzen. Other consultative groups related to the Sahara report directly to the makzen, bypassing parliamentary oversight. These include the Royal Advisory Council for Saharan Affairs (CORCAS), and the High Commission for Former Resistance Fighters and Members of the Liberation Army.

82 PJD won a new mandate through national parliamentary elections held Oct 7, 2016. At the regional level, however, Laâyoune/El Aaiún has long been a bastion of control for the Istiqlal Party, the center-right political party and, as the oldest continuous political party in Morocco, the one most closely associated with nationalism. The most powerful local elected official, Hamdi Ould Rachid, comes from a family closely tied to Moroccan rule and is a member of the Istiqlal Party. Elections in the Sahara, unsurprisingly, are notoriously corrupt. Many Sahrawi boycott them. However, to pride itself on high turnout, people are allegedly paid to vote. A couple of interlocutors told of having been paid to work to pay people to “get out the vote” in this manner.

83 It is sometimes suggested that the figure of the bergag is distinctly Moroccan. Playing on the Algerian motto “land of 1.5 million martyrs” referring to the number of Algerians who died in the War of Independence, the
Colloquial Arabic, or *darija*), I realize that a particularly embedded and diffuse, yet technologically rudimentary, form of this surveillance emerged before their very eyes in the moment when I pulled out my notebook. Neither police nor necessarily *mukhabarat*, the state uses (and, perhaps, pays) *braguig* to inform on people to the state.

The *bergag* could be a neighbor, a teacher, a café server, a Sahrawi, a *dakhili*\(^8^4\) – they could have been any one of the customers drinking tea or coffee in front of the Agjijimat building. I constantly received warnings about *braguig*, and while I could infer from certain interactions that specific small shop owners, café servers – or even interlocutors – were likely serving as government informants, their embeddedness in the social fabric of the city itself made it difficult to confirm their presence with any certainty. For that same reason, they were always on the mind. Months earlier, when I was still beginning fieldwork, a friend lingered with me in the street not far from my apartment, pointing up and down the block. Warning me about the perils of conducting research in Laâyoune/El Aaiún, and Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara in general, he suggested ominously that, on this block, alone, at least 15 people were under the employ of the state. These were the *braguig* whom Salih and his acquaintance saw emerge outside the Agjijimat café one late afternoon in Laâyoune/El Aaiún. And in that moment of emergence, refracted through their reactions, I felt as though the mutually imbricated relationship between “state” and “society” in Laâyoune/El Aaiún, and its diffuse effects in producing suspicion, manifested itself most fully.

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This pervasive sense of suspicion sometimes meant that my interlocutors were speaking to an audience that was at once invisible and immediately present. On one occasion, after a

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\(^8^4\) Known in the plural as “*dakhiliyyin,*” or “insiders,” meaning those from “inside” Morocco.
conversation in his taxi, a driver invited me to call and meet up at a later date. After several weeks passed, we met at a café on Avenue Mekka, which had been known as Avenida Galicia before Spanish withdrawal and now sits at the heart of the city’s more upscale commercial district. While not as overwhelmingly Moroccan as the military and police neighborhoods in the lower city, this part of Laâyoune/El Aaiún attracts a mixed crowd at night with the well-lit streets and shiny cafés. In our first encounter in the cab, the driver had proffered the kind of impromptu historical narrative – of the Sahara having been colonized not once, but twice (first by Spain, then by Morocco), the second time being much worse than the first – that became a hallmark of entering alone into a cab with a Sahrawi driver. This time, however, as we entered the public space downtown, the taxi driver opened our conversation by asking me about my religion and extolling the virtues of Islam. For the next hour and a half, he spoke to me about the sunna and Qur’an in an almost unbroken monologue, continuing even after we left the café and reached the outer neighborhoods where we both lived. It wasn’t until sometime later that I realized that his monopolization of discourse and his choice of topic was related as much to his discomfort with the surroundings as to his interest in proselytizing (which was not unusual as far as a topic of conversation, but usually was brought up by people whom I had only just met). In this way, the Moroccan state’s far-reaching surveillance and the pervasive sense of suspicion that it produced created a general, impersonal third party to many conversations, and shaped what people did, and did not talk about, in substantial ways.

Widespread suspicion, and tight surveillance, had broad ramifications for carrying out fieldwork in what I have been calling, in borrowing a phrase from Ilana Feldman, a “security society.” On one level, I was constantly preoccupied with the ethical concern about exposing someone I had met to retaliation by the state. On another level, I was worried that the creeping
fear which resulted from regularly hearing about the state surveillance would make me shy away from connecting with pro-independence Sahrawi activists. If I too closely followed the advice to steer clear of those bright lines demarcating people and places which the Moroccan state considered particularly sensitive (human rights activists, Hay Mu‘atalla, organized protest), then I risked letting the machinery of the state influence my research.

But in a context as politicized as Laâyoune/El Aaiún, where different sets of names and vocabulary had to be used with different interlocutors, I was concerned with more than just access. I realized with time that, through sheer overexposure, I actually risked internalizing one propaganda discourse over another: there was no neutral space. Over time, it became surprisingly and dangerously easy to conflate the Moroccan view that the “separatists” (“al-infissaliyyin,” or pro-independence Sahrawis) posed a “nuisance” (resistance) as if they – and not the state – necessitated the constant surveillance, and that therefore the “separatists” – and not the state – were the cause of the fear, instability, and suspicion that permeated my experience of Laâyoune/El Aaiún. In this sense, the activity of fieldwork research felt as though it were working not only against the interference of the state security apparatus, but against the felt weight of sovereignty, that authority which, in Carl Schmitt’s words “turns a part of the earth’s surface into the force-field of a particular order.” Schmitt’s nomos is a force of both order and orientation, naming the enemy and shaping politics not just as a struggle between factions and institutions but through, in Jacques Rancière’s terms, “the distribution of the sensible,” through which “[p]olitics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the

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ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of space and the possibilities of
time.”

This posed a number of methodological challenges, which, as I have outlined in this
section, were both logistical and, in Rancière’s terms, sensible. On one occasion, for example, a
friend arranged for us to conduct an interview with a pro-independence activist in what
amounted to a kind of “safe house” about ten minutes outside the city; another time, I climbed
into someone’s car thinking that I was going to a standard interview, only to find that we wove in
and out of side streets as the other passengers looked out the back to see if we were being tailed
by state intelligence. Aside from the difficulties and anxieties that attended the logistics of
arranging interviews, the ever-present awareness of surveillance had various effects on what
could be said. On the one hand, it was not uncommon to encounter someone and be spoken to on
a quasi-diplomatic register. In these instances, people were reciting political scripts to counteract
an enemy discourse. This diplomatic register reflects the degree to which the conflict, as a
struggle over sovereignty, has long been imbricated in the politics of international recognition.
Indeed, despite its political isolation under Morocco’s media blackout, and its relative obscurity
beyond regional, North African politics, the pivotal role of the international community in
resolving the conflict dates back to the 1950s, when the question was first put before the United
Nations’ Committee on Decolonization.

The absent presence of a third party – whether the fear of Moroccan surveillance, or the
appeal to international attention – shapes what can and cannot be said in Laâyoune/El Aaiún,
much the way that a shadowy force known as the “Breach” upholds the overlapping

87 Listed as a Non-Self-Governing Territory since 1963, the status of the territory has been the subject of debate at
the UN since at least October 1957, when a Moroccan delegate opposed the territory’s inclusion on the Committee
for Decolonization, claiming it as an integral part of Morocco, instead. José Ramón Diego Aguirre, La última guerra
sovereignties in Miéville’s *The City & the City*. Together with the contemporary conditions of intensive policing and surveillance, everyday life in Laâyoune/El Aaiún is structured by the binary field of national conflict, and is shot through with suspicion. This suspicion continues to shape the construction of Sahrawi political subjectivity in important ways, with the opposition of Moroccan to Sahrawi, and of political loyalty to opportunism. The longstanding struggle over sovereignty that has marked decolonization in the Sahara continues to shape both everyday life in Laâyoune/El Aaiún, as well constructions of the past. With the polarization of national conflict structuring everyday life in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara today, the evocation of different historical narratives and memories capture the ways in which this past is structured by the binary oppositions of the present.

Section II – Suspicion, Contestation and Historical Memory: El-Ouali Mustafa Sayid and Agdim Izik

The longstanding struggle over sovereignty that has marked decolonization in the Sahara has shaped both the built environment of Laâyoune/El Aaiún, as well as constructions of the past. With the polarization of national conflict structuring everyday life in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara today, the evocation of different historical narratives and memories capture the ways in which this past is structured by the binary oppositions of the present. Two examples, in particular, illustrate how this pervasive surveillance/suspicion produces competing narratives about past events and figures. The first involves El-Ouali Mustafa Sayid. El-Ouali Mustafa Sayid occupies a singular place in popular and official narratives as a founder, leader and martyr of Sahrawi nationalism. Because of drought and the political instability wrought by the Liberation Army of Morocco, Sayid’s father, like many Sahrawis, settled in Tan Tan, in the Wed Nun region, in the late-1950s. El-Ouali was among the first generation of Sahrawis schooled in
southern Morocco. El-Ouali then matriculated at Mohamed V University in Rabat and became involved in leftist student politics in the late-1960s. Affected by the experience of his father’s generation, many of whom were disillusioned by their experience with the 1950s Liberation Army of Morocco, and by news of the 1970 Intifadat al-Zemla in Laâyoune/El Aaiún, El-Ouali was at the center of a growing conversation among Sahrawis living in Rabat who were concerned about the political future of Spanish Sahara. El-Ouali is said to have consulted broadly with leaders of Moroccan political parties in the 1970s, while also participating in the student branch of UMT (L’union marocaine du travail), the labor union affiliated with the socialist Moroccan party, USFP. El-Ouali also helped to write a polemical piece in the publication Anfas, linked to the radical leftist group, Ila al-Amam, which declared “A New Palestine in the Land of the Sahara.”

In May 1972, El-Ouali and a group of fellow Sahrawi students in Rabat organized a street protest during the yearly festival, or moussem, in Tan Tan. In what is popularly seen as a formative moment in what was to become Polisario, local Moroccan authorities imprisoned the students, who, eschewing direct engagement with the Moroccan state, subsequently moved to northern Mauritania and began organizing Sahrawis living outside of Spanish Sahara, while also establishing international contact with figures such as Mu’ammam al-Qaddafi. Learning from the nascent movement which had been destroyed after Intifada al-Zemla, the goal was to organize working cells across the Sahara into a decentralized national liberation front. The students were remarkably successful, putting Spain on the defensive with insurgent attacks on military outposts beginning in 1973, and organizing pro-independence rallies in front of UN delegations visiting in the spring of 1975 (Chapter 4). When Morocco and Mauritania jointly annexed the territory later

that year, Polisario shepherded large numbers of Sahrawis fleeing the conflict to take refuge in camps near Tindouf, Algeria, and later captured more during their attacks on their new adversaries.

As a leader of the movement during this critical, formative phase, El-Ouali Mustafa Sayid remains a uniquely outsized figure in the history of the region. He remains revered as a charismatic leader, a hero and a martyr. Not unlike Che Guevara in Latin American leftist movements, the face of El-Ouali Mustafa Sayid has become emblematic of Sahrawi liberation and, besides perhaps the flag itself, remains the preeminent symbol of Sahrawi self-determination. For that very reason, narratives about his life are mediated by the politicized situation in the region at present. For many Sahrawis, whether they support Polisario, Sahrawi nationalism, or not, El-Ouali represents the irrepressible spirit of freedom which the Moroccan state cannot eradicate. The story which most reflects this dynamic, and which is almost always told when El-Ouali’s name comes up, whether in a formal or informal setting, concerns his achievements in higher education. While studying at Mohamed V University in Rabat, the story goes, El-Ouali achieved the highest score ever on a math exam, earning the honor of having his name engraved on a wall at the university, which has since been erased. This story reveals several tensions in the relationship between the Moroccan state and the people of the Sahara. Whereas the Moroccan government frequently tries to undermine any autonomous Sahrawi identity by pointing out that even the leaders of Sahrawi nationalism were products of the Moroccan education system, this story inverts such a narrative to suggest that El-Ouali was, instead, disavowed by Morocco even though he proved more than capable of excelling in

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89 Popular memories of El-Ouali in the course of my fieldwork are reminiscent of Aimé Césaire’s depiction of Patrice Lumumba, in *A Season in the Congo*, wherein Lumumba embodied a similarly impossible spirit of freedom, inspiring to all and exploited by all at one and the same time. Aimé Césaire, *A Season in the Congo: a Play*. (New York: Grove Press, 1969).
postcolonial society. Besides emphasizing the singular intellectual genius of their nationalist leader, the story foregrounds the erasure of Sahrawis, despite their ability to contribute as modern citizens on par with other Moroccans. This disrespect references a central point of tension between bidani people of the Sahara, and their neighbors, the chleuh, to the north. A couplet from one of Polisario’s rhymes, which circulated in the 1970s and served to mobilize people across the region to rally to their cause, references this sense of being looked down upon by the Moroccans:

*We climbed the mountain to the summit
To expose those who call us sheep herders*

The reference to El-Ouali’s legendary achievement at university similarly emphasizes the organic intellectual capacity of the Sahrawis, and their ability to surprise anyone who underestimates them.

Texts about El-Ouali Mustafa Sayid remain heavily censored; an activist I met in Laâyoune/El Aaiún mentioned that authorities confiscated a book about El-Ouali Mustafa Sayid from him after finding a copy while he was riding a bus back to Laâyoune/El Aaiûn from college. For this reason, I eagerly took up a friend’s offer to procure a text about El-Ouali as we were driving through Goulmime in the Wed Nun region of southern Morocco. As it turned out, a copy of the text, a memoire of sorts by the Libyan political operative Mohamed Said Qashshat about his time spent fomenting revolution in Mauritania and Western Sahara in the early 1970s, was delivered like sensitive contraband. We pulled over on the highway in Goulmime just long enough for my traveling companion’s friend, a former classmate from college, to pull up on his motorbike and hand the photocopied text over. The fellow on the motorbike barely lingered long enough for a greeting, and we promptly buried the text in the car trunk, beneath the rest of our

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90 Other ethical markers invoked by Sahrawis to differentiate themselves from *abel al-tell*, or people from the north, include deception and untrustworthiness.
luggage.

Respect for El-Ouali Mustafa Sayid within the Sahrawi community is unparalleled. Perhaps uniquely, he transcends deep tribal divisions that have historically riven the community, and which the Moroccan state relentlessly tries to exploit. A member of the most populous tribe in the region, the Reguibat, El-Ouali led a number of successful military campaigns, first against Spain, then against Morocco and Mauritania following Spanish withdrawal in 1975. During this time, El-Ouali was also traveling between Libya, Algeria, Lebanon and elsewhere in the Middle East in an attempt to garner material and diplomatic support for Polisario. Though initially close to Mu’ammar al-Qaddafi, Polisario developed particularly close institutional ties to Algeria, which has permitted Polisario’s state-in-exile to operate from refugee camps on its territory. El-Ouali was the point person in all of Polisario’s diplomatic missions. And yet he insisted on leading attacks at the front lines of battle, as well. As Polisario fought a war on two fronts against both Morocco and Mauritania during the period between 1976 and 1980, it made the strategic decision to focus its attacks on “the weakest link,” Mauritania, which increasingly relied on French air force support. Between 1976 and 1979 Polisario carried out direct incursions into Mauritanian territory, the most audacious of which involved an attack on the Mauritanian capital of Nouakchott. During this raid in July 1977, El-Ouali was killed by air strikes.

During this same period, however, the leadership of the Polisario movement underwent significant turmoil. The composition of the political bureau went through multiple changes, with dissenters imprisoned or, occasionally, executed. Facing extremely difficult conditions on the military front, Polisario became increasingly reliant on, and tied to, Algerian support and certain

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changes during this time are attributed to Polisario leadership having “sold” the national cause to Algeria. It was during this period of turmoil that El-Ouali was killed during a Land Rover-led attempt to strike Nouakchott. Whether due to the recklessness which led to his death, or the persistent obscurity surrounding his remains (the Mauritanian government has never identified or handed over El-Ouali’s body), a story persists which suggests that El-Ouali was “sacrificed” by members of Polisario leadership precisely because he would not submit to Algerian command.

Like the story about El-Ouali’s academic achievements, the story about his death may be apocryphal. Or, put another way, it may as well be apocryphal, since its persistence reflects a political position more than anything. On the first count, no matter how much Morocco tries to undermine his accomplishments, much less erase them, the spread of Sahrawi national consciousness remains a social fact. Whether attributed to the work of a charismatic leader, or to a cohort or generation, this achievement, like El-Ouali’s score on a university math exam, cannot be erased. Or, as a man in the refugee camps in Algeria put it, “For better or worse, we put this train on its tracks.” In this sense, El-Ouali serves as a transcendent figure for the Sahrawi people in the face of Moroccan repression.

The second story, meanwhile, is somewhat more complicated. In this narrative, El Ouali remains a transcendent figure of Sahrawi nationalism, but one sacrificed by the state-in-exile that purports to represent his legacy. In this sense, the persistence of this story matters most to people who dissent from both Morocco and Polisario, and therefore have little institutional purchase within the political conflict. This may include Sahrawis in Moroccan-occupied territory, refugees in Algeria who are disillusioned with Polisario leadership, Mauritanians of Sahrawi origin, and Sahrawis living abroad in Europe. In particular, it includes a certain contingent of ‘a’idin, or “returnees,” who joined Polisario only to suffer imprisonment or, in some cases, torture, during
the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s. Many ‘a’idin left after the ceasefire in 1991, but others remained in the camps until recently. For them, the story of El-Ouali’s death is a repudiation of Polisario leadership that, in continuing to revere El-Ouali, refuses to align itself with Moroccan propaganda. Here, the conditions of suspicion and uncertainty that allow for alternative historical narratives to persist also provide the space for political dissent.

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This dynamic also plays out in relation to how much more recent events are remembered. In the fall of 2010, a Sahrawi protest encampment in an area outside of Laâyoune/El Aaiún, known as Agdim Izik, grew into the thousands. After months of protest, Moroccan security forces laid siege to the tent encampment, estimated to include 6000 tents and upwards of 10,000 Sahrawis. During the siege, carried out the morning of 8 November 2010, eleven members of Moroccan security forces, as well as two civilians, were killed. Rather than seeking the perpetrators, Morocco targeted activists involved in media teams, and brought them to trial. The accused were tried before a military trial (since made unconstitutional), and the group of 25 (now known as the Agdim Izik 21, given that one was sentenced in absentia, and three others have been released) was given sentences ranging from 20 years to life imprisonment.

For many supporters of Sahrawi independence, the Agdim Izik protest represented a precious breakthrough in popular efforts to make the Sahrawi nationalist cause and resistance to

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Moroccan oppression visible before an international audience. The largest protest to take place in the occupied territories since the intifada of 2005, Agdim Izik represented a continuation, escalation and renewal of popular Sahrawi resistance to Moroccan occupation. Whereas major uprisings in 1999 and 2005 had involved protests of various kinds within the city, the Agdim Izik protest took form as a tent settlement that expressed dissent by moving outside the city of Laâyoune/El Aaiún. As such, it represented a rare instance where popular mobilization actually outmaneuvered the Moroccan state, in this case by moving beyond the confines of the city. In addition, the move to tents and the physical act of displacement resonated with longstanding practices in the Sahara where simply leaving a settlement constituted a fundamental rejection of authority.94 Although the violence precipitated by the Moroccan siege led to a measure of international coverage, Noam Chomsky’s claim that Agdim Izig marked the real beginning of the Arab Spring gave the most sought after kind of recognition to Sahrawi nationalism: a recognized place in world history.95 Furthermore, Agdim Izik has continued to attract attention from Amnesty International and other groups after Morocco conducted a military trial to convict media activists for the deaths of several Moroccan soldiers who were killed during the siege.96


In this manner, Agdim Izi has taken its place in a chain of events constituting the national history of Sahrawi popular struggle, from Intifadat al-Zemla in 1970, to protests in 1999 and the Intifadat al-Istiqlal launched in 2005. Scenes from Agdim Izi, either featuring crowds gathered in the tent city listening to speeches and waving SADR flags, or depicting its violent dispersal, are constantly played on SADR television broadcast out of the refugee camps, generally with reference to the “epic” [al-melhama] of Agdim Izi. Perhaps surprisingly, then, there was also a counternarrative of this event that emphasized its origins as a protest started by disillusioned, unemployed college graduates who sought jobs, with no other political aims. This take on Agdim Izi suggested that security forces did not immediately close down the encampment because of a lingering power struggle between Laâyoune/El Aaiún’s Wali, or governor, and the longtime president of the regional council and member of a powerful family, Hamdi Ould Rachid. What is more, this counternarrative suggests that Ould Rachid and other members of the Sahrawi elite actively provisioned the encampment with water, gas and other supplies as it grew. As the encampment developed, one member of the camp’s original coordination committee told me that they developed careful rules governing the behavior for those living in the camps, which included banning the raising of a SADR flag, knowing that such an act would give pretext to the Moroccan state to intervene. In this telling, it was an informant for the Moroccan state who first raised a SADR flag, sparking what turned into days, if not weeks, of political protest.

It should come as no surprise that, in a place at the center of an ongoing political dispute, there would be competing narratives of the past. But what is striking about the counternarrative concerning Agdim Izi is how the epistemological basis of political commitment can be inverted by a hermeneutics of suspicion. Any visible political act may be attributable to the work of an

https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/04/01/morocco-tainted-trial-sahrawi-civilians
informant, or an agent. Any outward expression of support for a cause may be interpreted as an opportunistic act to ingratiate oneself with the machinery and political economy of the conflict. Yet, similarly, the version of Agdim Izik protest that garnered international attention, and which focuses on the Sahrawi nationalist resistance to Moroccan repression, leaves no room to read political action outside of the grammar of conflict. Like so much that takes place in Laâyoune/El Aaiún, there is an endless, ongoing struggle over the very basis of reality: if pro-Sahrawi graffiti appears on walls around the city, someone will claim that it is the work of Moroccan security forces looking to create more work for itself. Some of these assertions are less plausible than others, and appear more blatantly propagandistic. But with so much surveillance embedded in everyday life, and with the pervasive sense of suspicion that arises, the relentless struggle in shaping discourse over the unfolding past and present of political conflict, act like a blustery wind that creates an ongoing sandstorm. This creates the conditions in which political claims to truth are frequently destabilized and, as a result, ongoing efforts to produce and sustain political legitimacy are constantly churning and muddying the surface of things.

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In this next section, I suggest that Laâyoune/El Aaiún’s political geography and built environment reflect the sedimentation of a prolonged struggle over political authority and sovereignty, ushered in by the arrival of decolonization as a horizon of political possibility beginning in the 1950s. As this history of decolonization has shifted from anticolonial struggle in the 1950s, to Spanish withdrawal and Morocco-Polisario armed conflict in the 1970s, to new arena of struggle following a ceasefire in the 1990s, the city of Laâyoune/El Aaiún has become increasingly pivotal to the political dispute. This next section will examine how a history of decolonization marked by three unresolved political projects is sedimented in the political geography of the city itself.
Sedimented histories: the political geography of Laâyoune/El Aaiún

Near El Ayun, a shed in ruins caught my attention:
“That was a phosphate prospecting company,” an officer told me.
“Why is it abandoned?”
“I don’t know. Military matter.”
“But the soil certainly is quite rich, why isn’t it being exploited?”
“Military matter.”

Laâyoune/El Aaiún is, and has long been, a heavily militarized place. The largest city in the disputed territory of Western Sahara, the city has been at the heart of efforts to decolonize the region dating back to the 1950s. In 1957, when the anticolonial Liberation Army of Morocco led an uprising throughout Spanish Sahara, the Spanish colonial administration kept Laâyoune/El Aaiún on lockdown, even as it temporarily retreated from the rest of the region. In 1970, Spanish soldiers shot and killed between two and twelve Sahrawi protesters on a small rise known as al-zemla, an event widely seen as marking – and, in its violence, amplifying – the public emergence of Sahrawi nationalism. But the events of 1975 and 76 – Spanish withdrawal, Sahrawi flight, and Moroccan annexation – are widely considered decisive in shaping the history of conflict that has followed. Since that time, the broad outlines of the conflict have remained largely in place: Morocco has effectively occupied the region since the Green March and military invasion in 1975; a Sahrawi independence movement, represented internationally by Polisario, has been based out of refugee camps in Algeria since 1976; and many (but not all) Sahrawis living in Moroccan-occupied territory support Polisario, Sahrawi

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98 This will be the subject of Chapter 3.
99 One man who was a child living in Laâyoune/El Aaiún at the time, recalls sleeping under a barrel cut in half as a protective measure for the clashes taking place outside the city. [Interview, Jan 24, 2016, Rabouni, Sahrawi refugee camps.]
100 This word comes from Hassaniya, the colloquial form of Arabic spoken and written (in poetry, in particular) in the Arabic-speaking Sahara.
nationalism, or both. While the conflict between Morocco and Polisario has continued without resolution for decades and remains ongoing, the locus of struggle has shifted several times: from 1975 until a UN-brokered ceasefire that took effect in 1991, the two parties were engaged in armed struggle; from the ceasefire until 2005, the conflict was displaced onto UN-mediated efforts to hold a referendum or, barring that, reach a peace settlement. And, since efforts to reach a settlement or hold a referendum have been stalled, if not abandoned, the conflict has shifted again, this time onto the moral-political terrain of human rights. Each shift in the terrain of struggle has transformed Laâyoune/El Aaiún while magnifying its importance within the broader landscape of conflict. At the same time, the city’s history is marked by the repeated use of incentives and coercion to populate the city, and a mutually imbricated relationship between a militarized “state” and a “society” of surveillance, which produces widespread suspicion.

Unfinished Political Project 1: Spanish colonialism, Moroccan contestation, 1956 to 1975

This shifting terrain of struggle, from Spanish colonialism, to Moroccan military intervention, to the past two decades of sustained conflict within the framework of a ceasefire, are etched in the three-part political geography of Laâyoune/El Aaiún. The city first took form as a city after World War II, under Spanish colonial rule. Following the discovery of phosphate deposits in 1947, Spain began building housing both for colonial workers, coming mostly

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102 Another constant terrain of struggle throughout the conflict has been diplomacy. Carl Schmitt’s observation seems apt in this regard: “A British diplomat correctly stated…that the politician is better schooled for the battle than the soldier, because the politician fights his whole life whereas the soldier does so in exceptional circumstances only.” Carl Schmitt, The Concept of the Political (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 34.

103 Phosphate rock, containing high concentrations of the essential agricultural element of phosphorus, is used in fertilizer. The Bucraa phosphate deposit, located 67 miles southeast of Laâyoune/El Aaiún, was first reported by the Spanish geologist Manuel Alía Medina in 1947. Spain began investments in mining infrastructure in the 1960s, exporting the first rock in 1972. For histories of mineral exploitation in the region, see John Mercer, Spanish Sahara (London: Allen & Unwin, 1976); Hodges, Western Sahara; Toby Shelley, Endgame in the Western Sahara What Future for Africa’s Last Colony? (London; New York: Zed Books Palgrave, 2004); Toby Shelley, “Natural
from the nearby Canary Islands, as well as Sahrawi veterans who had fought with General Francisco Franco during the Spanish Civil War. What is now known as Spanish Laâyoune/El Aaiún, or the lower city, consisted primarily of military bases, governmental institutions, a church and a cinema on one bank of the seasonal river, and a military post on the other. Spaniards lived to the east of the church, and Sahrawis to the west, near a cemetery in a neighborhood that became known as Barrio Cementario. The city in aggregate was little more than a Spanish military garrison situated on the riverbanks of the Seguier al-Hamra’. But the formation of two markets in Spanish Laâyoune/El Aaiún, Souq Djaj and Souq Lmkhakh, indicated that the emerging city was developing a foothold in regional commerce, and therefore maintaining a tenuous presence in the lives of people otherwise inclined to avoid the city outside of occasional trade, or as temporary refuge from conditions of scarcity in the desert. The name of one of the 1950s-era markets is emblematic of this relationship: because the columns supporting the market building reminded people of a camel’s leg bones, which contain juicy marrow [l-mukh, pl., l-mkhakh], this market became known as Souq Lmkhakh. To the Sahrawis in the 1950s, the city existed, like the few, other settlements they frequented, as a marketplace, and the name Lmkhakh played ironically with the particularly unfamiliar form of this new concrete market, and modern colonial city, rendering this new architectural form and built environment

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Resources and the Western Sahara,” in The Western Sahara Conflict: The Role of Natural Resources in Decolonization (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2006).

104 Between 1934 and 1950, Spanish Sahara was separated administratively from the Canary Islands, and placed under the jurisdiction of the High Commissioner of Spanish Morocco, based out of the city of Tetouan in northern Morocco. During this time, General Franco commandeered colonial subjects in Morocco and the Sahara to fight in the Spanish Civil War. M. R. de Madariaga, Los moros que trajo Franco--: la intervención de tropas coloniales en la Guerra Civil Española (Barcelona: Ediciones Martinez Roca, 2002).

105 [Interview, Jan 24, 2016, Rabouni, Sahrawi refugee camps.]

106 The traditional markets of the region all lay outside of the political boundaries of Spanish (later Western) Sahara. Goulmime, the northern hub of trans-Saharan trade, is in southern Morocco. Atar, an oasis with a famous date market, is in northern Mauritania. Tindouf, an old trading center rebuilt under French colonialism (and the subject of dispute between Morocco and Algeria dating back to the Sand War in 1963) is in southwest Algeria. Before the 50s, Spain built upon existing coastal enclaves, Dakhla and Tarfaya, as well as the pre-colonial inland outpost, Smara. In this respect, Laâyoune/El Aaiún was the first truly colonial city in the geopolitical territory of Western Sahara.
both more and less familiar.

Though a key moment in this region’s decolonization, events of the 1950s occupy an ambivalent place in both Moroccan and Sahrawi national historical memories. A 15-foot high monument that stands in the heart of current-day Laâyoune/El Aaiún exemplifies this ambivalence. The monument’s inscription memorializes the Battle of Dcheira, perhaps the greatest victory in the fleeting existence of the Moroccan Liberation Army, a late-1950s Moroccan-Sahrawi effort to destabilize Spanish and French colonial rule in the Sahara. Rather than holding a prominent place in the center of an open square, however, the monument sits within a fenced-in, open-air café-restaurant complex. Surrounded by café chairs, a flat-screen television, and a miniature fake water wheel, the stele is too austere to blend in with the diverting, family-friendly décor, and too short to distinguish itself from the prosaic surroundings. As a result, it sits markedly out of place and noticeably diminished by its surroundings. This is not by accident: after the monument was built in 1981, the open space at one of the busiest round points in Laâyoune/El Aaiún was leased indefinitely for a nominal price to the Ould Rachid family, one of the most prominent Sahrawi families to have benefited from its collaboration with Moroccan rule, who developed the plaza into the café/restaurant/amusement space that it is today.107

The purposeful marginalization of this monument is fitting, however, given the ambiguous place that this battle, and the brief anticolonial insurgency of which it was a part, occupies in both Moroccan and Sahrawi national history. Post-World War II decolonization began to shape the horizon of political futures in the Sahara as elsewhere, but as will be

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107 There is also a small aviary, with peacocks and other birds on display, at one end. Recently, reports have emerged that there are plans to build the first McDonald’s in Laâyoune/El Aaiún. This holds particular significance because of the marked absence of any visible signs of global capital in the city, and because of the symbolic legitimacy that any high-profile corporation would confer on Morocco’s occupation. While large-scale fishing and phosphate mining involving foreign distribution takes at the port some 15 miles the west, the only signs of foreign capital in Laâyoune/El Aaiún during my fieldwork was a French cosmetic chain, Yves Rocher (that might have been a knock-off, who knows).
discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3, the region’s status as a colonial hinterland meant that well into the 1950s and even 1960s, neither colonial nor national formations defined Sahrawis relations to political authority. It was in this context that an armed contingent from newly-independent Morocco sought to mobilize Sahrawis to overthrow Spanish colonialism. The movement may have reached its most successful moment in 1957 at the Battle of Dcheira when Sahrawi and Moroccan armed groups inflicted significant casualties on Spanish soldiers and caused Spain to withdraw from the entire territory, save for a few coastal enclaves. Soon after, however, France and Spain routed the forces through a coordinated counterinsurgency involving both ground forces and airstrikes.

At the same time, the Liberation Army was undermined by disputes both within the leadership, which was largely Moroccan, and between Moroccans and Sahrawis. Some of this may have even been orchestrated by the Moroccan state itself. Today, however, the Moroccan state promotes the history of the Moroccan Liberation Army (MLA) – with certain omissions – through ceremonies, conferences, and publications under the auspices of its High Commission on the Liberation Army and Former Members of the Resistance. And yet, the underlying discomfort with this historical recognition is two-fold: for Sahrawi nationalists, the MLA serves as both an uncomfortable reminder of the Moroccan Sultan’s capacity to mobilize Sahrawis through his religious and political authority, as well as a precursor to Morocco’s later, successful annexation of the territory in the 1970s. For Moroccans, meanwhile, the MLA’s tribulations point to the Moroccan state’s inability to maintain Sahrawi acceptance of Moroccan authority, represented by

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108 For example, the term “Sahrawi” did not become a political identity until the late 1960s and early 1970s. Zunes and Mundy suggest “the mid-twentieth century.” Zunes and Mundy, Western Sahara, 93.

109 In particular, Hassan II, then Prince, commander of the newly formed Royal Army, and inheritor to Mohammed V’s throne. This is one of the arguments made in Mohamed Bensaïd Ait Iddr, Safahat Min Melhamat Jaysh Al-Tahrir Bi Janub Al-Maghrib (Casablanca: Matha’a Taysir, 2001); Mohamed Ben Saïd Ait Iddr, Watha’iq Jaysh Al-Tahrir Fi Janub Al-Maghrib (Casablanca: Markaz Mohamed Ben Saïd Ait Iddr, 2011). (Discussed in Chapter 3.)
the number of Sahrawi resistance fighters who defected from the Army to join (or, as was often the case, rejoin) French or Spanish colonial armies. Reasons for the MLA’s disintegration are contested and will be discussed in Chapter 3, but the diminished stature of the monument to the Battle of Dcheira speaks to the ambiguous place of 1950s decolonization in the historical memory of the region, and how this contested history remains sedimented in the contemporary political geography of Laâyoune/El Aaiún.

After defeating the MLA in 1958, which required a joint counterinsurgency effort with France, Spain redoubled its investment in what it newly considered a colony of some consequence, thanks to the discovery of phosphates. Throughout the 1960s, Spain policed the border with Morocco tightly, and warned its Saharan subjects against Moroccan designs to exploit the region’s mineral wealth. As older residents recall, the city gradually climbed the southern bank of the river, as more housing was built for Spanish colonists and as Spain encouraged Sahrawis in the badiya to resettle in the city:

BM: There are those (who came to Laâyoune/El Aaiún) because of drought conditions, and there are those (who settled) because of the conditions of – [because] the Spanish administration/government would bring people from the badiya to populate the city. And they would...give them flour and oil and sugar from month to month, gratuitement, for free.

Me: Is that what happened to your family - did the Spanish policy attract them to settle in Laâyoune?

BM: Yes, on account of the help that the state was providing, people who were living in the badiya, when the drought conditions would come, or (when) the livestock didn’t produce enough food, or something like that, they’d bring them to the city so that they’d get the help. That help attracted people to come live in the city.

110 “It is certain that, with the scent of these riches, the jackals are beginning to prowl around your khaimas,"[tents]" Lieutenant-General Camillo Menéndez Tolosa, the Spanish army minister, warned the Sahrawis during a visit to El-Ayoun on May 16, 1967. "But now more than ever," he promised, "you will have us by your side, to the end and to the last sacrifice, to guarantee your will, without foreign pressure or interference, to protect you against the maneuvers and false fraternity in whose name it is intended to bring you into a household to which you have never belonged and in which, if they achieved their goal (something they will never do), you would be considered a poor relative to be exploited like a domestic." Quoted in Hodges, Western Sahara, 152.
They lived in tin-roof huts, then later the state demolished those - they demolished the metal/tin (huts) - and gave them a place to live.

Me: Like qubibat- 111

BM: Like the qubibat, like Colomina, up above, like Hay al-Matar, like the other Colomina neighborhood, and like Hay Lahouhum. All of those rose up from the city, from here. They were in tents, and tin huts, then they demolished the huts, and replaced them with, or gave them houses. They gave them places to live. That was how the old El Aaiún was.

With the operationalization of the phosphate mine, the “old El Aaiún” was transformed by an influx of Spanish workers and Sahrawi city-dwellers, and what had been a simple military post developed by 1974 into “a real town, with a population of over 40,000, one-third Spanish.” 112 As more worker housing was built, the city climbed above the south riverbank of Saguiet al-Hamra onto the flat expanse above, taking form in the neighborhoods of Colomina Vieja, Colominat al-Hamra’, Hay al-Matar, Hay Lahouhum, and what would later become known as Colomina Tirdis. At this time, however, the city remained for most Sahrawis a temporary resting point. The focal point for most homes remained the exterior, walled-in area, where sheep and goats were kept.

Souq Lmkhakh and the emergence of Laâyoune/El Aaiún through the process described by BM is characteristic of a regional phenomenon during the 1950s and 60s during which time both colonial governments and newly decolonized states sought to settle the people of the Sahara, and fix their political subjectivity. As French concerns developed iron mining in northern Mauritania in the 1950s, Sahrawis were drawn to Zouérate, F’dérik and Nouadhibou to work on building the railroad and other infrastructural projects. 113 Newly independent Morocco sought to settle Sahrawis in Goulmim, Tan Tan, Zaaq and Tarfaya, across its southernmost region, known

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111 A group of small, concrete hemispheric homes that were designed to prevent sand accumulation. These and other buildings that had domed roofs were characteristic of early Spanish architecture in the Sahara. The name “qubibat” is a diminutive from the Arabic word for dome [al-qubba].
112 Hodges, Western Sahara, 130.
as Wed Nun. Meanwhile, French Algeria promoted the old trans-regional market of Tindouf for settlement, a policy that independent Algeria continued through the 1960s.\footnote{\textit{…en 1962, les autorités algériennes essayèrent de fixer quelque 15000 nomades Rguibat dans la région de Tindouf.} Elsa Assidon, \textit{Sahara occidental, un enjeu pour le Nord-Ouest africain} (Paris: F. Maspero, 1978), 39. Regarding the effects of the Algerian Revolution on this part of the Sahara, based on responses I received in recording oral histories during fieldwork, Sahrawis had little interaction with the FLN, and were largely cut off from the Algerian Revolution. If there are recorded histories that argue otherwise, I have not yet encountered them.}

**Unfinished Political Project 2: Moroccan occupation, Sahrawi armed national liberation struggle, 1975-1991**

And then, suddenly, the transition from Spanish colonialism to Moroccan occupation transformed the city’s population and built environment again. The abrupt nature of Spain’s withdrawal is memorialized both by stories such as that which was recounted to me in Batimat one evening, and in the nomenclature of some of the city’s older neighborhoods. One of the oldest residential neighborhoods, down by the riverbed near Souq Djaj and Souq Lmkhakh, remains known as Catalonia. One of the first neighborhoods to be built up on the riverbank, in the 1960s, took its name from the Spanish company responsible for the new housing, Colomina. After 1975, this neighborhood became known as Colominat Tirdis. The command tirdis, which means “kick” in Hassaniya Arabic, recalls the collective effort among Sahrawis to “kick down” the doors of houses abandoned by Spanish colonists. Similarly, another neighborhood remains known as Diridik (“put your hands [here]”), referring to the way Sahrawis pushed their way into houses abandoned by Spanish colonists. Less marked, but nonetheless remembered in private by Sahrawis both in the refugee camps and in Moroccan-occupied territory today, are the properties abandoned by fleeing Sahrawis that have subsequently been expropriated by Moroccan settlers.

The demographics of the neighborhoods in the lower city today are overwhelmingly Moroccan, in part because of the density of government offices, military barracks, and security facilities such as the notorious jails Habs Lkhal (“the black prison”) and PCCM. As Spanish
Laâyoune/El Aaiún was transformed into a nexus for the Moroccan military state, the commercial and demographic center of the city moved up onto the expansive plateau running above the Saguiet al-Hamras south bank. Even as the war between Morocco and Polisario confined residents to the city limits and sometimes threatened supply lines to Morocco’s interior, the Moroccan state sought to place its imprint on the city’s built environment. One of its first moves was to construct a kind of Palais de Ville facing onto a vast open, paved, oval plaza at the western end of the city. In doing so, the Moroccan state razed most of Colominat al-Hamra’, a neighborhood built during Spanish rule. The residents from this neighborhood were moved into a new housing development on the other side of town, at what was then the eastern edge of the city. The site of this new neighborhood, which took its name from the project developer, Mu‘atalla, happened to be near the site of the Spanish colonial government’s 1970 massacre of Sahrawi protestors, memorialized as Intifadat al-Zemla among Sahrawis as the moment when Sahrawi national consciousness was forged.

The combination of a community of Sahrawis displaced by a new occupier, and the new neighborhood’s politically resonant location, has made Mu‘atalla an enduring center of Sahrawi nationalism and resistance to Moroccan occupation. Today, the political temperature of the city on any given day can be measured by the number of Auxiliary Forces vans [Quwwat al-Musa‘da] lining the street at al-zemla, now an intersection across from Mu‘atalla: the greater the number, the more likely that a demonstration has been planned. When I first arrived in Laâyoune/El Aaiún to do research, I was repeatedly warned to avoid this neighborhood if I wanted to remain in the Moroccan state’s good graces. This neighborhood’s committed resistance to Moroccan rule has posed such a challenge that subsequent development efforts have
focused on creating neighborhoods with a mixed composition of Sahrawis and Moroccans.\footnote{Fieldnote April 30, 2014}

Unfinished Political Project 3: Morocco-Polisario conflict after the ceasefire: 1991 to today

Despite the radical changes of 1975, Moroccan Laâyoune/El Aaiún did not fully take shape until after the ceasefire of 1991. On the heels of the ceasefire, it was believed that a
referendum on self-determination would be held in a matter of months. As Morocco and Polisario staked out conflicting positions over the criteria for establishing a voter list for the referendum, defining the determining self in self-determination became the new terrain of political struggle, and the referendum preparation process dragged on.\footnote{The effort to hold a referendum, an elaborate and ultimately unsuccessful attempt to define a list of voters for a referendum on self-determination, has been described in detail by practitioners closely involved with the process. Multiple factors stymied this effort. Because the geographical distribution of Sahrawis was much broader than Western Sahara – and because “Sahrawi” as an identity was itself a recent political development – establishing a voter list became both a political and anthropological problem. Contesting the voter roll became the new terrain of political struggle after the ceasefire, as Morocco and Polisario staked out conflicting positions. The UN peacekeeping mission established to carry out this process, MINURSO, established an Identification Commission and an increasingly elaborate set of criteria for determining eligible voters. The Identification Commission could not complete its work (a flood of applicants by Morocco, in particular, hampered these efforts) as efforts to organize the referendum dragged on for years. No significant progress has been made since results of the identification process were published in 2000. Erik Jensen, \textit{Western Sahara: Anatomy of a Stalemate?} (Boulder, CO [etc.]: Rienner, 2012); Jarat Chopra, \textit{United Nations Determination of the Western Saharan Self} (Oslo, Norway: Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 1994).} Taking advantage of these delays, Morocco encouraged settlement and invested heavily in urban development across the region. Cities throughout Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, including Laâyoune/El Aaiún, Boujdour, Dakhla and Smara, practically doubled in size as contingents of poor residents from the outskirts of Marrakesh, Rabat and other Moroccan cities were brought to the region, given housing and, in some cases, trained to adopt a Saharan background in a Moroccan state-led effort to enroll them in the voter lists for the referendum.\footnote{One scholar has dubbed this phenomenon the “Second Green March” (Mundy 2012) but I did not hear anyone use this phrase while conducting fieldwork.} Other settlers came by less formal means, looking to capitalize on the demographic growth in the region through small-time commercial establishments. This gave rise to the third phase of Laâyoune/El Aaiún’s development, as the city rapidly expanded south and east.

As the demographic weight and geographical center of the city shifted, new markets, now furnished with produce and second-hand goods trucked south from Morocco’s southern distribution hub of Agadir-Inezgane, replaced the old Souq Lmkhakh as the city’s commercial center. New neighborhoods settled largely by Moroccans who arrived in Laâyoune/El Aaiún...
during the 1990s seeking economic opportunity grew quickly and chaotically, outpacing urban infrastructure despite the Moroccan state’s heavy investment in the region. The names of shops lining Tan Tan Avenue, the main avenue in a popular quarter developed during this period, reflect the range of locations from “inside” Morocco from which small merchants have relocated: Casablanca Butcher, El Jadida Furniture/Upholstery, Agadir Barbershop, Tata Provisions, Café Ouezzane. The sustained influx of dakhilis, (or “insiders,” meaning those coming from “inside” Morocco) – arriving first as part of the relocation of prospective referendum voters in the 1990s, and then continuing throughout the 2000s as the region attracted laborers and merchants – reshaped the region’s population. This gave rise to demographically mixed, densely settled neighborhoods of three and sometimes four-story houses and apartment buildings. The development of a large block of land known as Laâyoune/El Aaiún Thulathi is representative of the city’s helter-skelter growth during this time. Because of its size, lack of electricity and reputation for high rates of crime, Laâyoune/El Aaiún Thulathi became popularly known as “Texas.” One of the first, mixed neighborhoods of Sahrawis and dakhilis, Texas epitomized the frontier-like qualities of the Sahara during this time: a representation of space as unbounded opportunity in the minds of immigrating Moroccans, while also capturing the city as a representational space of chaos and disorder for many Sahrawis. The name remains spray-painted on walls throughout the popular neighborhood today. At the same time, on the other side of town, the emergence of a new Sahrawi elite that cooperated with and benefitted from Moroccan rule became apparent in the built form of an architecturally distinct neighborhood known as Hay Villat (from “villas”).

With the dramatic demographic changes and the sustained conflict, significant tensions developed between dakhilis and Sahrawis. Not infrequently, the state has mobilized Moroccan

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settlers to attack Sahrawi homes or businesses. Some of the largest attacks have taken place in retribution for large Sahrawi protests, including those that took place in 1999 in Laâyoune/El Aaiún, and again in 2010 after the violent breakup of the Agdim Izik protest encampment, described earlier in this chapter. On a more regular basis, if confrontations take place with the police in a specific neighborhood, a select group of plainclothes thugs – perhaps civilian “dakhilis,” or perhaps simply plainclothes policemen – are sometimes brought through late at night to indiscriminately destroy property in order to turn small shop owners (whether Moroccan or Sahrawi) against the protesters. This happened at least once on Tan Tan Avenue, where I lived, which was frequently the site of rock-throwing confrontations between young men and police and soldiers.

Meanwhile, another process was taking place in the immediate aftermath of the ceasefire, with far-reaching repercussions for the city’s political geography and its emergence as the locus for political struggle over the future of Western Sahara. Unlike in other cities across Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, large numbers of those whom the state relocated to Laâyoune/El Aaiún in the 1990s came from the nearby region of Wed Nun in southern Morocco. Unlike dakhilis, these new arrivals were predominantly from Saharan tribes, including the Rguibat and the tribes comprising the Tekna confederation. Many had settled in Wed Nun only in the 1950s, and had relatives throughout the region including Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, Polisario-run refugee camps in Algeria, and northern Mauritania. Benefiting from free basic goods such as flour, sugar and oil, and with the promise of future free housing (which was ultimately provided

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119 Other times, the police simply do this work themselves. To take one relatively recent example, from 2013, that made it into international press reports: “Sidi Mohammed Salem Saadoun, the executive director of the [Moroccan Association of Human Right]’s local branch, said that after a demonstration in October, police broke into some 70 homes of people in retaliation. He noted that this didn’t happen after the most recent protests Dec. 10, calling it a step in the right direction.” Paul Schemm, “Tensions High in Western Sahara despite New Plan,” Yahoo! News, January 1, 2014, http://news.yahoo.com/tensions-high-western-sahara-despite-plan-110230170.html.

120 In contrast to laborers and petit commerçants enticed by economic opportunity, who came from all over Morocco.
during the 2000’s) these families coming from Wed Nun were placed in a vast tent city known as the Tents of Unity (Khaymat al-Wahda),121 which, stretching east on the road to Smara, effectively doubled the city’s footprint. A UN peacekeeping official touring Laâyoune/El Aaiún in the early 1990s saw a sea of tents marked with symbols of the Moroccan royal family, and noted that “this is not a spontaneous mass movement of people but appears an orchestrated effort.”122 Or, as one woman who had been resettled in this manner matter-of-factly described it one day from her home in Batimat, “The King brought us here and put us in tents” [jabna al-malik wa khayyimna hun]. Exact figures are hard to come by since Morocco’s census figures incorporate Laâyoune/El Aaiún and the surrounding area into administrative units that overlap with Morocco proper but, by 2004,123 it is estimated that 75-80% of the population in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara had come from outside the territory.124

The Khaymat al-Wahda contingent coming from neighboring Wed Nun have had a particularly complicated effect on Laâyoune/El Aaiún’s political geography. Despite having been resettled to the disputed territory with the expectation that they would vote for Morocco in the proposed referendum, their various social ties to longtime and former residents of the Western Sahara territory, including refugees in the camps, left their allegiance to the Moroccan cause very much in the balance.125 For this same reason, however, the characterization of Western Sahara as

121 Also known as Khaymat ak-Kebsh, literally the Tents of the Ram, because every family received a free ram for slaughter from the state on Eid al-Adha (the holiday celebrating Abaraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son).
122 Chopra, United Nations Determination of the Western Saharan Self, 33.
124 Jacob Mundy, “Moroccan Settlers in Western Sahara: Colonists or Fifth Column?,” The Arab World Geographer 15, no. 2 (January 1, 2012): 110.
125 Mundy, “Moroccan Settlers in Western Sahara.”
a “settler-colony” is more complicated than it might initially seem. Because the political allegiance of so-called “settlers” coming from Oued Noun could be somewhat fluid, their political affiliations and sense of identification became the object of intense politicization campaigns on the part of both Morocco and pro-Polisario groups operating in the territory during the 1990s. Their arrival to Laâyoune/El Aaiún in the 1990s, and the promises of future housing made as part of the bargain to bring them there, also effectively transformed the scale of the city and its built environment. In the 2014 government-planning map below, the lower-right portion of the shaded, square-shaped area (pink and orange in the color image) encompasses the areas of the city developed since 1991. The promise to house the people of Khaymat al-Wahda after their arrival in 1992 was the major catalyst for these developments.

The repetition of this phenomenon – of territorial mobility and confinement, of subjective fluidity and fixity, and of the (first Spanish, then Moroccan) state’s preoccupation with and indifference toward its subjects in this regard – is a defining characteristic of the social and historical process of the decolonization of the Sahara. As this process became structured by the conflict between Morocco and Polisario after 1975, the mobilization of people took on another dimension: in a region characterized by its low population density, the attraction of people itself to one national cause or another became an expression of political power related to mobility and

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126 The “settler colonial” label has recently been applied to Morocco’s presence in Western Sahara in the following: Erica Vásquez, “The Roots of Conflict: From Settler-Colonialism to Military Occupation in the Western Sahara (Part 1),” Jadaliyya, January 9, 2015, http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/20519/the-roots-of-conflict_from-settler-colonialism-to-; Erica Vásquez, “The Roots of Conflict: From Settler-Colonialism to Military Occupation in the Western Sahara (Part 2),” Jadaliyya, January 12, 2015, http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/20544/the-roots-of-conflict_from-settler-colonialism-to-. The effects of a state-orchestrated demographic influx of Moroccans (and Mauritians) into Western Sahara are unmistakable. However, in addition to the context-specific complicating factors given above, distinguishing between “settler” and “native,” or “indigenous,” land rights in a postcolonial African context more generally can be problematic. Amazigh, or Berber, cultural and political identity, for example, is predicated on a sense of indigeneity. This identity rejects Sahrawi claims to indigeneity on the basis that Amazigh predated Arabs, who were arriving as late as the 13th century, across North Africa and the Sahara. For an analysis of the devastating ramifications of politicizing the identities of “settler” and “native” in another, postcolonial African context, see Mahmood Mamdani, When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001).
mobilization. This was perhaps most successfully demonstrated by Polisario in the 1970s, when a transportation network of Land Rovers shuttled people from across the region – Saguiet al-Hamra, Wedi Dhahhab, as well as Nouadhibou, Zouerate and F’derik across northern Mauritania, and Tan Tan in southern Morocco – to live in the refugee camps. This operation succeeded because of Polisario’s organizational ability to navigate the desert landscape, as well as its popularity in mobilizing large numbers of people from around the region to join its cause. It should be noted that Polisario was known for conducting raids and kidnapping people to bring them to the camps during this time, as well.

Distinguishing these actions in terms of voluntary will, consent, or political commitment cannot account for the ambiguities of political affiliation for a population that, even in the 1970s, frequently sought to avoid affiliation with specific political authorities of any kind. I met one man, for example, who described spending most of his life in the refugee camps after Polisario captured him and his family during a raid of Tan Tan, when he was quite young. Raised in the refugee camps in Algeria, he had only recently left the camps and resettled in Laâyoune/El Aaiún because of a chronic medical condition. His entire family, including over ten children, remained in the camps, as did his allegiance: multiple times during the brief period I spent in his company, this man announced that, despite his diminished health, he remained ready “to die for my [Sahrawi] nation.” By contrast, another man who grew up in the southern Moroccan Wed Nun region reported leaving his family as a teenager in the 1970s to find work in Nouakchott, the capital of Mauritania. While working in Nouakchott as a mechanic, Polisario supporters

127 An anecdote that underscores this relative indifference toward politics concerns a humorous misunderstanding of Polisario’s name, *Harakat al-Sh’abiya li Tahrir Saguiet al-Hamra wa Wedi Dhahhab*, or *The Popular Movement to Liberate Saguiet al-Hamra and Wedi Dhahhab*, when it was first becoming known following successful attacks on Spanish outposts in 1973. I was told that some women mistook the name *Harakat al-sh’abiya…* or “The Popular Movement…” to be *Harakat al-sh’ariya…* or *Harakat al-sh’iryya…* “sh’ariya” roughly translates as “Movement of the Hair” in reference to the long hair that was popular among young men, who were the movement’s leaders. “Sh’iryya” refers to spaghetti.
128 Fieldnote May 2, 2014.
kidnapped him and took him to the camps. Sought-after for his mechanic skills, this man claims that he was eventually imprisoned for refusing orders after witnessing the point-blank execution of dissenters in the refugee camps. Spending several years imprisoned and then a number more under surveillance, this man left the camps and came to Morocco among the first wave of “returnees” (ʼaʿidan) following the ceasefire in 1991.

Both men now live in the newer, eastern neighborhoods of Laâyoune/El Aaiún surrounding Agjijimat – places like Douirat, Hay al-ʿAwda, Hay al-Wifaq, Hay 23 Mars and Hay al-Raha – which developed as Morocco distributed houses and plots of land to new arrivals throughout the 2000s. The first of these developments sprang up to house those living in the tents of Khaymat al-Wahda who had moved from Wed Nun in the 1990s. A second wave of growth came about in 2007, when Morocco, seeking to push a plan which would create a Sahara Autonomous Region under Moroccan sovereignty in lieu of a vote on self-determination, sought to attract “returnees” from the camps with promises of a plot of land and a monthly welfare stipend of 2000 dirhams (roughly equivalent to 200 euros a month). While people leaving the camps moved to Morocco for a wide variety of reasons – some of them political, others explicitly not – this initiative represented just the latest of a series attempts since the 1950s to demonstrate sovereignty through the mobilized resettlement of people. Each of these waves of controlled resettlement and displacement have shaped and reshaped the city of Laâyoune/El Aaiún, with the history sedimented in the city’s political geography.

Section IV – Naming Histories and Sovereignties: the Nomoi of the City

The transformations and expansions of the city have been marked, at each stage, with a renewed

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or expanded military government, the mixed use of coercion and necessity to relocate and displace populations, and an ongoing struggle over its sovereignty. While this continuous struggle has produced a series of largely incomplete political projects, the afterlives of these unsettled pasts remain etched in the city’s nomenclature. As I have alluded to throughout this chapter, a toponomy of Laâyoune/El Aaiún requires as much attention to vernacular names as official designations. There are place-names, such as Diridik (“put your hands [here]”), Colomina Tirdis (“kick”), and Zemla (site of the 1970 intifada, or uprising), which index moments in time, establishing historical perspective in relation to place. Their use in everyday interactions adds a political dimension to the city’s geography. As decidedly unofficial names that reference a period of Spanish colonialism which Morocco strenuously seeks to efface, they convey an implicit knowledge and provide some kind of purchase, however narrow, on place and space within a city that has undergone multiple transformations by repressive rule and population resettlement. In aggregate, the use of both official and informal names that reference different periods of Laâyoune/El Aaiún’s existence indexes a time and space of contested sovereignty – of the right to name – that remains the productive force of urban space and the city’s defining feature.

An entire subset of names capture the relationship between decolonization and efforts to populate the city and control the movement of people. The neighborhood of Lahouhum, for example, dates back to the period of Spanish colonialism. The name, which translates as “they threw them,” refers to the distance of this neighborhood, at the time of its settlement, from the rest of the city. Still a popular quarter that is now situated near the city’s geographic center, the name indexes today the city’s rapid expansion. At the same time, the indifference implied in the

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130 Thank you to Julie Skurski, Madhuri Karak and Mohamad Junaid for spurring me to think about the temporal dimension implicit in these place-names.
name about the subjects who lived there speaks to a relation between people and political authority in this region that has served as a recurring feature of the decolonization of the Sahara: namely, the sovereign power to mobilize people and control subjects’ movements – by authority, force, command, coercion, incentive or otherwise. Lahouhum captures this tension between the government’s interest in fixing or confining subjects to the city, and its relative indifference in where and how they live once there. Political projects to resettle and move people with relative impunity characterize the Sahara’s decolonization more than the colonial period itself. Oral histories concerning the settlement of Laâyoune/El Aaiún under Spain in the 1950s and 60s serve as an early example, and the name Lahouhum might be thought of as a trace of this process sedimented in the city’s popular nomenclature and political geography. The negative space marking the location where thousands of tents sheltered the people from Khaymat al-Wahda throughout the 1990s serves as another – and perhaps the largest – example of the city as the spatial expression of the repeated efforts to fix, and abandon, the people of the Sahara as political subjects of decolonization.

Like other incomplete political projects, these efforts have left their mark on the nomenclature and built environment of Laâyoune/El Aaiún in a manner expressive of an intertwined relationship between urbanization and coercion, political commitment and ambivalence. Another, more recent, example, involving Agjijimat, captures the intertwined relationship between legitimacy and scandal. Agjijimat is a village in Mauritania near the strip of Western Sahara that remains unoccupied by Morocco, and which Polisario refers to as the Liberated Territories. In December 2007, the Polisario Front held its 12th Congress in a nearby

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131 Built by Morocco with US, French and Saudi funding and technologies in the 1980s, the 2700 km berm separating Moroccan-occupation from the Liberated Territories, is a trench and barricade lined with mines and manned by upwards of 120,000 Moroccan troops. According to Jarat Chopra, the berm was strategically built so as not to coincide with the political boundary of Western Sahara: “If the wall closed the boundary, the POLISARIO
settlement within its Liberated Territories known as Tifariti. In response, Moroccan security organized a counter-movement in Agjijimat, hoping to upstage the Polisario congress with the televised spectacle of Sahrawis defecting en masse as an expression of support for Morocco’s recently-announced autonomy plan. To implement this plan, Morocco’s chief collaborator in Western Sahara, Khalihenna Ould Rachid, sought to employ Hamada Ould Derwich, a Mauritanian politician from the Rguibat tribe (the most populous tribe of Western Sahara, in general, and of the Sahrawi refugee camps, in particular). Ould Derwich sought to disrupt Polisario’s planned congress by mobilizing a group of Sahrawi refugees to cross the border to nearby Agjijimat. Moroccan television was going to be there to film what was supposed to be a contingent of Sahrawis defecting from Polisario leadership. When Mauritanian authorities got word and prevented the intervention from taking place, a group still appeared and was transported across the Mauritanian border into Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, to be received with great ceremony as the latest wave of “defectors” from Polisario. When this group arrived and it was found that the contingent of “defectors” was almost entirely composed of Mauritanian villagers, and not former members of Polisario or residents of the refugee camps, the whole thing became a scandal. The Moroccan state housed them in a posh hotel at a beach

would be in Algeria and Mauritania. If the Moroccans wished to pursue the POLISARIO it would be politically difficult to cross into these countries. Instead, they left a killing zone.” Chopra, *United Nations Determination of the Western Saharan Self*, 31. See also Zunes and Mundy, *Western Sahara*, 20–24; Swenson, “The World’s Longest Minefield Isn’t Where You Think It Is.”

With the ceasefire, this “killing zone” has become increasingly integral to Polisario’s construction of sovereignty. Dubbed the “Liberated Territories,” Polisario has taken to selling future rights for the exploitation of minerals in these territories. Whereas the refugee camps and SADR government are based in Algerian territory, Polisario has promoted infrastructural support for settlements in this strip, particularly for older Sahrawis drawn by the prospect of living pastorally. The fact that long stretches of this territory adjoin northern Mauritania make the territory suitable for raising and herding camels, unlike the more barren hamada where the refugee camps are located. Reflecting an increased prominence in SADR’s case for sovereignty, the Liberated Territories feature more and more prominently in their maps.

Khalihenna Ould Rachid rose from humble beginnings to become one of the wealthiest, most powerful Sahrawis under Moroccan rule. He became involved in politics after marrying the daughter of a wealthy Spanish businessman, subsequently becoming the leader of the pro-Spanish PUNS, el Partido de Unión Nacional Saharauí, in the 1970s. He later allied with Morocco and has held various positions advising the King on Saharan matters, serving as president of CORCAS, the Royal Advisory Council for Saharan Affairs since its inception.
outside of Laâyoune/El Aaiún for a month, until they were resettled in the standard, small, single-story box-like houses granted to ‘a’idin who left the refugee camps for Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara during this period. These developments dot the eastern reaches of the city and wherever they can be found the immediate surroundings are known as “Agjijimat,” as in the case of the tall, four-story building that fronts Avenue Smara where I met Salih and his acquaintance one afternoon.

How does a building in Laâyoune/El Aaiún, at the center of a dispute between Morocco and Sahrawi nationalists, come to refer to a village in Mauritania? In the contemporary context of political conflict and pervasive suspicion, the name, which in practice refers to multiple locations around the city, references political scandal. In this sense, the name of Agjijimat, refers to the spectacle involved in attempting to create political legitimacy through the mobilization, displacement and re-settlement of people, more than a village in Mauritania. But since it was also the site, on December 17, 1974, of one of the Polisario Front’s early attacks on Spanish colonial outposts, Agjijimat also references a notable, if relatively obscure, event in the formative stages of Polisario’s national liberation movement. In this way the name refers to two events, in multiple locations, which are situated within different historical narratives of competing political projects. Not unlike Texas and Lahouhum, then, Agjijimat indexes the fragmented geography of the decolonized Sahara, more generally. In this sense, the city’s built environment and nomenclature might be seen as the geographical sedimentation of a shifting, historically repeating process, which has characterized the decolonization of the Sahara and revolves around regional struggle over mobility and confinement. Taken together, many of the names of contemporary Laâyoune/El Aaiún – Catalonia, Colomina Tirdis, Diridik, Lahouhum,

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Texas, Khaymat al-Wahda, Agijimat – make for a concatenation of terms that together reflect the tensions of decolonization in the Sahara: a place of displacement, of fixed mobility, of mobile confinement, of deferred horizons, split allegiance, and contained insurrection.

**Naming/Sovereignty – Field**

The history of Laâyoune/El Aaiún’s formation is a history of the region’s decolonization. That is to say, the history of Laâyoune/El Aaiún is one of multiple, unresolved political projects. Not only does the nomenclature and built environment of the city reflect the sedimentation of each of these political projects, but Laâyoune/El Aaiún’s formation and tremendous growth reflects the importance of urban space as a vector through which attempts to establish sovereignty in this region of the Sahara have been carried out. Many of the residents of Laâyoune/El Aaiún live in the city thanks to these political projects which, through necessity and coercion, have attempted to fix the location and political subjectivities of people living in the region. And yet the ongoing contestation over sovereignty in Laâyoune/El Aaiún highlights ongoing contradictions in the concept of postcolonial sovereignty that depends upon both control of territory, and international legal recognition.

In asserting the primacy of sovereignty to rule of law, Carl Schmitt revisits the meaning of *nomos* as a concept that articulates the founding act of political order. Nomos, Schmitt suggests, “understood in its original spatial sense, is best suited to describe the fundamental process involved in the relation between order and orientation.”

Underpinning the relationship between order and orientation, *nomos* organizes authority through land-appropriation. Consequently, political order is spatially produced through the division and distribution of land. At the same time, the act of land-appropriation constitutes, for Schmitt, a founding political act.

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and an act of legitimacy:

In its original sense...nomos is precisely the full immediacy of a legal power not mediated by laws; it is a constitutive historical event – an act of legitimacy, whereby the legality of a mere law first is made meaningful.\(^{135}\)

Schmitt’s approach is important for understanding the illiberal context of decolonization in Western Sahara, where sovereignty has been defined – first by Spain, and then later by Morocco – largely by the power to occupy. The very act of occupation encloses and politicizes space insofar as it subsumes that space into a political entity, or order. Or, as cited earlier in this chapter, nomos, for Schmitt “turns a part of the earth’s surface into the force-field of a particular order.” This, too, is important for recognizing that much of the language that coalesces around the ongoing dispute over Western Sahara, including human rights and self-determination, ethnicity and nationality, overlays a field of force structuring the political geography of the Sahara constituted by a struggle to name and occupy – a struggle over nomos.

In foregrounding sovereignty as a de facto normative force, Schmitt’s concept of nomos betrays a preoccupation with the unitary cohesiveness of any political order. Hence, Schmitt’s focus on the primacy of territory, and with sovereignty itself as a norm that supersedes any other political claim, legal or otherwise. This is where Schmitt’s concept of nomos reaches its limits in the context of decolonization. As is known, the post-World War II decline of European colonial empire brought with it the emergence of a multilateral world order, and the enshrinement of the legal right to self-determination in the UN Charter. By the 1960s, numerous new nation-states (though far from all) exercised this right, by then a cornerstone of the United Nations, as a means of decolonization. Whereas a wave of decolonization took place in the 1950s and 60s, Western Sahara remained a Spanish colony until 1975. While this temporal disjuncture requires further examination and will remain a theme throughout this dissertation, the decolonization of Western

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\(^{135}\) Schmitt, 73.
Sahara became the object of competing sovereignties, in both a concrete and conceptual sense. Concretely, various political forces have struggled to appropriate the territory of Western Sahara for themselves. As discussed in the Introduction, Morocco’s occupation, based on claims of historical ties, and Sahrawi claims for the right to self-determination, are based on different modalities of sovereignty. That is, the Sahrawi right to self-determination is premised on popular sovereignty granted by legal recognition, in contrast to nomos.

Schmitt is also useful here in that he points out the contradictions involved in “bracketing” force in order to grant sovereignty through legal means: “It was not the abolition of war, but rather its bracketing that has been the great, core problem of every legal order.” In much of the world, this bracketing has been resolved in favor of legal recognition: this order of international law underpins the sovereignty of many postcolonies and other small nation-states in a post-World War II international order. Although decolonization formally disrupted a colonial order premised on European imperialism, it did not replace that order with a unitary, cohesive political field. Western Sahara exists, in this sense, as a remainder and a reminder of the unresolved contradiction between nomos and international law, between sovereignty, and self-determination. Rather than an ordered nomos, Western Sahara represents a disaggregated political space, or a space of competing sovereignties.

As I have tried to highlight by focusing on Laâyoune/El Aaiún in this chapter, the field is structured in binary terms between Moroccan and Sahrawi political causes, which influence the things that people can say, narratives about the past, and the spaces in which they can act. The politics of the present polarizes everyday life through demands for the expression of loyalty to

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136 For another discussion of sovereignty in the Western Sahara context, see Joffé, “Sovereignty and the Western Sahara.”
137 Schmitt, The Nomos of the Earth, 74.
138 Jackson, Quasi-States.
either Moroccan or Sahrawi nationalism. Scholarship on Western Sahara is structured similarly, focusing on nationalism and nationalist conflict as the framework for understanding the region’s past and present.\(^{139}\) This is in part due to political constraints from the conflict itself, which, until recently, have severely limited the kinds of research that it has been possible to undertake in the region. As described throughout this chapter, intense repression of Sahrawi nationalism has made research on the topic in Morocco difficult, and foreign visitors to Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara are regularly detained at the airport and refused entry, or otherwise expelled. The Polisario-run refugee camps based in Algeria, by contrast, has over the past decade increasingly sought to attract foreign delegations and other visitors, including researchers, in an effort to promote their cause. This has led to a number of important studies, some of them the first of their kind to document the vibrant social and political life of the Sahrawi refugee camps. This literature counters, in an important way, Moroccan state politics, as well as the obfuscating work performed by the discourse of security and terrorism, which overlooks the political organization of the camps themselves.

In focusing on government, citizenship and nationalism within the refugee camps, however, some scholarship on Western Sahara conflates the terms of nationalist conflict for the “roots of conflict” itself.\(^{140}\) Much of this scholarship reproduces the political scripts that interlocutors have at the ready for broadcasting their position to an international audience. Some of this is due to methodological constraints: research in the Sahrawi refugee camps, though much freer than the conditions in Moroccan-occupied territory, remains subject to the hegemony of Sahrawi nationalism. In foregrounding the uniqueness of the camps, however – one study

\(^{139}\) Wilson, *Sovereignty in Exile*; Mundy, “Performing the Nation, Pre-figuring the State”; Zunes and Mundy, *Western Sahara*; Martin, “Nationalism, Identity and Citizenship in the Western Sahara.”

characterized them as a “controlled experiment,” another as a “space of autonomy” – these approaches tend to represent the refugee camps as a discrete political unit and isolated geopolitical space. In many respects, these studies contribute to the project of mapping the national “geo-body.” The problem is methodological not simply because of who researchers can and cannot speak to, but precisely because the conceptual approach naturalizes the nation as the object of study. Writing of a similar situation in Israel-Palestine, the scholar Gil Hochberg suggests that taking the terms of a conflict as it appears is to mistakenly conceptualize “the political” in political conflict:

What does it mean to speak about a conflict in terms of how it appears or how we come to see it? To begin with, it means that we do not take the conflict as our point of departure (asking, for example, how it is represented in the media), but that we rather explore the very making of the conflict – its contours and mappings – by focusing on the distribution of the visual and asking, for example, what or who can be seen, what or who remains invisible, who can see and whose vision is compromised?

Some of the earlier ethnographic research conducted in the Sahrawi refugee camps resembles journalistic work, in that it begins and ends with the most visible phenomena of everyday life, rather than asking, as Hochberg suggests, “what or who can be seen, what or who remains invisible, who can see and whose vision is compromised?” By contrast, I suggest that despite this intense politicization along national identities, the ever-present binary tensions of national conflict that currently structure so much of Western Sahara ought to be conceptualized as a concrete abstraction.

Unlike the unitary ordering of space that Schmitt conceptualizes with his notion of nomos, Henri Lefebvre recognizes that a given political order contains a multitude of social spaces:

141 Mundy, “Performing the Nation, Pre-figuring the State,” 294.
142 Herz, From Camp to City, 186.
We are confronted not by one social space but by many – indeed, by an unlimited multiplicity or uncountable set of social spaces which we refer to generically as ‘social space.’ …Considered in isolation, such spaces are mere abstractions. As concrete abstractions, however, they attain ‘real’ existence by virtue of networks and pathways, by virtue of bunches or clusters of relationships.145

Similarly, in Laâyoune/El Aaiún today, the normative political dispute which organizes and mediates so much of social relations cannot fully obscure the fluidity and multiplicity of identities in everyday life. Moreover, the conflict between Morocco and Sahrawi nationalists is, I suggest, a political formation that is neither a fiction, nor a truth. Though it structures and organizes social relations and political authority in very real ways, as a conflict based on national divisions, it remains a concrete abstraction as defined by Lefebvre in that it “is developed by thought – just as it developed in time and space – until it reaches the level of social practice…”146 While the binary between two national causes crystallizes and distills difference into a politicized binary, as a concrete abstraction it remains a structure that never fully subsumes the multiple forms of life which have preceded, and are produced by it.

Conceptualizing national dispute as concrete abstraction helps to see the current situation in Western Sahara not simply “as it appears,” but as a political formation that both embodies certain social relations and conceals others. In the case of Western Sahara more generally, the division between Moroccan and Sahrawi epitomizes a tension between commercial and pastoral modes of living. These overlapping modes of living underpin relations of dependence and autonomy between groups that have been in contact for as long as the trans-Saharan trade has been in existence. However, the national conflict conceals the contradiction between modalities of sovereignty that were raised by the process of decolonization and that remain unresolved. In this sense, the decolonization of the Sahara has produced a political formation in concrete

145 Lefebvre, The production of space, 86.
146 Lefebvre, 100.
abstraction – an “ideological thing/not thing”\textsuperscript{147} that mediates the social and political space of everyday life in the region, and organizes what can be said, seen and acted upon into the binary dimensions of national conflict – but which obscures the transformations wrought by decolonization in the Sahara.

\textbf{Conclusion – The Binary Dimensions of Nationalist Conflict in Laâyoune/El Aaiún}

The Batimat buildings where I dined with the mother and her son are a good place to begin to understand some of these dynamics between competing sovereignties and their effects on people’s subjectivities. After a handful of Polisario leaders defected to Morocco in the late 1980s, the Moroccan state believed that political unrest and low morale in the refugee camps, combined with military stalemate, would contribute to an exodus.\textsuperscript{148} In anticipation, Batimat was constructed along the main road heading east to Smara. However, the influx of defectors never materialized in the numbers that Morocco expected. Instead, the vast sea of \textit{Khaymat al-Wahda} populated by Saharans who had been relocated from the neighboring Wed Nun region of southern Morocco filled in the open land to the east of Batimat. In the winter of 1992, when unusually heavy rains flooded the city and washed away the supplies of sugar, tea and other free provisions supplied by the state, a certain number of families dwelling in their tents broke into

\textsuperscript{147} Gary Wilder, \textit{The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude & Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 39. “Greater France was a concrete abstraction: an ideological thing/not-thing – neither only an object nor merely an idea – with a real social existence that both expressed and obscured the economic, social and cultural relations of an imperial nation-state.”

\textsuperscript{148} See Chapter 2. Morocco calls these defectors “\textit{a’idin}” or “returnees” after a speech by King Hassan II in which he promised that the “the merciful and forgiving” nation would welcome anyone “returning to their homeland” from the refugee camps. Moroccan intelligence and security services’ attempts to use “returnees” as a political tool to attract the broader support of Sahrawis in the occupied territory have been unsuccessful. Similarly, people’s reasons for “returning” – including those who were born in the refugee camps and had never before lived in Morocco or Western Sahara – are manifold and do not correspond to a purely political logic of defection. Today, many Sahrawis travel back and forth between Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara and the refugee camps in Algeria, maintaining property in both places. See Boulay, Sébastien. “Poétique et politique de la migration au Sahara occidental. Les \textit{cà’idîn}: repentants, migrants ou ralliés?” In \textit{La migration prise aux mots: mise en récits et en images des migrations transafricanaines}, edited by Cécile Canut and Catherine Mazauric. Paris: Le Cavalier Bleu, 2014.
the unoccupied Batimat and have lived there ever since.\textsuperscript{149} \textit{Khaymat al-Wahda} has long since disappeared, however, leaving a negative space surrounding Batimat in what, with subsequent rapid urban expansion, has become more or less the city’s geographical center.

Mohamed Salek’s in-laws, like the young videographer and his mother whose narratives opened this chapter, live in Batimat. The entire complex, as far as I know, is populated by Sahrawis (and not \textit{dakhilis}). When I visit Mohamed Salek’s in-laws, I am in Laâyoune, the largest city in Morocco’s “Southern Provinces” as they are called. When I visit the young videographer and his mother (which I could only do at night), I am in El Aaiún, in occupied territory. In one house, one says “Moroccan Sahara”; in another, “Western Sahara.” In one house, the family watches Moroccan or Mauritanian television channels; in another, the television is set to the national Sahrawi SADR tv, broadcast out of the refugee camps in Algeria, which frequently airs footage of clandestinely videotaped protests that have, in some instances, taken place less than a hundred yards from the apartment where the footage is then viewed.

While these differences may seem self-evident in the context of a political conflict between two, competing nationalisms, the divided attention illustrates a broader phenomenon of everyday life in Laâyoune/El Aaiún. In Arabic, “Laâyoune” and “El Aaiún” are pronounced the same, but the insistence among the parties to the conflict on different transliterations reflects the importance of naming – to the point of necessity, but also absurdity – in any struggle over sovereignty.\textsuperscript{150} And the struggle between Morocco and Polisario is, at root, not a struggle over ethnic differences – or, I would argue, even nationalist differences, strictly speaking – but a struggle over sovereignty. The struggle over sovereignty has real effects not just in politicizing everyday life in Laâyoune/El Aaiún or in perpetuating violent acts of coercion and resistance, but

\textsuperscript{149} Fieldnotes. May 29 2014, Laâyoune/El Aaiún
\textsuperscript{150} Carl Schmitt, \textit{The Concept of the Political} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 27.
also in shaping people’s subjectivity. For Sahrawis living as neighbors but with contested political allegiances, perhaps the strongest and strangest effect of this struggle is what I would call the effect of erasure. The friend-enemy relation is not simply one of war and annihilation (even if the prospect of war constitutes a defining aspect of this relation). When this relation becomes an important part of everyday life among neighbors, as among Sahrawis in Batimat and in Laâyoune/El Aaiún more generally, the effects of this struggle over naming discipline the subjects involved into practicing a kind of erasure. They cohabit with the enemy – sometimes even in the same family – but refuse them recognition. Put another way, their political subjectivity demands that they “unsee” the enemy in their midst.

Here, I am borrowing again from China Miéville’s novel, *The City & The City*, which imagines a city divided on itself – perhaps not unlike Sarajevo or Jerusalem – inhabited by the residents of two, sovereign city-states. In the world Miéville creates, the two city-states occupy the same space geographically, but citizens are disciplined from birth to “unsee” the objects or activities located in the sovereignty to which they don’t belong:

Such rigorous separation requires citizens to act and even to think and perceive as though the cities were *not* ‘grosstopically’ – that is, in the terms of actual, physical, Newtonian space – coterminous. From early childhood, every Besź and every Ul Qoman [the names of the two types of citizens in Miéville’s novel] must learn to ‘unsee’ the people, buildings, streets, motor vehicles, and everything else that the other city contains. Unseeing – the central ideological operation required to be conventional, law-abiding Besź or Ul Qoman citizen – is a maddeningly complex and indeed self-contradictory process that seems directly indebted to Orwell’s influential concept of doublethink.

I do not mean here to draw a direct parallel between the fictional world that Miéville creates in *The City & The City* and Western Sahara, or to suggest that the Moroccan and Sahrawi political entities are roughly equal in power, like two city-states. Instead, I draw attention to a kind of

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151 Thank you to Sumayya Kassamali for drawing my attention to this work.
disciplining that goes on when two competing sovereignties are operating over a long time in the same absolute space. An example of this sustained, subjective inattention is how Sahrawi nationalists discipline themselves to “unsee” the overbearing presence of Moroccan sovereignty everywhere around them. In private gatherings, through social media, in connection with human rights groups that follow the plight of political prisoners in jails throughout Morocco, and in following SADR television broadcasting from the refugee camps, Sahrawi nationalists carve out alternative spaces replete with the signs and information associated with the Sahrawi state. When I asked one young man about an upcoming Moroccan national holiday, for example, he responded with a dismissive wave of his hand and said, “that’s just ‘ajaj’” referring to a strong wind that comes from the east and brings with it a lot of sand and dust. Through a speech act, this young man sought to render Moroccan sovereignty invisible, like the wind: an annoyance, and distraction (and one that, like the weather, he hopes will eventually give way to something new) that does not require one’s attention. It can be unseen. Meanwhile, at tremendous effort and expense, and by pretty much any means necessary (including propaganda and favors, arrest and torture), the Moroccan state relentlessly tries to bend the subjects of its occupation to its will: to refer to the region as the Moroccan Sahara or Morocco’s Southern Provinces, to make the Moroccan flag as visible as possible, to erase all signs of resistance from the streets and walls of the city. It seeks to make its subjects unsee the state’s lack of legitimacy.

Despite the highly structured, binary dimensions of this political formation, it should not be surprising that there remains tremendous mobility among people across southern Morocco, Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria, and northern Mauritania. The quotidian nature of movement, in a situation polarized by nationalist conflict,

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however, is anything but banal. For one thing, the very physical act of traveling from the camps to Moroccan-occupied territory (and back) keeps channels of movement open where they have otherwise been restricted by militarized occupation and political borders. At the same time, political commitment in a situation of longstanding political conflict requires tremendous effort in the face of various forms of political violence and, in some cases, social marginalization. This next chapter will examine the resulting tension between fluid and multiple subjectivities that exist within a binary field of national conflict structured by the poles of loyalty and betrayal.
Chapter 2 – Subjectivity in Abeyance: Identification and “Return” across western Sahara

Chapter Overview: On Sahrawi Identity, Subject Position and Political Subjectivity

The previous chapter focused on the history that is sedimented in Laâyoune/El Aaiún, and which shapes the city’s political geography and built environment. The city’s development has paralleled the region’s decolonization dating back to the 1950s, and this history of multiple, unrealized political projects remains apparent in the city’s nomenclature and neighborhoods. Since 1991, when the ceasefire between Morocco and Polisario shifted the locus of conflict from armed combat to diplomacy, Laâyoune/El Aaiún has increasingly become a focal point in the struggle over sovereignty. Between Morocco’s military rule and Sahrawi nationalists’ efforts to publicize human rights violations (the subject of Chapter 5), everyday life in the city has become inextricably shaped by nationalist conflict. Social relations and public spaces are shot through with suspicion, and people are subject to intense surveillance and policing of their actions, relations and identities.

As the largest city and nexus of conflict in the disputed territory of Western Sahara, Laâyoune/El Aaiún epitomizes the polarizing effects of contested sovereignty, and how this situation has come to structure everyday life in the city, including constructions of the past. Contested narratives of the past create a discursive space of multiple, conflicting stories, which together undermine an epistemology of political truth. At the same time, I suggest that competing Moroccan and Polisario projects of sovereignty affect residents’ subjectivities by shaping what they can say, and how. The composite spelling of Laâyoune/El Aaiún foregrounds this dichotomy: the dual spellings denote the same name in Arabic [el-‘ayun] but, in the context of the dispute between Morocco and Polisario, connote two different political regimes. My use of both names is a redundancy and exaggeration. But I hold onto this split nomenclature to
foreground how competing sovereignties have divided the attention, allegiances and identities among people sharing the same absolute space of the city. The effects of this division create an effect of estrangement, or even erasure, among Sahrawi residents adhering to opposing poles within a field structured by Moroccan or Sahrawi national identities. Highlighting this dichotomy as an ideological effect of life in a situation of longstanding conflict also foregrounds this political formation as both a thing, and not a thing: a concrete abstraction.

The dichotomous structure of this concrete abstraction is both a lived reality and an effect of a longstanding dispute over sovereignty. However, in this chapter I argue that a focus on polarized national identities misses the processes of fixing identity that have defined the region’s history of decolonization and which contribute to a disaggregated political geography today. In the literature on Western Sahara, one could be mistaken for thinking that there are but two, national identities, Moroccan and Sahrawi, at odds in a zero-sum conflict over a single territorial entity. In particular, scholarship has focused on establishing Sahrawi nationalism as a social and political fact, largely through research conducted within the Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria. This work has had important implications in countering Moroccan propaganda that seeks to undermine Sahrawi nationalism in the ongoing political conflict. Despite providing this important political contribution, however, I suggest that a pervasive methodological nationalism has obscured other optics for understanding this fragmented and polarized political geography, and this complex history of decolonization.

While national identities such as “Sahrawi,” “Moroccan” and “Mauritanian” are frequently taken for granted in literature on the region, this chapter interrogates the processes that have been pivotal to fixing the identities of people in the Sahara since decolonization became an animating feature of regional political projects. When attention has been paid to
Sahrawi political subjectivity, scholarship has tended to focus on the formation of “ethnic” or nationalist identity. However, the geographic distribution of Saharan peoples has always been dispersed across an area much broader than a single, bounded territory. As a result, the correlation between people, rights and territory in the area has been deeply contested throughout the decolonization process, and since before the relatively recent formation of a Sahrawi national identity. For these reasons, I suggest that fixing Sahrawis nationally, much less ethnically, misses the dynamics of contestation over their political subjectivity – the dynamics of decolonization, in effect – in which people across western Sahara have been caught since the 1950s.

Rather than taking national identities as given, I propose an analytic distinction between identity, subject position, and political subjectivity. By identity, I mean the labels, whether chosen or ascribed, that individuals use to express belonging to various collectivities. In this region of the Sahara, these identities may be national (Sahrawi, Moroccan, Mauritanian, Algerian), tribal (e.g.: Rguibat, Izerguiyin, among many others), or one of several statuses within a cultural sphere known as trab al-bidan (hassani, m'allem, hartani). Individuals frequently, but do not necessarily, have a sense of belonging at all three levels, contributing to multiple identities. Many of these terms are relational: Sahrawi is defined against Moroccan, or dakhili, and, as explained in the Introduction, bidani identity is defined in relation to both Amazigh (chilha, pl. chleuh in the Saharan dialect of Arabic, Hassaniya), and non-Arab black Africans (kury, pl. lkwar).

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154 Moroccan scholars have written extensively on the tribe in the Sahara. This reflects the fact that, in Moroccan academia, tribe is a permissible topic, whereas any scholarship pertaining to nation or nationalism in the Sahara is highly circumscribed. While tribe as an organizing social, cultural and political structure is not a major focus of this study, Moroccan scholarship provides important insights into historicizing shifts in tribal boundaries and belonging in the Sahara over time, while also engaging with social theories regarding tribe as a political organization. Mohamed Dahman, *Dimamiya Al-Qabila Al-Sahrawiya fi Al-Magharib: Bayn Al-Tirhal wa Al-Iqama* (Rabat: Top Press, 2012); Rahal Boubrik, *Zaman Al-Qabila: Al-Sulta Wa-Tadbir Al-'unf Fi Al-Mujtama’ Al-Sahrawi* (Rabat: Dar Abi Raqraq 2012); Naimi, *L’Ouest saharien*; Mustapha Naïmi and Muhammad Sâlim Wuld Lahlîb Wuld Lhusayn Wuld ‘Abd Al Hayy, *Les Principales Preoccupations Des Rgaybat: Muhammad Sâlim Wuld Lahbib Wuld Lhusayn Wuld ’Abd Al Hayy*, trans. Mustapha Naïmi (Rabat: L’Institut universitaire de la recherche scientifique, 1992).
With the term subject position, by contrast, I refer specifically to categories produced by different political projects during the history of decolonization that continue to confer certain rights or benefits in the present upon those who qualify. Unlike identities, subject positions exist in relation to institutional power (both state and multilateral) rather than to each other. While they have come into existence through specific political projects and at different historical moments, these subject positions remain in place today thanks to the particular configuration of different state, multilateral and humanitarian administrative organizations that sustain each of these subject positions. In a more conventional political landscape, the most common subject position in this formulation would simply be “citizen.” Across western Sahara, by contrast, a field of competing regimes that support multiple, unresolved political projects supports a variety of subject positions, including refugees, ‘a’idin, human rights activists, and former members of the Moroccan Liberation Army. While these subject positions often exist on opposite sides of this political divide – refugees, for example, live in the Polisario-run camps in Algeria, while ‘a’idin have left those camps and returned to Morocco – they co-exist within the same field of political conflict.

In contrast to identities, which are a matter of belonging, and subject positions, which retain their lasting significance through various regimes of governance, political subjectivities refer to the modalities of recognition through which subjects relate to this complex field. These political subjectivities intersect with both identities and subject positions but political subjectivities are less positions, or figures, than features of a field distinguished by the politics of recognition. The political subjectivity of a Sahrawi female refugee, for example, cannot be understood without taking into account her visibility in relation to the international community. The political subjectivity of an ‘a’id, or returnee, who leaves the Polisario refugee camps to
“return” to Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, takes form through the modality of movement, both in terms of physical mobility and political transition. And, finally, the process of identification can be explored through the prolonged attempt to hold a referendum on self-determination in the 1990s, which shaped political subjectivities within this contested political field.

Through this critique of methodological nationalism, I suggest that scholarship on Western Sahara that attempts to explain the contemporary dispute strictly in terms of nationalist conflict and identity reduces multiple subjectivities and subject positions to the terms of the conflict itself. In this respect, identities and subject positions that both precede and are produced by the Morocco-Polisario dispute are elided by questions of identity and citizenship, loyalty and opportunism. This chapter will explore political subjectivity as shaped by movement and identification in two sections.

In order to counter the naturalization of this process of “fixing” the geography of subjectivities in this political landscape, the first section of this chapter foregrounds multiplicity, movement and mobility. Beginning from Nouadhibou, a Mauritanian coastal enclave which attracts people from around the region during the summer, I present a geography of movement and mobility in a context of political confinement.\textsuperscript{155} Whereas Chapter 1 focused on Laâyoune/El Aaiún in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, this chapter is situated in northern Mauritania, which borders both Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, and the Polisario-controlled territories of Western Sahara and southwest Algeria. Conveying the dynamics of political identification

\textsuperscript{155} Hagar Kotef, Movement and the Ordering of Freedom: On Liberal Governances of Mobility (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015). Page 11: “Movement and stability thus precondition each other…these particular categories are formed vis-à-vis other groups, which are simultaneously presumably less rooted and constantly hindered. The immigrant, the nomad, and certain modes of what we have come to term ‘hybrid-subjectivity,’ all represent subject-positions that are configured through their mobility, but that more often inhabit spaces of confinement: detention and deportation camps, modern incarnations of poor houses, international zones at airports. The flux that is frequently celebrated as subversive has repeatedly served to restrict movement-as-freedom, to facilitate non free movements (expulsion, slave trade, denial of land tenure), and ultimately to preclude movement.”
from outside of both the Sahrawi refugee camps (where much recent scholarship on Western Sahara has taken place), and Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara (where the stifling political climate limits much of what can be said) is part of a methodological claim for the usefulness of multi-sited ethnography in a disaggregated political geography. From Nouadhibou, I profile the ‘a’id, or “returnee,” a subject position produced by the conflict between Morocco and Polisario, but which occasionally escapes the nationalist political epistemology upon which the conflict is based. Despite the cynicism and stigma of betrayal frequently associated with this subject position, I suggest that the ‘a’id exemplifies the tension between ambivalence and commitment underlying seemingly fixed political identities in this region.

The second section of this chapter elaborates how the process of identification continues to shape political subjectivities across the region in two ways. First, I explore how documentation and “being counted,” structures how belonging is conferred or withheld for Mauritanians and Sahrawis moving between refugee camps and northern Mauritania. While the focus on refugee camps within literature on Western Sahara gives the impression that people’s residencies and identities are largely settled, many people have always moved between a region now divided between northern Mauritania, Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, and Saharawi refugee camps in southwest Algeria. This chapter examines the regimes of documentation that restrict and facilitate this movement in a fragmented political geography. Second, in recounting UN-led attempts to hold a referendum on self-determination during the 1990s, I examine how these efforts subjected certain groups to intense contestation over their identities and political commitments. While the identification process was shelved over a decade ago and the referendum was never held, I consider the effects of the identification process on a man who became the object of intense political recruitment during this time.
The first chapter showed how surveillance serves as an overarching modality of political recognition that shapes political subjectivities in Laâyoune/El Aaiún. This chapter will consider the two modalities just mentioned – mobility and identification – to describe geographies and subjectivities that exceed, complicate and sometimes reinforce the structured dichotomy of Moroccan-Sahrawi nationalist conflict.

Section I – ‘A’idin or Returnees: an Overview

‘A’idin are, in the terminology of the Western Sahara conflict, people who left the Sahrawi refugee camps, and “returned to” Morocco. The name derives from a speech given by the late King of Morocco, Hassan II, on November 6, 1988, marking the 13-year anniversary of the Green March, when some 350,000 Moroccan civilians crossed en masse into what was then Spanish Sahara as part of Morocco’s efforts to annex the territory, causing Sahrawis to flee to the refugee camps in Algeria where many remain today. The King’s annual speech on the anniversary of the Green March marks the occasion as a national holiday in Morocco, but the speech that year took on particular import since 1988 marked a critical year for Polisario leadership. After thirteen years, war with Morocco had stalemated, and Polisario had been unable to dislodge Morocco from the territory they occupied in Western Sahara. With social and political upheaval rocking Algeria, Polisario’s main political sponsor was rumored to be in negotiations with Morocco to potentially sell out the Sahrawi nationalist cause as part of a political bargain to normalize relations. And as reports of disappearances and torture carried out during wartime in the refugee camps came to light, Polisario leadership faced protests and

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upheaval in the camps.

After spending much of the previous decade on the military defensive, King Hassan II sought to take advantage of this newfound position of strength by addressing the population of the refugee camps directly:

“…I say to whomever lost their way and strayed from the path, that they must be dealt with mercifully [by] the homeland and kin, for God’s sake, [‘elayhim ‘an ytaqū allāh fi al-watan wa al-rahem], and that they should know that the nation is forgiving and merciful…”157

By using the language of those who had “gone astray,” Hassan II discursively created a moral and physical arc of “return” for anyone seeking to leave the refugee camps and come to Morocco – even if, as was the case with some refugees, they had never been in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, let alone Morocco proper, to begin with.158 Similarly, Hassan II evoked the nation in terms of moral acceptance and divine authority (“forgiving and merciful” [al-ghafūr wa al-rahim] are both terms in the Qur’an used to describe God) as a way to exhort Sahrawis to leave the camps, i.e., “to return.” It is important to note that Hassan II’s speech did not have the intended effect of inducing mass defections from the refugee camps.159 It did, however, create a new category of political subject: the ‘a’īdin, or “returnee.”

Between 1989 and 1997, a little over 1200 people left the refugee camps and “returned” to Morocco.160 These first ‘a’īdin coming from the camps tended to be high-profile members of Polisario’s leadership who were recruited to defect by Moroccan intelligence services with

158 Though the majority of refugees reached the camps in exodus from Western Sahara as Morocco and Mauritania occupied the territory, it was not uncommon for others to join the movement from northern Mauritania, or southwest Algeria.
159 The number of ‘a’īdin has been estimated to be between 10,000 and 11,000 in total. [Fieldnotes, 6/17/14, 6/30/14, Lāâyoune/El Aaiún] It is important to note, however, that precise figures are not publicly available because opaque institutions of Moroccan state security, including the Department of the Interior, intelligence agencies, and military personnel, oversee the process of approval and registration.
160 Ángela Hernández Moreno, Sāhara: otras voces (Málaga: Editorial Algazara, 2001), 49. Hernández Moreno counts 1274 people who defected between 1976 and 1997; all but 61 of those left 1989 or later. Because “‘a’īdin” was not a category before 1988, I am focusing on the numbers from 1989 onward.
promises of government jobs, large houses and other amenities. In this first wave during the late-
1980s and early-90s, especially, ‘a’idin were frequently enlisted by Morocco to publicize their
experience of torture or other harsh treatment under the Polisario.\footnote{161} One woman whose husband
disappeared during this period showed me pictures from her travels across Europe in the late-
1990s and early-2000s as part of a human rights group funded by Morocco.\footnote{162} A Mauritanian
living in Laâyoune/El Aaiún who had joined Polisario as a young man only to be imprisoned in
the refugee camps as part of a purging of the “Mauritanian community,” gave me a copy of a
book published by the Moroccan government that features a collection of profiles and
testimonials by former supporters who had fled the camps after allegedly suffering torture at the
hands of Polisario.\footnote{163} The subject position of the “returnee” within the framework of political
conflict came to resemble defectors who had suffered under the hands of Polisario leadership and
would now collaborate with Morocco. The author of a 2001 collection of oral histories by ‘a’idin
suggests that the term “which literally means those who return, are known in Morocco as the
people, men and women, who deserted the Polisario Front and came back, or returned, to this
country, since in joining this organization [meaning Polisario] they abandoned their country.”\footnote{164}

An older Sahrawi man who had been imprisoned by Polisario for most of the 1980s
provides testimony characteristic of the ‘a’idin who were imprisoned in the camps during the
war years:

‘A’id: [Polisario leadership] didn’t accept us [Tekna]; they were suspicious of us, imprisioned us, and made life difficult for us [ykarfasuna yasir min attakarfis]. Whoever died in prison, died, and whoever survived, came out of prison

\footnote{161} See, for example, Brahim Hakim and Omar Hadrami who had defected from the camps and arrived in Morocco a couple of months before this speech.
\footnote{162} Fieldnote, May 4, 2014, Laâyoune/El Aaiún. Far from being proud of her experience, this woman noted with resentment that Morocco “harvests from people what it wants.”
\footnote{163} Martyrdom and Suffering of the Moroccan Prisoners and Confined Persons within the Tindouf Region in the South of Algeria/Mehna Wa Mu’anut Al-Muhtajizin Wa Al-Sujana’ Al-Maghariba Bi Al-Mintaqa Tinduf Janub Al-
Jaza’ir, n.d.
\footnote{164} Hernández Moreno, Sâhara, 47.
handicapped, or messed up in the head [tari’ bi shay fi ‘aqilu]... You see: [he is showing me an effect of imprisonment/torture] The skin is gone here [misloukha] - it used to be normal/natural. See?

**Me:** That was a result of-

‘A’id: The handcuffs. They put your hands like that, and tie them together with rope, and the feet...they tortured us a lot. Thirteen years.

**Me:** What did they do?

‘A’id: This [showing me a mark on his skin]: they burned us, with fire. That was just certain members of the leadership. Whereas, our young people, we weren’t against them.

**Me:** It is difficult (for me) to understand why they did that to, uh, people who accompanied/were with them in the war.

‘A’id: Us, we’re not against our people. We’re children of the people, but I explained to you before that the leadership – and, in particular, Polisario leadership – don’t want someone who could be better than them. And they don’t want something to be said about them [shi yngal fiha]. You understand me? What they did to us - who did that to us was someone named Bachir [Mustafa Sayid], a brother of the Martyr el-OUali [Mustafa Sayid, a founder and former leader of Polisario, since deceased], and Brahim Ghali [current President of SADR], Lamine ould al-Bouhali and Soueid Ahmed al-Batal. Those were the Polisario leaders, and they’re the ones who governed. You understand? Some spared us, but they killed lots of Sahrawis in prison - lots - not just a little, you understand? You couldn’t protest your innocence - even if it were your father or mother, you couldn’t protest your innocence...You have your father: if your father does (something like) that and hits you; the president is like your father. The person responsible is like a father. Am I right, or what? But when it happens and they do that to you, you’re going to become far from - you can’t.

I prefer the Moroccans to them. You understand? Morocco, now, if you weren’t here [i.e., in disputed territory] but inside the country, you’d be free. You wouldn’t have any worries [ma ‘andek saliha]. But, these disputed territories, they are where there is fear.165

In recounting his own experience with torture, this ‘a’id narrated his experience in the camps as a way of bringing to justice the Polisario leadership, particularly since a number of those members that he deemed responsible for these abuses remained in power. In doing so, his testimony resembles the form through which a couple of publications from the late-1990s and

early-2000s presented the voices of ‘a’idin. One of these publications was by a Spanish scholar and the other was published as Moroccan political propaganda, but each attempted to frame the “voice” of the returnee as a witness to abuse and torture. The Moroccan publication, entitled *Martyrdom and Suffering of the Moroccan Prisoners and Confined Persons within the Tindouf Region in the South of Algeria*, includes books and pamphlets in Arabic and English.\(^{166}\) The books consist of a series of individual profiles, with background information of each ‘a’idin accompanied by first-person accounts of the torture that they suffered. Some profiles include photographs of the victims’ injuries. The interviews published by a Spanish scholar under the title *Sahara: Otras Voces* provides sociological data on the first wave of ‘a’idin, and is less narrowly focused on torture and abuse. However, the oral histories are similarly presented as testimony to the injustices perpetrated by the Polisario Front on its subjects during the 1980s. In both publications, ‘a’idin emerge as historical figures in the form of a dossier, or a compilation of documented testimonials that testify to political abuse. As such, they are among the first voices in the history of the Western Sahara conflict to publicize dissent within Polisario. More importantly, however, the way in which these ‘a’idin are represented as individuals testifying to political torture and abuse anticipates the adoption of human rights discourse as a tactic in the conflict between Morocco and Polisario, as it shifted from armed struggle to a struggle of diplomacy after 1991. This displacement of the language of decolonization by the language of human rights now characterizes the contemporary terrain of conflict, and will be discussed more in Chapter 5.

Instrumentalized in this way, the first wave of ‘a’idin arriving the early 1990s were both denounced by Polisario, and ostracized by Sahrawis living in Moroccan-occupied territory,\(^{166}\) *Martyrdom and Suffering of the Moroccan Prisoners and Confined Persons within the Tindouf Region in the South of Algeria/Mehna Wa Mu’anat Al-Muhtajizin Wa Al-Sujana’ Al-Maghariba Bi Al-Mintaqa Tinduf Janub Al-Jaza’ir.*
where many of them resettled. As the following poem demonstrates, Sahrawis on either side of Morocco’s dividing wall associated ‘a’idin with opportunism and betrayal:

Betrayal is bad and haram
[It is] a scandal upon us, and grave
Leave, you scandalous accuser
Betrayer of the Sahrawi blood
Leave and trade dignity
For little houses and cards
While orphans and widows
Are still here in sweetness/goodness [al-halawiya]¹⁶⁷

This poem directly addresses the same population that Hassan II sought to sway, but through accusation rather than invitation. It contrasts the virtuous steadfastness of “orphans and widows” who remain in the refugee camps despite significant sacrifices, with the transactional opportunism of those who betray their principles in exchange for “little houses and cards” offered by the Moroccan state. (“Cards” refer to state-issued identification cards that provide access to benefits.)

For the first wave of ‘a’idin, the benefits gained from “returning” tended to be negotiated individually with political officials connected with the Moroccan military, intelligence services, or the Makhzen. For those deemed of value to the government, these benefits were often quite generous and might include the promise of a government job. The Moroccan state hoped, or perhaps even expected, that the first wave of ‘a’idin might induce mass defections from the

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¹⁶⁷ l-khiyana shina wa haram
fadaha fina wa rzina
temshi ya mahdour taham
kha’in dem as-Sahrawiya
temshi wa tabaddl karam
bi douira hiya wa kartiya
wa l-ytam wa l-‘aramil
mazalu hun fi halawiya
camps and also sway popular support among Sahrawis within Moroccan-occupied territories. New families that arrived in Moroccan-occupied territory would appear on regional television news broadcasts, performatively describing the abuses they had suffered in the camps and expressing their gratitude to be in Morocco. First wave ‘aʿidan were valued for their capacity to testify to abuse and torture, while displaying their loyalty to the Moroccan state. In this way, benefits were provided on the expectation that this first generation of ‘aʿidan would serve the Moroccan cause in the Sahara, visibly and prominently, and were contingent upon political cooperation. ‘Aʿidan were, in short, expected to fulfill the role of the defector.

In “little houses and cards,” however, the poem refers to the more recent, standardized set of benefits provided by the Moroccan government as larger numbers of people began “returning” in the early- to mid-2000s. Today, the government provides a small plot of land and house in a city of Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, as well as an identity card that entitles ‘aʿidan to a stipend of $200 euros per month (known as al-inʿash). These benefits are less generous and are disbursed less reliably than they used to be. A frequent complaint among recent ‘aʿidan with whom I spoke in Laâyoune/El Aaiûn was that the number of benefit cards distributed by Morocco to a returning family varies widely, and often arbitrarily. One family may receive a card and the accompanying benefits for every child in the family; another may find that only the head of household receives a card.169

168 One ‘aʿid recounted that, before settling in Laâyoune/El Aaiûn, he spent time in a hotel in Rabat, where he was briefed by intelligence/military personnel about the conditions of his “return”: he could enjoy a stipend of 3000 euro per month and a house so long as he agreed to 1) not criticize Khali Henna ould Rachid, then the leading King’s counselor on Saharan Affairs, and 2) support Morocco’s autonomy plan. This ‘aʿid claimed that he initially accepted this offer, but then changed his mind. He now lives on the standard 200 euro per month and lives in a small house in one of the outlying neighborhoods of Laâyoune/El Aaiûn where many ‘aʿidan live. Fieldnote May 4, 2014, Laâyoune/El Aaiûn, Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara.

169 Fieldnote, undated, Laâyoune/El Aaiûn, Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara. As noted in Chapter 1, both individuals and families have “returned” since the inception of the category of ‘Aʿidan. Following the Agdim Izig protests in 2010, when the Moroccan government began to suspect the motives of single young men registering as ‘aʿidan and moving to Moroccan-occupied territory, “Morocco announced that it would give the benefits only to
Changes to the benefit regime appear to represent a broader shift in the Moroccan state’s expectation for ‘a’idan, and therefore in the subject position for those bearing this political label. Where ‘a’idan were once valued as defectors whose visibility was meant to impact the morale of the refugees in the camps, the increasing regularity and number of returnees permitted during the 2000s has in effect normalized their presence. Today, entire neighborhoods in Laâyoune/El Aaiún are marked by the modest, box-like, single story house described in Chapter 1 for those who came from Agjijimat. The same simple constructions were distributed to ‘a’idan. Unlike an earlier generation, many of whom fled the refugee camps for explicitly political reasons (whom I refer to as “first wave returnees”), more recent, “second wave” ‘a’idan who have come to Moroccan-occupied territory since 2000, do so for many different reasons. Some “return” in order to care for an elderly relative, or to find a job, or simply to reunite with relatives from whom they had been separated for decades. Some, even, seek to turn a quick profit by reselling the plot of land or “little house” distributed by Morocco, taking profits from the sale with them elsewhere – sometimes even back to the refugee camps. Many of these more recent arrivals outwardly disdain the Moroccan state and maintain unwavering support for Sahrawi nationalism. Others, it is rumored, may even have been sent by Polisario to serve as operatives in Moroccan-occupied territory.

As this expectation of loyalty and patronage between ‘a’idan and the Moroccan state has eroded, the stigma associated with this label among Sahrawis has begun to fade, as well. Where the “returnee” was once seen as a betrayer and opportunist, they are more often now viewed with relative indifference, by both the Moroccan state and Sahrawi society. No longer bound to supporting either Morocco or Polisario, the ‘a’id is an unusual figure in the contemporary

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landscape of political conflict in Western Sahara. On the one hand, this detachment from the two parties that structure the political field of conflict can lead to a kind of disillusionment and cynicism. No longer necessarily seen as a traitor, the figure of the ‘a’id still epitomizes political opportunism. Take, for example, the following joke about Ibrahim Hakim. A former Mauritanian government official who joined the Polisario Front in 1975, Hakim played a major role in raising SADR’s profile diplomatically by brokering Polisario/SADR’s entry to the Organization of African Unity in the early 1980s. After serving as foreign minister and minister of information, Hakim became one of the earliest and most high-profile ‘a’idin when he turned up in Morocco in 1992. Around this time, Morocco and Algeria were negotiating a rapprochement to finally recognize each other’s borders and build on the recently-established Arab Maghreb Union (AMU). As part of any agreement, it was rumored that Algeria would close the refugee camps and send Sahrawis back to Morocco. As the joke goes, the Morocco-Algeria rapprochement never fully materialized and was interrupted, at least in part, by the assassination of one of the lead Algerian negotiators, Mohamed Boudiaf. Before the assassination, according to the joke, Ibrahim Hakim met with Boudiaf in Algiers, learned of the plans regarding the refugee camps, and went straight to Rabat via Paris. The story is told as a joke on Ibrahim Hakim: so eager to leave Polisario for a more favorable situation, he anticipated a political development that never arose.

This joke also reflects more broadly upon the sense that “returnees,” in general, lack political principles or commitment. To some extent there is overlap here between the idea of opportunism and betrayal. The short poem cited above denounces “returnees” both for betrayal, and for trading political and moral dignity for “little houses and cards.” There is also, however, a

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171 Fieldnote, July 3, 2015, Nouadhibou, Mauritania.
certain distinction between these notions. The act of betrayal takes on meaning precisely because of the stakes involved in switching from one political commitment or another. The very act depends upon a situation of political polarization; one cannot betray an ally to a neutral party, but to an enemy. An action taken to be opportunistic, on the other hand, suggests a complete disregard for political commitment of any kind. In the context of the Western Sahara conflict, an “opportunist” [*wahid intihazi*] is a label for someone who demonstrates a lack of principles, a kind of shallow materialism, and an inability to maintain political commitment.

The accusation resonates, however, precisely because the potential for widespread opportunism is a constant threat in the context of prolonged political stalemate. While the ‘*a’id* serves as the paradigmatic opportunist, the construction of political subjects as opportunistic circulates in subtler and more pervasive ways in popular discourse, particularly in Moroccan-occupied territory. As a jaded observer put it in the context of Laâyoune/El Aaiún, “material things [*al-mada*] are fundamental; give people something and they’ll just be quiet.” Making the same point but from the standpoint of the recipients of these “material things,” a friend in a café once intimated that the quickest way for anyone in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara to get out of a bad legal situation (such as getting arrested for hashish, for example), is to raise two fingers in the symbol of Sahrawi victory and claim oneself a political prisoner. These are both references to the political economy of political conflict in Moroccan-occupied territory. As seen in the example of ‘*a’idin*, Moroccan state benefits are doled out or withheld through a calculus of political loyalty. Competing with the Moroccan state’s system of benefits and punishment, there is also an alleged payment system through which SADR/Polisario’s Ministry for the Occupied Territories provides incentive for protesters in the occupied territories to make themselves visible (and, it is rumored, to sustain injury in a way that can get caught on tape).
It is important to note here that many of these generalized examples of opportunistic political behavior circulate as rumors. The rumors about protesters getting paid – much less paid to sustain injuries – was never anything I could substantiate.\textsuperscript{172} It should also be noted that rumors of opportunism or political indifference serve the Moroccan state’s unrelenting efforts to undermine nationalist support, and in this way the state likely encouraged or amplified this discourse. Still, these allegations are, in Veena Das’s conceptualization, a form of language defined by its lack of signature that becomes pervasive and gains its “perlocutionary force” through an appeal to unfinished past events in the present.\textsuperscript{173} In this context of protracted conflict where, despite continuous polarization, the immediate horizon for political change remains elusive, these rumors reflect a broader disillusionment. And, as the joke about Brahim Hakim attests, the ‘a’id represents the quintessential opportunist in this context.

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In the previous chapter, I introduced Lahcen, an ‘a’id who had been in Moroccan-occupied Laâyoune/El Aaiún since the 1990s. Unlike other “first wave” ‘a’idin who benefited from jobs in government administration along with generous pay and housing, Lahcen experienced only marginalization since his return:

When, from the highest reaches of the Moroccan state – which, at that time, was the late Hassan II – when we were called to as Sahrawis in the Polisario Front, they said to us that “the nation is forgiving and merciful,” and we listened to the speech, believing that in the call there was no clientelism or patronage. So we put the issue of the Sahara to the side.

But when we came to Morocco, they took revenge upon us and they threw us in the streets - listen, they threw us in the streets without any integration. Now, I am not a [state] employee - but when the Moroccan security forces from Mauritania - Sahrawi by origin - come here, they don’t learn/understand anything

\textsuperscript{172} These rumors were, however, specific enough to claim that a Sahrawi living in the Canary Islands known as “the crow” [al-ghurab] allegedly serves as conduit for payments from SADR to Sahrawi nationalists in Moroccan-occupied territory.
They don’t know anything: on the issue of the Sahara, they are not well-educated. They don’t read at all. They don’t know anything besides their own name. They integrate here - complete integration, with a public job/position, and are welcomed with warm hospitality [bi hafawa]. But when we came from the Polisario Front, and we are from this very place – [we] the sons of the Sahara – we are thrown out and ignored and thrown in the alleyways and streets: decades without integration. Meaning, there was something duplicitous [an intent that was not trustworthy] in the call to us in the first place, on the part of King Hassan II. They took revenge on us for ten years. Why?

First, either because of the period that we spent in the Sahrawi army, or because of my father who resisted them. You understand? And that matter, we consider the drop that overflowed the cup. And the straw that broke the camel’s back...1

Lahcen draws particular attention in this passage to the contrast between his marginalization, despite having lived in the territory prior to Morocco’s occupation, and the state’s recruitment of Mauritanians into the state security apparatus, as police, educators or administrators. This reflects a longstanding process in which Morocco has sought to turn the population of the Sahara “inside-out.” In casting the Moroccan state’s marginalization of him as an act of spite and vengeance, Lahcen contends that he and others fulfilled the moral arc of return called for by Hassan II, only to be betrayed by a duplicitous Moroccan state.

Despite this frustration at the marginalization that he has faced since his return to Moroccan-occupied territory, Lahcen’s reasons for returning stemmed from a similar sense of frustration while serving in the Sahrawi People’s Liberation Army during the 1970s and 80s. Lahcen reported that, after being hospitalized in Algiers for battle wounds, he was reprimanded and imprisoned for his regiment’s behavior, then later removed from his position, serving the remainder of the war in a non-military position. Lahcen’s experience of marginalization by both Morocco and Polisario is reflected in his disavowal of both parties:

I assure you that, now, I belong to neither Morocco nor the Front. I am moderate/in the middle [wasati], and I value dignity and peace and dignified living. I don’t like injustice or wrongdoing. And I am against the Polisario Front

174 Interview October 11, 2014, Laâyoune/El Aaiûn, Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara
in certain matters, despite the fact that...25 [members of my family] are now with Polisario. And [I am] against Morocco on a number of ideas. And I do not support that Morocco should have sovereignty over the Sahara, unless it happens with our consultation and consent. That’s the end. Did you understand me?

Salam ‘alaykum. I am going to smoke a cigarette.  

Many Sahrawis distance themselves from Polisario, for various reasons, but remain deeply committed to Sahrawi nationalism and the right to self-determination. Among ‘a’idin such as Lahcen, however, I encountered more of a resignation that the principles of the conflict themselves were no longer meaningful because they depended upon bankrupt political entities for their realization. Hence, his resort to abstract moral principles of dignity and peace.

Contrary to what these excerpts might suggest, Lahcen was quite reticent to talk about himself, and more interested in relaying a specific history to me, than in talking about himself. This set him apart both from pro-Morocco ‘a’idin who reflexively reported their experience of torture and abuse at the hands of Polisario leadership during the 1980s, and from huquqiyyin (Chapter 5), who would do the same in regards to ongoing Moroccan repression. What interested Lahcen most in our conversations were two things: conveying the importance of the events of 1988 in the refugee camps, and coming up with new metaphors to describe the destruction and hopelessness that he bore witness to in the present.

The history of Polisario culminating in the events of 1988, in Lahcen’s telling, can be divided in two periods. The first period was between 1974 and 82, which involved the most intense fighting of the war and during which, for three years (1976-79) Polisario waged a war on two fronts against Morocco and Mauritania. Facing constant threats to its existence on the battlefield, this period was also marked by power struggles among leadership, some of which led to a series of purges within Polisario’s ranks. The first involved a dispute following a conference in 1974, when Polisario was still in its infancy. Members from the Saguiet al-Hamra region

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175 Interview October 11, 2014, Laâyoune/El Aaiún, Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara
surrounding Laâyoune/El Aaiún were imprisoned, after protesting that too many members of Polisario’s Executive Committee were from northern Mauritania and Algeria. This faction claimed that the preponderance of Algerian Sahrawis solidified the alliance between Polisario and the Algerian state from that point forward.\textsuperscript{176} Subsequent purges resulted less from power struggles than a concerted effort to target certain populations that were deemed potentially foreign elements and therefore untrustworthy by Polisario leadership, including members of Tekna tribes, a group of former prisoners under Spanish colonialism (Lglibat Lfoula), a group known as “friends of the French community” (Matar al-Ghar), and “the Mauritanian network.”

As these purges led to imprisonment, torture, disappearance, or defection (usually, at that time, to Mauritania),\textsuperscript{177} the ongoing near-total mobilization within the camps and beyond around winning the war left refugees in the camps unaware that SADR/Polisario’s security apparatus was turning on its own. Lahcen claimed that many people chose to ignore, or preferred not to know about, the “purging” going on within Polisario’s ranks during that time, in part because to voice these misgivings would have invited accusations of being a traitor \textit{[kha’ìn]}.\textsuperscript{178} But others claimed that conditions within the camps simply didn’t allow for people to acknowledge what was going on. On one occasion, a female ‘a’ida remarked that during this time, if one saw someone who looked disturbed (like they may have suffered abuse or torture), one didn’t ask any questions. However, Lahcen noted that eventually the purges between 1976 and 82 led a younger generation to start asking questions. This culminated in an intervention led by one of the founders of Polisario who occupied a number of leadership positions in the Front between 1976 and 1988, including Director of Military Security, Omar Hadrami (also known by his nom de

\textsuperscript{176} Hernández Moreno, \textit{Sáhara}, 80–84.
\textsuperscript{177} Nicola Cozza, “Singing like Wood-Birds: Refugee Camps and Exile in the Construction of the Saharawi Nation,” Ph.D. diss., (University of Oxford, 2004), 193. For one allegation of how torture was carried out at what was called the “National Hospital.”
\textsuperscript{178} Fieldnote July 31, 2014, Laâyoune/El Aaiún, Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara.
guerre, al-'Athmi). As Hadrami brought these violations to light, the refugee camps erupted for five days in October in what is sometimes called the intifada of 1988:

It was a fragile empire [embraturiya hasha]: no one lifted their head without getting it cut, until 1988. That intifada took place, and after that you could speak. And you could say, I’m so-and-so, son of so-and-so, from this tribe. You understand me? Then, you could say that, and no longer be afraid.

And those who undertook it included al-'Athmi, and a group from among the younger members of the leadership. They are the ones who protested, which lifted the morale from that place where you couldn’t say a word, to where you could speak. And defend yourself/stand up for yourself. You understand me? If not for that, nothing.179

A year later, in July 1989, Hadrami became the first high-profile ‘a’id to return to Morocco.180

The history of 1988 is one that has drawn little attention from scholars of the Western Sahara, with the exception of the aforementioned collection of oral histories of ‘a’idin (Hernández Moreno, Sahara: otras voces), and an unpublished dissertation (Cozza, Nicola, cited above). Likewise, Morocco’s best efforts to exploit this history of abuse to political advantage has not resonated either locally among Sahrawis, or beyond. Aside from the relative obscurity of this history, its importance to a group of ‘a’idin serves to highlight their disjunctive relationship to the nationalist histories that frame the ongoing conflict. Hadrami’s prominence in Lahcen’s account contrasts with the fact that Hadrami and other high-profile ‘a’idin have failed to build a popular following within Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, or in the camps. Indeed, many point out that, as a former Director of Polisario’s Military Security, Hadrami may well have been responsible for many of the abuses that he shed light on before departing for Morocco. Similarly, the significance of the purges during this time are often refracted through different social alignments. Some view the repression of this period in tribal terms, as the demographic majority

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179 Interview, March 28, 2014, Laâyoune/El Aaiún, Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara. Polisario leadership held an emergency congress to address the demands of the protesters. Cozza reports that one decision reached as far as the abuses was that “a Sahrawi court would judge those high politicians responsible…only after the achievement of independence of Western Sahara.” Cozza, “Singing like Wood-Birds,” 199.
180 Pazzanita, Historical Dictionary of Western Sahara, 305.
Rguibat wielded their power within the camps to persecute Tekna, Wlad Dlim and members of other, smaller tribes. Rguibat who consider Hadrami a traitor downplay the significance of the uprising in 1988, referring to it as a riot [\textit{shughab}], rather than an \textit{intifada}. And, finally, there are those who prefer to subordinate this history to the ongoing struggle for self-determination, referring to past abuses during this time as “simple mistakes” [\textit{al-\textquoteright aghlat al-basita}].\footnote{As one \textit{\textasciitilde a\textasciiacute id} incredulously asked after citing this attitude, “what simple mistakes are there in execution? Or killing or kidnapping?” Interview June 30, 2014 La\textquotesingle youne/El Aaiún, Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara.}

Lahcen’s insistence that I understand the extent of and resistance to Polisario’s repression during the 1970s and 80 built upon a longer history in which he made clear that, historically, the people of Western Sahara never lived under Moroccan rule. Left with two histories negated by the present, it is small wonder that Lahcen’s views of the current political situation were shot through with cynicism. Invariably, when I would ask him for his opinion of protests in Laâyoune/El Aaiún going on at the time that called for human rights monitoring in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, Lahcen would dismissively state that the politics of the present were a product of a “fabricated Sahara” [\textit{al-Sahara al-mustana\textasciiacute a} or, sometimes \textit{al-Sahara al-mufabraqa}] and that the “original Sahara” which belonged to the “original Sahrawis” was as irretrievable as the Americas of the Native Americans. To make this point, Lahcen regularly resorted to colorful metaphors, suggesting that the Sahrawi people were like gum, and the forces of time, displacement and resettlement continue to stretch them more and more thinly, the better to chop them into pieces. (On another occasion, he used cilantro to make a similar point.) When I asked whether he supported those continuing to call for self-determination, he contended that they represented a “fabricated people” acting Sahrawi better than “the originals.” Other times, Lahcen conspiratorially suggested that the Moroccan state itself fostered the current version of the Sahrawi nationalist movement in the territory it occupies, and that the
prolongation of the conflict served only to benefit political elites in Morocco as well as Polisario leadership in Tindouf, Algeria. Citing Nikolai Bukharin in reference to the seeming omnipotence of the Moroccan state in Laâyoune/El Aaiún, he grimly asserted, “when the state wants something from you, it gets something from you.”\textsuperscript{182}

Lahcen’s cynicism constitutes a common and important political emotion in the context of prolonged political conflict in Western Sahara, and it is not incidental that the ‘a’id would be particularly prone to this disillusionment. As Lisa Wedeen noted in her study of Syrian citizens who developed means of dissimulating, or acting “as if” their support for an authoritarian regime were real, this dissimulation invariably has a depoliticizing effect.\textsuperscript{183} Building on Wedeen’s observations, Lori Allen remarked that a cynical disposition that had developed among many human rights workers in Palestine in the 2000s also created space for critique and hope.\textsuperscript{184} The context of Western Sahara resembles aspects of both Syria before the civil war, and Israel-occupied Palestine. As in Syria under Assad, Western Sahara is a context of relentless politicization; as in Israel-occupied Palestine, the conflict’s prolonged stasis lends itself to apathy. In discussing the historiography of Polisario authoritarianism during the 1980s that Lahcen and other ‘a’idin find particularly important, I observe that the subordination of this history to a broader struggle that they can no longer actively support can lead to a generalized cynicism. While this cynicism certainly may create the space for critique, in the case of ‘a’idin such as Lahcen this disillusionment with both Morocco and Polisario does not provide much space for hope.

\textsuperscript{182} Fieldnotes April 4, 2014, Laâyoune/El Aaiún, Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara. Lahcen was educated in Cuba, which may have contributed to his familiarity with Bukharin.  
On the other hand, ‘a’idin are somewhat unique in the context of nationalist conflict for openly flaunting political commitment. No longer bound by the poles of national loyalty or accusations of betrayal that politicize so much of everyday life in both Moroccan-occupied territory, and the refugee camps, ‘a’idin also embody a kind of opportunism that rejects the stakes of nationalist conflict. While many Sahrawis oppose Polisario but remain staunchly nationalist, the ‘a’id’s relative indifference toward either Moroccan or Polisario legitimacy constitutes a position – or non-position – that in certain instances seems to deflate the significance of national commitment itself. In this way, the ‘a’id’s opportunism is multivalent, constituted by rank self-interest, but also by a capriciousness or fickleness predicated on social and political mobility. In a recent article devoted to these figures, Sebastién Boulay notes that ‘a’idin’s motives for “returning” generally have no bearing on their political convictions. This is important to note since Morocco tries to capitalize on the phenomenon of “returning,” [al-‘awda] by associating the act with political defection.185 As increasing numbers of ‘a’idin have little to no loyalty to Morocco, and may even remain outwardly antagonistic toward the state long after their arrival, the politics of al-‘awda may simply be embedded in the very act of mobility within a context of separation and confinement.

As Boulay notes elsewhere in citing the work of the anthropologist Pierre Bonte, in the context of the Sahara and Mauritania, departure from a group can itself constitute a political act:

In this nomadic western Saharan society, to separate [désolidariser] from a camp in order to settle elsewhere with one’s relatives is an evident mode of political autonomization, and more generally of scission and recomposition of groups (Bonte 2008).186

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186 Boulay, 100; Bonte, L’émirat de l’Adrar mauritanien.
In the contemporary context of prolonged nationalist conflict, the significance of al-‘awda may not lie in the act of leaving from one group for another, as was common among the “first wave” of ʿaʿidin who left the refugee camps to join the Moroccan cause. Rather, in describing the relative fluidity of the ʿaʿid’s political subjectivity, I am mostly referring to the more numerous, “second wave” ʿaʿidin whose very mobility constitutes a kind of disconnection from the confining geographies and categories of nationalist conflict. Given Lahcen’s insistence on the “fabricated” reality of political activity going on around him, one might even see among certain ʿaʿidin in their disillusionment with the terms that structure everyday life a kind of ideological “dissociation” that allows them to hold the concrete abstraction of nationalist conflict in abeyance. I do not wish to suggest that this way of being relative to the political commitments that predominate and shape the contemporary landscape of Western Sahara are somehow “better” than the politics of committed nationalists. Rather, I wish to explore the potential, and limits, to acknowledging that a subject position produced by prolonged nationalist conflict, can generate certain kinds of political movement, mobility and opportunism that in turn challenge certain premises of the conflict itself. Can the figure of the ʿaʿid, long considered a subject position of cynical opportunism, also entail a form of political movement and physical mobility that undermines the prevailing poles of loyalty and betrayal in a context of nationalist conflict?

**Section II – Nouadhibou, Mauritania: Mobility in Confinement**

Situated midway down the bay side of a peninsula that juts out into the Atlantic, Nouadhibou is Mauritania’s second-largest city. Originally established by the French as Port Etienne, the city subsequently became integral to Mauritania’s national economy, both as a fishing port and for the export of iron ore that is transported by train from the Mauritanian mines of Zouérate and F’derik some 670 kilometers to the east. The railway transporting iron in open-air cars reaches its
terminus at the peninsula’s southern tip, at one of the administrative headquarters for Mauritanian’s state mining entity, la Société Nationale Industrielle et Minière (SNIM), in a neighborhood known as Cansado. In an attempt to recruit foreign investment, the city has recently been designated a free-trade zone. In this sense, Nouadhibou is a classic enclave: a hub of import-export activity that constitutes a central node in the Mauritanian national economy, even as it exists in tenuous relation to the rest of the country geographically.

This tenuous relation is exacerbated by the fact that a political boundary dating back to the colonial era bisects the length of the peninsula. Where the bay side was part of French West Africa, the ocean side belonged to Spain, where a thriving port, La Guëra, emerged during the 1960s as a commercial hub for imports from the Canary Islands. Separated by several kilometers, the growth of Nouadhibou and La Guëra was closely connected during this period such that locals, to avoid paying tariffs, would wait until sundown to smuggle imported Spanish goods across the peninsula by foot for resale in Mauritania. During the early years of the war in the mid-1970s many young men from the tribes of northern Mauritanian, known as “ahel al-Sahel,” were recruited by Polisario.

Both Nouadhibou and La Guëra became military targets because of their strategic location relative to the railroad, a vital link to the import and export of hydrocarbons and minerals, respectively, for Mauritania’s national economy. Following Spain’s abrupt withdrawal in 1975, La Guëra was abandoned and today, under the terms of ceasefire, the formerly Spanish half of the peninsula is under SADR/Polisario’s jurisdiction. Because SADR/Polisario does not have or exercise the means to oversee this territory beyond periodic

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187 Cansado, meaning “worn out” in Spanish, is a company town built in the 1960s that houses SNIM management and their families. In addition to the railroad terminus, an oil and gas depot are located at the peninsula’s southern end.

188 Interview, June 16, 2015, Nouadhibou, Mauritania. The interviewee described this period as “revolutionary times” between the Nasserist, Ba’athist ideas in circulation, as well as the Maoist Kadihin (“toilers”) movement that was ascendant in Mauritania in the early 1970s. “Those who stay and study will only worry – better to go” join the fight, was one of the sayings from the time that this man recounted.
sweeps through the area, this strip of land effectively exists in limbo. Today, aside from a handful of licensed fisherman and a few Mauritanian military officers on the lookout for contraband, La Guëra is a ghost town. The rest of the peninsula remains undeveloped,\(^1\) and serves as a kind of demilitarized zone between Morocco and Mauritania.

As this tenuous relation to borders and competing sovereignties suggests, Nouadhibou is shaped by a fractured political landscape even as it is in Mauritania and therefore not technically a part of the disputed territory of Western Sahara. Hemmed in by the railroad and the boundary fence marking the formerly Spanish territory beyond it, the city stretches north-south along the bay side of the peninsula, a long and narrow patchwork of neighborhoods composed of different peoples living in relatively unintegrated juxtaposition. The “old” town, which dates back to the city’s establishment as a fishing port, is now largely populated by immigrants from across Central and West Africa working in artisanal or commercial fishing.\(^2\) The villas of Kra’a Nasrani,\(^3\) where restaurants cater to Spanish, Chinese and other expatriates involved in the fishing industry, line the bank leading down from the “old” town to the commercial port. In the opposite direction, Numerowatt, the most populous section of Nouadhibou, stretches north up the peninsula toward the mainland, with its back to the bay.\(^4\) Dubai\(^5\) and Baghdad, two neighborhoods on either side of the main road that together constitute Numerowatt, are where the vast majority of Mauritanians and Sahrawis, collectively known as bidanis, live.

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1. The only exception to this is a monk seal observatory run by an environmental NGO that was built on the formerly Spanish, ocean side of the peninsula, with approval from SADR/Polisario.
2. A rotating contingent of Spanish coast guard officers are based in Nouadhibou to police and deter boats of immigrants from striking out for the Canary Islands.
4. “Numerowatt” refers to a numbering system by which each section of the neighborhood is named according to its position in the grid of public water taps. “Robini 1” (from Fr robinet) is furthest south, up to Robini 6 at the edges of the city.
5. Dubai is said to have emerged during the mid-2000s when cocaine trafficking significantly boosted the city’s economy.
As an enclave, Nouadhibou is a space of transit: for immigrants from Central and West Africa to work; for iron ore shipping out of the country with every train arriving from the mines; for cars and other goods imported overland from Europe through Morocco, en route east to the refugee camps in Algeria, or points south; and for the Mauritanian state to attempt to capture rents and fees from goods and people passing through. But it is also an important junction where Sahrawis from the refugee camps and from Moroccan-occupied Sahara meet and escape the heat, politically and climatically. Morocco and Algeria maintain consulates – meaning, as well, an intelligence presence – at opposite ends of the city, demonstrating the political salience of this space of movement and mobility within a geography of conflict and division. And in the summer, when the peninsula benefits from the cooling effects of Atlantic trade winds not found elsewhere in Mauritania, Nouadhibou’s population swells. Expansive villas in the neighborhood of Dubai are transformed from empty shells into bustling hubs of sociality. Apartment buildings to rent by the day in the more densely settled Baghdad neighborhood fill with vacationers from Nouakchott, Mauritania’s capital, as well as Sahrawi refugees escaping the desert heat of the camps in Algeria. At night, the streets are flooded with car and foot traffic.

It was here where I met Mohamed Mouloud, who had come to Mauritania with his wife, their two children, his cousin’s family, and several in-laws. By the time we met, Mohamed Mouloud had been in Nouadhibou for a month, having arrived from the refugee camps where he had spent most of his life. Aside from the requisite tea set, prayer rug, and rolled up bedding, Mohamed Mouloud’s modest, two-bedroom rented apartment in Numerowatt remained characteristically unfurnished and spare. In the kitchen, stockpiled foodstuffs lined the floor: a huge sack of rice, a tub of cooking oil, and other goods brought from the camps and marked as humanitarian aid had been brought to provision the family for the summer. Unlike many of the
other visitors filling Nouadhibou that summer, however, Mohamed Mouloud, his family and in-laws sharing the apartment in Numerowatt had packed up and left the refugee camps for good, intending to move to Dakhla, in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara. Although Mohamed Mouloud had been born in the refugee camps, and neither he nor any of his immediate family had ever been to Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, in order to move to Morocco they had to present themselves to the Moroccan consulate as “returnees,” or ‘a’idin.

**Gathering I: The Aspiring ‘A’id**

Though some reach Moroccan-occupied Sahara by way of Spain, most “second wave” ‘a’idin leaving directly from the refugee camps travel overland through northern Mauritania. The travel through northern Mauritania is necessary, because the heavily militarized sand berm that demarcates the eastern bounds of Moroccan-occupied territory is lined with soldiers and mines and largely prevents direct travel between the refugee camps and Moroccan-occupied territory. Mohamed Mouloud’s extended family had taken the route through northern Mauritania to reach Nouadhibou, a two-day journey from the camps. The first leg involves roughly twelve hours of travel via four-wheel-drive “taxis” that ply the commercial route between the camps and Zouérate, the largest mining town of northern Mauritania. From Zouérate, travellers board the train that transports iron ore from mine to coast, a 16-hour trip. Though arduous, travel between the camps in southwest Algeria and northern Mauritania is a well-worn route, both on account of the deep ties between Sahrawis in the refugee camps and ahel al-Sahel of northern Mauritania, and because regional commerce based on re-selling humanitarian aid from the camps into the Mauritanian market is centered in Zouérate. 

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194 One of the “multahiqin” who left Moroccan-occupied territory to live in the camps, described his journey from Laâyoune/El Aaiún through an unmanned point in the berm and into the Liberated Territories controlled by Polisario, where he was picked up by the EPLS and taken to the camps.  
When I first met Mohamed Mouloud, he had been in Nouadhibou for several weeks and was looking forward to reaching Moroccan-occupied territory soon. Over the next couple of months, which coincided that summer with Ramadan, we met fairly regularly either at his apartment or with whomever he was visiting among the large contingent of friends and acquaintances who were also summering in Nouadhibou. Unlike “first wave” returnees, whose discourse tends to adhere to a derogatory and highly politicized portrayal about the camps, Mohamed Mouloud easily switched between aspects of life in the refugee camps that he deeply valued, and his reasons for leaving. His cousin, he recalled, once denounced Polisario leaders to a BBC television crew: proof, he said, that one could speak freely in the camps. On the other hand, he noted that taking a political position in the camps that was in favor of anything less than Sahrawi self-determination risked facing accusations of being a Moroccan spy. Moreover, Mohamed Mouloud considered Polisario leadership corrupt, distributing political and economic opportunities along family lines, and monopolized by several subfractions, or *afkhadh*, of Rguibat al-Sharq: Awlad Daoud, Awlad Cheikh, Swayad, Tehellat, Boueihat. When we met a Sahrawi policeman riding in an official SADR state vehicle on the streets of Nouadhibou, which was not an uncommon sight that summer, Mohamed Mouloud good-naturedly said to him at some point in their conversation, “but the Sahara’s not Polisario.” In an implicit critique of SADR’s centralized authority in the camps, he noted drily about the truck, “[Polisario’s] got a lot of those…”

Perhaps most significantly, Mohamed Mouloud articulated commitment to the refugee camps in generational terms. An older generation had cast their lot with life in exile and accepted the sacrifices that come with living in the camps indefinitely: “[it’s] between them and God [mulana],” as he put it. A younger generation, including his own, will not abide: they go to Spain,
or wherever else, while making it clear that they won’t stand the status quo indefinitely. Mohamed Mouloud considered himself between these two generational positions: he had been born and grew up in the camps, went to school in Algeria – an experience that he remembered fondly despite the fact that it took place in the midst of the Algerian civil war – and, since returning to the camps, grew impatient with the lack of any meaningful opportunities to work, or save, for his family. As a result, he has turned his attention to providing for his children, and with that in mind, had made arrangements through a relative to move to Dakhla, in Moroccan-occupied territory. Initiating this process required registering with the Moroccan consulate in Nouadhibou for the “right to return” [haq al-’awda] and qualify for benefits [al-in’ash].

Like many aspects of the Morocco-Polisario conflict, the process of “returning” is coordinated between Moroccan state officials in Foreign Affairs, the military, and intelligence apparatuses associated with the Ministry of the Interior. In the late-1980s and early-90s, the first ‘a’idin would simply appear, unannounced, in Morocco while their means of getting there remain shrouded by the opacity of intelligence work and the intrigue of diplomatic maneuvering. As mobility between the refugee camps and Moroccan-occupied territory has increased since 2000, the process of “return” has become somewhat less fraught. The approval of ‘a’id status still passes through the Moroccan security state nexus, however, and therefore remains opaque and arbitrary. When I first met Mohamed Mouloud, he was optimistic that he and his family would be moving to Dakhla as soon as within a week. In anticipation, he was full of questions about how the cities in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara compared with Nouadhibou. As time wore on, however, it became apparent that he had little sense or control over when Morocco

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196 It is common for students in the refugee camps to be sent abroad for secondary and higher education. The state sponsors a limited number of students to study in Cuba; larger numbers study in Algeria. See Dawn Chatty, *Deterritorialized Youth: Sahrawi and Afghan Refugees at the Margins of the Middle East* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010).
would grant him “the right of return.”

On the surface, the process of “return” seemed simple. Mohamed Mouloud reported that after presenting himself at the Moroccan consulate in Nouadhibou and declaring his interest in “returning to the nation [al-watan],” he was asked some questions (“they examine your frame of mind verbally” [ykharras nesfiyatek shafahiyan’]), and then told to wait. Mohamed Mouloud and his friends and acquaintances who had either gone through the process of “return,” or were trying to, all recognized that the Consulate is mere window-dressing. Rather, they said, the men working in intelligence stationed at the Consulate were the ones running the operation and making the decisions. Whatever the logic and timing to getting approval for “return,” the process seemed both simple but also entirely opaque.

One evening, an acquaintance from the camps who had become an ‘a’id and was working in Moroccan-occupied Dakhla joined Mohamed Mouloud and his friends. Gathered on the floor around the requisite tea set, in the back room of a rented house in Numerowatt Robini 1, the evening had the feeling of an information session: everyone was interested in what the friend from Dakhla had to say about conditions in Moroccan-occupied territory. The man from Dakhla embraced the role of resident expert, regaling us with stories of what daily life was like in Dakhla (“people are citified and time is full”), his ambivalence about living amongst so many chilha197 (“you feel as though it’s not in your interest [to be around so many chilha], but then when you think about it…”), and his encounters with the Moroccan state. Most dramatically, however, the friend from Dakhla launched into a story of crossing the border in order to arrive in

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197 The word (chilha, sing.) refers to the amazigh, or Berber, people of southern Morocco, distinguished by their language, tachelhit. Catherine Taine-Cheikh, Dictionnaire Hassāniyya français. dialecte arabe de Mauritanie 6, 6, (Paris: Geuthner, 1990). Tachelheit-speaking amazigh people have historically been Sahrawi’s immediate neighbors to the north. In my fieldwork, chilha-chleuh was commonly used to refer to Moroccans or Algerians, in general, as people from north of the Sahara. In Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara chilha frequently simply refers to Moroccans.
Morocco, largely to advise Mohamed Mouloud who had purchased a van in Nouadhibou and hoped to bring the vehicle with him and his family into Morocco.

Everyone, the friend from Dakhla says, has the right to bring a car into Morocco, but not livestock. As proof, he described reaching the border between Morocco and Mauritania, which involves a gap of several kilometers, known variously as al-Guerguerat, “the hole” [al-hufra] or, colloquially, Qandahar, where free trade in various kinds of goods (cars, cigarettes, hashish) has flourished over the years. According to several accounts I heard about this border (I did not make this border crossing myself), there is often a long line of vehicles waiting to get through Moroccan customs – “Africans transporting ‘all kinds of stuff,’ and chilha bringing goods from Morocco,” as the friend from Dakhla put it – such that travelers often have to sleep in their vehicle overnight in order to keep their place in queue. After waiting overnight in line, the friend from Dakhla described reaching the front of the line only to be told that he couldn’t bring his car into the territory. As the friend told it, he used “convincing language” [al-kalam al-muqni’a], holding his ground until a higher-up came down from his post and ultimately approved entry for this man and his car. In this way, the success story of using “convincing language” (the friend was quick to point out that “convincing language” did not entail getting angry or yelling at the gendarmes), provided an example for how ‘a’idin could strategically assert their agency in the face of a vast political machinery meant to intimidate them. As background to this example, however, the ‘a’id friend from Dakhla stressed the important role played by luck [“al-’azhar.

[198] In this conversation, it was alleged that the Joumani family enjoys a monopoly on camels in the territory.

[199] The unregulated nature of this space between borders leaves it vulnerable to arbitrary intervention. Folks in Nouadhibou reported that sales of second-hand vehicles from Europe had flourished in “the hole” throughout the 2000s until the President of Mauritania, Mohamed ould Abdelaziz, enacted new regulations restricting the kinds of automobiles that could be imported into Mauritania. In August, 2016 Moroccan armed forces, in an apparent violation of terms of the UN ceasefire occupied “the hole” under the pretense that they were cracking down on contraband there.Edith M. Lederer, “Morocco Accused of Cease-Fire Violation in Western Sahara,” The Big Story, August 16, 2016, http://bigstory.ap.org/article/f647c6f8e73b4e7fbdbfb16d431bdf183/morocco-accused-cease-fire-violation-western-sahara.
‘endhu dur kebir’] in determining how long one has to wait to earn the “right of return.” The friend had waited several months; the same would end up being true of Mohamed Mouloud and his family, as well.

Gathering II: Judgment

Late one evening during Ramadan, Mohamed Mouloud and I were in a rented house in the northern reaches of Nouadhibou, in Numerowatt Robini 6. We were with a group of men watching television and making tea, including: an ‘a’id who had made the trip to Laâyoune/El Aaiún to see relatives from the refugee camps summering in Nouadhibou; a friend from the refugee camps; Mohamed Mouloud’s brother-in-law; and a Mauritanian-Sahrawi man who lived in Nouadhibou but had family in the refugee camps. It was after midnight, and we had all had many rounds of tea when the conversation turned to Omar Hadrami. Hadrami, as mentioned previously, was one of the earliest ‘a’idin, having defected to Morocco in 1989. As a founding member of the Polisario Front, Hadrami was and remains one of the most high-profile ‘a’idin to have left the camps and, since his “return” to Morocco, has served a number of prominent roles in national and regional government.

In the summer of 2015, Hadrami was in the news again, having recently been appointed to a new position advising the King of Morocco on Saharan affairs, which prompted Mohamed Mouloud to assert that he thought Hadrami “supports Sahrawis” [ybhri al-Sahrawiyyin] despite actively opposing the Polisario Front and having disavowed Sahrawi nationalism. The Mauritanian-Sahrawi man with family in the refugee camps flatly rejected this statement as “a contradiction.” The group argued over this for a while, and it became clear that most of the others were dubious of Mohamed Mouloud’s view. Mohamed Mouloud’s younger brother-in-law sided with the Mauritanian-Sahrawi, explaining that Hadrami chose his mother’s people,
referring to the Aït Oussa, a Tekna tribe based in Wed Nun, over “his own” tribe (meaning the tribe of his agnatic kin), the Rguibat. This led someone to take a straw poll. Everyone besides Mohamed Mouloud thought the assertion that one could “be” Sahrawi and not be nationalist was an untenable position. One friend, making tea, stared at the television, apparently abstaining. This led someone to declare cryptically that national identity can be democratic in this way, and conversation moved on.

Although this impromptu referendum brought closure to the question of identity in the context of this gathering, the constituents of this conversational vote were themselves occupying multiple subject positions. The man who flatly rejected Mohamed Mouloud’s proposition as “a contradiction,” for example, lives in Mauritania but has close ties to the refugee camps. These folks are sometimes referred to as “Mauritanian of Sahrawi origins” or simply *ahel al-Sahel*. 

*Ahel al-Sahel* refers to the tribes historically associated with the territory of Western Sahara, such as Rguibat, Wlad Dlim, Laarousiyin and Barikallah, which are largely coterminous with those found throughout Mauritania, but specifically those concentrated in the country’s drier, northern region. The ties between Polisario and northern Mauritania run deep. After facing repression within Morocco, Polisario leadership was largely based out of northern Mauritania between the years of 1973 and 1975 and announced its establishment from the northern Mauritanian mining town of Zouérate in 1973. Even as the Mauritanian state capitulated to pressure from first Spain and then Morocco to repress Polisario’s activities within the country, many people in northern Mauritania continued to materially support Polisario fighters. A Mauritanian National Security report from that era notes:

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200 *al-Sahel* in the social geography of the Sahara refers to “the coast” where the desert gives way to the landscapes of less arid climates. *Ahl al-Sahel* is a relational term that predates colonial or national borders and distinguishes more nomadic people of *al-Sahel* from those living in the similarly arid east (*ahel al-Sharq*), where there are more oases, and the south (*al-Qibla*), which borders the Senegal River and supports cattle.
It is certain that all of the sons of the tribes of the region are offering support for the Sahrawi fighters, and especially those of the Rguibat tribe to which most of the Front’s leadership belong...this includes the contributions of merchants and Sahrawi workers, as well as certain Bedouin notables/elders [wujuha'] who present their camels to the Front’s bases in order to provide meat to the fighters, while the women donated their jewelry. 201

The leader of Polisario at the time, El-Ouali Mustafa Sayid, sought to convince the President of Mauritania, Mokhtar ould Daddah, of their shared cause by describing the Sahrawi and Mauritanian peoples as “two eggs in one nest.” 202 At the diplomatic level, however, the Mauritanian government contested the Western Saharan people’s right to self-determination before the UN on the very grounds of these similarities, claiming that the peoples of the two territories shared the same “cultural entity” known as trab al-bidan. 203 When war broke out in 1976 and the Mauritanian state sided with Morocco, many ahel al-Sahel moved to the refugee camps and joined Polisario. And as processes of displacement, resettlement and mobility have continually shaped and reshaped the geography of political conflict in the Sahara since the 1970s, the overlap between Sahrawi and Mauritanian peoples – particularly those in northern Mauritania – has remained constant.

Unofficial figures from ten years ago estimate that 25,000 Sahrawis live in Mauritania, mostly in the cities of northern Mauritania, Nouadhibou, F’derik and Zouérate. 204 It should not be surprising, then, that refugees in the camps remain closely connected with Mauritania through commercial, kinship or other property ties that go back generations. It is not unusual for a family to maintain property both in the camps and in the mining towns of Zouérate and F’derik, regularly traveling between both. An older generation, in particular, may use a combination of

Mauritanian and Sahrawi forms of identification to access pasturelands of northern Mauritania and those in the territory of Western Sahara under Polisario control, known in the refugee camps as the Liberated Territories. Others may renew a prior generation’s connection with Mauritania in search of employment, or simply mobility. In one instance, I met a man who was born in Zouérate where his father worked on building the railroad that now transports iron ore to the coast. When the war broke out in 1976, his father joined Polisario and the family moved to the camps, where they have been based ever since. Forty years later, the family retains the original plot of land in Zouérate, though diminished in size, where, when I met him, this man was staying and applying for a Mauritanian passport in order to visit family in Moroccan-occupied territory.

To be sure, certain distinctions between Mauritanians and Sahrawis have inevitably sharpened with time, whether from the lingering bitterness left by the four years of war between Mauritania and Polisario, the effects of Morocco’s attempts to instrumentalize “non-Sahrawi” Mauritanians by resettling them in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, or simply the distinct habitus that has developed among those living in the particular political and economic conditions of refugee camps. Particularly when people from around the region converge on Nouadhibou in the summer, a range of markers, from clothing to moral and ethical judgments of behavior, are used to distinguish between Sahrawis and Mauritanians. However, the identity “Mauritanian of Sahrawi origins” captures the enduring overlap between refugees and the tribes of *ahel al-Sahel*, blurring these distinctions and complicating the relationship between the consolidation of national identity and its boundaries.

In this way, the resident of Nouadhibou who called Mohamed Mouloud’s position on Omar Hadrami “a contradiction,” himself embodies a contradiction inherent in the Sahrawi national project. In a disaggregated political landscape where affiliation and belonging typically
mapped onto genealogical cartographies of kinship, in the case of tribe, and cultural spaces tied
to models of moral excellence, in the case of trab al-bidan, efforts to consolidate a unitary sense
of ethnic nationalism constantly face the issue of who falls “inside” and “outside” of these
boundaries. Recent literature on the importance of “connectivity” to the reproduction of
economic, social and cultural space in the Sahara highlight the difficulties posed by new,
postcolonial modes of identification:

Hence, in the contemporary Sahara, with the growing impact of centralized states,
nationalism, and the bounded and exclusive ethnic categories that accompany
them, radically different notions of identity are put forward, putting pressure on
earlier identities that relied on regional connectivity.205

The notion of connectivity is an important one, as it conveys an aspect of life in the Sahara
integral to the sociocultural realms. However, I would also like to posit the importance of fluidity
and multiplicity, which are characteristic of political subjectivity in the Saharan context where
mobility and separation are as important to the realm of political authority as connectivity and
consolidation. The “Mauritanian of Sahrawi origins” embodies this phenomenon of multiplicity
and fluidity in a single subject position.

While the man from Nouadhibou called Mohamed Mouloud’s proposition “a
contradiction,” the more extended reply came from Mohamed Mouloud’s brother-in-law. By
referring to Hadrami’s split allegiance between his mother’s people, from the Ait Oussa tribe,
and his father’s people, the Rguibat, Mohamed Mouloud’s in-law questioned Omar Hadrami’s
loyalty not explicitly in national terms, but through the idiom of kinship and tribal affiliation. By
suggesting that Hadrami placed ties to his matrilineal kin over and above those on his father’s
side, the young man used the patrilineal norms of tribal kinship to cast aspersions on Hadrami’s
political loyalty. Parsing Hadrami’s national and political commitment through the idiom of

205 Scheele, Smugglers and Saints of the Sahara, 127.
kinship and tribal affiliation, this explanation highlights the entanglement of national and state sovereignty projects in the Sahara with social relations organized by kinship and tribe. This returns to Alice Wilson’s point that state and tribal sovereignty in the Sahara are formed out of the same social relations, and that one process of making sovereignty entails the “umaking” of the other. Wilson foregrounds this mutual imbrication between the relations of tribal and state sovereignty in the context of the refugee camps in order to note that this relationship is not unidirectional: sometimes tribal relations are overwritten by the state, while at other times they reassert their significance.206 Similarly, the young man’s evaluation of Hadrami’s loyalty and betrayal in terms of kin aligns Sahrawi nationalism with Hadrami’s father’s tribe, Rguibat, and allegiance to Morocco with his mother’s, Aït Oussa.

In doing so, the brother-in-law is also referring to Hadrami’s subject position along two fault lines that have persisted during efforts to unify under the collective identity of Sahrawi during the era of decolonization. While the Rguibat constitute the largest tribe populating Western Sahara, and are particularly dominant in both refugee camp society and Polisario leadership, Aït Oussa is one of the largest Tekna tribes (a collection of Saharan tribes based in Oued Noun in southern Morocco). Rguibat and Aït Oussa have historically intermarried, Hadrami being just one product of this union between members of these rival tribes. Following the failure of the Moroccan Liberation Army in the 1950s, however, the Moroccan state cultivated support among the Aït Oussa, furnishing them with weapons and promoting raids between the two tribes as a means of sowing distrust.207 Perhaps as a result, the Aït Oussa tribe has been heavily recruited into the Moroccan Army, and Aït Oussis occupy prominent positions in the upper echelons of Moroccan state administration. By suggesting that Hadrami “preferred

206 Wilson, Sovereignty in Exile, 32.
207 Fieldnote, undated, Tan Tan, Morocco.
his mother’s people” to his father’s tribe, the young man accuses Hadrami of siding with the Aît Oussa over the Rguibat and, by association, Morocco over Polisario. The distinction remains significant both within the camps, where Rguibat are seen to be the dominant constituents of Polisario and SADR, and in Moroccan society, where to be Rguibat is to be ascribed a subject position of potential traitor (see Chapter 5).

In addition to the Rguibat-Tekna division, the young man is also referring to a division within the Rguibat tribe between the *afkhadh*, or tribal subfractions, known as “Rguibat al-Sahel,” found closer to the Atlantic coast, and Rguibat al-Sharq. While together these two halves form the Rguibat tribe, this division follows the segmentary logic of North African and Middle Eastern tribal affiliations more generally, whereby smaller groupings stand in opposition to one another unless the imperative arises to unite against a common foe who lies outside the groups’ kinship structures. In the case of Rguibat al-Sahel and Rguibat al-Sharq, these divisions have largely been subsumed under the Sahrawi identity and Polisario’s project of national liberation. However, the consolidation of Polisario’s leadership by members of *afkhadh* from Rguibat al-Sharq during the 1970s, and the leadership’s repression, torture and abuse that came to light in 1988 exacerbated resentment among Rguibat al-Sahel (as well as other tribes) over their marginalization. While members of all tribes participated in the 1988 uprising in the refugee camps, members of Rguibat al-Sharq view the event as a divisive “riot” that reproduced the segmentary divisions between Rguibat al-Sharq and Rguibat al-Sahel. The rebellion was led, of course, by none other than Omar Hadrami, a member of Rguibat al-Sahel.

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This discussion among ‘a`idin in Nouadhibou captures the complex array of identities involved in constituting Sahrawi nationalism, and the competing frameworks for expressing collective identities. In light of this conversation, I would like to return to Alice Wilson’s perceptive point that nation-state and tribal projects of sovereignty in the Sahara are mutually imbricated. Questions of loyalty and affiliation are regularly expressed through the idiom of kinship, illustrating how the emergence of national identities do not erase pre-existing forms. However, I would suggest that the categories involved in this discursive space are not limited to the binary of nation-state or tribe. I have highlighted this conversation among a group of men in Nouadhibou for what it conveys about the multiple identities that many individuals embrace within the fragmented political geography of decolonization in Western Sahara. Both tribal and national affiliations in this context associate with collectivities that overlap current geopolitical boundaries (Sahrawi, Tekna, ahel al-Sahel), and in other cases subdivide genealogically and geographically within a broader unity (ahel al-Sahel/Sharq/Qibla in Mauritania, Rguibat al-Sharg/al-Sahel in Western Sahara). Identities emerge in relation to tribe and nation, but also in relation to hierarchical cultural spatial imaginaries that exists outside of national time (trab al-bidan), as well as subject positions that emerge in the context of prolonged nationalist conflict (‘a`id).

Indeed, the fact that most of the men were either ‘a`idin, or in the process of “returning” is an important factor in the conversation that I have been analyzing. Their mobility, as ‘a`idin, destabilizes the poles of loyalty and betrayal in the context of nationalist conflict. But the inverse is true, too: the group’s appraisals and dismissals of Omar Hadrami, who is in many respects considered the original ‘a`id, serves to historicize the category that they share. Their willingness to judge Hadrami without assuming that his status as a defector defined their own, highlights
shifts and continuities in the significance of the figure as a subject position in regional context. The “return” of Hadrami in 1989 was nothing short of a political spectacle: for many, al-‘Athmi embodied the notion of “return” as betrayal. Twenty-five years later, the act of “returning” was less about political motive, and more a matter of finding work, education for children, a future. In this way, requesting “the right to return” from the Moroccan state is no longer considered a humiliating act of betrayal and shame, but simply an expression of movement and mobility.

Reflecting upon the aftermath of civil war in Sri Lanka, another context of nationalist conflict, Sharika Thiranagama suggests that historically shifting judgments of treason and betrayal give perspective for how judgments of political right and wrong are made, but additionally indicate how politics could have been framed otherwise:

> Traitors, then, are not given once and for all but created by history, as new frames of interpretation are opened up, allowing a sense that it could have been different, that there were other possible forms of engagement. Only by exploring the complex ethical terrain through which acts of treason are judged and evaluated can we begin to understand why some people are violently punished for acts of betrayal, while others are either forgiven or ignored.²⁰⁹

Given the multiple frameworks for making sense of identity and political action that were expressed in this conversation about Omar Hadrami, and the fact that it took place among “returnees,” itself a subject position of movement and mobility, I suggest that these men were implicitly discussing “other possible forms of engagement” within a political context structured by nationalist loyalty and betrayal.

Finally, it is not incidental that this conversation was taking place in Nouadhibou, rather than within Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara or the refugee camps in Algeria. Mohamed Mouloud’s suggestion that one could “support” Sahrawis collectively and not support Sahrawi nationalism, for example, would immediately invite suspicion of betraying the national cause if

he were to state this in the refugee camps. Conversely, questioning Morocco’s occupation of the Sahara from within Morocco is nearly impossible. In Nouadhibou, by contrast, there is much greater latitude in discussing the effects of ongoing political conflict. In this space of transit, Sahrawis and Mauritanians from across the region converge in a space devoid of much of the suspicion and surveillance that structures Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara. Likewise, the popular discourse of national diplomacy that predetermines many interactions with foreigners visiting the refugee camps is not pervasive here. Of course, the convergence of people from around a politically fragmented region will reproduce many of the tensions and suspicions at the heart of the nationalist conflict. It was not incidental that one of Mohamed Mouloud’s friends kept his silence when the “referendum” on Sahrawi identity was put forward in Robini 6, staring at the television instead: many prefer to keep these thoughts to themselves, even in Nouadhibou. Nonetheless, in serving as both a hub of movement and mobility within the regional geography of confinement, and an enclave that stands outside of the loci of competing sovereignties, Nouadhibou provides a setting where the processes of fixing people’s identities are held in abeyance. This context where the recitation of political scripts that achieve diplomatic visibility, express national loyalty, and confirm identification are contested, if not refuted, provides the conditions for “other possible forms of engagement” with the region’s past in the present.

Section III: Identification by Referendum

Two noteworthy exceptions, Samia Errazouki and Nadir Bouhmouch, have both visited Sahrawi refugee camps and critiqued Moroccan state policy on the Sahara, although both accounts were published from outside Morocco, I believe. Samia Errazzouki, “Part 1: Notes from the Western Saharan Refugee Camps,” (blog), accessed May 17, 2014, http://samiacharquaouia.wordpress.com/2014/05/11/part-1-notes-from-the-western-saharan-refugee-camps/; Errazzouki, “Chomsky on the Western Sahara and the ‘Arab Spring.’” Nicola Cozza’s dissertation serves as another example. Most of Cozza’s fieldwork was conducted in Nouadhibou, and he recorded oral accounts of the 1988 intifada in the refugee camps. The silence on this part of the history in literature on the Western Sahara conflict reflects the predominance of research conducted within the refugee camps. (‘A’idin in Moroccan-occupied territory spoke of this event, as well, but in Morocco any discourse devaluing Polisario carries the stain of state-backed propaganda.) Cozza, “Singing like Wood-Birds.”
One such form of engagement took place through the straw poll, which brought the men’s discussion of Omar Hadrami and Sahrawi nationalism to an end. As was intended by the Sahrawi-Mauritanian man who proposed it, the vote was carried out quickly and informally, by voice and gesture – or abstention from both – and confirmed a majority view within the group that Sahrawi identity could not be decoupled from nationalism. Neither the suggestion nor the outcome of the vote elicited much debate. Rather, in bringing closure to a voluble exchange of views, the casting of votes provided a segueway for the conversation to move on to a less contentious or explicitly political topic. Despite its apparent simplicity, the conversational vote was also a gesture toward the unrealized referendum on self-determination for Western Sahara.

A part of the formal process for applying self-determination under international law, a referendum in Western Sahara was preempted first by Morocco’s invasion in 1975, and subsequently – and perhaps more agonizingly – during a prolonged process during the 1990s. As part of the ceasefire agreement of 1991, the United Nations established a peacekeeping mission in Western Sahara, MINURSO, tasked with overseeing a referendum. Hopes were high that the referendum would be carried out within the year.²¹²

From the outset, however, Morocco and Polisario staked out conflicting positions on how to determine the list of eligible voters for the upcoming referendum. Polisario sought to restrict the list of eligible voters to those listed on a 1974 Spanish census, and their descendants. Morocco sought much more expansive criteria, calling for the inclusion of all members of all tribes associated with the territory. These differences were strategic. Polisario counted on a more restricted voter roll to work in its favor, even if the colonial-era census may have excluded some of the families of Polisario’s founding members and highest ranking officials. Morocco’s

²¹² Initially, prognosticators set a time frame of 36 weeks from the formation of MINURSO to holding a referendum. Erik Jensen, Western Sahara: Anatomy of a Stalemate? (Boulder, CO [etc.]: Rienner, 2012), 43.
position in opposition sought to include tribes with tenuous connections to the territory, but whose members, the government believed, could be counted on to vote in Morocco’s interest. Those tribes which under Spanish administration had been listed as “Tribes of the North,” and “Tribes of the Coast and South” became the focus of the dispute, since these were terms used by Spanish administration to categorize anyone living in the territory who did not belong to one of what Spain identified as the territory’s seven main tribes (Rguibat Charg, Rguibat Sahel, Izerguiyin, Ait Lahsen, Laaroussiyyin, Wlad Dlim, Wlad Tidrarin). The dispute centered on both which tribes to include, but also, if including parts of “neighboring” tribes, whether to allow eligibility up to the level of tribal subfraction (al-fakhdh), or a more narrow kinship group (al-ahel).

In an attempt to resolve this dispute over the criteria for voting, MINURSO established an Identification Commission, with agencies set up across the region in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria, as well as across Morocco and Mauritania. As Erik Jensen, the former UN employee who directed this process, notes in his detailed account of MINURSO’s Identification Commission during the 1990s, Morocco and Polisario’s dispute over the criteria of eligible voters for the referendum did not translate easily into a technical solution. The struggle over the anthropological basis for determining a voter list had implications for the evidence and procedure used for verifying potential voters’ identity and affiliation. Polisario’s position depended upon Spanish documentation for verification. Morocco argued that colonial-era documentation excluded family members living outside the territory at

213 Jensen, 50. The Spanish categories of “Tribes of the Coast and South” borrowed from relational terms that referred to tribal groupings by cardinal direction. In Mauritania today, “ahel al-Sahel,” “ahel al-qibla” and “ahel al-Sharg” are the main descriptors used to distinguish between regions of the country: “people of the coast,” “people of the south,” and “people of the east.” From the Mauritanian perspective, however, “ahel al-Sahel” includes many of the seven tribes listed by Spain as those living in Western Sahara.

214 Jensen, 49. “Voter registration, which sounded technical in New York, was the political hard core, as Morocco and the Frente Polisario knew only too well.”
that time. In response, Morocco asserted that all members of any tribal subfraction counted in the Spanish census should be eligible to vote, and that oral testimony verified by shaykhs from each subfraction ought to be used.

Moreover, as the UN-led process of determining eligible voters unfolded, Morocco increasingly appeared to be exploiting the bureaucratic process by flooding the Identification Commission with applications. The Commission, which had set up processing stations in Morocco, northern Mauritania, the refugee camps, as well as the territory of Western Sahara itself, received three times as many new applications from its offices in Morocco as from those in refugee camps and Mauritania combined. In addition, I heard from several people whose relatives had been recruited to “train” non-Saharan’s to present themselves as Sahrawi before the Commission. As a result, the process of identifying a list of eligible voters dragged on for the better part of a decade, and has been largely abandoned ever since results of the initial round of the identification process were published in 2000. Across the region, this period is referred to holistically as ‘amaliya tahdid al-hawiya, or the identification process.

Given this context, the impromptu vote in Nouadhibou among friends evoked the history of this unresolved political project. Not only did it bring closure to the topic of conversation but this gesture performed a kind of resolution to determining the “self” in Western Sahara. Even as it evoked the unresolved project of Sahrawi popular sovereignty, the vote among friends also served as a point of contrast, an expression that consolidated the meaning of Sahrawi identity simply, decisively, and in a manner which has eluded Sahrawis to this day. By staging “other

215 Jensen, 71. 42,468 new applicants from Polisario, 14,486 new applicants in Mauritania, and 176,333 new applicants in Morocco.
216 Fieldnote, undated, Laâyoune/El Aaiún, Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara
217 The final figure for those found eligible to vote came to 86,412, a slight increase of the 72,370 listed in the Spanish census. The number of appeals, however, reached 131,038 and, after six years of hearings, the prospect of repeating the time-consuming process of convening shaikhs from both sides of the conflict essentially rendered the entire process moot.
possible forms of engagement” with the region’s past in the present, this brief and relatively uncontroversial vote among friends in Robini 6 in Nouadhiobu was, in a sense, an act of self-determination. In this way, the act was performative if not effective. Their vote, which stages the sovereignty of “the people,” in a national sense, brings to mind Nathaniel Berman’s notion that the “self” in self-determination is a “form of argument:”

The recognition of a particular ‘people’ is an effect of a particular form of discursive reconstruction. The ‘self’ of self-determination emerges through the particular textual dynamics of subjective and objective conceptions, dynamics guided by the particular type of disruption giving rise to their conflict. No less than the legal competence over self-determination, the ‘self’ is a form of argument.218

Berman’s analysis comes from looking at the legal discourse of self-determination in international law, one which has taken place through moments of disjuncture or transition when sovereignty is, as his title indicates, “in abeyance.”219 This insight helps to think through the discussion of identity and belonging taking place in Numerowatt 6 as, similarly, a form of argument between a group of men. In this sense, evoking the referendum belies its inescapable presence in the history of the region’s decolonization, but is also expressive of their own “subjectivity in abeyance,” as ‘aʿidin who, themselves, were on a trajectory, movement, or transition, between identities and subject positions.

Section IV – Multiple Returns

Despite the duration of the Identification Commission process throughout the 1990s, the intricacies of the process directly affected only certain groups. Those shaykhs appointed by either Morocco or Polisario to preside over oral testimony of prospective voters, for example, found themselves in positions of concentrated power. In the context of the refugee camps, this

219 Berman, “Sovereignty in Abeyance.”
made for a particularly sudden shift given that Polisario had worked for a generation to dissolve what it considered traditional, or tribal, bases of authority. For those who registered and testified before the Identification Commission, however, the process was largely administrative. Certainly, there were contentious cases: like something out of a soap opera, people alluded to instances where shaykh’s, under political pressure, refused to recognize people who were patently from their own family. Or, for example, in the case of those presented by Morocco as prospective voters who had no connection to the Sahara, there were stories of how the training that these candidates underwent ultimately revealed itself, as these fraudulent applicants stumbled over their newly adopted Sahrawi name, or failed in some other crucial detail. More generally, however, I found that people who lived through the experience either did not want to talk about it, or found the experience mundane. One woman simply recounted her day as a mundane, bureaucratic experience: somewhat baffled by what to do, she followed instructions, answered questions, and was otherwise nonplussed by the experience.

However, the significance of the identification process could be seen in relation to broader transformations to the region. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Morocco transferred large numbers of settlers to the territory and began investing heavily in regional economic development durin this time. Many of these settlers were poor Moroccans transplanted to cities in Western Sahara such as Boujdour, Dakhla and Tarfaya with promises of housing and land. Some underwent the training described above; these transplants tended to live in distinct neighborhoods built for their arrival. By contrast, large numbers of Sahrawis who belonged to the contested category of “Tribes from the North” were transplanted specifically to Laâyoune/El Aaiún, where they formed a large tent city mentioned in Chapter 1, known as Khaymat al-Wahda. In addition to transforming the demographics and political geography of the city, the

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220 Fieldnotes, Laâyoune/El Aaiún, Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara.
people of *Khaymat al-Wahda* experienced the effects of the identification process in a particularly intense way. Unlike other transplants, who had only questionable basis for voting in the referendum, these transplanted Sahrawis were guaranteed the right to vote in the referendum, but who they would vote for remained very much in question. While Morocco furnished residents of *Khaymat al-Wahda* with free sugar, flour, oil and other necessities, along with the promise of future housing, these transplanted Sahrawis were now in closer proximity to the epicenter of Sahrawi national struggle. And as the Identification Commission labored through years of administrative and procedural work of identifying eligible voters, Sahrawis in *Khaymat al-Wahda* became subject to a different kind of scrutiny, from friends and neighbors alike, that sought to identify their political commitments and affiliations. When people across western Sahara refer to *tahdid al-hawiya*, or identification, during the 1990s, they are referring as much to this scrutiny that demanded political identification, as to the years-long administrative process which provoked such everyday politicization.

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Most ‘a`idin formally move between sides in the political conflict only once. The effort expended in attempting to fix the identities of those subject to this dispute, however, is ongoing. This final profile of an ‘a`id illustrates this continuous pressure to commit to one side or another in his double movement. Born in Tan Tan, in the southern Moroccan region of Wed Nun, Mohamed Salek’s family was among those brought to Laâyoune/El Aaiún to live in the vast tent city known as *Khaymat al-Wahda* in 1991. Discussed in greater detail in Chapter 1, *Khaymat al-Wahda* was one of the first major efforts by the Moroccan state to shape the demographics of Western Sahara while contesting the list of eligible voters for a potential referendum on self-determination. Unlike those resettled to Moroccan-occupied territory from the outskirts of major
cities across Morocco, however, the population of *Khaymat al-Wahda* was constituted largely by members of Saharan tribes already deemed eligible to vote, but who had been living in the neighboring region of Wed Nun. Like many of the major movements of displacement and resettlement motivated by decolonization in the Sahara, it is not easy to distinguish between voluntary and forced resettlement. Mohamed Salek’s father, for example, was a retired member of the Moroccan Armed Forces when the family moved. Whether he participated in this project of resettlement orchestrated by the Moroccan state because he was still subject to orders within a chain of command, because his pension was threatened if he did not move, or because he wanted to support his country in this endeavor, I cannot say.

What is certain, however, is that upon moving to *Khaymat al-Wahda* as a child, Mohamed Salek grew up in a context of intense politicization. On the one hand, the Moroccan state provisioned his family, like all of those living in *Khaymat al-Wahda*, with free basic goods such as water, flour and oil, in addition to free medical care, shelter and electricity. At the same time, Sahrawis loyal to Polisario sought to educate him of the justness of Sahrawi nationalism, no doubt describing the violence of Morocco’s invasion, the number of people imprisoned during the 1970s and 80s, or otherwise disappeared, and the ongoing state repression of Sahrawi nationalism. Unwittingly or not, in moving to *Khayma al-Wahda* Mohamed Salek’s family put themselves at the epicenter of a fierce political campaign where the upcoming vote would determine the sovereignty of their new home. Starting at the age of ten, Mohamed Salek himself became one of the most sought-after voters.

Politicized by the Sahrawi nationalists who recruited him, Mohamed Salek joined pro-Polisario “cells” named for martyrs of the movement who had died under Moroccan occupation,

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221 As noted in Chapter 1, the camps were popularly known as “*khaymat al-kebsh,*” or Tents of the Ram, for the free ram distributed to families in the tent settlement on the holiday marking Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac, *Eid al-Adha.*
such as the Group of Martyr Bashir Lahlaoui, the Forum for Truth and Equity on the Sahara, and others. These groups emerged in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara in the mid- to late-1990s, when Morocco’s maneuverings with regards to eligible voters increasingly appeared to be a strategy meant to prevent the referendum from ever taking place. Drawing upon the emerging language of human rights in the context of the dispute (Chapter 5), these groups demanded greater information on disappeared persons dating back to the 1990s, and increasingly gave voice to a public identity for Sahrawi politics in Morocco. Indeed, some of the most prominent Sahrawi human rights activists today, such as Aminatou Haidar, Ali Salem ould Tamek and Ibrahim Dahman, first got in touch and involved with each other through these groups.

Mohamed Salek became involved enough in the Sahrawi nationalist cause that he committed, as part of a cohort of activists, to move to the refugee camps in Algeria. Following the inverse trajectory of the Moroccan ‘a’idin, those who moved to the camps from Morocco are known within the camps as “joiners,” or multahiqin. I met a number of multahiqin who had been living in the camps for years, working for SADR-affiliated civil society organizations such as AFAPREDESA, and supporting the Sahrawi national cause. Mohamed Salek was among them for a time, having moved to the camps, where he benefitted, like many of the refugees, from education in Algeria and found work with UJSARIO, a youth organ of SADR in the camps. Not long after reaching the camps, however, Mohamed Salek said he became disillusioned by what he claims to be Polisario’s favoritism toward members of the Rguibat tribe, and its marginalization of members of “Tribes from the North,” or Tekna tribes. Moreover, upon learning about the government’s pre-1988 violent past only after arriving in the camps, which he also considered an outgrowth of Polisario’s tribalism, Mohamed Salek felt as though he had been misled. A few years after arriving in the camps, he decided to return to Morocco as an ‘a’id, a
move that he recognized has left him stigmatized by those whom he has left on both sides of the berm: “When you return ‘a’id, you live two things: there are those here [in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara] who call you ‘traitor,’ and those with the [Polisario] Front who call you ‘traitor.’”

Having moved twice as an act of “désolidarisation,” Mohamed Salek’s experience testifies to the experience of having one’s political subjectivity be the object of such intense political struggle. Because of his ongoing bitterness toward his experience in the refugee camps in Algeria, Mohamed Salek characterizes the experience of his initial politicization in terms of being inculcated with a “fabricated reality”:

Mohamed Salek: The [people of the Khaymat al-Wahda] camps, akhi [brother], they were people of the Sahara [ahel al-Sahra’], they came from the Tan Tan region, but they're all Saharan and lots of those tribes - every family has a member with the [Polisario] Front, or two, or an entire family. So the internal separatists, or, human rights activists (huqiqiyin) as they are called, are mercenaries (murtazaqin). They [the human rights activists] are among those who fed this tendency. Protesting against the Moroccan order…ruined, ruined, the thinking of many young people, because they were injected by this antagonistic thinking, and by this sabotage. And they [the human rights activists] benefited, personally, from these protests. So the residents of the [Khaymat al-Wahda] camps suffered two-fold: originally, [the Sahrawi residents of Laâyoune/El Aaiún who predated their arrival] say that we're coming from inside Morocco, while…the Polisario Front says that we're Saharan people and concerned by the issue, and so [we] can organize protests. So what happened is that reality was fabricated [fabraqa al-waqa’]. I mean, there have been a lot of victims from this, young men and women.

Me: What do you remember from this time?

Mohamed Salek: I was among the people who were injected [huqina] [with these ideas]…and I don't deny that I participated in establishing a number of cells, with lots of mobilizing for the struggle and I had a farfetched idea [fikra wahmiya], until I joined the Polisario Front [of what I was fighting for], and when I joined the Polisario Front everything that I encountered was an illusion inside an illusion and so I became convinced [tuvwaladat liddayyi qana’a rasikha] that we, Tekna tribes, we are, in truth, on account of the historical link by bay’a to the King, that we are Moroccan tribes. That's a result of what I experienced/lived in the [Polisario-run refugee] camps as far as marginalization and exclusion and
tribalism and discrimination and being informed about my cousins who'd been shot while in Polisario prison. And who were tortured and separated from each other and had their families violated. All of that’s the truth.\textsuperscript{222}

Mohamed Salek’s account notes that his political affiliation has been the object of both struggle and suspicion since the time he was a child. In being moved to \textit{Khaymat al-Wahda}, he observes that even as Polisario supporters sought to influence his outlook, other Sahrawis living in Laâyoune/El Aaiún when \textit{Khaymat al-Wahda} was established initially viewed the new residents with great suspicion. Given that their presence was clearly the result of a project of the Moroccan state, and that residents of the camps were lavished with handouts from which longtime residents were excluded, the camps could be seen as part of Morocco’s strategy to create and deepen divisions among Sahrawis. What is particularly interesting, however, is that his political subjectivity became the object of suspicion and marked him as a target for recruitment. In the context of political conflict, those who cannot be trusted need to be convinced.

Mohamed Salek’s present disillusionment with his past experience in the camps causes him to view the subsequent period of his activism as a young man with bitterness and regret. Where he once thought that he was being recruited into a revolutionary struggle, he now sees “mercenaries” posing as human rights activists. Of course, whether “mercenaries” or human rights activists, these people were also likely neighbors and peers: Sahrawis living in Laâyoune/El Aaiún and, quite possibly, even in \textit{Khaymat al-Wahda}. Mohamed Salek frames this shift between joining the struggle for independence to leaving it, disgusted, as a trajectory of discovering the difference between believing in a “fabricated reality” of the Sahrawi nationalist cause, and then learning a much less inspiring “truth” upon arriving at the camps. This trajectory is reminiscent of Lahcen’s “return” to Morocco, only in reverse: Lahcen complained about responding to the call to “return” to Morocco with an open mind, only to find himself deceived.

\textsuperscript{222} Interview 8 July 2014, Laâyoune/El Aaiún, Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara.
and marginalized upon his arrival. More than the corruption or bankruptcy of Polisario and its affiliated human rights activists – who are, as Lahcen’s story points out, no more manipulative or coercive than the Moroccan state – Mohamed Salek’s perspective is noteworthy for his two-dimensional way of seeing. Where once Mohamed Salek saw the righteousness of human rights supporters, he now sees mercenaries and agents paid by the Algerian-backed, Polisario-run Ministry for the Occupied Territories. Where once Mohamed Salek saw in Polisario a righteous liberation struggle, he later saw an exploitative, discriminatory cadre of corrupt rulers. This two-dimensionality reflects the binary of friend/enemy, loyalty/betrayal, and Morocco/Polisario, and might be thought of as a way of seeing that both produces and is produced by the concrete abstraction of nationalist conflict.

However, the language of a “fabricated reality” that Mohamed Salek and Lahcen share, and that Mohamed Salek heightens with references to having been “injected” with beliefs and his decision that the nationalist struggle was, ultimately an “illusion inside an illusion” gives one the sense that he, too, holds this structure of conflict in abeyance. In the passage quoted above, he has been particularly critical of Polisario leadership of the refugee camps and the ideology that led him to join. However, aside from accepting that his people once pledged allegiance to the Moroccan sultan, which is his reference to bay‘a, Mohamed Salek’s affiliation to Morocco was more a matter of necessity than an expression of enthusiasm for their cause. In this sense, his movement between nationalist causes highlights the modes of governance that have expended tremendous resources in an effort to configure his political subjectivity in certain ways – to identify him, politically. At the same time, this same movement highlights how Mohamed Salek has sought to hold the concrete abstraction in abeyance.

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Conclusion

The experience of Mohamed Salek captures how the political struggle to define the determining self of self-determination during the 1990s took place at the level of controlling populations and defining political subjectivity, as much as at the level of diplomatic negotiations over the rules and criteria for establishing voter rolls. And whereas important literature on the Western Sahara conflict tends to focus on institutional political actors to identify the “root” causes of conflict, the dynamics of its perpetuation, and lessons to be learned about conflict resolution, the political subjectivity of the people involved is too often overlooked.

In the next chapter I aim to show how this history of fixing the political subjectivity of the people of the Sahara dates back to the 1950s, and the current political geography is in many ways the expression of tensions of autonomy and dependence between bidani people of the Sahara and their more sedentary neighbors to the north, the chleuh.

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By moving without conforming to the polarized dichotomy of Moroccan or Sahrawi nationalism – either by moving to Morocco but maintaining Sahrawi allegiances, or by moving to Morocco and disavowing national commitments of any kind – these “second wave” ‘a’idin represent a more fluid political subjectivity that had been restricted and fixed by the polarized process of decolonization in the Sahara. These ‘a’idin are representative of what Hagar Kotef calls “hybrid-subjectivity,” meaning they are “configured through their mobility, but [they] inhabit spaces of confinement.” The movement of returnees between camps, politically and physically, makes visible the tremendous efforts expended to fix the Sahrawi as political subjects, in location and in identity, throughout the process of decolonization. This “hybrid-subjectivity” of the “returnee” in

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224 For a detailed account of the latter, see Jensen, *Western Sahara.*
the Sahrawi context is both produced by the polarized political geography of nationalist conflict, and has increasingly come to complicate this concrete abstraction through its mobility and fluidity.

In critiquing methodological nationalism as it pertains to Western Sahara, I suggest that this approach has foreclosed two important dimensions to the history and political geography of the region. Suggesting that Sahrawi nationalism was the outcome of a colonial dialectic reduces the historical complexity of the Sahara as a disaggregated political field that has involved multiple colonial regimes, a mobile populace with multiple and fluid political affiliations, and a temporal disjuncture in the processes of decolonization across the region. Rather than a dyadic relation of colonizer-colonized, which, if such a relation existed at all in Western Sahara, existed for little over a decade (1958-1970), I suggest that Sahrawi identity emerges within the political field of decolonization, where multiple relations to political authority have been in contestation for decades. Rather than tracing the emergence and consolidation of a single collective identity, I suggest that Sahrawi subjectivity during decolonization might better be understood in terms of various attempts to fix multiple, shifting subjectivities. This chapter has elaborated on this multiplicity through an account of the ‘ai’d, (pl. ‘a’idin, literally “returnee,”), whose significance as a political label has shifted with time. The subject positions of the ‘a’id, stand in ambiguous relation to the contemporary poles of loyalty and betrayal that structure nationalist commitment, whether Moroccan or Sahrawi. While bearing various stigma of “defector,” “betrayer,” and intihazi, or “opportunists,” ‘a’idin are prone in some instances to a stance of cynicism and resignation, lacking faith in either Morocco or Polisario. In other instances, I suggest that the ‘a’idin’s movement represents, in certain cases, a kind of subjectivity that holds the structures of nationalist conflict “in abeyance.”
The mid-1950s were a tumultuous time across the Maghreb, Sahara and Sahel regions, as a rising and seemingly pervasive anticolonial sentiment connected the horizons of political possibility from across disparate areas of the globe. Anticolonial insurrection had spread across Morocco following the exile of Sultan Mohammed V to Corsica and then Madagascar in 1953. On the heels of the Bandung Conference in 1955, the arrival of Algeria’s National Liberation Front (FLN) as a diplomatic force with the announcement of its Soummam Platform in 1956, and Gamal Abdel Nasser’s Suez triumph that same year, Third World anticolonialism was emerging as a force capable of tipping the scales of global political power against colonial empire.

Decolonization’s resonance across continents generated a horizon of expectation even in seemingly unexpected regions of the colonized world. After a local asked him about the war in Indochina while he passed through Wed Nun on a last-gasp “adventure” in 1954, a French traveler noted in disbelief that this anticolonial consciousness had reached even the Sahara.

And yet, even as the end of European colonial empire became more apparent in the late-1950s with the independence of Morocco and Tunisia in 1956, and Ghana a year later, capital investments poured into the Sahara, and regions that had previously been colonial hinterlands increasingly became the sites of a late-imperial scramble. In a foreshadowing of its *françafrique* neocolonial policies toward natural resource extraction in Africa, in 1957 France established l’Organisation Commune des Régions Sahariennes (OCRS), a “transcolonial” administrative

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225 Diego Aguirre, *La última guerra colonial de España*, 14. Between July 1954 and June 1955 two assassination attempts were carried out against the Sultan Ben Arfa who had been installed in the place of the exiled Mohammed V, as well as several attempts against a number of high profile members of the French Protectorate. 784 attacks, 477 explosions, 1430 instances of arson, 331 acts of sabotage were recorded during this time, as well as the death of 41 French and 254 Moroccans who were considered collaborators.


regime encompassing the Algerian Sahara, with an eye toward retaining access to newly
discovered oil reserves.\textsuperscript{228} The following year, a 75-year concession was granted to an
international group of investors for the purposes of exploiting iron ore deposits in a northern
Mauritanian mountain, Kidya Idjill. With the backing of the International Bank for
Reconstruction and Development, this mining concern, known as MIFERMA (Mines de fer de
Mauritanie), undertook the construction of two worker towns, as well as a 650km railroad near
the border with Spanish Sahara, for the ore’s extraction and export.\textsuperscript{229} And although full-scale
exploitation had not yet begun, Spain’s recently-discovered phosphate deposit in Spanish Sahara,
known as Bucraa, was drawing the attention of its neighbors.\textsuperscript{230} As a result, borders that had
previously been left largely undefined (such as the so-called “Trinquet Line” between the French
Protectorate in Morocco and French Algeria) or unpoliced (such as the border between Spanish
Sahara and the surrounding French colonial territories) increasingly became vectors of political

\textsuperscript{228} Yaël Kouzmine et al., “Etapes de la structuration d’un désert: l’espace saharien algérien entre convoitises économiques, projets politiques et aménagement du territoire,” \textit{Annales de géographie}. 2009, no. 670 (2009): 671–78. The OCRS provided the option for bordering entities to join the economic zone upon decolonization, working in coordination with decolonizing bordering entities such as Niger, Mauritania and Chad.

\textsuperscript{229} Bonte, \textit{La montagne de fer}; Audibert, \textit{MIFERMA}.

struggle. As one account of Spanish Sahara noted, “the coast has been replaced, as the zone of conflict, by the inland boundary.”

These inland boundaries transected the pasturage, wells, oases, shrines and marketplaces of *trab al-bidan*, or land of the *bidan*, encompassing a Saharan populace that shares the Arabic dialect of Hassaniya. Closely associated with the varied geographies shaped by the desert climate between these “shores” of the Sahara, this “land of the *bidan*” was, in the early 1950s, divided between multiple colonial administrative regimes: Spanish Sahara, French West Africa, French Algeria, and the French Protectorate in Morocco. This region of western Sahara, which today includes parts of Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania, and Mali, and encompasses the disputed geopolitical territory of Western Sahara, was largely a colonial hinterland. Although France maintained military posts throughout both northern Mauritania and southwest Algeria, French West Africa was administered from Dakar, a thousand kilometers away. And, until the establishment of the aforementioned OCRS, France governed the Algerian Sahara under military

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231 When the military administration of Algeria’s Territoires du Sud was suspended in 1947 the border region between French Algeria and France’s Protectorate in Morocco was administered under a peculiar entity known as les Confins Algéro-Marocains (CAM). The border between Morocco and Algeria was never fixed juridically. As the number of concessions granted for prospecting and mining in places within CAM’s jurisdiction (such as Kenadsa and Tindouf in what is now southwest Algeria) increased, it became increasingly difficult for colonial officials to resolve the border definitively. In coordinating administration of the border region between colonial regimes, CAM became both a means of mitigating the ambiguity of the border situation, and deferring its resolution. When Morocco gained independence in March 1956 CAM dissolved, but ambiguity over the border remained, particularly since the *de facto* border had shifted to Algeria’s favor when Moroccan anticolonial movements were gaining momentum in the early 1950s. Frank E Trout, *Morocco’s Saharan Frontiers* (Geneva: Droz, 1969); Benjamin Acloque, “L’idée de frontière en milieu nomade: héritage, appropriation et implications politiques actuelles : Mauritanie et Sahara occidental,” in *Colonisations et héritages actuels au Sahara et au Sahel: problèmes conceptuels, état des lieux et nouvelles perspectives de recherche, XVIIIe-XXe siècles*, ed. Mariella. Villasante Cervello and Christophe de. Beauvais (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2007), 351–81.


233 When referring to the geopolitical territory that remains under dispute, I use Western Sahara. When referring to a regional space – particularly in the 1950s, when borders and political entities differed significantly from today – I use western Sahara. The lower case “western Sahara” refers to a broader region than Western Sahara proper, and includes parts of southern Morocco, southwest Algeria and northern Mauritania. Some works refer to this region as Atlantic Sahara, but I am reluctant to use this term since, in Moroccan scholarship, it serves as a kind of neologism to avoid naming “Western Sahara” as a political entity, which is not my intent here. E.g.: Rahal Boubrik and Colloque International la Reforme et ses Usages, *Le Sahara atlantique* (Rabat: Univ. Mohammed V, Fac. des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines, 2012).
administration, unlike the rest of the French colony. Spain’s colonial presence was restricted largely to coastal fishing enclaves even into the 1950s and, as a result, Spanish Sahara attracted bidanis who sought to avoid French taxation and keep contact with colonial rule to a minimum. Southern Morocco under the French Protectorate, including Wed Nun, was known as the fiefdom of Pasha T’hami el-Glaoui, whose relatively unchecked power distinguished this region of French rule from the rest of the Protectorate.

In part because of this fragmented geography of colonial rule, the dynamics of decolonization across western Sahara did not follow the dialectics of struggle between colonizer and colonized. Instead, the late-colonial influx of capital to the Sahara increasingly contributed to a scramble not only for territory, but to gain the allegiance and guarantee the support of the bidanis living in the region. French advocates used the language of protecting Saharan minorities as a justification for establishing OCRS in the Sahara. In Mauritania, France focused on constructing a national identity so as to facilitate a referendum vote in favor of national independence, overseen as part of the French Loi Cadre during the late 1950s. Following the discovery of phosphates after World War II, Spain belatedly dispatched the anthropologist Julio Caro Baroja to its territory, then known as Spanish West Africa, to learn about its colonial

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235 Acloque, “L’idée de frontière en milieu nomade: héritage, appropriation et implications politiques actuelles : Mauritanie et Sahara occidental”; Kouzmine et al., “Etapes de la structuration d’un désert”; Ryo Ikeda, “The Paradox of Independence: The Maintenance of Influence and the French Decision to Transfer Power in Morocco,” The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History 35, no. 4 (December 1, 2007): 572. Ikeda describes el-Glaoui, Pasha of Marrakesh, as a “warlord” whose concentrated power in southern Morocco served as a countervailing force both to the Makhzen, or Morocco’s central administration under the French Protectorate, as well as to the religious authority of Sultan Mohamed V.
subjects, the findings of which Caro Baroja published in a 1955 ethnography. And while French rule in Algeria was increasingly preoccupied with the FLN by the mid-1950s, the colonial military administration had been active in reestablishing the market town of Tindouf as a regional hub of western Sahara since 1934. Newly independent Morocco, meanwhile, tried an altogether different strategy of attracting support among people from across the region by enlisting them in an armed movement, known as the Moroccan Liberation Army, that aimed to destabilize French and Spanish colonial rule. Just as the horizon of decolonization in the Sahara increasingly led to an influx of capital to the region, so too, did the 1950s see the intensification of efforts to fix the political subjectivity of the people of the region.

In this sense, this region of the Sahara during the 1950s defies what Luise White terms “the orderly process of decolonization.” White’s apt phrase joins with a broader critique of the historiography of decolonization for retrospectively naturalizing the outcome of a massive reconfiguration of the relations between sovereignty, people, and territory. By contrast, considering the horizons of possibility opened by decolonization draws attention to the discontinuities and alternative possibilities constitutive of this process. A particularly

238 Julio Caro Baroja, *Estudios Saharianos. [With Plates and Maps].* (Madrid: Instituto de Estudios Africanos, 1955). Spanish Sahara was administratively incorporated into a province of Spain after World War II, and renamed Spanish West Africa. The administrative center of the province was in Sidi Ifni, a Spanish enclave on the coast of southern Morocco that is not contiguous with the rest of Spain’s colony. Spain withdrew from Sidi Ifni in 1969.

239 Attilio Gaudio, *Le dossier du Sahara occidental* (Paris: Nouvelles éditions latines, 1978), 138. The ambiguous status of Tindouf was central to Morocco's irredentism. It was a part of the "Confins Algéro-Marocains," established in 1934 to allow for joint administration of certain regions along the Algerian-Moroccan border. This border was never fully delineated. By 1956, Tindouf was technically a part of French Algeria but, by multiple accounts, was supplied from the Moroccan port of Agadir until independence in 1956. Paul Mousset, *Ce Sahara qui voit le jour* (Paris: Presses de la cité, 1959), 198; Gaudio, *Le dossier du Sahara occidental*, 154.

240 Luise White, *Unpopular Sovereignty: Rhodesian Independence and African Decolonization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 22. “By orderly I do not mean a political process free of riots and repression, but orderly in terms of the idea of African territories crossing a threshold by which they would become nation-states and take a newly claimed rightful place in the community of nations, the UN, the Commonwealth, and even the Organization of African Unity (OAU).”

The seductive aspect of the historiography of decolonization involves the assumption of synchronicity, or the idea that anticolonial struggle coincided with the achievement of national consciousness, culminating in the transfer of power by former colonies to newly independent nation states. Decolonization certainly transformed the relationship between people, sovereignty and territory across the region, but from the vantage point of the Sahara in the time-space of the 1950s, in particular this process did not constitute a moment of synchronicity but, rather, the onset of a disjunctive political present. Decolonization of the Sahara in the 1950s, I argue, ushers in a series of unresolved political projects with afterlives that continue to haunt the region’s political present, most clearly in the ongoing dispute over Western Sahara. In this chapter, I will be exploring the ongoing ramifications of decolonization in western Sahara through historical narratives surrounding Morocco’s Liberation Army in the Sahara from 1956-59.

Section I – Anticolonial Irredentism: Morocco’s Liberation Army in the Sahara in Regional/International Context, 1956-59

The Moroccan Liberation Army (MLA) was the outcome of both territorial ambiguity and temporal disjuncture between the abrupt end of the French Protectorate, and the intensification of armed resistance in the Moroccan countryside. As a means of attenuating anticolonial demands for the withdrawal of French empire from the Greater Maghreb, and in an attempt to try and consolidate its control over Algeria, which was governed as an administrative unit of France proper, France expedited the decolonization of the adjacent Protectorates in Tunisia and Morocco. These direct negotiations stood in tension with the aims of the MLA, a group with membership from across North Africa, which aimed for the decolonization of the Greater Maghreb and drew upon support from Gamal Abd al-Nasr. In August 22-29, 1955, French negotiations in Aix-les-Bains with a group of Moroccan political figures established a

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242 Ikeda, “The Paradox of Independence.”
framework and set the course for ending French colonial rule, but left the outcome uncertain. For many involved in anticolonial resistance, and particularly those associated with the MLA and the Moroccan nationalist Istiqlal Party, the terms of the Aix-les-Bains agreement were deeply disillusioning. In response to the French premise of “independence within an interdependence liberally negotiated,” Ahmed Balafrej, a member of the Moroccan Istiqlal party, said: “Interdependence was talked about: the word does not possess any juridical content…even the notion of interdependence is only valid to the extent that it expresses an organic reciprocity, for the people cannot be interdependent unless they are already independent.”

Meanwhile, the span of time between the Aix-les-Bains negotiations and March 1956, when France recognized Moroccan independence, was marked by political escalation. A shipment of arms arranged by Gamal Abd al-Nasr, coming from Czechoslovakia and arriving by boat to Morocco’s northern Mediterranean coast, was divided between the MLA and the Algerian National Liberation Front. An armed insurrection subsequently developed in the mountainous Rif region in northern Morocco. Meanwhile, Abdelkebir and Allal Fassi, leaders of the Moroccan nationalist Istiqlal Party, hosted a meeting in Madrid in January 1956 with other MLA leaders, making the strategic decision to divide the newly strengthened MLA in three. By spreading the freshly armed fighters throughout the country, between the Rif in the north, the Central and High Atlas to the east, and the Souss and Sahara to the south, the Liberation Army appeared to be preparing for a long resistance.

245 Hodges, Western Sahara, 74. The decision to divide the MLA in three was based on memories of the defeat of Abd el-Krim Khattabi and his forces in the Rif War of the 1920s, which, following years of armed resistance, were ultimately surrounded by the French from the South and the Spanish to the North. Interview 18 September 2014, Rabat.
And yet, by March 1956, just three months after the meeting of anticolonial leaders in Madrid, France had restored Mohammed V to his throne, abrogated the Treaty of Fes, ended its Protectorate and granted Morocco independence. Spain, which governed northern Morocco with a protectorate of its own, ended its rule one month later, but maintained control over enclaves on the Mediterranean (Ceuta and Melilla) and Atlantic (Sidi Ifni) coasts, as well as its colony in the Sahara. The abrupt end to the French and Spanish protectorates in Morocco stands in marked contrast to the growth of the MLA as an armed resistance movement, which appeared to just then be preparing for a new scale of conflict. This sense that decolonization did not bring about the end of anticolonial struggle was articulated by Allal Fassi on June 19, 1956 in terms that can be read as nationalist, irredentist and, simultaneously, as an expression of anticolonial solidarity:

Now, if Morocco is independent, it is not completely unified. The Moroccans will continue their struggle until Tangier, the Sahara under French and Spanish influence from Tindouf to Colomb-Bechar, Touat, Kenadza, Mauritania are liberated and unified. It is necessary to complete Morocco’s independence. Our independence will only be complete with the Sahara and all of the other territories whose delegates have come to Rabat proclaiming union. It is necessary to struggle for a complete union. It is necessary to retake the regions under Spanish and French influence. Our solidarity is profound for we have made a promise with God to liberate Algeria, Tunisia, the Libyan Fezzan. Our future is in Africa, we, North Africans, we have been equals in history, under colonialism, and we will live as equals in independence.

Fassi’s claim to a “Greater Morocco” has subsequently come to be seen, with reason, as fostering an irredentist ideology which has caused lasting instability in the region, what with Morocco’s refusal to recognize an independent Mauritania until 1969, and its invasion and annexation of

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246 Tangier was an international zone during the Protectorate but became a part of Morocco soon after its independence.
Western Sahara starting in 1975. In 1956, however, al-Fassi’s claim was at once anticolonial and irredentist, a matter of political posturing surely calibrated for an international audience, while also serving as a catalyst for the populist MLA now spread throughout the country. Independence had arrived in Morocco only a few months before, and there was already a sense that it was inadequate and compromised.

A map reflecting claims articulated by Allal el-Fassi and Morocco’s Istiqlal Party starting in 1956.


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While the MLA elsewhere in Morocco disbanded, its extension south into French Algeria, French West Africa, and Spanish West Africa, became, in a sense, the expression and object of a struggle that had been preemptively foreshortened. Nonetheless, by June 1956, a group of some 150 men under the leadership of Ben Hamou Mesfioui, a veteran of the French war in Indochina, arrived in Goulmime, a northern hub of trans-Saharan commerce that, in 1956, bordered Wed Nun and what was then called Spanish West Africa. The group included a large contingent from the central plains of Morocco known as Zemmour, and was receiving arms and aid from anticolonial fighters who had taken refuge in the Spanish enclave of Sidi Ifni, on the Atlantic coast. Though initially supported by the Moroccan state, the MLA was not a part of the newly formed Royal Armed Forces of Morocco, which was then operating under the command of Prince Hassan II with French advisers.

Even as it established headquarters in Goulmime in the summer of 1956, the MLA was an anticolonial armed movement operating in an independent nation-state. This status as an “irregular army” indexed the moment of transition in which the MLA’s Sahara campaign emerged, between colonial withdrawal and postcolonial state formation. This transitional character is also reflected in the MLA’s munitions, organizational structure, and personnel. On the one hand, the MLA had a standard military hierarchy, with distinctions between officers, most of whom were Moroccan and soldiers, most of whom were from the Sahara. On the other hand, the officer-led regiment of 300 soldiers was known as “al-rha’,” a term derived from the

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250 Hodges, Western Sahara, 75.
word for “millstone” or “grindstone” which refers to the units of armed self-defense around which a village or tribe in rural Morocco would rally.  

The hybrid organization basis of the MLA, blurring the distinction between a “regular” and “irregular” armed force, can also be seen in its munitions. Aside from the Abd al-Nasr shipment via Czechoslovakia, the MLA relied upon an eclectic collection of arms, including French- and Italian-made grenades, and American-made pistols. Ben Saïd Aït Iddr notes that, aside from a stock of guns that the MLA had already accumulated, the Royal Armed Forces of Morocco provided 300-450 shotguns, with other arms expropriated from French loyalists, and the remainder provided by volunteers who joined. In addition to shotguns, the Moroccan state at some point funded the MLA, so that the soldiers could be offered stipends. Angela Hernández Moréno notes that, upon enrollment, MLA soldiers received 2000 francs, a military outfit, a gun (type “lebel”), training, and pay at the rate of 2000/mo. Aït Iddr suggested that the Makhzen provided 50 million centimes to pay 5000 soldiers, but that this funding only arrived in 1959 and became the object of political contestation between MLA leadership and the Moroccan state. At least one interlocutor mentioned that his reason for leaving the Army was due to a lack of pay. Not unlike the MLA’s organizational structure, however, it appears as though many of its armed fighters furnished their own guns, usually rifles of World War I vintage. In oral histories, former fighters frequently referenced “ts’aiya’s” and other rifles used in hunting, during their narratives of fighting for the MLA.

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251 The Hassaniya-French dictionary makes reference only to “millstone,” and not to any armed unit, suggesting that the term’s military use has its roots in rural Morocco, and its use in the MLA was related to much of the MLA’s Moroccan leadership having been based in the Rif Mountains prior to the campaign in the Sahara. Catherine Taine-Cheikh, *Dictionnaire Hassâniyya français. dialecte arabe de Mauritanie 4, 4*, (Paris: Geuthner, 1990), 759.


255 Interview June 8, 2015, F’derik, Mauritania.
And this speaks to a significant feature of the MLA’s composite military form: though most of its leadership were Moroccan anticolonial fighters, its ranks were filled by bidani and Ba’amranian tribesmen of Wed Nun and the Sahara. Sahrawis and Ba’amranian’s constituted an estimated two-thirds of the MLA, and the vast majority of the Army’s combatants. Where the Moroccan leadership were mostly (although not exclusively) young men who had been active in the pre-‘56 urban-based resistance, bidanis who took up arms to join the MLA cut across

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256 Ba’amran is a tribe based in and around Sidi Ifni, the center for the administration of Spanish West Africa until 1958. The MLA campaign in the Sahara is sometimes called the Ifni War, because some of the most sustained confrontations between the MLA and Spanish forces occurred there.

generations. There were, of course, young Sahrawi men who left their families to join the MLA, accounts of which I heard directly through oral histories. But part of the MLA leadership’s approach was to recruit shaykh’s, such as Khatri ould Joumani and Lhabib ould Bellal, who, as leaders of tribal subfractions, could mobilize large numbers of bidan. In parts of Wed Nun where the Aït Oussa tribe is based, I was told that the mobilization around MLA fighting was total: entire fergan, or groups of families living in tents that travel together, contributed livestock and joined the cause. This mobilization, where it was total, cut across gender lines as women prepared food, served as lookouts, and readied camels’ saddles for men to mount and ride into an attack.  

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A receipt acknowledging the donation of twenty sheep by Yahdih Bin Bahi to the Moroccan Liberation Army in the Sahara.

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258 Note from Interview, Laâyoune/El Aaiún, June 17, 2014.
While the reasons for why *bidanis* joined the MLA may have been manifold, and will be discussed later in this chapter, Moroccans’ recruitment appears to have been largely successful. Reaching an estimated 1200 to 1500 fighters in early 1957 and as many as 5000 later in the year, the Army relied heavily on *bidani* fighters to carry out a series of attacks on French outposts along the ambiguously defined border between Morocco and French Algeria, near Tindouf. The first attack on a military outpost at Um Laachar was carried out 19 June 1956, part of a series that continued from August through January 1957, targeting the French outposts Merkala, Zemoul, Zegdou and Tinfouchy along the Algerian/Morocco border. During the fall of 1957, another MLA detachment had traveled south by camel, traversing Spanish Sahara over three months before reaching northern Mauritania. In January 1957, this contingent launched an attack near the city of Atar, hoping to benefit from the spontaneous support of Mauritanians in the area and spark a larger uprising. Instead, the French met them with an equal force, including many *bidani* soldiers fighting with the French. The support from local Mauritanians never materialized, and the MLA was routed, with significant losses, including 41 prisoners taken by France. During the retreat north, the MLA also was forced to disarm by Spanish colonial officers.

At independence, Morocco was divided between Spanish rule in the north and far south, and French rule in the most populous regions in between. When the anticolonial struggle against the French Protectorate was at its peak in the early 1950s, anticolonial fighters frequently took refuge in areas of Spanish rule, including Sidi Ifni, a coastal enclave in southern Morocco and the center of Spain’s colonial administration for the Sahara. MLA leaders have noted that, at the

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259 Diego Aguirre, *La última guerra colonial de España*, 73.
outset, the Liberation Army had counted upon Spain’s accommodating stance toward any activity that would undermine French colonial stability. Exploiting “the contradiction” between France and Spain, as it has been termed, would allow them to traffic material through Spanish Sahara and launch attacks into French Algeria and Mauritania. Some former MLA leaders even claimed to have been “friends” with Spanish military officers, and in regular communication with these officers about their plans.

In light of this strategy, the defeat in northern Mauritania in January 1957, compounded by having been disarmed by Spanish authorities, represented a turning point for the MLA. From that point forward, the MLA established more permanent camps throughout Spanish Sahara, along the Saguiet al-Hamra in the north of Spanish Sahara, and in the Tiris region to the south. Throughout 1957, the MLA carried out attacks against Spanish military posts and settlements from these strongholds throughout the territory, including Argoub, El Ayoun, Lemsid, Tafoudart, and Ghaywa. By November 1957, some 4000 to 5000 soldiers, distributed across four or five regiments, were stationed in Spanish Sahara and Spain’s already-tenuous presence across broad swaths of the colony had been further depleted by Sahrawi soldiers who defected and joined the MLA. With the MLA now training their old rifles against Spanish targets, the Spanish colonial administration withdrew from nearly all of the territory, with the exception of its military bases in El Ayoun, and the coastal enclave of Villa Cisneros (now known as Dakhla). The MLA’s gains in Spanish Sahara would prove to be temporary, however, as its offensive drove Spain to cooperate with French colonial officials.

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261 Ait Idr, Watha’iq Jaysh Al-Tahrir Fi Janub Al-Maghrib.
262 Hernández Moreno, “Réflexions Sur La Guerre d’Espagne Contre l’Armée de Libération Marocaine Dans Le Territoire d’Ifni et Le Sahara Espagnol (1957-58),” 289–90. Hernandez Moreno quotes an interview with Driss Boubker, a Moroccan from Casablanca and former leader of the MLA.
263 Hernández Moreno, 292; Chaffard, Les carnets secrets de la décolonisation., 269. The Spanish military historian Diego Aguirre estimates a smaller number, but listed thirteen distinct groups of MLA fighters in Spanish Sahara in the summer of 1957.
In July 1957, the new Governor General of Spanish West Africa, Mariano Gomez de Zamalloa, met with the French General Gabriel Bourgund. The colonial officials met again in September in Dakar, and once more in the winter of 1957, by which time they had come to an agreement to carry out a two-phased, coordinated countinsurgency campaign against the MLA. Meanwhile, by November 1957, Morocco had established a Direction des Affaires Sahariennes, while reportedly sending signals, covert and otherwise, that it was ready to be rid of the “uncontrolled elements” of the MLA. The first phase of Ecouvillon, from 10 to 19 February, 1958, focused on clearing bidanis out of the northern tier of Spanish Sahara, known as Saguiea al-Hamra. To complete the second phase of what was called Opération Ecouvillon, a combination of soldiers and air strikes were used to “sweep” bidanis out of the southern tier of the colony, known as Tiris, from February 10-20, 1958. All told, some 15,000 French soldiers entered Spanish Sahara from Mauritania and Tindouf in Algeria, and as many as 8500 Spanish soldiers swept in from the coast. While leaflets were dropped warning bidanis to flee the territory, one report lists 132 killed, 37 injured, and 51 taken prisoner from Opération Ecouvillon.

For bidanis who lived through the year commonly referred to as ‘am khabt tyayyir, or the year of the aerial strikes, the bombardment drove MLA fighters either south to Mauritania, east

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264 According to Georges Chaffard, the French Defense Minister, Jacques Chaban-Delmas had “deduced that [France and Spain] hardly had to fear Rabat’s reactions” to Ecouvillon, based on indications from Morocco’s Makhzen that the state wished to be rid of the MLA. Chaffard, Les carnets secrets de la décolonisation, 273. In 1957, the Moroccan Foreign Minister at the time, Ahmed Balafrej, had referred to the events in the Sahara as being caused by “uncontrolled elements.” Assidon, Sahara occidental, un enjeu pour le Nord-Ouest africain, 18.

265 The name refers to the brush used to clean the barrel of a gun. “[de fusil] swab; [de bouteille] (bottle-)brush; [de boulanger] scuffle.” Le Robert & Collins, anglais: français-anglais, anglais-français., 9th ed. (Paris; Glasgow: Le Robert; Collins, 2010), 326. The operation is sometimes also referred to as “Opération Ouragan,” or “Operacion Teide.”

266 Mouset, Ce Sahara qui voit le jour., 200–202; Hernández Moreno, “Réflexions Sur La Guerre d’Espagne Contre l’Armée de Libération Marocaine Dans Le Territoire d’Ifni et Le Sahara Espagnol (1957-58),” 300. Mouset notes that this counteroffensive was undertaken in complete secrecy, so as not to draw further international attention to French colonial activities in North Africa.

267 Chaffard, Les carnets secrets de la décolonisation., 280.
to Tindouf in French Algeria, or north to Wed Nun. One former MLA fighter mentioned traveling twenty days by foot to reach Wed Nun. Another described the journey as follows:

They arrived in planes. They fired at us and killed camels. The planes hovered overhead and sent out parachutes in the sky, and 14 planes went by like this [motions with his hand]. And they went back and forth all over the place, and descended to fire. By God, by God, the camels - the planes were descending in order to seek out a camel and hit it. Because they could get lower and fire at it. So our division split up, completely, and we spent the whole day in the wad [river bed], our supplies - we lost everything.

Complete loss. We lost [everything] there. When it was the afternoon, the force arrived with tanks, from near Smara and came to us and fired at us. So we surrendered. They left at night, so we took off by foot, to get away from them, and we continued on, heading for Morocco.

M: On foot?

Yup, We didn't have clothes.

M: From Lghaywa? [in Tiris]

From Daysfa - Lghaywa's close, also - but we left from Daysfa to Laâyoune Ghoman, before Goulimime a little, after Wed Draa on that side. It took us a while (fawtna zaman) walking by foot. And there wasn't any food - we were eating just the plants, and water. And the clothes, also, a lot of it wasn't with us. It was a bad situation! We went through all that trouble/we were worn out. (Nahna mtakarfasin)269

Several accounts, including one report from a French journalist who visited Tindouf just months after the operation, note that the counterinsurgency was entirely covert: “for Ecouvillon there were neither war correspondents, nor photographers, nor cinematographers, nor communiqués.”270 Just days before Ecouvillon, a bombardment of Algerian FLN regiments in Tunisia had drawn unwanted international attention, leaving France sensitive to the need for secrecy, particularly since the military operation was being carried out in Spanish Sahara.271 The

268 Interview 10 Jan 2016; Tindouf, Algeria.
269 Interview 8 June 2015, F’derik, Mauritania.
270 Gaudio, Le dossier du Sahara occidental, 161. The account written within months of the operation is Mousset, Ce Sahara qui voit le jour.
271 France had previously overrun its border with Spain in the name of colonial order, most prominently in 1913, when it destroyed the city of Smara, in Spanish Sahara, which was the center of Ma al-Aynayn, the leader of a
viability and clandestinity of Opération Ecouvillon underscores the stark contrast in visibility between processes of decolonization in the Sahara, and concurrent anticolonial struggles for independence elsewhere – even, or especially, in Algeria.

Far from having overthrown colonial rule, bidani MLA fighters displaced by Ecouvillon found themselves ensnared in processes of Mauritanian and Moroccan state formation. On April 10, 1958, in Tintekrat near Fort Gouraud (now F’dérak) in northern Mauritania, a gathering was held to rally support for Mauritania’s upcoming vote for autonomy, which was expected to lead to national independence under France’s Loi-Cadre:

Three hundred Rguibi tents were assembled. A colorful spectacle. Six hundred fighters parade on camel before the President Moktar Ould Daddah and the Commander of the Region of Atar, Mr. Vézy. An offering of camels. Lengthy discussion under the presidential tente. It is by design that the High Commissioner Cusin refrained from appearing, and asked General Bourgund not to come, the better to savor the victory: the Rguibat must recognize, in pledging allegiance to Mr. Ould Daddah, of their affiliation to the Mauritanian nation. The presence of the Commander of the Region [Cercle] and of officers from the Saharan Affairs attest to France having given its support to the President...

The above description of Tintekrat captures the spectacle surrounding France’s attempt to attract bidani tribesmen – along with France’s particular focus on the largest tribe of western Sahara, the Rguibat – to affiliate with the emergent political nation of Mauritania, whose representative, Mokhtar Ould Daddah, would become the French-backed President for most of the next two decades.

Meanwhile, those MLA Sahrawi fighters who fled north and arrived in Wed Nun encountered spectacle of a different sort. April 1, 1958, several months after Opération Ecouvillon, Spain agreed to transfer the Wed Nun region at the northern end of its colony, to

zawiya who was calling for jihad to overthrow the Moroccan Alawite Sultan collaborating with the French Protectorate. Acloque, “L’idée de frontière en milieu nomade: héritage, appropriation et implications politiques actuelles: Mauritanie et Sahara occidental,” 357.

272 Chaffard, Les carnets secrets de la décolonisation., 278. Another account of Tintekrat can be found in François Beslay, Reguibats: de la paix française au Front Polisario. (Paris: L’harmattan, 1984), 113.
Morocco. By this time, the Liberation Army was in complete disarray. Some members of the MLA’s leadership were reputedly seeking to overthrow the King of Morocco and establish a republic. Fissures within MLA leadership, possibly related to support for or opposition to the monarchy, had led certain members to imprison others in the southern Moroccan town of Bouizkarn. At the same time, Spain and France actively recruited leading bidani shaykhs to defect from the MLA. Meanwhile, throughout 1958 the Moroccan state was actively trying to disband the MLA and incorporate its members into the Royal Armed Forces. As Sahrawi soldiers spent much of 1958 stationed in various parts of Wed Nun, rumors circulated about Morocco’s plan to incorporate Liberation Army fighters into the Royal Army of Morocco. By the beginning of 1958, bidani fighters had already begun defecting, having become disillusioned with the MLA for any or all of the reasons above.

In early December, 1958, several regiments of bidani soldiers that had been stationed in Wed Nun for nearly a year since Opération Ecovillon had swept them north from Spanish Sahara, broke into the stockade in Tan Tan. They detained the one Moroccan officer on hand, Saleh al-Jeza’iri, and, led by bidani regiment leader Mohamed al-Kher, they reclaimed weapons that had been taken from them months earlier. Ts’aiya’s in hand, they headed for points west and south. Some were actively recruited by the French, which dispatched prominent bidanis who had joined the French, such as Ba ould Dkhil, to meet rebelling soldiers partway and provision them with supplies flown in by France. Large contingents headed to Tindouf, in French Algeria and Bir Moghrein, in Mauritania. Another large contingent, led by Khatri ould Joumani, returned to

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273 This transfer was concluded through the Angra de Cintra Agreement. The region transferred is sometimes referred to as the “Tarfaya Strip” after a small coastal town in the Wed Nun region.
274 Ben Saïd Aït Iddr, Moulay Abdeslam Jebli, and Nemri were among the leaders of the MLA’s political wing who later formed the 23 Mars movement, a radical leftist group whose members were involved in attempts to overthrow Hassan II, and were exiled in Algeria and France throughout the 1970s and 80s. Mehdi Bennouna, Héros sans gloire: échec d’une révolution, 1963-1973 (Casablanca; Paris: Tarik éditions; Paris Méditerranée, 2002).
Spanish Sahara, as returning civilians rather than armed insurgents. The breaking into the stockade, known as *mdigadig l-magazin, or taksir l-magazin*, came to define the failed efforts between Moroccans and *bidanis* to collaborate on a project of anticolonial resistance. The MLA was finished, but the process of decolonization in the Sahara had only just begun.

Section II – Friends of the State: Morocco’s High Commission for Former Resistance Fighters and Publicly Historicizing the Liberation Army in the Sahara

On June 20, 2014, a conference was held at the Hotel de Ville of Laâyoune/El Aaiún, in Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara, with all of the trappings of a state-sponsored affair: traffic had been stopped on Avenue Mecca to allow a motorcade of officials and conference participants to pass through under the Moroccan flags lining the city’s central avenues, which had been raised for the occasion. Sponsored by the Ministry of Culture, the conference was the latest in a series dating back to 1989, with each annual installment focusing on the reign of one of Morocco’s Alawite sultans. Named for the founder of Morocco’s ruling dynasty and funded by the Ministry of Culture, University Moulay Ali Sharif had arrived in Laâyoune/El Aaiún, the largest Moroccan-controlled city in the disputed territory of Western Sahara, for its 18th installment, bringing together historians from across Morocco under the heading “The Second Period of Sultan Sidi Mohamed Bin Yousef’s reign: 1939-1955.”

In the morning, the Governor of Laâyoune/El Aaiún spoke, thanking specific members of the audience for their role in resisting colonialism and participating in Morocco’s Liberation Army (MLA). Other officials made reference to the “spontaneous” uprising by the people of the Sahara following Sultan Mohamed V’s exile from Morocco in 1953.²⁷⁶ For the afternoon session, a university historian from Casablanca, Noureddine Belhaddad, gave a presentation with

²⁷⁶ King Mohamed V was exiled by France, briefly to Corsica and then Madagascar, from 1953-55, and replaced by his uncle, Mohamed Ben Arafat.
the title “The Uprising of the tribes of Moroccan Sahara following the Exile of Mohamed V.”

The talk was short on specifics, but in the course of his presentation Belhaddad asked rhetorically, “When Sahrawis rose up in 1953, and when Sahrawis dressed in black to mourn the King’s exile, who was making them do that?” When Professor Belhaddad posed this question, an older Sahrawi man seated in the front row, wearing the typical bidani attire of blue, embroidered robe, or dra’a, and black litham head-wrap, stood up in protest and addressed the panelists directly. Belhaddad continued, uninterrupted, as the man cinched the dra’a around his waist and marched out of the building.

I stayed until the end of the talk, then walked out of the Hotel de Ville, the interior of which is decorated with large murals (in a vaguely social realist style) that depict the 1975 Green March when the Moroccan army organized some 350,000 civilians, as a mass demonstration of Morocco’s claim to sovereignty over the territory, to cross the border into what was then Spanish West Africa. By the time I exited the hall, the man who had left the conference was waiting for a taxi at the curb. I walked aimlessly up the wide avenue; it was well before the mid-afternoon prayer, and Sahat al-Mechouar, the vast public plaza across the avenue which had been built after Morocco razed the Spanish colonial-era neighborhood Colominat al-Hamra’ following its military occupation of the city in 1976, was empty. As I crossed the street, a young man in a business suit gave a hiss to draw my attention. Evidently a member of the conference’s security retinue, he asked for my information (name, affiliation, etc), first in Arabic and then in English as he approached, before letting me go on my way. By this time, the Sahrawi man who had left the conference in protest had found a cab, so I continued on my way.

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A longstanding, ongoing dispute over the sovereignty of Western Sahara between Morocco and
SADR/Polisario shape the historicization of the region’s decolonization in readily apparent ways. However, I open with this ethnographic scene to illustrate how regional decolonization in the 1950s – and the MLA’s incursion into the Sahara from 1956-59, in particular – raises uncomfortable political histories for both Moroccan and Sahrawi nationalists. For Sahrawi nationalists, the MLA serves as an uncomfortable reminder of the Moroccan Sultan’s capacity at that time to mobilize people of the Sahara through his religious and political authority. The MLA’s campaign in the Sahara can also be seen as a precursor to Morocco’s later annexation of the territory in the 1970s. For Moroccans, meanwhile, the MLA’s internal divisions and rapid demise point to Morocco’s inability to legitimize its rule in Western Sahara, then and now. For both Moroccan and Sahrawi nationalists, the MLA epitomizes the complex relations of autonomy and dependence between people of the Sahara and their neighbors to the north. The reasons for the MLA’s disintegration remain contested, but the conference at Laâyoune/El Aaiún’s Hotel de Ville highlights the tensions involved in any effort to make this history visible: the complexities of this period of regional decolonization sit in disjunctive relation to any given national historical narrative.

Following the overview of the MLA’s military campaign in the Sahara between 1956 and 59 in the previous section, the next two sections of this chapter will examine how historical narratives surrounding the MLA shape, and are shaped by, contemporary politics in Western Sahara. In a context of nationalist conflict, I suggest that the MLA appears as a history that is “alien to the times” of the present, since it reveals relations of neither independence nor sovereign unity between Moroccans and Sahrawis but, instead, a dialectic of autonomy and dependence. As mentioned in the introduction, recognizing the temporality of a past that is

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277 The National Museum in Rabouni, the administrative center for SADR/Polisario in the Sahrawi refugee camps, ignores the MLA in a timeline on the museum’s wall historicizing Sahrawi nationalism and anticolonial resistance. 278 Bloch, “Nonsynchronism and the Obligation to Its Dialectics,” 31.
seemingly out of step with the present is important for understanding how the apparently anomalous histories of decolonization in the Western Sahara disrupt the very premise of decolonization as an orderly sequence of events. As a particular kind of disorderly history that both cannot be consigned to the past, and cannot be resolved with the present, I suggest that the MLA constitutes a “nonsynchronous contradiction” in relation to the present. Drawing upon Ernst Bloch’s concept, this chapter considers the different ways in which the history of the MLA manifests itself as an “unsettled past” in the present context of nationalist conflict.

This section examines how the Moroccan state attempts to produce a visible but restricted historical narrative regarding decolonization in the Sahara during the 1950s, principally through the High Commission for Former Resistance Fighters and Members of the Liberation Army. Through publications, public events and museums, the High Commission publicizes the exploits of the Moroccan Liberation Army (MLA) in the Sahara, while attempting to control the narrative over its relationship to the Moroccan monarchy and Moroccan nationalism. In this sense, the High Commission’s role in attempting to monopolize the production of history regarding the Liberation Army is an extension of the Moroccan state’s tenuous and contested claims to sovereignty. While the High Commission’s provision of benefits for veterans has made the subject position of “former resistance fighter” fairly prominent in Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara today, the current visibility of these figures often highlights the MLA’s uneasy relationship to Moroccan national history, particularly when these figures evoke controversies from the 1950s that continue to haunt the present. While the High Commission’s mission to

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279 Bloch, 35. “The subjectively nonsynchronous contradiction is pent-up anger, the objectively nonsynchronous is unsettled past...” Kristin Ross’s notion of anachronism is similarly compelling: “The persistence of non-growth-driven cultures in the present builds confidence in the possibility of anachronism by allowing encounters in one’s own moment with actually embodied aspects of the past, stranded or land-locked, as it were, but still sporadically perceptible.” Kristin Ross, Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune (London: Verso, 2015), 74.

publicize this historical moment keeps the MLA visible in the present, its purpose of producing history as a means of legitimating sovereignty ensures that this history remains closely tied to state security prerogatives. The next section of this paper will examine the tensions between visibility and control underpinning state-led efforts to produce the MLA’s public history, by focusing specifically on the High Commission’s museums, as well as a private archivist who might be described as a “friend of the state.”

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The 2014 conference in Laâyoune/El Aaiún illustrates how the emphasis on Sahrawis’ historical allegiance to the Sultan of Morocco remains a prominent theme in Morocco’s state-sanctioned narrative. When performed, however, this public history frequently encounters resistance and begets controversy, as with the Sahrawi man who walked out on Nourredine Belhaddad’s conference presentation in protest. As a result, the maintenance of the public form of this history is as closely tied with the institutions of Moroccan state security and intelligence as with academic scholarship. Much as Morocco is engaged in an ongoing dispute over sovereignty in Western Sahara, the historicization of the MLA in the Sahara is imbricated in Morocco’s ongoing struggle to legitimate and maintain sovereignty in the region. While the 2014 conference was sponsored by the Ministry of Culture’s University of Moulay Ali Cherif, the state institution with the mandate to sustain national memory surrounding the MLA is the High Commission for Former Resistance Fighters and Members of the Liberation Army. The High Commission was established June 15, 1973, which, as Samia Errazzouki points out, followed two unsuccessful coup attempts against King Hassan II that took place the two previous years (July 1971, August 1972). Given this context, the establishment of the High Commission might be seen as a counterrevolutionary act, taking place at a moment of political opening in the
1970s\textsuperscript{281} when a number of groups, some including former MLA members, were involved in plots to potentially overthrow Hassan II:

These mobilizations took on the form of violent acts of resistance in Rabat and Casablanca, sparking a round of arrests and disappearances. During the same month that Hassan II issued dahir nº 1.73.252, on June 25, 1973, 149 people accused of taking part in these acts stood trial in the military tribunal in Kenitra. It was under the shadow of these events that in 1973 the Moroccan state’s domestic intelligence agency, the Direction de la Surveillance du Territoire (DST) was created.\textsuperscript{282}

Initially a means of coopting political opposition through the distribution of state benefits, and for Hassan II to consolidate power, the establishment of the High Commission was, in this sense, an instance of Moroccan state formation through the reappropriation of the past.

Today, however, the High Commission makes the past visible in the present through museums, events and publications that incorporate the MLA into a narrative of history that blends anticolonial nationalism with loyalty to the Alawite dynasty. The High Commission’s museum, which opened in 2001, consolidated documents from the MLA’s struggle into an archive housed at headquarters in the Agdal neighborhood of government ministries in the capital city of Rabat. While purporting to present an exhibit of MLA anticolonial resistance, the lower floors of the museum, which one first encounters upon entry, feature a number of artifacts that predate or are otherwise not directly related to MLA activities (such as material from the Rif War of the 1920s), and the upper floors, which show documents and photos from the MLA, focus on the period of Mohamed V’s exile and return, 1953-55.\textsuperscript{283} Local branches of the museum for the High Commission which have opened more recently in Sidi Ifni, Tan Tan, Laâyoune, Boujdour and Dakhla (all located in either southern Morocco or Moroccan-occupied Western

\textsuperscript{281}Subject of Chapter 4
\textsuperscript{283}Errazzouki. Also based on my own visit to the High Commission’s museum in Agdal, Rabat, July, 2013.
Sahara) follow a similar design. With few exceptions (at the museum in Boujdour, for example, where a private archivist and friend of the state donated photographs and documents), exhibited material emphasizes nationwide uprisings, with very little documentation specific to the Sahara, and focuses on the period from 1953 to 1955, which erases the anticolonial unrest, such as the MLA in the Sahara, that continued after Moroccan independence in 1956. In each museum branch, the exhibited materials are set against the backdrop of portraits featuring Alawite kings.

In addition to the museum displays, the High Commission has established a prolific publication wing, which provides an outlet for dissertation work by Moroccan PhD students in history, circulates periodicals such as National Memory (al-Dhakira al-Wataniya), and publishes

“Kings of the Cherifian Alawite State”
A series of portraits of Moroccan Kings at the Boujdour branch of the High Commission for Former Resistance Fighters and Members of the Liberation Army, in Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara.
edited volumes to commemorate the anniversaries of particular events. As with the museum displays, the publications align the culmination of anticolonial resistance movements with the return of Mohamed V from exile, and Moroccan independence. Mohammed Zade’s *Résistance et Armée de Libération au Maroc (1947-1956)*, to take one of the more thorough histories published based on High Commission archives, for example, ends its study in 1956. This periodization synchronizes the end of anticolonial resistance with Moroccan independence, erasing the sense of dissatisfaction with decolonization which remained after 1956, and drove the MLA’s campaign in the Sahara. Those publications that directly address MLA activities in the Sahara from 1956-59 invariably describe this armed movement in nationalist – and gendered – terms, phrasing the MLA’s campaign as an effort to reunite the “usurped regions” [*al-manatiq al-mughtasiba*] of the “Moroccan Sahara” with the nation. As with the museum display, the High Commission’s publishing arm seeks to synchronize MLA anticolonial resistance with the timeline of Moroccan national independence and conflate this movement with what Errazzouki terms “the perceived organic and enduring centrality of the monarchy that nationalist histories have propagated.”

The High Commission’s active role in publicizing this controversial moment stands in tension with the control it maintains over MLA archives and which, by association, it attempts to maintain over the narrative of the MLA. In the course of my fieldwork, this tension was embedded within a broader ambiguity concerning the High Commission’s central mission. The publications and museums suggest an active pedagogical role in promoting the public history of

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287 Errazzouki, “The Moroccan Non-Exception.”
the MLA in the Sahara. But, in the course of multiple visits to Morocco and Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara during fieldwork in 2013 and 2014, I was never granted authorization to access High Commission archives, nor were High Commission staff authorized to refer me to former resistance fighters. Only on one occasion, in Tan Tan, a city in the Wed Nun region of southern Morocco, did an employee address the High Commission’s reluctance to make its archive available. Because documentation at the local level remained scarce, according to this employee, the vast majority of documentation remains archived in Rabat. As for family and privately held documents, the employee said that while the High Commission is open to collecting them, very few families have taken the state institution up on this. What followed was one of the more frank discussions of the Moroccan state’s relation to MLA history:

The employee then mentioned that, unfortunately, we would have a hard time getting anywhere on the matter given the political sensitivity, and the fact that the High Commission really doesn’t deal with or provide this history, for multiple reasons.

For one thing, the employee said, the High Commission was established to manage all matters related to veterans of the National Resistance, and only recently (this employee mentioned an initiative started in 2000) was it given the additional mandate to historicize that period, but that the Mandoubiya lacked the capacity in personnel (ناقص الكفاءات) to carry this out.

In addition, though, this employee said that the institute isn’t really interested in promoting “scientific” research on the matter. This staff member pointed out that even if they were to sit down with former Army members and record the most basic information, someone would censor it before it ever saw the light of day. In this way, the High Commission acts as a kind of puppet master - pulling the strings of what gets said at commemorative events (this employee used the term “تمييز”) and on the information collected, since its censorship guarantees that only selective information is published.

In short, as this person put it, there is no freedom in this matter.

The High Commission attempts to manage the tension between publicity and control over this history by restricting access to first-hand sources, even as it keeps MLA history visible in the

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288 La yhum bi tarikh ‘ilmî
289 Fieldnote, October 26, 2014, Tan Tan, Morocco.
public sphere. In doing so, the High Commission itself represents an institutionalized tension between producing historical visibility, and maintaining control over this discourse.

There are, however, additional forms which this tension takes, not least in the figure of the “friend of the state” mentioned above, who donated certain documents to the High Commission’s museum branch in Boujdour, a coastal city in Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara. Early on in my research, I received a phone call from an unrecognized number. The man told me that I “did not need to know” the caller’s name, but that he wished to introduce me to someone, who turned out to be Hamadi. Hamadi’s father had kept a private archive and had been an active participant in the MLA in the 1950s, and the son had inherited both his father’s archive and political proximity to the Moroccan state. After the introduction by phone, Hamadi invited me to his house in Lââyoune/El Aaiún (he has property in both Boujdour, his hometown, and in Laâyoune/El Aaiún). When he welcomed me to his home, Hamadi had just returned from an annual trip to Rabat for the Festival of the Throne (Eid al-‘arsh) to perform bay’a, a ritual renewal of allegiance and submission to the Moroccan king performed by notables from around the country.

The purpose of my visit had been for Hamadi to introduce me to some of his documents pertaining to the MLA, and he initially expressed his enthusiasm at the prospect of being able to share documents from the history of the MLA toward academic ends. When I asked whether I could share the documents with two Moroccan graduate students with whom I had been working, Hamadi expressed his reservations. Instead, he suggested that it was possible to share some of this history with me precisely because I was approaching the subject from outside Morocco. Once he began showing me documents, however, this certainty waned. One document Hamadi

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290 Thank you to Professor Beth Baron, Andrew Alger, Jeremy Randall and Sara Pekow of the Middle East Studies dissertation workshop at CUNY-Graduate Center for encouraging me to flesh out this figure.
pulled from his binders was a type-written report that circulated among MLA leadership about how to proceed following Opération Ecouvillon. At its conclusion, the report identified several prominent Sahrawis for having collaborated with French and Spanish counterinsurgency efforts. Another handwritten paper, which Hamadi said was French propaganda, named three bidanis who had “joined” the French cause, encouraging others to do the same. All of the documents appeared to be originals. After spotting the names, Hamadi asked me not to photograph the documents and to erase the photographs I had already taken, suggesting that I could copy portions of the documents by hand, but at a later date.

That later date, as it turned out, took place at an evening gathering at Las Dunas, a public outdoor café situated near one of the busiest intersections of Laâyoune/El Aaiún. Hamadi agreed to meet with me, along with the two Moroccan graduate students with whom I had been arranging interviews and conducting research. As we were getting started, Hamadi noted that a colleague who had important contacts with regards to the MLA was going to join us. The fellow arrived, and upon introduction he mentioned that he had done his research on US foreign policy toward terrorism. He sat and listened as we talked about the MLA in general terms and discussed the prospects for meeting people to whom Hamadi might introduce us. After about 15 to 20 minutes, Hamadi’s guest got up and left, leaving me his email address as we talked about meeting in the next few days. Somehow, it was only after we finished meeting with Hamadi and went to another café, when one of the graduate students pointed out the obvious: the man to whom Hamadi introduced us was clearly working for the Department of the Interior, and had been conducting reconnaissance.

My interactions with Hamadi the archivist were representative of how the history of the MLA became manifest in the present: visible and therefore seemingly accessible, but with that
access conditional upon being cleared, first, as a friend of the Moroccan state. The publications, museums, archives and events together comprise the Moroccan state’s attempts to coopt and consolidate a hegemonic narrative in which the Sahara had to be reclaimed in order to restore national unity from French and Spanish colonial usurpation. That the state remains deeply invested in controlling what should be remembered and what must be forgotten about the MLA in the Sahara should not be surprising precisely because Morocco’s legitimacy in the region remains tenuous. But given that publicizing this history still requires the cooperation of living members from this period, former resistance fighters themselves often manifest this tension between publicity and control over this history. However, they cannot fully escape the hegemonic narrative surrounding this history which is tied to Morocco historicizing its claims to sovereignty. As a result, the counternarratives emerge as scandals more than as means of rethinking the historiography itself. The pervasive sense of scandal functions as a kind of institutionalized controversy surrounding the history of the MLA.

Section III: Institutionalized Controversy: Counternarratives and Public Secrets in Historicizing the MLA

As much as the history of the MLA is mediated in a highly restrictive manner by the politics of the present, the Moroccan state cannot fully monopolize the historical narrative on the MLA in the Sahara. This is in part because the state’s failure to address the complexities entailed by this unresolved project of decolonization ensures that this history remains riven with controversy. Another reason is because living, former members of the MLA do not necessarily conform to Moroccan state narratives. In this section, I will examine historical counternarratives, including histories by Ben Said Ait Iddr, a former member of the political wing of the MLA, oral histories published as part of dissertation research by the Moroccan sociologist, Ali al-Omri, and
rumors that I encountered in the course of my fieldwork. Each of these counternarratives complicate the official narrative promulgated by the Moroccan state. However, because they cannot separate themselves from the political stakes of nationalism shaping the political field in the present, these counternarratives are frequently consumed by controversy. This “institutionalized controversy” surrounding decolonization of the Sahara in the 1950s, as manifested by rumors, oral histories and other counternarratives, both indicates and conceals the complexities of this unresolved project of decolonization.

In my initial meeting with him, Hamadi appeared to be hesitant to share his documents, not because of the imperatives of state security and sovereignty, but presumably out of concern with protecting the reputations for the descendants of those named in the documents. This consideration of the history of the MLA differs from the state security imperative, and is worth exploring on its own terms. If the state security approach to the history of 1950s decolonization emphasizes synchronism and control, another aspect of the historiography of the MLA is rife with scandal. Even in a context of competing sovereignties, where Moroccan legitimacy in the Sahara remains deeply contested, the distinction between an anticolonial resistance fighter and a “traitor” (kha’în) still holds great currency. In this way, the sense of scandal surrounding the history of the MLA is structured by the same poles of loyalty and betrayal that structure the contemporary political field of nationalist conflict, and perspectives on the MLA become a kind of prism through which political dynamics of the present are read.

Ali al-Omri, a Moroccan sociologist who conducted his dissertation research on the Moroccan Liberation Army in the Sahara, published a collection of oral histories through the High Commission.  

291 The first edition created an uproar among certain veterans who claimed

that they had been slandered by the claims found in specific interviews from the published collection. Those who felt wronged went so far as to take the author to court.\textsuperscript{292} The High Commission attempted to withdraw the first printing from circulation, and published another edition. Both editions are marked as “first edition,” and with the same publishing year, but certain passages in the first edition are missing from the altered version. In the first edition, for example, El Ouali Ba Bayt asserted that one Larabas Ma al-Aynayn had been charged by the MLA with delivering arms to a regiment near Laâyoune/El Aaiún, but ended up giving himself up to the Spanish authorities and disclosing his cargo.\textsuperscript{293} Though Larabas was imprisoned on the Canary Islands for this, El Ouali Ba Bayt’s account implied that Larabas had not been a reliable or trustworthy member of the anticolonial struggle of the 1950s. In the second edition, this account has been removed and, according to several people, Larabas was one of the aggrieved parties who threatened al-Omri with libel. As the son of an influential shaykh, Mohamed Laghdaf Ma al-Aynayn, and as part of a tribe that has been considered loyal to the Moroccan state, Larabas has occupied a series of powerful governmental posts since 1975, including President of the Provincial Council, President of the Council of Learning, and Judge on the High Appellate Court for the region of Laâyoune/El Aaiún. In the role of judge, Larabas presided over trials for Sahrawis arrested for their political activity, and was notorious for accepting bribes in this role. In this sense, El Ouali, who was imprisoned for thirteen years following Moroccan annexation for allegedly providing material support to the Polisario Front, was perhaps settling scores for the injustices and imbalances of power that had accrued over decades of political dispute.


\textsuperscript{293} al-Omri, \textit{Al-Muqawama Al-Sahrawiya Wa Al-‘Aml Al-Watani: Muqabalat Wa Watha’iq}. 
It was not simply that El Ouali was questioning Larabas’s participation in the MLA, however. After all, there is no doubt, according to those I spoke with, that Larabas was involved in the MLA, and was imprisoned by Spain for these activities. Rather, El Ouali may have been trying to correct for the privileged role that Larabas, as member of a tribe favored by the Moroccan state, has had in making and speaking for this history. This has afforded Larabas, and “friends of the state” like him, not just the status that comes with public acknowledgment as a member of anticolonial resistance, but the opportunity to frame the history in simple terms of anticolonial nationalism: in fighting for Morocco, Larabas was imprisoned by Spain. This narrative, buttressed by the High Commission’s events and publications, marginalizes the participants who experienced this history in all of its complexity of competing sovereignties and transforming relations to political authority. The controversy over Larabas’s role in the MLA also reflects the “nonsynchronous contradiction” entailed in historicizing the MLA in the present – even disagreements end up filtered through the binaries of loyalty and betrayal to the nationalist cause.

The prestige associated with being recognized as a former MLA fighter might appear paradoxical. After all, the recognition bears the ambivalence of having participated in an armed movement that did not succeed in its primary aim to dislodge Spanish and French colonial rule across western Sahara, and which was largely sold out by the Moroccan state that initially backed the effort. Moreover, part of the MLA’s leadership may have been plotting to overthrow the Moroccan king, while many of the Sahrawi fighters who joined this armed movement ended up feeling betrayed and defected. Perhaps to compensate for this historical ambivalence, the High Commission liberally bestowed recognition upon former members of the MLA after its establishment in the 1970s. Some claimed that people took advantage of the financially tenuous

294 Fieldnote 14 October 2014.
situation of certain former members of the MLA, paying them for an attestation in order to gain approval for benefits. Others allegedly enlisted enough relatives willing to sign an attestation in order to compel an obliging member of the High Commission’s administration to grant recognition. Whether directly sanctioning these practices, or not, it is not difficult to see how the enrollment of large numbers of former anticolonial fighters under the High Commission’s benefit regime served the state’s interest in repurposing the MLA’s anticolonial heritage to align with both the monarchy, and Morocco’s state-sanctioned historical narratives.

Regardless of the process, the end result was that the ranks of former members of the MLA swelled with fraudulent members. As the Director of one of the High Commission’s local branches acknowledged, some pensioners receiving benefits from the High Commission had birthdates on their veterans’ identification cards that preceded the MLA in the Sahara by only twelve years. This speaks to the space which the MLA history occupies between public history and public secrets. Because of the Moroccan state’s politicization of this history, the gap between the state-sanctioned historical narrative, which is both visible and visibly inaccurate, casts a shadow over parts of this history which do not align with the national narrative but are too well-known to be ignored.

In the relatively limited historiography of the MLA that is not sponsored or published by the High Commission, Ben Saïd Aït Idr’s works distinguish themselves for providing a relatively comprehensive account of the MLA, and a distinct argument. Aït Idr was a part of the MLA’s political wing, which organized funding and funneled arms to the Army’s headquarters in Goulmim, but did not participate in military campaigns in the Sahara. Like others involved in the MLA’s political wing, including al-Fqih Ben Basri, Said Bounailat, Moulay Abdeslam Jebli, and Ibrahim Tizniti (later known as Nemri), Aït Idr went on to form the 23 Mars movement, a

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radical leftist group whose members were engaged throughout the 1960s and 70s in attempts to overthrow the monarchy in Morocco. After spending decades in exile in Algeria and France, Aït Iddr returned to Morocco and published two histories of the MLA, based both on his experience and on MLA documents that he obtained privately.

In doing so, Aït Iddr presents a history of the MLA that foregrounds two dynamics, one of them explicitly, the other perhaps unwittingly. Aït Iddr’s central argument, first presented in his 2001 publication, is that the MLA was not undone by French-Spanish joint counterinsurgency but by a series of damaging schisms and unnecessary obstacles that emerged between the MLA and the Moroccan state, and from within the MLA itself:

Rather, the difficulties and obstacles that [the MLA] faced from within were effectively and actually stronger, so despite the military loss before the colonial alliance, the Liberation Army could have come out with a new result, enabling the lifting of morale, and opening new horizons in order to continue fighting a new battle.

Primary among these internal constraints was the Moroccan state’s ambivalence toward the MLA. This is the focus of Aït Iddr’s first book on the subject, Safahat min Melhamat Jaysh al-Tahrir bi Janub al-Maghrib. As Aït Iddr suggests, the newly independent Moroccan state became increasingly ambivalent toward the MLA even before the group had arrived in Goulmime. As the armed faction made its way south taking revenge upon and seizing property from people seen as French loyalists, and kidnapping French officers who were still stationed in southern Morocco, the MLA became seen as a threat to the stability of the new nation state.

As a result, Aït Iddr suggests that the Moroccan state increased surveillance over the MLA’s operations in Goulmime and, more damagingly, sowed discord among MLA leadership.

296 Bennouna, Héros sans gloire.
297 These documents reputedly belong to Nadil al-Hashimi, leader of one of the MLA regiments.
298 Aït Iddr, Safahat Min Melhamat Jaysh Al-Tahrir Bi Janub Al-Maghrib, 12.
299 The title translates as Pages from the Saga of the Liberation Army in Southern Morocco
Drawing upon the notebook kept by an official in the MLA, Aït Iddr suggests that a meeting was arranged in Bouizkern, just north of Goulmimne, in 1957. At the height of their gains against Spain, MLA officers were commanded to leave their posts. Some traveled from as far south as Tiris, in southern Spanish Sahara and, upon reaching Bouizkern, a number of those summoned were arrested. The entire town was apparently under siege while the power struggle between MLA officers played out. There are conflicting reports about who led this plot. Aït Iddr blames officials from the Moroccan state who, he claims, had convinced a faction of MLA officials to join the Royal Armed Forces, and then force others to do the same.300 Another historian, however, documented how some of the MLA’s leaders, including Ben Hamou and Driss el-Alawi, ruled with impunity, imprisoning and executing French “collaborators” during 1956 and 57 when the MLA first arrived in Goulmimne. By this account, Bouizkern may have either been a continuation of this heavy-handed leadership, or a revolt among a disillusioned group of MLA officers.301 Regardless, Aït Iddr notes that what he calls the “Bouizkern Plot” “contributed in a fundamental way (bi shakal jidhari) to changing the original direction of the Liberation Army, and pushing it to build a different strategy that was forced upon it, without its wish.”302

In his first history, written in 2001, Aït Iddr focuses largely on the role that the formative Moroccan state played in stymying the MLA’s campaign in the Sahara. According to Aït Iddr, state agents withheld support from the MLA, or actively undermined its efforts. Though Aït Iddr never mentions him by name, the implication is that the Prince Hassan II was responsible for these countermeasures, seeing the MLA as a threat to the Royal Armed Forces that was newly under his command. In this first historical account, Aït Iddr depicts the MLA as a largely

300 Aït Iddr, Watha’iq Jaysh Al-Tahrir Fi Janub Al-Maghrib, 58.
302 Aït Iddr, Watha’iq Jaysh Al-Tahrir Fi Janub Al-Maghrib, 23.
coherent extension of the anticolonialism that predated Moroccan independence, but which was suddenly betrayed by the newly independent Moroccan state. However, not unlike the High Commission museums, the bidani and Ba’amrani fighters who constituted most of the MLA’s armed force have a limited role in this history. In Aït Iddr’s second history *Watha’iq Jaysh al-Tahrir fi Janub al-Maghrib*, published in 2011 and based largely on notes kept by an MLA officer, Aït Iddr characterizes the MLA as an armed movement betrayed by potential allies and besieged by otherwise avoidable obstacles. In this history, there are plots and conspiracies (*al-dasa’is wa al-mu’amarat*) at every turn. In this second account, Sahrawis do make an appearance, but they are most prominently identified as the creators of these plots and conspiracies. Nonetheless, unlike the earlier publication, Aït Iddr focuses more on the relationship between MLA leadership, which was largely Moroccan, and the Sahrawis who constituted the rank and file of the armed movement.

This leads to the second insight from Aït Iddr’s historiography of this period, which begins to shed light on the relationship between Moroccans and the bidani tribesmen they had recruited to join their ranks. In both works, Aït Iddr is invested in redeeming the MLA’s leadership from the suspicions and aspersions that have dogged historical understandings of their role in potentially plotting to overthrow the King, as well as alienating the Sahrawis who initially rallied to their cause. As a result, Aït Iddr makes it his task to prove that members of the MLA’s leadership were motivated purely by nationalism (with no other, anti-monarchical aims) and sought to spread this nationalism to the people of the Sahara. In one passage, he notes:

To that end, the leadership opened a school for political formation whose responsibility fell to one of the leaders of the Resistance, comrade Abdesslam Jebeli, with the aim of raising the political level of the Liberation Army soldiers.303

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303 Aït Iddr, 115.
The MLA, Aït Iddr notes, also provided education and housing to children displaced by Opération Ecouvillon in cities across southern Morocco such as Agadir, Tafraout and, most famously, in a repurposed mansion in Casablanca known as Dar Touzani.\(^\text{304}\)

In drawing attention to the MLA’s material efforts to better the people of the Sahara, Aït Iddr also provides an unvarnished perspective of how MLA leadership viewed Sahrawis at that time:

The Army took some major steps in creating a national consciousness (\textit{al-wa’yi al-qawmi}) and nationalist feeling (\textit{al-sha’ur al-watani}) until the words ‘traitor’ and ‘loyalist’ and ‘general interest’ and ‘independence’ and ‘freedom’ and ‘colonialism’ and ‘struggle’ and ‘unity’ and ‘racism’\(^\text{305}\) – and other expressions that had not been in use before the Army’s arrival, when the Sahara only knew the likes of the word ‘camel’ and ‘rain’ and ‘grazing’ and ‘tea’ and ‘French territory’ and ‘Spanish territory’ and a distorted picture of ‘the North’ and ruinous battles (\textit{al-ma’arik al-tahina}) that took place between one tribe and another.\(^\text{306}\)

Whether one believes that the MLA was responsible for instilling these feelings in the people of the Sahara is less important, here, than drawing upon Aït Iddr’s account – which is, again, based on a journal kept by a Moroccan MLA officer – for its ethnographic insights into the relationship between Moroccans and \textit{bidanis} at this time. The condescension in this passage is apparent, associating the \textit{bidanis} with political ignorance and backwardness. Without the “gift” of national consciousness, this passage implies that the people of the Sahara knew only the geographies imposed by French and Spanish colonialism. This passage also constructs the way of life in the Sahara as a series of vacuous preoccupations with ostensibly apolitical things: livestock, weather, and sociality, i.e., “‘camels’ and ‘rain’ and ‘grazing’ and ‘tea.’” What politics they do have, this

\(^{304}\) Ait Iddr, \textit{Safahat Min Melhamat Jaysh Al-Tahrir Bi Janub Al-Maghrib}, 118–19.

\(^{305}\) \textit{Al-`unsriya}, refers here to the pride and favoritism that one tribe holds for its own members over those of another.

\(^{306}\) Ait Iddr, \textit{Watha’iq Jaysh Al-Tahrir Fi Janub Al-Maghrib}, 40; Ait Iddr, \textit{Safahat Min Melhamat Jaysh Al-Tahrir Bi Janub Al-Maghrib}, 115. Many of the primary documents used by Ait Iddr were obtained from a former MLA fighter, rumored to be Nadl al-Hashimi. In his 2011 book, he presents a journal by al-Hashimi; it is not clear whether Ait Iddr has edited this journal, or not. There are unattributed excerpts from this journal also in the 2001 book.
stereotype asserts, is the chaos of tribal warfare associated in the Moroccan political imaginary with *al-bilad al-siba’*, or the land beyond the pale of state control.

Aït Iddr’s historiography of the MLA is well-known in Morocco, and for good reason. In acknowledging obstacles which the MLA faced from the Moroccan state and within its own ranks, this perspective contests the High Commission’s state-centered historiography, which attempts to erase any separation between the politics of anticolonialism, Moroccan nationalism, and allegiance to the Alawite dynasty. Because he is writing within certain political constraints, Aït Iddr cannot directly accuse the King of undermining the MLA. Instead, he focuses on other parties: the agents of the state responsible for Bouizkern and, subsequently, the Sahrawis who, in defecting from the MLA, failed to show the requisite loyalty of committed nationalists. In a certain respect, Aït Iddr’s work serves as a counternarrative to Moroccan state-centered narratives that refuse to acknowledge the complexity of this historical moment. This also serves to some extent as a corrective to the Spanish historiography, largely completed by military historians, which minimizes the level of Sahrawi involvement in the MLA.307

However, Aït Iddr’s focus also belies a preoccupation with the terms set by the state-centered narrative: the people of the Sahara are characterized as blameworthy (whether duplicitous or ignorant) because of their inability to remain steadfast and loyal to a national goal. In this specific way, Aït Iddr’s counternarrative resembles the controversy surrounding Ali al-Omri’s oral histories. Both counternarratives complicate, in different ways, the state’s attempt to align this history with its own interests of legitimation and sovereignty. In doing so, these counternarratives spark controversies that contest the most visible inaccuracies in the state-

307 Though she does not draw upon Aït Iddr’s work, Angela Hernández Moreno offers a similar critique of Spanish historiography in Hernández Moreno, “Réflexions Sur La Guerre d’Espagne Contre l’Armée de Libération Marocaine Dans Le Territoire d’Ifni et Le Sahara Espagnol (1957-58).” The military histories she draws from are Rafael Casas de la Vega et al., *La Última guerra de África: campaña de Ifni-Sáhara* (Madrid: Servicio de Publicaciones del EME, 1985); Diego Aguirre, *La última guerra colonial de España*. 
sanctioned public history. Nonetheless, these counternarratives remain constrained by the politics of national historiography and, as a result, their debates end up framed by the poles of loyalty and betrayal.

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In this section, I have examined historical accounts that, in one way or another, contest the High Commission’s attempts to monopolize the historical narrative of the MLA in the 1950s. Because these studies must accept certain parameters within which to debate what took place, the focus tends to leave nationalism itself unexamined. When Sahrawis aren’t erased entirely from this narrative, they are generally evaluated relative to the framework of loyalty and/or betrayal to the MLA cause. This even occurs in the instance of oral histories, where the controversies engendered focused on questions of loyalty and betrayal, and not necessarily the ambiguities of the MLA as a political phenomenon. These controversies illustrate how the MLA remains an “unsettled past” that sits in disjunctive relation to the political present of nationalist conflict. In the next section, I attempt to displace this framework by using the MLA as a point of departure from which to consider the transformative effects of decolonization on the people of the Sahara during the 1950s. The sources for this account include oral histories, a rumor, and a poem.

Section IV – Disorderly Histories: 1950s Decolonization of the Sahara through Oral Histories, and Rumor

With one exception to this point, I have largely avoided presenting oral histories by MLA participants, despite the fact that the recording of oral histories through interviews constituted a significant part of my research of the MLA in the Sahara. This is in part because the methodology presented a number of challenges, which I have tried to outline above. In Morocco and Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, the High Commission’s effort to coopt the history of decolonization in the Sahara in the 1950s in order to serve the Moroccan state’s struggle to
legitimate sovereignty in the territory constrained everything from the use of names (“Moroccan Sahara”) to the recognition or omission of historical events. No one I interviewed while I was in Morocco or Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, for example, would provide a first-hand account of *mdigadig l-magazin*, although people would acknowledge that the event took place. The contemporary framework of nationalist conflict often served as the “audience,” whether absent or present, shaping interviewees’ narratives. This polarized context constrained what could be said and what could not be said about events of the period leading, as I suggested in the previous section, to a historiography grounded in assigning blame for the demise of the MLA. This “institutionalized controversy” manifested itself in interviews I conducted with certain interlocutors eager to blame Ben Saïd Aït Idr, for example, for revising the history of the MLA for the purposes of resuscitating his own reputation. When I conducted interviews in the Polisario/SADR-run refugee camps in southwest Algeria, the effects of the political conflict manifested themselves in reverse form, particularly since I was carrying out interviews with the assistance and in the presence of an employee of SADR’s Ministry of Communications.

Although the form and content of oral histories about this period deserve further analysis in their own right, I turn to a specific passage from a single interview with a former MLA fighter in an attempt to situate this experience within broader changes across western Sahara during this period. Rather than evaluating this military campaign in relation to national projects still in formation at that time, or that were yet to come, I suggest that the events in the region between 1956 and 59 can be particularly revealing for what they can tell us about decolonization as an attempt to fix the political subjectivity of people of the Sahara. M’hamid, for example, was a soldier under Spanish rule in Smara in 1957, when a MLA contingent arrived and commanded

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his group to surrender. M’hamid spent the next year fighting for the MLA. After the Army was routed by Operation Ecouvillon, M’hamid and his unit spent twenty days traveling on foot to reach Wed Nun, where they subsequently remained camped out for months awaiting orders.

M’hamid recalls that during this time, word spread among the bidani fighters that they had been “tricked,” and so they broke into a stockade of arms and defected, in what was known as *mdigadig l’magazin*:

M’hamid: …Mdigadig L-magazin: when a year had passed, at the beginning of 59, the chleuha said, “The war's over.” For them, in their minds [damir unfusahum huma], the war was over and they said that they were going to disarm the Sahrawis. …[It was a] trick [khid’a]: … Take their arms, and leave them. You understand?

Me: Meaning, they took the arms from the Sahrawis…

M’hamid: …Almost three months passed, and they were promoting that idea, that the Liberation Army will be followed by the Royal Army…And when they said that they were going to promote that rumor, that it would trick us into [joining] the Royal Army.

There was someone in Tan Tan who was the leader of a unit [katiba], a Sahrawi, known as Mahfoud ould Ma’atalla…raised in Marrakesh, in Morocco…He called the leaders of the platoons [fasa’il], and leaders of the regiments. All of them Sahrawi. Called them and told them a story, that it was a trick: Morocco tricked you.

Me: He's the one who told you about the trick.

M’hamid: But, it wasn't clear to us; we weren't convinced by it. [mahi jadd ‘elina]

Me: Why not?

M’hamid: We had at that time, just the Sultan, and nothing else. Just the Sultan, and that's it. [Ma’atalla] was the one who was there for us, and that's it. Three months passed and he called them and met with them, the leadership, two days each week. They met. And he passed along the trick that was being planned. You understand, or what? This guy was raised in Morocco, and he was aware [khbari] - smart.

After becoming convinced by Ma’atalla of this trick, M’hamid participated in *mdigadig l-magazin*, when MLA soldiers tied up their Moroccan commander and broke into the stockade of
arms which had been taken from them. M’hamid and hundreds of others then left Tan Tan with
the aid of a handful of prominent shaykhs who, with the support of France, provided material
goods and transport to Tindouf, Bir Moghrein, or points south in Spanish Sahara. By 1960,
M’hamid was a soldier in the Mauritanian army, attending independence ceremonies in
Nouakchott. Since joining the Polisario Front in the 1970s, he has lived in the Sahrawi refugee
camps in Algeria.

There are three aspects of M’hamid’s oral history and itinerary that I would like to dwell
on. The first is his political mobility. The significance here is not only that there were different
perspectives from bidani former combatants about why they participated in the Liberation Army
– the myriad of motives both contradict the notion that nationalism was a hegemonic force at the
time, but also defy cataloguing. Rather, I take the significance of these varied perspectives to
suggest the multiple political and ethical commitments, as well as the various collectivities to
which people of the Sahara had a sense of belonging at that time. Rather than thinking of their
identities as fixed in tribal (Rguibi, Ma al-Aynayn, Izerguiyin, Wlad Dlim, among many others)
or national (Mauritanian, Moroccan, or Sahrawi), I have used the descriptor bidani to draw
attention to the relatively undefined political geography of western Sahara during the 1950s.
Recognizing these processes as in flux serves to highlight the tremendous effort expended during
this time – by the Moroccans, by the French, and by the Spanish – to define and redefine borders,
to fix the subjectivities of their subjects, and to delineate the horizon of political futures in the
region.

The second part of M’hamid’s personal narrative that I would like to focus on involves
his reference to the Sultan, and to being “tricked.” Whether the people of the Sahara have
historically pledged some form of allegiance to the Sultan of Morocco, or not – and whether that
constitutes “a sovereign tie” – has been the subject of a ruling by the International Court of Justice, and is beyond the scope of this chapter.\textsuperscript{309} But the reference to having “nothing but the Sultan,” and then being “tricked” by the Moroccans they encountered, can be understood in a number of ways. For M’hamid, it seemed to reference the fact that he and many others had been ordered to trek north to Morocco and disarm, and then, rather than receiving compensation, he and others were threatened with conscription into the Moroccan Army. He had been tricked into fighting for a national project, rather than an anticolonial one.

But the notion of being “tricked” speaks to tensions that exist on a number of levels. It speaks to the tension between people of the Sahara and their neighbors to the north, whom M’hamid refers to, in ethnicized terms, as \textit{chleuh}.\textsuperscript{310} Without resorting to overdrawn dichotomies between nomadic and sedentary peoples, it is worth recognizing how the MLA laid bare many of the relations of complementarity and antagonism that are entailed between these mutually imbricated groups, particularly in border regions such as Wed Nun, which is where \textit{mdigadig l-magazin} took place. Underpinning the apparent reciprocity in regards to this transitional region on the shores of the Sahara, there is a tension between autonomy and dependence, between pastoral and commercial modes of living, that entail questions of trust, power and respect, as well as political and moral commitment. This tension is captured more generally in multiple Sahrawi proverbs that invoke the north as a place to be avoided:

\begin{quote}
The sahel is the house of money 
The south, for wandering 
The east is the house of fire 
And don’t look to the north
\end{quote}\textsuperscript{311}

\textsuperscript{309} The questions addressed by the ICJ Advisory Opinion on Wesern Sahara referenced here are discussed in an Appendix. ICJ., \textit{Sahara Occidental. Avis Consultatif Du 16 Octobre 1975 = Western Sahara. Advisory Opinion of 16 October 1975.}

\textsuperscript{310} \textit{Chilha}, pl. \textit{chleuh}, technically refers to Amazigh, or Berbers, but many Sahrawis use this term to refer indiscriminately to people from the north, including Moroccans and Algerians of all backgrounds.

\textsuperscript{311} \textit{Al-sahel bayt al-mal} 
\textit{Al-gibla tuf}
And, again, this time framed in terms of advice should one’s son head in one of two directions:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{If he goes south, don’t hesitate} \\
\text{And if he goes north, don’t [let him] go}^{312}
\end{align*}
\]

And, finally, a couplet that more explicitly associates danger and difficulties with Morocco:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Whoever goes south, gets what he needs} \\
\text{And whoever goes to Morocco, it is ruined}^{313}
\end{align*}
\]

Whether as a potential site of moral corruption, or political trouble, these proverbs present the North, or tell, as a place to be avoided.

And, yet, the North was also a place where people from the Sahara took refuge, whether from drought or war (both of which occurred during 1956-57\textsuperscript{314}) as well as for commercial purposes. In this sense, the third aspect of M’hamid’s narrative of particular interest is the figure of Mahfoud ould Ma’atalla the bidani raised in Marrakesh who alerted the MLA fighters to having been tricked. M’hamid spoke with reverence during our interview about ould Ma’atalla’s role in alerting the bidani soldiers to the fact that they had been sold out by the Moroccan leadership of the MLA. Ould Ma’atalla’s position as a go-between aligns, in this telling, with his subject position as a bidani living in Morocco. In M’hamid’s telling, this left ould Ma’atalla both alert to the machinations of the MLA leadership, yet sympathetic to his fellow bidanis. Ould Ma’atalla is far from an anomaly. On several occasions in the course of my fieldwork as people referenced their family history they mentioned relatives – often from just one or two generations prior – who had spent time in locations throughout Morocco, such as Ben Guerir, or the

\[\text{Al-sharg bayt al-nar} \]
\[\text{Wa tell la tshuf} \]
\[\text{ ila ystagbil la tarud} \]
\[\text{Wa ila ygaf la t’adu} \]

\[\text{Al-Ouali Ba Bait, whose oral history has been translated into Modern Standard Arabic: men istaqbil yrfa’ min sha’nu} \]
\[\text{wa men ytijah ila al-maghrhib ykhrah} \]

\[\text{Gaudio, Le dossier du Sahara occidental, 142.} \]
Maamora forests outside of Rabat. In both instances, this had been a temporary stay and the relatives had returned to the Sahara with their identities and way of life intact. The sense of danger posed by the North, however, would seem to be related to the prospect of those who do not return but, instead, settle in the north and, potentially, assimilate.

My point is to suggest that distrust between people of the two regions is no more structural than a certain interdependence. However, as a horizon of political possibility, decolonization foregrounded the tensions in this social relation in historically specific ways. Indeed, while much literature on colonialism in North Africa has focused on the centrality of the construction of Arab and Berber identities under French colonial rule, I would suggest that making sense of the relationship between peoples of the Sahara and people to the north is fundamental to understanding the region’s decolonization. This is not simply because of the ‘sedentary/nomadic’ difference, but because the two groups experienced colonialism and decolonization in related, but radically different ways. Unlike Morocco under the French Protectorate, the Mediterranean French Algeria, or the Senegalese of French West Africa, the Sahara had largely been treated as a military outpost, and a colonial hinterland. And, likewise, just as European empire was withdrawing from its former colonies in the 1950s, capital investment in the Sahara was surging. And yet, decolonization brought about a political convergence of these divergent histories.

This brings me to my last point, which is that M’hamid’s description of having been “tricked” by the Moroccans resonates with what I’m going to call a persistent rumor, or story, related to the MLA that crops up in written sources and that I also encountered during fieldwork.

Multiple written accounts have suggested that internal dissension which led to a certain number of *bidani* defections from the MLA may have been attributable to disagreements between Moroccan leadership and certain *bidani* shaykh’s who had rallied to the cause. Tony Hodges writes:

> Very little is known about the causes of these defections. The western ways of the young radical Moroccans in the Army of Liberation’s leadership may have alienated the austere and traditional nomads…

And reporting from Tindouf, Algeria in 1959, shortly after Operation Ecouvillon, Paul Mousset reports that Rguibat tribesmen who had been combatants in the MLA whom he met there claimed that:

> …these Moroccans who presented themselves as the flower of Islam were praying very little or not at all, drinking beer and shaving their beards.

The persistence of this rumor came through in my fieldwork. One interlocutor suggested that *bidanis* in Goulmimine had been put off by MLA leaders who put out their cigarettes on portraits of Mohamed V. On another occasion, a man of a younger generation said that he’d been told:

> [the Moroccans of the Liberation Army] didn't pray, they drank wine and they shaved their beards…and that's when it all began.

This difference in religious or ethical sensibilities between young Moroccan freedom fighters – some of whom were fighting not for the King, but for a republican or socialist future – and Sahrawi combatants, point to 1950s decolonization in the Sahara as a disjunctive time-space. Where the political and religious authority of the Sultan could still rally freedom fighters from the Rif to the Sahara in the name of anticolonial struggle, their conceptions of what constituted the Sultan’s authority differed significantly.

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316 Hodges, *Western Sahara*, 79.
318 Fieldnote, November, 2015
This is not to suggest, in any way, a lack of coevalness between the two, or to place one within modernity, and the other without. Indeed, one former MLA fighter now living in Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria responded to the name of a Moroccan who had been involved in the MLA and is now a retired colonel living in Rabat by saying, “Jenah bin Acher, he was my friend!” Those who converged on Goulmimite in the summer and fall of 1956, whether Moroccan or bidani, shared many things, not least an anticolonialism, broadly construed. However, the divergent projects animating a young, socialist Moroccan liberation fighter from Casablanca and a bidani shaykh from the Sahara highlight the different political horizons for which each was fighting: the nation, or the Sultan; jihad, or a socialist future. These might be thought of as indicative of the “disorderly” nature of this history: reflecting neither nationalist unity nor separatist antagonisms, the history of the MLA reveals the complex relations of autonomy and dependence between Moroccans and bidanis that constitute a nonsynchronous, or “unsettled past” in relation to the present context of nation state-based decolonization.

Section V – Alternative Geographies: 1956-58, Tan Tan, and western Sahara at the Threshold of Decolonization

Stanza I – Tan Tan and Tiris: Place and Displacement across western Sahara

Somewhere between 1956 and 1958, in the fall, two brothers composed a poem in Tan Tan. Alternating stanzas, Mohamed Ibrahim ould Sid Ahmed ould Sidi composed the first and third stanzas, and his brother Bashir composed the second. This dialogic form, known as l-gta, illustrates how poetry can serve as a means of spontaneous entertainment and creative expression in Hassanaphone, or bidani, poetry. While this dialogic form of poetic composition

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can serve as the basis for a verbal duel, Catherine Taine-Cheikh notes that “poetic jousting is not tied to a specific theme.” In this instance, the brothers’ tone is structured less by a sense of competition than a tacking back and forth between playful boasting, a celebration of moral goodness, and a longing for their home. These three themes are all present in the first stanza, composed by Mohamed Ibrahim:

Lmagta‘ Lahmar and Lkhaljan
And Lgara and Fam Ifandan
And the “Jardin” and the Hasi of Tantan
And Lahmaydiya and Dra‘a Lkhayl
This is my home (since) the summer
And that is thanks to God
But replace those with Iniyyan
Or with Lmanhar and Najdayl
And the longing that surrounds me
And comes to me at the end of the night
Reminds me of the home of the Bidan
Morning, noon and night
And all the other seasons of the land
The autumn with the rainfall and the runoff
And I‘m still here, trembling/lonely
I don’t see any way for poetry
But home is knocking on the mind
There is nothing more beautiful
As for me, my home has never been spoken badly of
The meaning of which is clear, and as proof
All of that from Nagjir on
It’s like it recognizes me even at night
And don’t be afraid of me forgetting
I won’t forget you, not for a long time

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321 Transliteration of the poem follows vernacular pronunciation in Hassaniya, rather than IJMES transliteration standards.
322 Rejfān: lit. “trembling”
323 ‘A kidiya, or small mountain, in Tiris.
324 Lmagta‘ Lahmar wal Khaljan
wa fjardin wa hasi Tan Tan
had wakri fi sayf nban
badal had bi Iniyan
dhak lhazem elayyi zignan
wa hajjal wakr Ibadan
wa had ‘ad awwan at-turban
wa ana bagi hun wa reifan
ghayr lwakr targ dhhan
wa Lgara wa Fam Ifandan
wa Lahmaydiya wa Dra‘a Lkhayl
dhak ila tasrif Jalil
wa bi Lmanhar wa Najdayl
wa jinni ‘ad ‘agib layl
Imbat wa Inathal wa Imgayl
li kharif wa lmsayl wa sil
mani ra‘i lejhan sabil
ma fi ha lilmakhloq jamil
Mohamed Ibrahim opens by listing a series of places in and around Tan Tan, at that time a military outpost south of the river Wed Draa. Situated in a narrow and variegated plain between Morocco’s Anti Atlas mountains to the north, the Atlantic Ocean to the west, and the hard rocky Saharan hammada to the east, Tan Tan is located in a region at the northern end of the Sahara, known as Wed Nun. Thanks to its intermediary climatic and geographic position between the Sahara and points north (the “tell”), Wed Nun has historically been a gateway for trans-Saharan trade coming from the south and leading through the market town of Goulmim toward the agricultural plains and cities of Morocco. Unlike the more arid desert regions to the south, however, Wed Nun receives sufficient rain for seasonal grain cultivation, such that in times of drought it often hosts an influx of camel herding pastoralists from neighboring tribes who otherwise follow seasonal pasturage throughout western Sahara. As a place where pastoral nomadic and sedentary living overlap, Wed Nun has historically served as a point of convergence between multiple modes of life. Writing in 1934, the French colonial officer Frederic de la Chapelle suggested that the region “nicely synthesizes the reciprocity between nomads and sedentary people.”

Although uniquely situated at a point of convergence between overlapping ways of life, Wed Nun, like much of the Sahara, is also structured by displacement. The historical

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wa ana wakri ma gut shiyyan  ma ‘ana ha battil wa dalil
had kamil Nagjir ‘ala  khayf lima ya’refni filil
wa la kha’ifni li nansahu  mani nassih wa dhak tawwil

325 Spain’s modern colonial presence in the Sahara was first established through a concession at the Berlin Conference of 1884, when it was granted by the European powers an enclave in southern Morocco, known as Sidi Ifni, and a coastal territory proximate to the Spanish Canary Islands. Surrounded by French colonies, after World War II Spain’s Saharan territories administratively became a part of was called “Spanish West Africa,” and governed under Spain’s Moroccan Protectorate. Spanish colonial presence beyond several coastal enclaves was nominal until the late 1950s, when the territory was administratively incorporated into a province of Spain and renamed Spanish Sahara.

involvement of Wed Nun tribes in trans-Saharan trade has led to their dispersion across commercial networks to places as far-flung as Atar, Tindouf, Taoudenni, Walata, Timbuktu and Saint-Louis. As a semi-desert region, Wed Nun itself is also susceptible to water shortages, and, like other tribes of western Sahara, people in Wed Nun have been known to take refuge in the rural plains of Morocco during times of drought. Underpinning this apparent reciprocity, then, is a tension between autonomy and dependence that cuts across several axes: between sedentary and nomadic modes of living, between commercial and pastoral means of subsistence, and between the different tribal (Tekna, Rguibat, Laarousiyin, among many others), ethnic (Arab and Amazigh), and religious (Muslim and Jewish) groups that converged, intermingled and dispersed through these intersecting ways of life.

In the mid-1950s, before Spain began expanding its nominal colonial presence in the Sahara beyond several coastal enclaves, Tan Tan was more a military garrison than a town. In 1956, Tan Tan was a Spanish military outpost at the threshold, in space and time, of decolonization. And unlike other Saharan towns such as Goulmime and Tindouf, which emerged through trade networks that were either trans-Saharan or colonial in nature, Tan Tan would develop largely through the struggles over political authority and population control that characterized processes of decolonization in the Sahara. By the fall of 1958, after Spain transferred the northernmost strip of its Saharan colony, Tan Tan was a part of newly independent Morocco. In the intervening two years, the city would swell with bidani fighters who, after joining the Moroccan Liberation Army in the Sahara (MLA), were pushed north by a

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327 Ghislaine Lydon refers to “a certain cosmopolitanism” enjoyed by the Tekna, a confederation of tribes in Wed Nun, thanks to these far-flung commercial networks. Ghislaine Lydon, On Trans-Saharan Trails (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 161.

joint Spanish-French counterinsurgency. Many bidani’s who had joined the MLA subsequently found themselves in Tan Tan, stranded and disarmed. Some were conscripted into the Moroccan Royal Armed Forces (RAF), as tanks from the RAF surrounded the city following its transfer from Spanish to Moroccan control. Others fled to French Algeria and Mauritania. Another contingent returned to Spanish Sahara, no longer as anticolonial insurgents, but as colonial subjects fleeing the nascent processes of postcolonial state formation.

While I received conflicting reports as to whether the brothers composed this poem in 1956 or 1958, whether at the outset or end of their participation in the MLA, it is clear from Mohamed Ibrahim’s first stanza that Wed Nun has failed to capture his imagination. In referring to it as a hasi, or well, he implies that, regardless of its military importance to either Spain or Morocco, Tan Tan is more waystation than destination. Though he begins by listing a series of places in and around Tan Tan to situate himself in time and space, he does not dwell in his present situation. Perhaps finding this fledgling settlement uninviting, unimpressive (his use of the French word “jardin” was perhaps dismissive) or simply unfamiliar, he runs through a series of places nearby (Lmagta’ Lahmar and Lkhaljan, Lgara and Fam Ifandan, Lhamaydiya and Dra’a Lkhayl), without offering any further description. Indeed, his mind is elsewhere and he soon moves on to his main preoccupation, the absent presence of home, using this conversation with his brother to indulge in “the feeling that surrounds me” when he thinks of places like Iniyyan, Lmanhar, Najdayl and, later in the stanza, Nagjir. Together, these hills, stream beds and water sources constitute a region known as Tiris, some 900km south of Tan Tan that in the late 1950s was divided between the northern reaches of French West Africa (soon to be Mauritania), and the southern tier of what was then called Spanish West Africa.329 With its varied landscape, Tiris

329 This border remains the same today, marking the de jure border between Western Sahara and northern Mauritania. Today, this borderland is far more complex, marking the de facto lines of occupation when a 1991
is renowned for providing an unusually vast expanse of seasonal pastureland ideal for grazing camels, sheep and goats, following rains (“The autumn with the rainfall and the runoff”). In 1859, from the administrative capital of French West Africa in Dakar, Senegal, Colonel Louis Faidherbe wrote of Tiris:

> Between this sebkha (d’Ijil) and the sea one finds a country that is not found on any map, nor in any geography, and the name for which is nonetheless continually on the mouth of those who speak of this part of Africa or who live there, or who travel there; it is Tiris.

> Now what is Tiris? It is a country where there is neither a village nor a tree, nor of course the smallest stream; until now it has not seemed important to make it appear on maps. But from October to May it is covered in pasture, and all of the tribes from Wed Nun in the north, until Senegal in the south, and to Tichit in the east, that is to say, living within an area of 40,000 square km, go to Tiris with their herds of camel and sheep in order to find grass there. During our winter in Senegal, by contrast, from June to October during the season of rains, there is no grass in Tiris, and the tribes return each one to their country where they find pasture. This year, even Mohammed el Habib, cheikh of the Trarza, went to Tiris.

This place, which, Mohamed Ibrahim boasts, is so familiar to him that it would recognize him “even at night,” visits him during his time in Tan Tan, reminding him of its beauty. This longing for home leaves the poet feeling “rejfan,” trembling from a cold that one can assume is a result of being both north of Tiris, and simply so far from home. Despite this separation, Mohamed Ibrahim expresses a clear resolve in the stanza’s closing couplet, directly addressing his home with the reassurance that his longing won’t be forgotten, “not for a long time.”

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Stanza II: “Neither Stifled nor Pressured”: bidani Moral Geography and Genealogical Identity

Lmagta‘ and Fam Targuan
Those are in my soul, and Lkarban
And L‘atef, also, and Amazzan
Meaning affection, oh, from before
From Tagba to Zemoul Iniyyan
The place where the land separates
And from Laglat to Inzaran
Here the people are generous
Tiris is not two hearts attached
From one resting place you see another
And in all of this are people
And sharaf who shine in candle light
And there are zawaya with notables
And the Qur’an and Khalil
And the mosque and call to prayer
And people who give with piety
And I, among them, with goodness in store
And the action that isn’t vile
And I know about riding camels
And I travel this way and that
I am neither stifled nor pressured
And no route before me is closed off
And I only befriend notables
Who are free and small in number
And I won’t be interrupted in my poetry
For on my verses an elephant could rest
And I won’t stray from the bidani way
As my origins are bidani and the proof
Is that I make the ambiance, rhythm and poetry
Biki and Tawwil are both known [to me]
And I pledged/sold that to God
The pledge/sale took place some time ago
And when people pledge/sell in these times
I think that one should not rescind

331 Places near Dakhla and Aouserd, in Tiris, in present-day Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara.
332 Tjala, pl tuwajil: “petite colline rocheuse isolée” Catherine Taine-Cheikh, Dictionnaire Hassâniyya français. dialecte arabe de Mauritanie 2, 2, (Paris: Geuthner, 1989), 187. (Taine-Cheikh, v.2 p187)5/11/18 3:06 PM. Here, the poet appears to be using this feature as a metaphor for the people grouped together in this region
333 fi khazini li hassan – this is also a reference to being from a “big tent,” or a family with the means (and morality) to be generous.
334 Prosody (buhur) in azawan.
335 Over these three lines, the poet plays with the meanings of “sell,” and “pledge,” which share the same root [b-a-’] in Arabic. I’ve maintained the split translation in order to illustrate the movement between completing a sale, in a transactional sense, and pledging allegiance, in terms of submission to authority.
God created these nations
And separated between them that separation
From Boulawtad to Dar Aman
Where there is boukar\textsuperscript{336} and atil\textsuperscript{337}
While very little of this is found
In Tan Tan and Draa Lkhayl
And if it is there it is not well-known
Where its traces are found at night.\textsuperscript{338}

Feeling “neither stifled nor pressured,” Bashir ould Sid Ahmed ould Sidi picks up where his brother’s first stanza left off, expressing his affection for Tiris. Bashir opens the stanza by naming more places (“Lmagta’ and Fam Targan,” “Laglat to Inzaran”) and closes by referencing vegetation endemic to Tiris (“boukar and atil”). In referencing the region’s natural features, rather than cities or towns, Bashir gives an implicit description of the human geography of the region at this time, which in the 1950s was still defined by its inland seasonal grazing, rather than permanent settlements on the coast. But Bashir soon makes it clear that his affection for Tiris is tied to the people who gather there, as much as the natural beauty of the place. His

\begin{footnotes}
\item[336]\textit{Panicum turgidum}. A desert grass. Taine-Cheikh, \textit{Dictionnaire Hassāniyya français. dialecte arabe de Mauritanie} 6, 6.  
\item[337]\textit{Maerua crassifolia}. A tree/shrub with green leaves. Taine-Cheikh.  
\item[338]Lmagta’\textsuperscript{a} wa Fum Tergan
Wa L’atif\textsuperscript{b} mli wa Amazan
Min Tagbi li Zamoul Ainian
Min Laglat ilayn Inzaran
Tiris mahum galbayn gwan
Wa hadha kamil fih l’-’arban
Wa fih zwaya min l-a’yan
Wa fih masjid wa l-‘adhan
Wa ana fi khazni li hassan
Wa n’arif fih arkub imilian
Mani medium wa la nekdan
Wa la nesshab shi ma hu l-a’yan
Wa la naqta’ \textsuperscript{c} end azawan
Mul hawl tarab wazan
Wa hadha yba’ atu li ssabhan
Wa mnadem ba’ fadha ‘alawan
Mulana khalg dha lawtan
Min Bu al-Witad ila Draman
Wa hadha milkan najad nakir
W-allah huwa kanu shahir menin
\end{footnotes}

\begin{flushright}
\textit{hadou fi khalg\textsuperscript{i} wa Lkerban}
\textit{ma’ana ‘atf ‘ah gbil}
\textit{blad mnin y’ud te’azil}
\textit{hadha fih nass tuwwajil}
\textit{min mgayl tashuf mgail}
\textit{wa sharaf yggidhum qandil}
\textit{wa fih l-qur’an wa fih Khalil}
\textit{wa nass tenfaq fi sabil}
\textit{wa lfe’l lli ma hu radil}
\textit{wa tisdar fi sabil fi sabil}
\textit{wa la mahsur a’liya sabil}
\textit{wa ahrawi min had dhalil}
\textit{kifani yteku fihum al-fil}
\textit{assli bidani wa dalil}
\textit{ya’refha baying wa tawwil}
\textit{maddayt al-bi’a fih gabil}
\textit{ma zanti zin ‘alih iqil}
\textit{wa fassal fih ha at-tafsil}
\textit{fiha boukar wa fiha itil}
\textit{fi Tan Tan wa fi Dra’a Alkhayl}
\textit{ykun ‘atheru fi l-layl}
\end{flushright}
allusions to a “generous” number of people who still enjoy enough space so as not to be like “two hearts attached” describes an idyllic landscape of fergan, or groups of tent-living families traveling together, with livestock in tow. That one tent can be seen from another seems to evoke an ideal landscape of proximity and distance – a poetic pastoral of seminomadic pastoralism.

With his affection for the land established, Bashir elaborates on the piety and moral goodness of the people populating Tiris. From the mosque and call to prayer to the acts of giving, he extolls their religious devotion (mosques and zawaya) and ethical goodness (“people who give”). At the same time, a boastful pride runs through Bashir’s stanza. In defining the company that he keeps by their moral propriety, he refers both to their religious commitment, and their sharaf, or honor. This honor, based on the claim of patrilineal descent from the Prophet Mohamed, continues to underpin Arab identity in the Sahara, and to mark the status of certain tribes in the region, among them Bashir’s Laaroussiyyin. As Mandana Limbert and Engseng Ho have shown in the Indian Ocean context, this renders Arabness not so much an ethnic identity as “a caste or class notion, reproduced through patrilineal genealogy.” In the Sahara, this status is racialized as bidani “white” identity in contradistinction to non-Arab Africans (“l-kwar”), and made hierarchical through the genealogical nobility of sharaf, in contradistinction to the servility of slaves and other dependents. The line “sharaf who shine in candle light” expresses this racialized status by referring to light-skinned people who “shine,” or glow, by candlelight.

Bashir’s boast of being “neither stifled nor pressured” elaborates a sense of subjectivity constituted by relations with bidanis of similar status “who are free and small in number.” In this

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339 Mandana Limbert, In the Time of Oil Piety, Memory, and Social Life in an Omani Town. (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2010), 144; Engseng Ho, The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 158. Limbert looks more at the racial aspect of this genealogical Arabness in contemporary Oman, while Ho emphasizes the religious significance of genealogy in constituting an Indian Ocean Arab diaspora. Ho: “a particularly complex interweaving of religious and genealogical status has helped define what it means to be Arab in this wide field.”
way, Bashir’s sense of freedom and autonomy is deeply tied to ethically appropriate behaviors, moral goodness, as well as status within the hierarchies of Saharan social formations. This *bidani*-ness is highly differentiated and shot through with hierarchies, distinctions and tribal affiliations. Beyond the status distinctions between tribes, a group of *firgan* in Saharan society may be constituted by another set of hierarchies, differentiating between “notables,” such as Bashir, and their dependents, who might include *haratin*, or freed slaves, *ma’alleem* (a class that provisioned a collection of families with cookware and necessities for traveling), *iggawen* (traditionally, families of poets), and slaves. As one colonial officer put it, the multiple sets of status distinctions within and between tribal affiliations render Saharan society “doubly hierarchical,” since authority and autonomy in the Sahara have historically been predicated on the control of dependents, or people, rather than territory.

In their ethnographies of Bedouin poetry in Egypt and Yemen, Lila Abu-Lughod and Steve Caton both discuss the importance of autonomy as an orienting value in Bedouin society, which bears a close family resemblance to *bidani* forms of life. For Caton, the persuasiveness of poetic rhetoric in Yemeni politics was necessary because “rule over those who cherish their autonomy demands the art of persuasion, not coercion.” Lila Abu-Lughod qualifies the importance placed on autonomy as a cultural value among Bedouin in Egypt by noting its gendered dimension, as an ideal that for many women remains unattainable:

But if honor derives from virtues associated with autonomy, then there are many, most notably women, who because of their physical, social and economic dependency are handicapped in their efforts to realize these ideals. Although they

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340 Tara Deubel refers to “Bidan” as “a high-status category.” Deubel, “Between Homeland and Exile,” 2010, 19, footnote 12. For a more contemporary discussion of this “social pyramid” and the efforts of SADR/Polisario to overwrite these hierarchies, see Wilson, *Sovereignty in Exile*, 50.


342 Scheele, *Smugglers and Saints of the Sahara*, 133.

share the general ethos and display some of the virtues of autonomy under certain conditions, their path to honor in this system is different. For Abu-Lughod, poetry becomes – for men and women alike – a medium for the culturally acceptable expression of vulnerability. In both Caton’s and Abu-Lughod’s accounts, poetry is understood as an expressive form that preserves an idealized sense of autonomy through an allusive language that achieves and conceals its primary aim (submission to authority of another in Caton’s case study, disclosure of vulnerability in Abu-Lughod’s). With Caton’s and Abu-Lughod’s insights in mind, Bashir’s stanza about being “neither stifled nor pressured” might be thought of as a poetic expression that conceals the relations of dependence underpinning bidani notions of autonomy.

At the same time, however, Bashir’s stated “proof” (dalil) of his “bidani origins” refers not only to hierarchical status, but to the cultivation of certain moral behaviors, as well as the mastery of certain cultural practices, such as poetry. Bashir uses poetry to boast of his capacities as a poet, both in technical terms (when he announces the prosodic forms he knows “Biki” and “Tawwil”), and in a more expansive sense (“for on my verses an elephant could rest”). With these boasts, Bashir is making clear that poetry itself is an aspect of a cultivated bidani identity. As Judith Scheele points out in her ethnographic work from southern Algeria, in Saharan society “status categories and 'ethnic groups' more generally are not thought about in terms of bounded groups but rather with reference to a model of excellence to which people correspond to varying degrees.”

In this stanza, poetry, piety and genealogy together serve as elements around which bidani “models of excellence” are cultivated, claimed and expressed.

This model of excellence relates to what Scheele describes as “a genealogical vision of the world” with implications for property, identity and authority that run counter to the bounded concepts of race, ethnicity and nation. Scheele’s notion of a genealogical relation to identity and authority based on hierarchical but open-ended encompassment, rather than the boundaries of ethnicity and nation, brings to mind the work of Engseng Ho and how a genealogical lexicon enabled the translation and transferal of authority across an Indian Ocean diaspora of mobility and trade. Ho’s insights regarding the production of a “moral geography” where “places in turn become signs for values” also provides an apt frame for thinking with Bashir and Mohamed Ibrahim about the moral goodness associated with the place-names, otherwise poetic and inscrutable, dotting the poem like signposts.

With the moral geographies of Tiris and the complexities of bidani identity elaborated in this stanza, I hope to show that this poem challenges easy translation of the concepts of identity, land and belonging across western Sahara to the contemporary context of nationalist conflict, just as the complexity of Saharan social, cultural and political formations have long defied bounded nation-state configurations of territory, people and sovereignty. Of course, Mohamed Ibrahim’s and Bashir’s expressions of longing in this poem describe a sense of displacement that would understandably resonate with the current political field driven by nationalist conflict, fragmented political geography, and exile. But in reducing these expressions entirely to a presentist discourse of nationalism, as they so often are in the literature on Western Sahara conflict, the richness of poetic longing is lost, as are the complexities of Saharan subjectivities, and the layered histories of regional decolonization. Rather, I suggest, this poem illustrates the degree to which western

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346 Scheele, Smugglers and Saints of the Sahara, 145.
347 Ho, The Graves of Tarim, 94.
Sahara has been radically transformed from the 1950s to present – or since the boundary-making processes of decolonization emerged. Therefore, the evidence of experience from different moments of decolonization in the region need to be historicized rather than assumed.348

**Stanza III – Love and Longing**

Today, really, Jalyat is far
As is Gran and Laghraydat
This distance and the distance to ‘Agaybat
The home of your parents for Ramadan
Where there is a remedy for any sadness,
For love349 and remedy for Satan
And moreover it is the place of souls
The place of souls and such goodness
Regardless of what has happened with the passing of time
It nevertheless remains [home] for all time
Where there are youngsters and girls
And, what is more, beautiful camels to ride
And there’s also Lgour which isn’t bad
And Um Daggan and Lkarban
And Tarf where I spent the night
Gart L’adayl, full of love350
And Lmanhar and Twinagjarat
There, where the longing at night
Took from me all reasoning
And left my balance trembling351
This, here, is the place of houses
And of my joy in the cold and the heat
Also, there is Sallam, who left
My mind worn out from so long
Love for her regenerates352 in my soul
But right now Iniyyan is far
And so is Aatf and Laachariyat
And if there are still understanding people
They won’t reproach me for turning at length
Toward the land of the Bidan

349 *dellal*: “(très rare) “amour”… “Coeur (style poétique)” (T-C, v4, p654)
350 *ghaywan*: “séduction, amour, charme” (T-C, v8, p1718)
351 *reifan*
352 *nekrat* refers to the end of spring, at a time when plants would otherwise stop growing, when more rainfall causes them to resume growing.
And the land of the camel and pretty girls
Return me, without any dissembling
To my land, oh God
Until I see the mouths of the riverbeds
And I’ll stop and pull up with a tin can/metal barrel
A kettle of water from Bir Inzaran
To break, if [only] I were [there], a bit of wood

In the third and final stanza, Mohamed Ibrahim continues and intensifies the poem’s theme of longing for Tiris. At the top of the stanza, he continues listing place-names but, whereas in the first stanza he was insisting on their proximity in his mind, now he flatly acknowledges the distance of Jalyat, Gran, Lâghraydat and ‘Agaybat. Even as he avoids further mention of Tan Tan, the reality of his separation from Tiris is more present than ever in this concluding stanza.

Nevertheless, the timelessness of this homeland remains unchanged, and as the stanza progresses Mohamed Ibrahim increasingly expresses this longing for Tiris in terms of desire. From “dellal” to “ghaywan” to “’azzat,” he evokes a series of terms that articulate his love, ardor and dear feelings for a homeland increasingly personified in the figure of a woman. First referring to the appeal of home in terms of the young women (tafilat) and camels (amliyan) who are present there, more generally, Mohamed Ibrahim eventually names her Sallam, and recounts

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353 *Jehdan*: Taine-Cheikh v2, p295 “dissimulation, secret”; “faire de tenir secret qqc, de cacher (un secret)”.
354 Assl ba’id lium jelliyat, wa ba’id Gran wa Lâghraydat
Had ba’id wa ba’id ‘Agaybat, Dar ahlek dhi fik fî Ramadan
L fiha tib l’ayat, Lil dullaal wa tib ash-shaytan
Wa hiya zad bled li khlagat, Wa bled li khlag ila yzyan
Ysu mza ha fi lftat, Yaghayr ytem ila bla azman
Fi l’ail wa tafilat, Wa shi ma dhak rkub amliyan
Wa fi Lgour wa ma hum shinan, Wa fihum Um Daggan wa Lkarban
Wa Tarif fih w hi nbat, Gart L’aday bil ghaywan
Wa Lmanhar wa Twinagjarat, Fum Lhezam al bat kran
Rah misu bini min hejjet, Lima khalli mezzani rejfan
Hud huwa bul diyarat, Tarabi fi l-berd wa fi l-hawman
Wa fi hum mulli Sallam khallat, ‘Aqli ysafl min ‘awdan
‘Azzat-ha fi khlagi nekrat, Ghayr ba’id lium Iniyan
Wa ba’id ‘Atf wa L’asharyat, Wa had bad mnadem fiyan
Ma ykessir li tal tlfat, ‘Ala shur trab l-Bidan
Wa trab ilbil wa shabihat, Rj’ani ma fiha jehdan
Li trabi ya lwhid fi dhat, Ilayn nshuf afam lwedian
Wa nukaf wa netla’ min tinuat, Maghraj min ma’ Bir Inzaran
Kasir lu kunt khshibat
how his encounters with her both left him “worn out” (“Sallam khallat/’aqli ysaf,”) and enables his longing to regenerate, like the season of extended rainfall and growth (nekrat). This passage is particularly interesting because, by equating his love for Tiris with his love for Sallam, Mohamed Ibrahim evokes this longing not only as a powerful emotion, but a destabilizing force. In doing so, he recycles the term “rejfan” which, in the first stanza, referred to shivering from the lack of warmth that he feels in Tan Tan. In this stanza, the poet recalls an evening of love and longing in Tiris that “took from me all reasoning/and left my balance trembling.” Here, the trembling of rejfan refers to the destabilizing force of an intimate encounter. Recalling this experience with his love/home inverts the relationship of distance the poet currently experiences in order to evoke the feeling of longing as a regenerative feeling of intimacy.

With this, Mohamed Ibrahim concludes the poem with an appeal that allows him to imagine his return one more time:

Return me, without any dissembling
To my land, oh God
Until I see the mouths of the riverbeds
And I’ll stop and pull up with a tin can/metal barrel
A kettle of water from Bir Inzaran
To break, if [only] I were [there], a bit of wood

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In its expression of longing for another place, the brothers’ poem is representative of a popular bidani poetic genre known as nasib. According to Catherine Taine-Cheikh nasib as a genre “nostalgically evokes ties with formerly frequented places.”355 With movement and displacement a structural element of life in 1950s Tiris (as Colonel Faidherbe noted a century earlier, Tiris drew people from around the region from October to May, and then emptied out the rest of the year), the nasib offers a genre particularly well-suited to seminomadic pastoralism. But the

brothers’ expression of longing remains meaningful beyond the time and space in which they composed their poem. Today, this expression of longing may resonate on multiple registers. In the present context of nationalist conflict – for the poets’ descendants living in refugee camps in Algeria, for example – the longing for Tiris may easily translate to a longing for a return to their national homeland, from which Sahrawis governed by SADR/Polisario have been exiled now for over 40 years.

For bidanis living throughout the region, whether in Moroccan-occupied territory, Morocco, or even Mauritanian cities, this stanza may express longing, in a more generalized sense, for a time when seminomadic pastoralism still prevailed as a way of life. With settlement in cities a major feature of the era of decolonization in the Sahara, when colonial and postcolonial administrations sought to sedentarize people of the Sahara, poetry became a means of expressing longing for the bādiya, or desert, in contradistinction to the city. This sentiment was articulated with particular emphasis during my fieldwork in the largest city of Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, Laâyoune, where Sahrawis increasingly found themselves settling more permanently, on account of militarized occupation and wage labor, since the 1990s. Not infrequently, interlocutors would mention how the inability to “see far” from within the concrete walls of an urban residence particularly affects older Sahrawi folk, whose embodied capacity for relaxation (a frequently-used term, “ynfatah sadru,” means “opening of the heart”)356 depended upon escaping the architecture of the house. For Saharans living in cities, the poem’s resonance may be understood not only in relation to a specific place (Tiris), but as a kind of cultural poetics of space (bādiya). It was frequently mentioned to me, for example, that the tent, open at all times,

356 Cf. Charles Hirschkind, The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006). Hirschkind describes how listeners to cassette sermons in Cairo used the phrase “ynshirah al-sadr” (which he translates as “opening of the heart”) as a Qur’anic reference to convey the embodied sense-memory of ethical piety which his interlocutors sought to cultivate.
is a defining aspect of life in the Sahara, and a characteristic sign of trust and hospitality. In this way, the locked metal doors of the urban house represent the tent’s antithesis, in synecdochic relation to the opposition between the city and badiya.

Tara Deubel’s research provides further insight into how poetry gives expression to this discourse of longing for the badiya. According to Deubel, the poet Sidati Essallam, a longtime resident of Laâyoune, connects the sensory experience of poetry to life outside the city, in the badiya. Particularly since this experience has diminished with widespread sedentarization over the last generation, the badiya provides a source of inspiration both for the poet and their audience: “[Essallam’s] representations of the rural experiences of mobile pastoralists and their forms of knowledge resonated with both his contemporaries and urban youth. Older generations shared in his nostalgia for lifestyles they had largely abandoned in moving to the city and youth sought to reconnect with the badiya…” The limiting horizons of the urban built environment across western Sahara contrasts with the sensorily rich experience of the badiya, an experience which remains evocative for poet and audience alike.

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To this point, I have discussed how the poem’s theme of longing for Tiris translates across multiple registers, some of them grounded in the present context of (occasionally forced) urban living, and conflict between Morocco and the Sahrawi nationalist movement. In concluding, I would like to turn now to the context in which the poem was produced. Whether in 1956 or 1958, the brothers were in Tan Tan either at the beginning or end of their involvement with a

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359 For an insightful discussion of the badiya as a both a refuge and space of governance in the context of political conflict, see Alice Wilson, “Ambivalences of Mobility: Rival State Authorities and Mobile Strategies in a Saharan Conflict,” American Ethnologist 44, no. 1 (February 1, 2017): 77–90.
fleeting and peculiar anticolonial armed movement known as the Moroccan Liberation Army in
the Sahara (MLA). Led by mostly young Moroccan men, the MLA recruited *bidani* shaykhs to
mobilize entire Saharan tribes in supporting the armed movement’s attempts to claim parts of
French Algeria, French West Africa and Spanish Sahara for newly independent Morocco.
Recruited by Moroccan anticolonial fighters, *bidanis* from around the region initially rallied to
the cause, under the sign of jihad or the Moroccan Sultan. Though most of its leadership were
relatively young Moroccans, the MLA’s ranks were filled by *bidani* tribesmen, who constituted
an estimated two-thirds of the Army, and the vast majority of its combatants.³⁶⁰ Where the
Moroccan leadership were mostly (although not exclusively) young men who had been active in
the pre-‘56 urban-based resistance to Morocco’s French Protectorate, *bidanis* who took up arms
to join the MLA came from across western Sahara, a region that included southern Morocco and
surrounding Spanish and French colonial territories. By 1957 several thousand members of the
MLA had occupied most of Western Sahara, effectively reducing Spanish colonial presence to a
handful of coastal enclaves.³⁶¹

The MLA’s success, however, was fleeting. Despite its initial incursion, a covert French-
Spanish counterinsurgency in early 1958 routed the MLA and drove the combatants out of
Spanish Sahara. On April 1, 1958, several months after the French-Spanish counterinsurgency,
Spain agreed to transfer the region of Tan Tan at the northern end of its colony, to Morocco. By
this time, the Liberation Army was in complete disarray. Some members of the MLA’s
leadership were reputedly seeking to overthrow the King of Morocco and establish a republic.³⁶²

³⁶⁰ Ángela Hernández Moreno, “Réflexions Sur La Guerre d’Espagne Contre l’Armée de Libération Marocaine
285.
³⁶¹ Hernández Moreno, 292.
³⁶² Ben Saïd Aït Iddr, Moulay Abdeslam Jebli, and Nemri were among the leaders of the MLA’s political wing who
later formed the 23 Mars movement, a radical leftist group whose members were involved in attempts to overthrow
At the same time, Spain and France actively recruited leading bidani shaykhs to defect from the MLA. Meanwhile, throughout 1958 the Moroccan state was trying to disband the MLA and incorporate its members into the Royal Armed Forces. After bidani soldiers spent much of 1958 stationed in various parts of southern Morocco, with rumors circulating about Morocco’s plan to incorporate MLA fighters into the Royal Army, many of them deserted. After overthrowing their Moroccan officers and reclaiming their rifles in a revolt known as mdigadig l-magazin (breaking into the stockade) they left Wed Nun for points west and south. Large contingents headed to Tindouf, in French Algeria, and northern Mauritania. Others returned to Spanish Sahara, as colonial subjects rather than armed insurgents.

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For some, mdigadig l-magazin and the MLA has come to epitomize the failure of Moroccans and people of the Sahara in what Hannah Arendt terms “the elementary problems of human living-together.” In the contemporary political landscape of nationalist conflict, mdigadig l-magazin is rarely discussed in public. Morocco promotes historical memory of the MLA in Sahara through commemorative events and state-sponsored publications, but these efforts remain closely tied to Moroccan state security prerogatives that simplify its history and effectively silence public discussion of events such as mdigadig l-magazin. In the Sahrawi refugee camps, on the other hand, the MLA is erased almost entirely from a Sahrawi national narrative that promotes the historical memory of unwavering resistance to both Moroccan and Spanish rule. Perhaps it is fitting, then, that the allusive language of Bashir and Mohamed Ibrahim’s poem – a poem about longing to leave Tan Tan and return to Tiris – indexes this moment in the region’s


tortuous history of decolonization. By the fall of 1958 in Tan Tan, the MLA was finished, but the process of decolonization in the Sahara had only just begun.

Situating Mohamed Ibrahim’s and Bashir’s poem in relation to their involvement in the MLA in the late 1950s also provides background to their longing, and suggests that their displacement had a specific cause that was neither the seasonal result of seminomadic pastoralism, nor the outcome of nationalist conflict, the displacement from Tiris to Tan Tan in 1958. Rather, their displacement was the result of mobilizations and conflicts surrounding the emergence of decolonization as a horizon of expectation across the Sahara. In this way, the brothers’ poetic longing emerges from a particular moment that has had specific ramifications for understanding the relationship between decolonization, border-making and displacement across western Sahara.

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Today, the poem’s construction of Tiris as object of longing translates across multiple registers. *Nasib* as a genre is particularly apposite to the situation of displacement in a region long characterized by mobility and borderless-ness, and the poem’s ongoing circulation across the occupied territories, refugee camps, and borderlands of western Sahara, demonstrates the existence of a receptive audience for this form of creative expression of longing. Longing for the *badiya* takes form within a cultural poetics of non-urban space, as well as a nostalgia for an eclipsed way of life. Meanwhile, nationalist longing for Tiris is tied to a specific history of conflict and exile since 1975, one which also sustains a sense of belonging to the Sahrawi nation, and a commitment to realizing the return of Tiris – now configured as part of a national territory – in the future. And, finally, I suggest that the longing expressed by Mohamed Ibrahim and Bashir presents another layer of signification concerning the moral geography of the Sahara and
a genealogical bidani subjectivity that may not necessarily be commensurable with the post-1975 nationalist concepts of identity and territorial sovereignty. The way in which Mohamed Ibrahim and Bashir’s poem resonates at different registers indicates how multiple layers of decolonization’s history – including the 1950s, post-1975 nationalist conflict, and today – are sedimented in the poem’s expressions of longing.
Chapter 4 – Open Horizons of Change, Narrow Spaces of Dissent: the Spatiotemporal Frameworks of Sahrawi National Liberation and 1970s Decolonization
Appendix – Chapter 4

CPASS (Comité Provisoire d’Action Scolaire) – Mauritanian student group at the secondary education level that formed in 1968 and became a part of the Kadihin movement.

Ila al-Amam – Marxist-Leninist political group active in UNEM in the 1960s and 70s, and affiliated with the publication Anfas.

Kadihin – A popular Mauritanian opposition movement that formed in the early 1970s and was a strong early supporter of Polisario. Coopted by state reforms, the movement continued in diminished form after 1975.

MIFERMA (la Société des Mines de fer de Mauritanie) – France-based company that operationalized the mining and transportation of iron ore from northern Mauritania beginning in 1960. Industrial engine of Mauritania. Nationalized in 1974; renamed SNIM.

Mars 23 mouvement – Radical New-left political group active in UNEM in the 1960s and 70s. Named for the date when the Moroccan state violently repressed student protests in 1965.

MLA (Moroccan Liberation Army) – A Moroccan-led anticolonial, irredentist armed movement with widespread Sahrawi participation that briefly disrupted French and, especially, Spanish colonial rule across western Sahara in the late 1950s. The subject of Chapter 3.

National Democratic Movement – Formed in 1966 in Mauritania, in opposition to the ruling regime, when bidani and non-Arab Black intelligentsia joined together following inter-ethnic violence in the country. Joined with what became the Kadihin in the early 1970s.

Polisario Front (Frente Popular para la Liberación de Sagui el-Hamra y Río de Oro) – Sahrawi national liberation movement formed in 1973. Polisario established SADR, a state-in-exile, in 1976 and, since then, has been based in refugee camps in southwest Algeria.

SADR (Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic) – The state-in-exile declared by Polisario in 1976. Often used interchangeably with Polisario because, even if they are institutionally distinct (Polisario is the liberation movement, SADR the state), they operate in combination.

SNIM (Société Nationale Industrielle et Minière de Mauritanie) – the name of MIFERMA following Mauritanian nationalization in 1974.

UGESM (l’Union générale des étudiants et stagiaires mauritaniens) – Mauritanian National Union of Students that formed in 1971 when pre-existing groups organized around bidani and non-Arab Black membership, joined forces.

UNEM (l’Union National des Etudiants Marocains) – Moroccan National Union of Students

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364 Chassey, Mauritanie 1900-1975, 472–73.
UNFP (Union National des Forces Populaires) – Primary left opposition party in Morocco; crushed by events of and fallout from March 23, 1965.

Introduction: Three Frameworks for Historicizing Sahrawi National Liberation

In the mid-1960s, Mohamed Ibrahim Basiri returned to Morocco from his studies in Cairo and Damascus and began publishing a newspaper, *al-Shumu* [“Candles”], that called for Saharan independence. Basiri was by lineage a member of the Rguibat, the most populous tribe of western Sahara, but had been raised in central Morocco at his family’s *zawiyah* near the agricultural city of Beni Mellal. After Moroccan authorities shut down his publication, Basiri moved to Smara, a historic town in Spanish Sahara, and began organizing a movement to overthrow Spanish colonialism in 1968. Basiri’s movement, known as the Vanguard Movement for the Liberation of Saguiet el-Hamra’ and Wedi Dhahab, began as a secret order amongst Basiri’s relatives and other acquaintances who received him in Smara. The movement appears to have borrowed certain organizational elements from Ba’ath Party politics, such as requiring an oath of initiation and regular monetary contributions from its members but, according to several former members, it did not adhere to any specific political ideology – whether Maoist, Leninist, or Arab nationalist (Ba’athist or otherwise) – among those that were prevalent at the time.

The Vanguard Movement was still in its formative stages when Spain organized a festival open to foreign journalists in El Aaiún, the provincial capital of Spanish Sahara, on June 17, 1970. On the day of the event, Sahrawis organized a protest on the outskirts of El Aaiún on a small rise known as *al-zemla*, demanding certain rights of the Spanish government. When protesters threw rocks at Spanish police, the police returned with live fire, killing as many as 12

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365 *Harakat al-taliʿya li tahrir al-Saguiet al-Hamra wa Wedi Dhahab*. Wedi Dhahab is also referred to by its Spanish name, “Rio de Oro,” particularly in Western cartography. The Spanish referred to this movement as the “Muslim Party.”

protesters. In the aftermath, Spanish officials arrested members of Basiri’s movement. Basiri himself, who was not present at the protest, was arrested and disappeared; his body has never been found. Apprehended members of the Vanguard Movement were sent to different prisons across Spanish Sahara and the Canary Islands. Intifadat al-Zemla, as the event became known, came as a shock to Sahrawis living under Spanish colonialism who, in the aftermath, began to consider violent means necessary in order to overthrow Spanish rule.

Aside from catalyzing the political consciousness of Sahrawis living under Spanish colonialism, Intifadat al-Zemla also brought those living in an isolated Spanish Sahara back into correspondence with those in surrounding areas:

Whoever wasn’t taken to prison that evening…Those who could, fled far away, beyond the borders - to the north, south and east…When those members (of the Vanguard Movement) arrived in those regions, they brought with them the news (of the event)…this was the only means of delivering the news: there was no telephone, only (direct) communication. And people in the external, surrounding areas – Sahrawis – began to think and talk and discuss from 1970 to 1973, about three years.

Those fleeing Spanish persecution began to break Spanish Sahara’s isolation. One member of the Vanguard Movement made his way to Nouakchott and, perhaps through relatives, brought news of the uprising to Mauritanian Ba’ath Party members there, who organized a protest in front of the Spanish embassy. Others ended up in Morocco and Mauritania. In this way, Intifadat al-

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367 “Zemla, Massacre of.” In Pazzanita, *Historical Dictionary of Western Sahara*, 453. The number of casualties reported ranged between 10 and 12.

368 Interview, Rabouni, Sahrawi refugee camps, Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, Algeria, 16 January 2016. “After what happened on 17 July, people understood that in order to leave/end colonialism, it won’t happen peacefully. But, maybe, the experience was clear: we had protested peacefully, calling for merely some of the rights - not even all of them - and the reaction left it difficult to imagine what would happen if we had demanded more than that. The reaction [already] was: mutual understanding with colonialism wasn’t possible, unless by fire, or violence. Whoever comes [at you] with violence, must be met with violence. That idea began becoming more general.”

369 Ibid. This period, 1970-73, has retrospectively become known among Sahrawi nationalists as the period of al-harakat al-janiniya, or “the embryonic movement.”

370 Interview, Nouakchott, Mauritania, February 22, 2015.

371 “There were those who fled toward Morocco: people who were either arrested, or who fled to Morocco, or in the direction of Mauritania. Lots of people who were mobilized by the issue and afraid of being assassinated or arrested,
Zemla brought Spanish Sahara out of the isolation that had been imposed only a decade before, and in convergence with the horizons of expectation prevalent among political movements in the surrounding region.

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Following official Polisario/SADR discourse, studies of the Western Sahara typically begin with Intifadat al-Zemla in 1970 as the starting point for a history of Sahrawi nationalism. In my research, oral histories from those who witnessed the event only corroborate the significant impact that the protest’s violent repression had on Sahrawis living in Spanish Sahara, and beyond. These oral histories also corroborate the prevailing historiography that suggests that Intifadat al-Zemla served as precursor to the subsequent emergence of the Polisario Front in 1973, and the institutionalization of Sahrawi national liberation in a state-in-exile in refugee camps in Algeria. In this chapter, however, I situate the emergence of Sahrawi national liberation movements within several, complex spatiotemporal processes. Rather than a linear history of nationalism, beginning from its supposed point of origin, I point to three frameworks that are necessary for contextualizing Sahrawi nationalism, yet which remain overlooked in historiography of Western Sahara.

The first looks toward the past, examining how Spanish colonialism during the 1960s isolated the people and territory of Western Sahara in a manner that was unprecedented in the Sahara, through border-making practices. Historiography of the region that draws a direct line from 1970 to the present naturalizes the geopolitical territory of Western Sahara, separating it from 1970 to the present naturalizes the geopolitical territory of Western Sahara, separating it

those 30 who were in the ranks [of the movement] when Basiri was arrested, they either fled to Morocco or to Mauritania - most of them, of course. There were those who just fled to the countryside, and that’s it, since they weren’t very well known, and so they went to the badiya and stayed there. So, that’s the most important event [that took place] in the Sahara.” Interview Laâyoune/El Aaiûn, Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, December 4, 2014.

from a regional context of disaggregated authority that has generated multiple, unresolved political projects dating back to the 1950s. Periodizing the political project of Spanish colonial isolation during the 1960s, by contrast, historicizes the consolidation of Western Sahara as a geopolitical space. Foregrounding the mechanisms of colonial border-making draws our attention to sociohistorical and political processes entailed in the production of political formations, rather than assuming the territorial nation-state as a natural outcome of post-World War II decolonization.

Training our focus on this exceptional period also foregrounds several developments that shaped subsequent dynamics of Sahrawi nationalism. The first concerns the border-making processes that effectively isolated the territory and population during the 1960s. The second involves urbanization and the emergence of new social formations in the Sahara, which I call “government towns.” Concomitant processes of urbanization and isolation can be seen as an effect of the spatial fix of international capital, a process which, as I showed in the previous chapter, began in the Sahara during the 1950s, but which continued in earnest throughout the 1960s, both in Western Sahara and northern Mauritania. This isolation is particularly important, as well, for understanding how Western Sahara became a political object characterized by what I am calling “conceptual blankness.” Defined by its isolation and relatively light population, this “conceptual blankness” enabled Western Sahara, as a territory, to become the object upon which multiple political futures were projected during the 1960s and 70s.

In the second section of this chapter, I argue that Sahrawi nationalism and the formation of the Polisario Front must be understood in relation to contemporaneous political developments across the region. Rather than focusing on the contributions to Sahrawi nationalism that came from either “inside” or “outside” of its borders, this section, instead, situates Spanish Sahara

373 Thank you to Sam Fury Childs Daly for this phrasing.
within a regional and global constellation of political developments during the 1970s. The implication here is that, as with political projects at other moments of decolonization, the emergence of Sahrawi national liberation can only be understood through a framework of connected interdependence. Without privileging any specific movement for its “founding” role, this traces the connections between Polisario and contemporaneous movements, including the New Left Ila al-Amam and 23 Mars movements in Morocco, and the Kadihin\textsuperscript{374} movement in Mauritania.

Understood in theoretical terms presented by Theodor Adorno, constellation offers a conceptual framework or theory of history without “reducing it to individual concepts or pairs of concepts.”\textsuperscript{375} In a region shaped by multiple political regimes and formations that cannot be understood through conventional frameworks that focus on self-evident relations between state and subject, governing regime and governed populace, constellation becomes a particularly apposite framework to understanding decolonization in the Sahara. At the same time, in pointing to the contemporaneity between Sahrawi nationalism and a number of other movements across northwest Africa, the framework of constellation distinguishes regional political dynamics of the 1970s from those a generation earlier. In the previous chapter, I argue that the politics of decolonization in the 1950s were marked by complex relations of autonomy and dependence between people of the Sahara and Maghrib. In this chapter, by contrast, I note that this constellation marks a moment in the early 1970s of rising anticolonial, anti-imperial politics across the region that is marked by a sense of global political awareness, and a generational sense of identification with history.

\textsuperscript{374} The term “kadih” (pl. kadihin) in the Mauritanian context refers to a person who has no wealth. Unlike “al-‘umal,” which refers to a class of wage laborers, al-tabaqqa al-kadiha, refers to a class of poor people that encompasses peasants more than wage laborers, or a kind of lumpenproletariat.

Despite the contemporaneity among movements in the early 1970s, the third section of this paper examines how shifts in global politics produced another “disorderly” relation between Sahrawi decolonization and concurrent developments. This section begins by noting the dramatic rupture entailed by Morocco’s invasion of Western Sahara in 1975, which forced Sahrawis to flee to refugee camps in Algeria. The backing of Morocco by the United States and France have been identified as major factors in facilitating the preemption of Sahrawi national self-determination. While acknowledging these as proximate causes, I suggest that this transformation of the Sahrawi national project is particularly important for understanding the disjunctive temporality in which Sahrawi nationalism emerged.

By 1975, the wave of post-World War II decolonization had largely subsided. As Samuel Moyn has suggested, during the 1970s political programs overtly asserting collective rights, such as Third World anti-imperialism and self-determination, were increasingly overtaken by human rights. This latter, as a moral and political regime, would increasingly define institutional priorities at the global scale. While this particular historicization of human rights has been contested, Moyn is not alone in recognizing the 1970s as a historical conjuncture during which the political horizon of national liberation and sovereignty began dissipating. Kristin Ross describes a similar shift in France following May ’68 when, during the 1970s, prominent former activists from the left began an intellectual project of criticizing the politics of Third World anti-imperialism, promoting in its place a humanitarian ethic in relation to the postcolonial world. Thinking along with Ross and Moyn in this manner helps to see that Sahrawi nationalism emerged at a particularly fraught, or disjunctive, moment within “a larger history of competing

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376 Mundy, “Neutrality or Complicity?”; Mundy, “Seized of the Matter”; Zunes and Mundy, Western Sahara.
ideologies of human betterment” between anticolonial self-determination and human rights.

This third framework has implications for situating Sahrawi nationalism within a changing history of the national form. As Manu Goswami notes, the modularity of the national form needs to be historicized:

Nationalist claims of particularity and the imagined singularity of national formations only become intelligible against and within a global grid of formally similar nations and nation-states.

While Sahrawi nationalism emerged as an anticolonial, anti-imperial project under Mohamed Basiri’s Vanguard Movement, and followed by the Polisario Front, it only became intelligible – that is, practicable as a political project – through the paradigmatic form of an emerging global humanitarianism, the refugee camp.

In this way, I suggest that Sahrawi national liberation can only be understood by situating its emergence and perdurance in relation to three spatiotemporal frameworks. The first two concern the Sahrawi national liberation’s emergence: first, in relation to a specific period of isolation under Spanish colonialism during the 1960s; and, second, in relation to a regional constellation of liberation movements in the early 1970s. The transformation and perdurance of this liberation movement into a “nation of refugees” highlights the disjunctive, or disorderly, relation between Sahrawi nationalism and tectonic shifts in global politics during the 1970s from Third World self-determination toward a global ethic of humanitarianism.

Section I – Territorial Sovereignty and Spanish Sahara during the 1960s: Border Policing and the Government Town

The Moroccan Liberation Army’s military campaign between 1956 and ’58 had lasting effects on the region’s political landscape, even if the insurgency’s aims of destabilizing French and Spanish colonialism were generally unsuccessful. The most immediate change involved Spain’s transferal of an area, known as the Tarfaya Strip, to Morocco through the Angra de Cintra Treaty of April 1958. This shifted the border between Morocco and Spain from the river Wed Draa approximately 95 km south to the 27º40´ parallel. Meanwhile, significant numbers of Sahrawis had been displaced either after mobilizing to fight with the MLA, or in fleeing from Opération Ecouvillon, the joint Spanish-French counterinsurgency of 1958. As noted in the previous chapter, Ecouvillon was designed to “sweep” MLA combatants out of Spanish territory, either north to Wed Nun in the newly transferred Tarfaya Strip under Moroccan control, east to Tindouf in French Algeria, or south to the developing cities of Zouérate, F’dérak and Nouadhibou in northern Mauritania.\textsuperscript{381} After fallout between Sahrawi combatants and Moroccan leadership of the MLA in 1959, a number of former MLA fighters also returned to the newly designated capital of Spanish Sahara, the fledgling city of El Aaiún.

The MLA’s campaign in the Sahara also precipitated changes to Spain’s administration of its African colonies. On January 10, 1958, Spain dissolved Spanish West Africa, a colonial jurisdiction administered from the northern Moroccan city of Tetouan that had included Spanish Morocco, Spain’s Saharan territory (often referred to in terms of its northern and southern regions, Saguiet el-Hamra’ and Rio de Oro), and the coastal enclave of Sidi Ifni.\textsuperscript{382} With the

\textsuperscript{381} In March 1958, before the transfer of the Tarfaya Strip, Morocco reported to the UN that 13,000 Sahrawi refugees had arrived in its territories following Opération Ecouvillon. Whether accurate or not, this marks the beginning of an ongoing political phenomenon in which the number of Sahrawis in a given territory becomes a matter of political contestation and manipulation. I have not found any figures for how many fled to French Algeria or northern Mauritania. Hodges, \textit{Western Sahara}, footnote 43, page 84.

\textsuperscript{382} Sidi Ifni is a southern Moroccan city on the Atlantic coast, roughly 500 km north of the present-day border between Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, and Morocco proper. Spain retained control of Ifni until 1969. Although it was a center of Spanish administrative and commercial activity in Africa, the coastal enclave was never contiguous with Spain’s Saharan territory.
dissolution of Spanish West Africa, Spain not only established separate administrations for Sidi Ifni and its Saharan territory, but changed the political status of both from colonies to provinces. Saguieł el-Hamra’ and Rio de Oro became a single Spanish province named Spanish Sahara, with “all of the rights that this entails.”\textsuperscript{383} Claudia Barona Castañeda notes that Spanish historiography of this period offers multiple reasons for what motivated Spain to hold on to these territories, including an interest in maintaining them as protection for the nearby Canary Islands and, in the Franquist discourse of the time, as a “defense for Western civilization in Africa against Communist advances.”\textsuperscript{384} Regardless of motive, the reorganization signaled Spain’s intent to consolidate control over the Sahara following the MLA’s incursion in the late 1950s.

The administrative changes reorganized jurisdictions within Spanish Sahara, designating El Aaiún the provincial capital for the first time, and establishing city councils in three other cities, including the port towns of Villa Cisneros (now Dakhla) and La Guêra in the south, and the historical town of Smara to the east. The new administrative structure was also meant to bring Spanish government closer to its Saharan subjects by basing provincial governance, at least in part, on Sahrawi institutions and practices. Qur’anic law and traditional property rights were incorporated into colonial administration, for example, with separate courts and judges designated for these proceedings. In deference to the widespread pastoral nomadism of many Sahrawis at the time, certain representatives for El Cabildo, a provincial council of 14 that was established in 1962, were designated according to tribal fractions, rather than municipality.\textsuperscript{385} This practice would be expanded when, facing increased international pressure before the United Nations, Spain instituted a general assembly constituted entirely by Sahrawis, known as \textit{al-}

\textsuperscript{385} Barona Castañeda, \textit{Los hijos de la nube}, 25–26; 40.
Jem’a, in 1967. Named after one of the traditional forms of bidani inter-tribal council in the Sahara, the 82-member al-Jem’a became the highest representative institution of provincial administration, superseded only by the Spanish-appointed Governor General, and with the purpose of functioning as interlocutor between Spanish government and what was perceived to be an increasingly restive population.386

Reforms to the territory’s formal political status and governing institutions were not, however, what substantively marked this new phase of Spanish colonial rule. A Spanish-appointed Governor General retained sweeping and final powers and, as Barona Castañeda notes, “Although the civil presence in the territory increased, this did not modify the military character of the province, even if it did influence relations with the inhabitants.”387 Rather, the administrative shift from colony to province coincided with intensified oil and mineral prospecting in the region, along with an effort to build infrastructure and operationalize the mining of Bucraa, a significant deposit of phosphate rock that had been discovered shortly after World War II. Given that Spain’s inland presence in the territory before 1958 amounted to little more than a handful of military outposts (many of which had been abandoned at the height of the MLA’s campaign in 1957), the new phase of investment in the colony388 was comprehensive. In July 1960, 54 new companies began work in the territory, in sectors ranging from construction, shipping and food imports, to banking, hospitality and naval supplies.389 The focus on infrastructure led to the construction of over 5000 km of new roads to facilitate communication.

386 Barona Castañeda, 41; Pazzanita, Historical Dictionary of Western Sahara, 96–101; Lippert and Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association, The Struggle in Western Sahara and Foreign Intervention, 3. Membership numbers vary slightly. Lippert reported that there were 104 members in al-Jema’a. Pazzanita and Barona Castañeda both cite 82, excluding two Spanish officials who attended meetings, but had no voting privileges.
387 Barona Castañeda, Los hijos de la nube, 39.
388 Though nominally a province, I will refer to Spanish Sahara as either a territory, or colony, throughout this chapter, since the designation of “province” did not substantively alter the colony-metropole relation between Spanish Sahara and Spain.
389 Barona Castañeda, Los hijos de la nube, 22.
and transportation between the northern and southern parts of the territory, Saguiet el-Hamra’ and Wedi Dhahab, respectively, and to the interior. Another major infrastructural project involved the construction of ports in the two largest cities, Villa Cisneros in the southern part of Spanish Sahara, and El Aaiún in the north.

El Aaiún, the first Spanish administrative capital in the Sahara that was not a coastal enclave, was built largely from the ground up in the early 1960s, with 371 houses constructed in 1960 alone. As discussed in Chapter 1, Spanish investment beginning in the 1960s transformed what had been a water source, fledgling local market and colonial military base into a growing city of colonial administration and Spanish settlers (many of them coming from the nearby Canary Islands). A Sahrawi recalls how the influx of settlers changed the city of his childhood:

Before then, there were military bases and military men, and you saw very few Spanish families. There were maybe one or two small schools, but there were not many families of military officers or government officials then.

But then companies began coming with their workers and commerce, and they started bringing their families and then colonialism started to get established and govern [baida’ istiqrar al-ist’emar wa yhakemha], and they laid out a strategy for the region for exploiting resources. And they began to discover phosphates, and to figure out and plan investments for those minerals which it was possible (to plan for).

Prospecting companies came and began prospecting for other minerals or natural resources, and life - and El Aaiún began getting bigger and bigger and bigger.

Construction beginning in the 1960s initially addressed the need to accommodate a growing colonial settler population that was moving to El Aaiún to staff the administration, and to work for newly-arrived companies involved in construction and mining. However, the process of

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391 el-’uyun is the plural for water spring in Arabic [el-’ayn]
392 Interview, Rabouni, Sahrawi refugee camps, Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, Algeria, 16 January 2016. The government buildings constructed in El Aaiún during the early 1960s included the seat of provincial government, an administrative office housing several administrative branches, a governor’s house, police headquarters, jail, post office, telegraph office, and schools. Barona Castañeda, Los hijos de la nube, 21.
urbanization itself produced wage-labor employment opportunities which, when extended to Sahrawis, began transforming their relationship with the city from a marketplace and seasonal way-station toward a year-round place of residence.

This process was by no means immediate or uniform, but several factors were combining to influence increased settlement in cities across the Sahara during the 1960s, including the social formations developing around extractive industry, the policies of newly independent nation-states, and intermittent drought. In southern Morocco, Sahrawis continued moving to the city of Tan Tan throughout the 1960s, joining a community that had settled there after Ecouvillon and the unrest that followed. In northern Mauritania, the mining and port cities of Zouérat and Nouadhibou grew rapidly along with the multinational iron ore conglomerate, MIFERMA, which became operative in 1961. As mentioned previously, it was reported that in 1962 Algerian authorities attempted to “settle” 15,000 members of the Reguibat tribe in Tindouf. And, according to results from a Spanish census, by 1974 only 17% of Spanish Sahara’s population was “nomadic.”

Even if the accuracy of the Spanish census is uncertain (it is unclear what proportion of this population was constituted by European settlers, for example), the Spanish administration adopted policies encouraging, or even forcing, settlement during the

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393 Ahmed-Baba Miské and Jean Lacouture, *Front Polisario: l’âme d’un peuple* (Paris: Rupture, 1978), 113; Paul et al., “With the Polisario Front of Sahara,” 18. The Polisario officials Mohamed Salem Ould Salek and Hassan Ali, interviewed in MERIP in 1976, summarized the phenomenon: “In recent years the nomadic Saharan people were sedentarized. This was partly due to the years of drought when their herds died and they were forced to come to the cities or towns. Then, with the launching of the armed struggle, the Spanish rounded up the people and brought them into the cities in order to control them. And finally, with all of the tension in the region between Mauritania, Morocco and Algeria, the borders were closed so that the tribes could no longer circulate freely in search of grazing land.”

394 Interview, Nouadhibou, Mauritania, May 22, 2015.


By 1976, on the eve of Spanish withdrawal, one account estimated El Aaiún’s population to be 28,500 (another estimate was “over 40,000”), and while these figures clearly are not indicative of a major metropolis, El Aaiún constituted a social formation that only emerged in the Sahara during the era of decolonization: the government town.

In addition to urbanization and infrastructural investment, post-1958 changes to Spanish rule in the Sahara focused on border control. As part of the colony’s administrative reorganization, a November 17, 1960 decree integrated the Grupos Nomadas, a mobile Sahrawi police force previously delegated to roam the countryside (many of whom defected to join the MLA in the late 1950s, only to return following its dissolution), into the military. Many of these reorganized “Nomadic Troops” were now tasked with border control, instead of domestic patrols.<sup>401</sup> During this time Spain increasingly relied upon a “language test” for people seeking to cross the border with Morocco that depended upon differences in pronunciation between Moroccan spoken Arabic, known as darija, and the Hassaniya Arabic dialect spoken by bidani people of the Sahara. Border control on the Spanish side allegedly would ask people crossing from the north to enunciate the Arabic word for either “wolf” (\(dhi'b\)) or “fox” (\(th'aleb\)). The test was used to distinguish and block entry for darija-speakers who gloss the classical Arabic

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<sup>398</sup> Barbara E Harrell-Bond, *The Struggle for the Western Sahara* (Hanover, NH: American Universities Field Staff, 1981), 7. “…a program of forced urbanization, begun in 1958, was pursued with even greater vigor. To force the Sahrawis to move into the towns, the Spanish killed their cattle, poisoned their wells, and closed borders. New buildings were erected in the towns and communications were extended throughout the country.”


WSC/16 SOAS WSC Special Collection; Tony Hodges, *Western Sahara: The Roots of a Desert War* (Westport Conn.: L. Hill, 1983), 130.


<sup>401</sup> Barona Castañeda, *Los hijos de la nube*, 23.
phonemes \textit{dh} and \textit{th} into hard “\textit{d}” and “\textit{t}” sounds (\textit{di’b}, \textit{t’aleb}). Hassaniya-speakers who enunciated the \textit{dh} and \textit{th} sounds in their speech were allowed to pass.\footnote{Fieldnote January 24, 2016, Rabouni.}

That the intensification of border policing coincided with a shift in the border’s location only made it more fraught. Prior to 1958, Spanish colonial territory ended at the Wed Draa river, a geographical boundary that has traditionally marked the northern edge of the Sahara. With the previously-mentioned transfer of the Tarfaya Strip in ’58, the boundary between Morocco and Spain moved approximately 95 km south to the 27º40’ parallel, becoming a veritable line in the sand which ran east-west through the desert north of Saguiet el-Hamra’. No longer able to rely upon border geography as a natural barrier, Spain increasingly utilized linguistic and cultural markers at the border crossing with Morocco in order to demarcate its territorial sovereignty.

While Spain’s reliance on a linguistic marker to police the boundary with Morocco predated the changes following 1958, the shift in location and concomitant intensification of border policing during the 1960s gave the border new meaning. The pronunciation test represents an attempt to disentangle the complicated relationship between people of the Sahara and people to the north in terms of identity, much the way that a border attempts to disentangle spatial relations through the instantiation of an abstract line. As explored in previous chapters, the complexity of these relations between people of Morocco and people of the Sahara frequently defies such neat boundaries, and yet the effects of these policing practices ramify beyond the borders.\footnote{Far from a straightforward ethnic or linguistic definition, Sahrawis frequently evoke moral and ethical distinctions as a means of differentiating themselves from \textit{ahl al-Tell}, or people from the North. Sometimes these references revolve around the education of children. Ma El-Ainin El-Abadila ould Cheikh Mohamed Laghdaf, a Sahrawi who led the Moroccan delegation to the UN in 1966, was said to have believed that educating his children in Morocco entailed an upside and a downside: “knowledge is gained, morals are lost” (\textit{ribh al-ma’arif, khasir al-’akhlaq}). Fieldnote Laâyoune/El Aaiün, December 13, 2014. Another, older Sahrawi man living in Laâyoune/El Aaiün who is himself a leading local historian said that he refused to let his grandchildren go to Morocco because of what would happen to their morals. Since there are no universities in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, none of}
tests create new mechanisms for social division, including the instantiation of the border as a marker of ethnic, or national, difference. In this sense, with the intensification of border policing, the Spanish administration’s linguistic pronunciation border test to separate Sahrawis from Moroccans was effective not only at policing the border, but at inscribing difference in terms of “insiders” and “outsiders” to Spanish Sahara.

Literature on the effects of Spain’s increasingly tight control over the Sahara during the 1960s is relatively scarce. The rupture brought about by Morocco’s invasion and annexation in 1975 and 76, which brought Spanish colonialism to an end and produced the geography of military rule and exile in refugee camps that continues to structure the political situation today, has tended to overshadow the period of Spanish colonialism in terms of historical memory. This erasure is not simply a matter of scholarship. It was not uncommon in the course of my fieldwork to encounter a sentiment among Sahrawis that Spain’s presence in the Sahara never actually constituted colonialism. Speakers invoking this discourse often cited the fact that Spain established their presence in the Sahara peacefully through coastal trade and, in some cases, concluded agreements with local tribes over terms of protection and exchange. When Spanish colonialism was acknowledged, it was usually in favorable contrast to Morocco’s scorched earth military campaign and occupation, which has resulted in the disappearance of hundreds of

his grandchildren have gone to higher education. Fieldnote, Laâyoune/El Aaiún, June 23, 2014. The complexity of this difference is also the subject of Chapter 2; see also Judith Scheele on moral containment in the central Sahara. Scheele, Smugglers and Saints of the Sahara.


Sahrawis, and the displacement of thousands more.\textsuperscript{407} Historiography reproduces this nostalgia either by glossing over Spanish colonialism, or by reducing its presence to a foil for the emergence of Sahrawi nationalism.\textsuperscript{408}

And yet, even the limited historical material on the subject suggests that Spain actively isolated the territory, and Saharan subjects, from outside influence during the decade of investment and extraction that began in 1960. Along with closing the border, Spain cultivated a discourse within the territory that distinguished the colony’s Saharan subjects from “the enemy” to the north:

“It is certain that, with the scent of these riches, the jackals are beginning to prowl around your khaimas,[tents]” Lieutenant-General Camillo Menéndez Tolosa, the Spanish army minister, warned the Sahrawis during a visit to El-Ayoun on May 16, 1967. “But now more than ever,” he promised, “you will have us by your side, to the end and to the last sacrifice, to guarantee your will, without foreign pressure or interference, to protect you against the maneuvers and false fraternity in whose name it is intended to bring you into a household to which you have never belonged and in which, if they achieved their goal (something they will never do), you would be considered a poor relative to be exploited like a domestic.”\textsuperscript{409}

In this passage, Lieutenant-General Menéndez Tolosa amplifies a sense of vulnerability among Sahrawis in relation to their more powerful neighbors to the north in order to situate Spain as the protector of Sahrawis’ interests. The allusions to false forms of kinship in this speech also present Spain as more trustworthy and less exploitative than Morocco – particularly important since deception, as noted in Chapter 3, is often an underlying tension in bidani relations with neighbors to the north. Along with the discourse of outside threat (Moroccan in the particular

\textsuperscript{407} Ibid. The phrase in Arabic is, as one interlocutor put it, that Moroccans “burned the green and the dry (vegetation)” [\textit{harqu al-‘akhdar wa al-yabis}].


\textsuperscript{409} Hodges, Western Sahara, 152.
form, Communist in the abstract), Spain also utilized an expanded colonial presence to try and inculcate a sense of loyalty among Saharan subjects through patronage and education:

In 1966, no fewer than 16 African Orders and 25 Imperial Orders of the Yoke and Arrows were awarded to compliant Sahrawis. Other handouts ranged from blankets to jet flights to Mecca. A sense of nationalism was further encouraged by playing on the Sahrawis' fear of neighboring states, and emphasizing the threat of communism. (In 1963, for example, Spain published a map of Africa which asserted the communist domination of Morocco to be 70-90 percent of the population, that of Mauritania and Mali 60-80 percent, and that of Algeria 50-70 percent).\(^{410}\)

I have not found any other sources to corroborate the claim in this passage that Spain actively promoted a sense of nationalism among Sahrawis. The one time it was directly addressed in an interview, my interlocutor suggested that “Sahrawi” first became prevalent as a term of identity in contradistinction to “Spanish” during the colonial period of the 1960s. It was not, however, until political movements took form starting in 1968 and continuing into the 1970s that the term took on positive content as a nationalist form of identity, according to this interlocutor.\(^{411}\) I do not, in other words, want to suggest that Spain initiated Sahrawi nationalism. Nor did Spain fabricate a sense of antagonism between Sahrawis and Moroccans out of whole cloth: mistrust was widespread from the fallout of the MLA in the late 1950s.

The isolation in Spanish Sahara, however, marked a significant departure from the ease with which people moved across borders throughout the region of western Sahara before the 1960s, a change which had significant and lasting effects.\(^{412}\) This shift affected the circulation of people, as well as information and ideas. One man mentioned that when he was younger and

\(^{410}\) Harrell-Bond, *The Struggle for the Western Sahara*, 8.

\(^{411}\) Interview, Rabouni, Sahrawi refugee camps, Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, Algeria, 16 January 2016. For literature on the recent emergence of “Sahrawi” as a political identity, see Sophie Caratini, *La république des sables: anthropologie d’une révolution* (Paris, France: L’Harmattan, 2003); Mundy, “Colonial Formations in Western Saharan National Identity”; Zunes and Mundy, *Western Sahara*.

going to school in El Aaiún, he remembered reading an article by the Moroccan leftist Ali Yata\footnote{Ali Yata was the longtime leader of the Parti Communiste Marocaine, and successor groups. By the 1970s, Yata adamantly supported Moroccan annexation of the Sahara. See Ali Yata, \textit{Le Sahara occidental marocain à travers les textes} (Casablanca: Editions al-Bayane, 1982). In addition to publishing on the matter, Yata campaigned internationally in Eastern Bloc countries pressing Morocco’s claims to the Sahara in the 1970s. Pazzanita, \textit{Historical Dictionary of Western Sahara}, 450–51.} calling for Sahara’s independence, and that when the article fell into Spanish hands, colonial officials tried to buy up all the copies.\footnote{Fieldnote, Smara Refugee Camp, Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, Sahrawi refugee camps, Algeria, January 10, 2016.} Another recalled that teachers would call students “marroqui” if they were behaving badly in school.\footnote{Fieldnote, Laâyoune/El Aaiún, November 26, 2014.} As a man who worked at the Bucraa phosphate mine during the early 1970s, and later joined the Polisario Front, put it:

> Very little reached inside (Spanish Sahara)...Everything was forbidden, so what got through was just whatever they had with them, because the guards (at the borders) were always there.\footnote{Interview, Rabouni, January 24, 2016.}

As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, very little seemed to penetrate the colonial isolation of Spanish Sahara until Intifadat al-Zemla in 1970. But when the politics of national liberation did emerge in Spanish Sahara following Intifadat al-Zemla in 1970, this was because of a regional and international context receptive to the Sahara’s decolonization. The connections with existing anticolonial and anti-imperial movements that ensued in the early 1970s, and the shared horizons of political possibility that they entailed, are explored in the following section through the concepts of contemporaneity and constellation.

**Section II – Contemporaneity: A Constellation of Liberation Movements across Northwest Africa in 1972**

**A. Morocco: Open Horizons of Discussion and Narrow Spaces of Dissent**
From Nouakchott to Rabat to Algiers, the summer of 1972 was “hot.” In May of that year, a group of college students from Rabat travelled to Tan Tan, in the Tarfaya strip of southernmost Morocco, where some had family. They returned for an annual moussem in honor of Sidi Mohamed Laghdaf, a shaykh, religious scholar and son of Ma al-Aynayn. Ma al-Aynayn, the elder, was the founder of a colonial resistance movement that originated, initially with Moroccan backing, in Smara, in Western Sahara, that later sought to overthrow the Moroccan Alawite sultans who had accepted the French Protectorate in 1912. The cohort descending upon Tan Tan sixty years later were themselves seeking to end Spanish colonialism in the Sahara, and had been engaged in discussion with a range of different actors in Morocco over how best to bring this about. Motivated by the Zemla uprising in El Aaiún on June 17, 1970, in which Spanish authorities shot and killed Sahrawi protesters, the college students believed that the horizon for change was near.

Raising banners in Arabic calling for the end of Spanish colonialism, with slogans such as “Free Sahara, and out with Spain,” “Spain, get out, the Sahara isn’t yours,” and “Franco, you impostor, Sahara is for the free,” the students were building on widespread sentiment in Morocco and elsewhere that Spanish colonialism in the Sahara had to end. According to multiple accounts, however, the students also raised banners that alluded to King Hassan and Moroccan national unity, including “Hassan is our king, liberation our aim,” “Hassan and us, we will unite the nation,” and “We are all with Hassan in struggle, and with arms we will make the Sahara rise up with our spirits.” The references to the King and Morocco do not necessarily represent

417 Undated fieldnote, Laâyoune/El Aaiún.
418 Pazzanita, Historical Dictionary of Western Sahara, 251–54.
support for the King. Rather, they indicate the fine line that the activists were walking at the
time, as the King of Morocco had barely survived a military coup d’état the year prior and was
cracking down on all forms of dissent – which, aside from the military, was predominantly
coming from the left.

Indeed, the state did not reward the protesters’ appeal to the King’s authority, and some
35 of them, including El-Ouali Mustafa Sayid, Omar Hadrami, Biydelah Mohamed Cheikh, Ma
al-Aynayn ould Khatihenna and Ahmed Mahmoud Lilli (a.k.a., Mohamed Lamine ould Ahmed)
were arrested and beaten. One witness recalls the local authorities’
harsh response, and the
resulting fallout from this event:

These people called to free (the people of the Sahara) from the yoke [mesqat
ru’usahum] of colonialism. They didn’t say anything about a Sahrawi republic -
no - they said “Hassan is our King, and liberation is our goal.” With that, they
were met with a beating with pipes, and jail. Even when they were released and
returned, their scholarships were taken away.

Me: Meaning all of them were university students at that time?

Some of them, yes. Their scholarships were cut off; their chance of success,
reduced. An individual can no longer succeed. [They were subject to] police
surveillance. So, they thought, “we came here to help bury your father - and you
chased us away with a shovel”…We came here to free (the Sahrawis) from the
yoke of colonialism, and we’re prepared to liberate (the Sahara) within the
framework of Moroccan unity, and our operation was met with getting hit with
metal pipes, our chances for a successful future taken away [nasbat al-najah
tahayyid], the scholarship taken away, and police surveillance and harassment.422

After their arrest and release, a number of protesters, including El-Ouali, fled Morocco to
Tindouf, in Algeria, and Zouérâta, in northern Mauritania.

Three months later, in August, the Moroccan National Union of Students (UNEM)
convened for their 15th congress in Rabat, led by New Left organizations such as 23 Mars and Ila

421 It is a common trope in Morocco to single out specific state authorities, or a specific branch of government, as a
way of registering one’s criticism while avoiding direct criticism of the King.
422 Interview, Laâyoune/El Aaiún, October 29, 2014.
al-Amam [“Forward”]. 23 Mars emerged out of the Union National des Forces Populaires (UNFP), a left-wing political party led by Mehdi Ben Barka that had been devastated by violent state repression of protests in 1965, which left hundreds dead. Following this crackdown, and Ben Barka’s assassination that same year in Paris, 23 Mars formed out of the former UNFP, went underground, and adopted a more radical, leftist stance, memorializing the date of the ’65 protests in its name. The movement included a handful of veterans from the 1950s independence struggle (including Mohamed Ben Saïd Aït Iddr and several other former members of political wing of the 1950s Moroccan Liberation Army [Chapter 3]), but was predominantly a student movement. Ila al-Amam, meanwhile, was founded by Abraham Serfaty, a former government functionary, and Abdellatif Laâbi, a poet and founder of Souffles, the influential French-language cultural review, and forerunner to Anfas [“Breaths”]. Serfaty and Laâbi established Ila al-Amam in 1970, and adopted a more explicit Marxist-Leninist position than 23 Mars, but both movements were composed largely of students, and both operated without state recognition.423

When the groups met as part of the UNEM Congress in Rabat in 1972, their collective influence was at its height. Though 23 Mars and Ila al-Amam shared an opposition to the Moroccan regime, decolonization of the Sahara had become a central issue in the Congress’s proceedings, and a split emerged between the two groups’ positions. Ila al-Amam lobbied for the Congress to take a position explicitly in favor of Sahrawi self-determination, while 23 Mars took a position that was “more nuanced…without contesting the marocanité of the Sahara,” arguing instead for “a voluntary union, on a democratic basis, between the Moroccan people and the Sahrawi populations.”424 The position of the 23 Mars movement relative to the Sahara – like the

poster slogans at the Tan Tan protest earlier that summer – reflects a combination of political expediency and principle that cannot be easily disentangled. On the one hand, by the early 1970s the sovereignty of the Moroccan state had created a political field that exerted tremendous pressure on Moroccans to conflate Saharan decolonization with Moroccan national unity. The stakes for leftists had been clear ever since the Moroccan state jailed leftist Ali Yata and exiled Mehdi Ben Barka for their dissent over a border war with Algeria in 1963, and those stakes had only risen since.425 On the other hand, it would be overly simplistic to suggest that 23 Mars shied away from calling for the Sahrawi right to self-determination simply because of state repression and intimidation. The historic ties between Morocco and the Sahara influenced many in Morocco from across different social classes and political persuasions.

Nor was this debate limited to student organizations or the Moroccan left. In the early 1970s, with the horizon of decolonization imminent, discussion of the Sahara issue in Rabat was “open”:

This discussion/debate would not be limited to a specific group, nor to a specific idea. Sahrawis, Moroccans, including those convinced by the need to “return” the Sahara to Morocco, presented one idea. And those convinced by the need for independence presented their idea. And those coming from a progressive perspective - for example, the Marxist thinking present at university, presented that idea. The only idea absent was the Islamist position that is happening now; that wasn’t present. These were the ideas that were there. Those coming from a progressive position combined [ytalaqa’] with the Moroccan left.

Me: Like the 23 Mars movement?

23 Mars, Ila al-Amam, and others. Those coming from the unified Morocco position, and the expansion of its empire, joined the Istiqlal Party. Those coming from the position of (Sahrawi) independence, depended upon the idea of self-

425 Heckman, “Radical Nationalists: Moroccan Jewish Communists 1925-1975,” 236. The so-called “Sand War,” was based on disputed borderlands between Morocco and Algeria that had been shifted around between French administrative regimes during the colonial period and left unresolved at decolonization. Tindouf, in southwest Algeria, and a focal point of the MLA’s campaign in the Sahara in the 1950s, was a focal point of this border conflict in 1963. See Trout for extensive background on the colonial origins of the ill-defined Morocco-Algerian border. Trout, *Morocco’s Saharan Frontiers*. 
determination. And in this way, the discussion was open.

It took place in people’s homes - even (in the homes) of those who worked in the Palace – in the Royal Administration [al-diwan al-maliki]. There were people close to the monarchy, yet despite this, they weren’t embarrassed to [lem ytaharraj] enter this debate. There were officers in the Royal Army - of course, they were formerly of Jaysh Tahrir [MLA] – who participated in this discussion.

Me: Really? The discussion wasn’t limited to students, only?

There was no forum ['awima] specific to students, or young people: the discussion was open. Of course, students played a role and entered this discussion from all sides – they even changed positions within the debate. In traditional society, women did not participate in the discussions in these kinds of matters, but beginning with this period, women were among the central actors, and participated in the discussion.

So, during this period in the 70s, the debate/discussion was open, and everyone participated.426

I excerpt from this interview at some length, with a man who had been a university student in Rabat at the time and was subsequently imprisoned for 13 years, because his account of the debate in Rabat over the future of the Sahara in the early 1970s captures the horizon of imminent and indeterminate change. In part because of this indeterminacy, and, in part because of Spanish Sahara’s isolation within the surrounding region, the Sahara became the object onto which multiple, potential futures were projected.

One, final aspect of the debate between Ila al-Amam and 23 Mars is worth noting because it distinguishes the 1970s from a generation prior. By the early 1970s, there was a sense that effective decolonization, which would counter both imperialism and neocolonialism, required not just national independence, but supranational political formations. The 23 Mars movement was likely not immune to a growing sense of disillusionment on the left with the postcolonial nation-state. A former member of 23 Mars cited the New Left’s martyr and inspiration to convey this tension, claiming that Mehdi Ben Barka once said: “The Sahara must

be a connecting bridge, and not a region of separation.”\textsuperscript{427} This view could be attributed to the various influences of the Non-Aligned Movement and Arab nationalism, and the Cold War field of supranational political alignment. From this perspective, the creation of a “mini-state” would, in the context of 1970s Third Worldism and the Cold War, invariably create another forum for superpower struggles, whereas 23 Mars believed that the decolonization of Western Sahara without its independence could render this part of the desert a “connecting bridge” for democratizing rule throughout Morocco, Mauritania, the Greater Maghreb and, possibly, beyond. Hopes for Western Sahara to become a catalyst for anti-imperial political formations was one of several horizons of possibility projected onto the Sahara in the 1970s, which prefigured the territory (oftentimes, more than the people) as a space from which region-wide liberation might emerge.

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The basis for the split between 23 Mars and Ila al-Amam came from an article published earlier that year in \textit{Anfas} ("Breaths"), the radical Arabic-language literary and political review aligned with Ila al-Amam. Published in the December-January 1971-72 issue – the last issue of \textit{Anfas} before it was shut down by Moroccan authorities – the article ran under the provocative title “A New Palestine in the Land of the Sahara.”\textsuperscript{428} Written for an audience across the Maghreb and Mashreq (\textit{Anfas} was estimated to have a press run of 5000 copies, and a “sizable following” across the Middle East),\textsuperscript{429} the piece introduces readers to the situation in Spanish Sahara by

\textsuperscript{427} Interview, Rabat, Morocco, November 24, 2014. “\textit{al-Sahra` khass takun qantara al-wassl, wa laysa mintaqat al-fassl.”} This interviewee, a former member of 23 Mars, also mentioned that the rejection of separatism from the left was based on the view that the Sahara could serve as a potential ‘focal point’ for the liberation of the Greater Maghreb.

\textsuperscript{428} "Philistine Jadida Fi 'Ard Al-Sahra'/A New Palestine in the Land of the Sahara.”; \url{http://bnm.bnrm.ma:86/ListeVol.aspx?IDC=4}.

warning that it could become “a new Rhodesia…a new Palestine.” Much of the article is devoted to providing a historical, sociological and political sketch of the people in the territory, describing, for example, the Sahrawi people’s involvement in – and disillusion with – the Moroccan Liberation Army of the 1950s as part of the historical background. The sociological background provides basic information on the major tribes of Spanish Sahara, with a section on “Features of Class Differentiation” that pays particular attention to the potential for “groups of young people” [al-shabab] to lead an anticolonial movement. In addition, the article emphasizes the need to raise the political consciousness of those living outside of the cities in the desert badiya. Despite these distinctions, the article stresses the pivotal role that the undifferentiated category of “the masses” [al-jamahir] must play in order to overthrow Spanish colonialism.

As a reflection of the Marxist-Leninist orientation of Ila al-Amam, with which Anfas was closely affiliated, the article references both the forces of imperialism and, in reference to Morocco and Mauritania, the “reactionary parties surrounding the territory” that have helped to maintain colonial rule and inhibited the formation of a liberation movement there. In a section that lists several possibilities regarding what could happen to the territory, the article returns to the theme of its title by suggesting that the territory’s future could follow one of three paths: it could become “a new Rhodesia” ruled by Spanish settlers; it could end up annexed by and divided between Morocco and Mauritania; or it could follow a path of “autonomy” [hukm al-dhati] under continued Spanish rule, deferring decolonization to a later date. The hoped-for outcome of national liberation is left unstated. The article then lays out a series of “basic facts” that capture the present situation in the territory. The first is the continuation and deepening

[rusukh] of the Arab identity among Sahrawis. The second point warns of the “increasing imperial presence” in the region, and the third notes the “expansionist, divisive and exploitative intentions” of the “reactionary” parties surrounding the territory, in reference to Morocco and Mauritania. Last on the list, however, the article notes the absence of a committed nationalist leadership in the territory at that time.435

By way of conclusion, the article outlines, in a Leninist fashion, the way forward, or “the way to liberation.”436 And here, some of the most intriguing observations are made. In repeating a point made several times, the article notes that the “Sahrawi masses” must provide the basis for any transformative change. Notably, however, this concluding section of the article is articulated under the heading “The link between liberating the Sahara, and liberating the surrounding Arab region.”437 Like 23 Mars, Ila al-Amam sees Sahara’s liberation as a means toward broader, anti-imperial liberation. In contradistinction to 23 Mars, however, the Anfas article argues that the notion of the territory’s “marocanité” must be set aside, giving priority, instead, to movements across the region coming together in solidarity to liberate the territory. This, in a sense, is Ila al-Amam’s reply to 23 Mars. It follows, however, that because of the territory’s small population, the absence of any nationalist leadership in the territory, and the presence of Sahrawi “refugees” in neighboring territories, there is the need “similar to the Palestinian situation” to rely upon and mobilize the surrounding areas of the Sahara.438

The article in Anfas does not list any author, but El-Ouali Mustafa Sayid, one of the students who protested in Tan Tan in 1972, was reputed to have been involved with Ila al-Amam, and the article reflects El-Ouali’s close understanding of the situation in the Sahara at

The article is of particular interest, then, for several reasons. For one, it provides a sense of the horizon of expectations animating the discussion and activism surrounding the decolonization of the Sahara in the early 1970s. Change seemed imminent, but the possibilities were apparently quite indeterminate. In addition, the article appears to be written as a polemic drawing attention to Western Sahara, and exhorting an international audience to support the Sahrawi cause. In this sense, the points of reference to Palestine and Rhodesia are informative, as is the emphasis on Sahrawis’ “continuing and deepening Arab identity.” By describing Sahrawis’ Arab identity as “deepening,” the article is presumably not referring to Arab identity in the more racialized, genealogical sense discussed in Chapter 2 (since this had never really been in question), but, rather, in the political, Arab nationalist sense as an appeal to the journal’s readership. In a further appeal to a broader audience, Sahrawi liberation is directly tied to the broader cause for “liberation of the surrounding Arab region.”

Thirdly, the article represents an engagement in the debate within Morocco – or, more specifically, within the Moroccan left – over the proper way to support decolonization in the Sahara. Ila al-Amam is clear that the “marocanité of the Sahara” should be set aside, and a liberated Western Sahara must precede the hoped-for transformation of Morocco and, perhaps, the Greater Maghreb. Fourth, if it can be assumed that El-Ouali had a significant role in either informing or writing the article, this “way to liberation” outlines what the Polisario Front would effectively accomplish from 1973 to 1976: cultivating support among “the masses” in the Sahara through secret cells, while concurrently preparing a networked diaspora of Sahrawis in Mauritania, Algeria, and southern Morocco to mobilize when the situation demanded action. In

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439 According to one interviewee, the research and writing was largely done by a 23 Mars member named Mohamed Lmarini. Interview, Rabat, November 24, 2014.
this sense, the article is a kind of blueprint for what the Polisario Front would do over the next few years.

Lastly, the article draws attention to an important aspect of the Sahara: that the “masses” within Western Sahara might not be massive enough. This last point connects to a theme that runs throughout this dissertation: that the decolonization of this region of the Sahara depended upon initiative and support from surrounding areas. We have seen at various moments in the region’s history – whether it was the relatively borderless western Sahara of the 1950s, Spanish Sahara’s isolation during the 1960s, or Western Sahara today – political projects in the Sahara have always depended upon regional and international connectivity to support attendant claims of independence and autonomy. This dialectic of autonomy and dependence renders moot the question of whether Sahrawi nationalism emerged from “inside” or “outside” the territory.

Beyond the content of the article itself, the context in which it was published illustrates the narrow margin in which leftist groups operated in relation to the Sahara issue during the early 1970s. In August 1972, as 23 Mars and Ila al-Amam attempted to sort out conflicting positions over the Sahara at the UNEM Congress, a coup attempt was carried out against Hassan II, the second unsuccessful coup attempt by the Moroccan military in as many years. In January 1973, UNEM was disbanded, and a series of student political leaders were arrested in police raids on universities. In March 1973, an Algerian-based group of Moroccans in exile carried out an

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440 Note Spain’s census from 1974 registered 73,497 Sahrawis in the colony. Zunes and Mundy, Western Sahara, 191.
attack on several rural outposts of Moroccan gendarmes; this was followed by another round-up of leftist activists throughout Morocco.\footnote{Assidon, \textit{Sahara occidental, un enjeu pour le Nord-Ouest africain}, 57; Bennouna, \textit{Héros sans gloire}.}

Several of the students arrested at the Tan Tan protest in May 1972 had already fled the country and thereby avoided getting swept up in these arrests. Almost a year after the Tan Tan protest, and just months after the crackdown in Morocco, on May 10, 1973, the Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguía el Hamra y Río de Oro, or the Polisario Front, announced its formation from Zouérate, in northern Mauritania. May 20, the Front carried out its first attack on a Spanish military outpost, El Khanga. Some of the students who fled from Tan Tan in the summer of 1972, led by El-Ouali Mustafa Sayid, were involved in both the formation of Polisario Front in northern Mauritania, and in the Khanga operation ten days later.

\textbf{B. “Two Eggs in One Nest”: Mauritania, Polisario and the Kadihin movement}

1972-73 marked a clear turning point in the relationship between the left and the Moroccan regime, but Moroccan leftists were not the only ones deeply involved in debating and discussing the future of the Sahara. In the following section, I will examine the Kadihin movement in Mauritania, another point in the constellation of movements that became engaged in the liberation of Western Sahara in the 1970s. Mauritania became independent in 1960 but gained recognition from Morocco as a nation-state, and admission to the Arab League, only in 1969. In addition to having its legitimacy as a nation-state contested externally by Morocco throughout the 1960s (Morocco claimed Mauritania as part of “Greater Morocco”), there had been doubts and schisms within the country about its future since its formation.

Following its decolonization under the French loi Deferre carried out between 1958 and 1960, a certain skepticism lingered among many Mauritanians about their country’s life.
independence. This skepticism is captured by several sayings which circulated during this time. The first rhyme frames the loi Deferre referendum of 1958 – in which Mauritanians, like all former members of French West Africa, chose between immediate independence that would cut off ties with France, or continued involvement in the Communauté Française transitioning to formal independence in 1960 – as a pair of bad choices:

“Oui” or “Non” are just two options
That leave the chooser disinterested;
“Oui” is no good on principle
And the problem with “Non” is the money

“Oui” was a vote to remain a part of the French community while transitioning to independence in 1960, presented here as a betrayal of the promise of decolonization and therefore “no good on principle.” “Non” was a vote for immediate independence in 1958, with the consequence of being immediately cut off from French support. The “oui” vote prevailed amidst widespread questions about the integrity of the referendum, and Mauritania became independent in 1960 with France’s hand-picked “successor,” Mokhtar Ould Daddah, becoming president.

Despite its decolonization in 1960, Mauritania’s new status seemed to reflect a neocolonial relation as much as an independent one:

Independence is misunderstood,
Meaning it is not cheap [mutabakhil]
Colonialism is buried within
In the pocket of independence

The fact that both of these rhymes were composed and remembered in the genre of Hassaniya poetry suggests that they circulated broadly and were reflective of popular sentiment of the time.

For much of the 1960s, then, even as Mauritania was struggling to establish its legitimacy and

444 Interview, Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 18, 2015. l-oui wa non la khiyarat, wa l-mukhir mahu marghban/l-oui mhaliya fi l-hassanat, wa mhaliya fi l-fadha non
445 Chaffard, Les carnets secrets de la décolonisation., 257.
446 Interview, Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 18, 2015. l-istiqlal mahu mafhum, m’ana mahu mutabakhil/l-ist’emar dakhil melmum, fi juwa al-istiqlal dakhil.
achieve full recognition as a nation-state before the United Nations, there was a certain

disillusionment within Mauritania that independence was compromised by the country’s
eoccolonial relationship with France. As one former MLA fighter who later became a soldier in
the Mauritanian army put it, the transition was as superficial as a change of clothing:

As God is my witness, [laughing] I know exactly who they were. Those that
ended (colonial) rule, they were with us, but then they changed their clothing -
just their clothing! They gave independence at that time to countries from here to
there, and they called it Sham independence [al-istiqlal al-mzayf]. They call it
sham independence. By God. Yup.447

The country continued to use the French franc, its military continued to depend upon French
assistance, and the largest post-independence actor in the country’s economy, the multinational,
World Bank-backed mining concern MIFERMA, was run by international financiers.

Several movements would emerge within Mauritania during the late 1960s to oppose
Mokhtar Ould Daddah’s government, calling for an end to the country’s neocolonialism.
Foremost among these was the Kadihin movement, which coalesced out of multiple points of
origin beginning in the 1960s. One thread begins in the fallout from the violent confrontations
between Arab bidani, and non-Arab Soninke, Wolof and Pulaar students at Mauritanian
educational institutions in February 1966. The violence, which had been precipitated by a
government attempt to Arabize education, resulted in several deaths and caused a reorientation
among certain non-Arab Black and bidani elites who had until then been inspired by Modibo
Keita’s Malian republic and Nasr’s Arab nationalism, respectively.448 Abandoning Arab
nationalism, these bidani elites joined their Black counterparts at a conference in southern
Mauritania to develop an agenda premised on national unity, opposition to the governing regime,

447 Interview, June 8, 2015, F’derik, Mauritania.
448 Chassey, Mauritanie 1900-1975, 392–93.
social transformation and, first and foremost, ending Mauritania’s neocolonialism.\footnote{Interview, Nouakchott, Mauritania, April 5, 2015. “Neocolonialism was our principle concern. This movement, which formed at Tokomadi [in Gorgol province, in southern Mauritania] in ’68 had four aims. The first was ending/cleansing [tasfiya] neocolonialism. The second was uniting the Mauritanian people - Arabs and Blacks. The third was to fight against the phenomenon of feudalism - slavery, oppression of women, and more. And a just redistribution of land. The fourth aim was to build an independent state of sufficient sovereignty. Those were our aims.”} Out of this conference would emerge the National Democratic Movement.

In May of 1968, the same year as the formation of National Democratic Movement, Mauritanian police fired on striking mine workers in Zouérate, at the iron ore mines owned by the internationally-financed MIFERMA, killing seven. Students across the country organized mass protests in response. At one of these protests in Rosso, a town in southern Mauritania, the police again responded with violence. For one student protester, this marked a turning point: “The police intervened brutally, hitting students hard with rifles, and I became convinced that the regime was by nature a brutal, terrible power.”\footnote{Interview, Nouakchott, Mauritania, April 16, 2015. This account resonates with the connection between getting beaten by the police baton and the politicization of May ’68 protesters in France, which Kristin Ross conveys through an examination of the term “matraque,” a French adaptation of the Arabic “matraq.” In the instance cited above, the interviewee used a different Arabic term “darb,” but his narrative conveys a similar relationship between the experience of getting hit by the police, and political awakening. Ross, \textit{May ’68 and Its Afterlives.}, 27–32.} Out of this developed the Comité Provisoire d’Action Scolaire (CPASS), whose members became the foot soldiers for the National Democratic Movement, producing and distributing the Kadihin’s Maoist-influenced publication, \textit{Sihat al-mazlum} (“Cries of the Oppressed”). A women’s branch of the movement formed, and the movement’s social agenda, which included a call for social equality among citizens, a fight against slavery, and consciousness-raising among rural folk, took shape.\footnote{Interviews: Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 30, 3015; April 1, 2015; April 16, 2015; April 24, 2015; Nouadhibou, Mauritania, June 14, 2015. The women’s branch, l’Association Démocratique des Femmes Nationales (ADFN) and other aspects of the movement which focused on social change constitute perhaps the most lasting and significant legacy of the Kadihin.} The Kadihin movement developed as a social reform project as much as a political one, inspired by Maoist literature on educating and organizing rural workers. An explicitly populist, anti-elitist
movement, the slogan for members went “I’m a kadih and the kadihin are without money, and without cars.” This is the second origin story of the Kadihin.

The third origin story takes place in Damascus. In July 1968, the same year as the formation of National Democratic Movement and CPASS, approximately 20 Mauritanian students studying at university abroad (there were no institutions of higher education in Mauritania at the time) convened in Damascus for a conference hosted by the Syrian Ba‘ath regime. Students came from Dakar, Paris, Cairo and Kuwait. The majority of these students were opposed to Mokhtar Ould Daddah’s government, but unable to organize within the country. The conference was held in the Damascus parliamentary building but, according to Mohamed Mahjoub Ould Bih, a Mauritanian student in Syria at the time, Syrian Ba‘athist government officials did not interfere in the conference proceedings. The challenge for those attending was to bridge the ideological gap between Arab nationalists and Marxists (who tended to be students in Paris, affected by the student protests there). Out of this meeting, Mauritanian university students continued organizing around the premise that Mauritania’s problem was a matter of neocolonialism, and not ethnic differences between Arab and non-Arab groups.452

After a meeting between bidani and non-Arab Black student groups in Nouakchott in 1971, Mauritanian students formed a national union, UGESM,453 and established contact with CPASS and the National Democratic Movement. By the summer of 1972, when UGESM declared a general strike, the Kadihin had formed as a popular, grassroots extension of the worker, student and party unions. Facing significant repression by the Mauritanian state, including forced conscription in the army, members of the party and movement remained

452 Interview, Nouakchott, Mauritania, April 23, 2015. These events form the basis of Dr. Bih’s memoir Mohamed Mahjoub oued Mohamed Mukhtar oued Bih, Attadhakar: dhikrayat wa khawatir wa ‘ahdath (Nouakchott: Maktabat al-Qarnayn, 2017).
453 l’Union générale des étudiants et stagiaires mauritaniens
underground. The presence of the Kadihin was not officially announced until the following year, but with student and labor strikes occurring with regularity, the movement maintained a series of demands focused on ending Mauritania’s neocolonial status. Specifically, the Kadihin demanded the abrogation of Mauritania’s mutual defense agreement with France, the establishment of Mauritania’s own currency (replacing the franc), and the nationalization of the iron ore mining concern, MIFERMA.454

The Kadihin were ascendant when Polisario was in its formative, or “embryonic” stages,455 and members from both movements regularly gathered at an office in the northern Mauritanian mining town of Zouérate. Kadihin members provided Polisario with supplies, including arms, during this early period. The mutually imbricated relationship between the two movements is also captured by a phrase attributed to the Polisario leader, El-Ouali Mustafa Sayid, who is reputed to have told the Mauritanian President Mokhtar Ould Daddah that the Mauritanian and Sahrawi peoples, sharing the same bidani heritage, are “Two eggs in one nest – if you disturb one, you will disturb the other.”456 And, indeed, the simultaneous emergence of progressive movements for liberation in Mauritania and Spanish Sahara portended the potential for sweeping change in both places. In January 1974, when Polisario convened for its Second Congress, held in secret in the badiya close to the border between Spanish Sahara and northern Mauritania, the lone delegate from an outside organization to attend was a Kadihin representative, Mustafa Badreddine.457 As a former Polisario member from northern Mauritania put it “Kadihin were on our side, helping us. Kadihin, by God, Kadihin were against the

454 Interviews: Nouakchott, Mauritania, April 5, 2015; April 23, 2015.
455 The phrase used in reference to Sahrawi mobilization between 1970 and 1973, or after al-Intifadat al-Zemla and before the declaration of the Polisario Front, is al-harakat al-janiniya, or the “embryonic movement.”
government here… They didn’t like colonialism. Kadihin, by God, they were with us." In 1972, as movements were in their “embryonic” stages, Sahrawi nationalists and the Kadihin grew in tandem, like two eggs in one nest.

C. Qaddafi, Arab Nationalism and Contested Political Futures in Mauritania and the Sahara

If Spanish Sahara was largely isolated from regional and international political currents in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and politics in Morocco was increasingly circumscribed by state repression, the situation in Mauritania was altogether different. Though the Kadihin and Polisario Front played an important role in this politicization, they were neither the only political projects animating this field, nor the first ones to infuse revolutionary politics into postcolonial Mauritanian society. Mauritania appears to have attracted the interest of multiple foreign countries after its decolonization, which perhaps viewed its rural populace as a tabula rasa, and the country a political vacuum to be filled by competing Cold War ideologies. To hear those who came of age during this time tell it, the capital of Nouakchott – which, like El Aaiún, developed from almost nothing during the 1960s – was a city of tents and embassies. The Chinese, Iraqi – and, later, Libyan – embassies all distributed literature in an effort to win the hearts and minds of the residents of this burgeoning capital.

China had a particularly visible presence in Mauritania in the 1960s, a relationship tied to the fact that both the People’s Republic of China and Mauritania struggled to win recognition before the United Nations. Through major public works projects, including the development of infrastructure for a water supply, the dredging of an industrial port, and the construction of landmark public buildings in Nouakchott such as Dar al-Thatqa, which remains one of the most

458 Interview, F’derik, Mauritania, June 9, 2015.
impressive structures in the capital today, Chinese support visibly bolstered Mauritania’s development.459 At the same time, the embassy distributed free Maoist literature. As one man reminisced of the 60s and 70s, “oh…in every tent in Nouakchott, there was a Little Red Book by Mao Tse-Tung. Can you imagine?!460 Maoism, in particular, informed the program of the Kadihin movement, in educating and organizing rural communities.461

Of course, the visible presence of propaganda and other political activity in Nouakchott did not necessarily affect the vast majority of the population living in rural areas, many of whom were averse to explicitly secular and political ideologies of the time. A running joke from that era involves the Iraqi embassy which, pleased with rising demand for their Ba’ath Party literature, sent two functionaries to find out who was consuming the literature, and if the relationship could be cultivated further. When a man came the next morning and gathered all of the free pamphlets and books from the embassy, the Ba’ath functionaries eagerly followed him outside the city, only to be disappointed when they found the ideological tracts fed to a herd of goats.462

Nonetheless, the Ba’athist and Nasserist political ideologies, like the Maoist literature, both found an audience, and the latter became particularly influential following the 1969 coup in Libya that brought Colonel Mu’ammar Qaddafi, an acolyte of Gamel Abd el-Nasr, to power. Qaddafi’s charisma and adventurous foreign policy had impacts on the region that were both

459 Chassey, Mauritanie 1900-1975, 377. Also mentioned in several interviews.
460 Interview, Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 17, 2015. De Chassey also remarked on the “cultural” presence of Mao that accompanied China’s aid in Mauritania: “Visible au nombre des petits livres rouges et aux insignes de Mao: auprès de la jeunesse des villes, mais aussi dans la brousse où ne se rendent pas les techniciens étrangers et peu de fonctionnaires locaux.” Chassey, 377.
461 One of the Kadihin’s founders and leaders, Mustafa Badreddine, was reputedly called, in a play on words that incorporates the Arabic name for China [as-Sin] into his surname, Mustafa “Badr-as-Sin.”
462 Fieldnote, May 13, 2015 F’derik, Mauritania.
immediate and lasting. On June 6, 1972 – one month after the Tan Tan protest, two months before the UNEM student congress in Rabat, and four months before the Kadihin movement formed in Nouakchott – Colonel Qaddafi gave a speech in Atar, in northern Mauritania, calling for the end of colonialism in Spanish Sahara. Two months later, Qaddafi dispatched an operative named Muhammad Saïd Qashshat to northern Mauritania to organize Nasserist groups and foment revolution in both Mauritania and Spanish Sahara.

Qashshat’s efforts, and Qaddafi’s popularity, spurred the formation of Nasserist political groups among a younger generation in northern Mauritania. Between Polisario and the Maoist Kadihin already on the scene, the northern Mauritanian cities of Atar, Nouadhibou and Zouérate, perhaps more than anywhere else in the region at that time, became centers of political fomentation, animating debates and discussions for a younger generation coming of age in the 1970s. While Qaddafi befriended El-Ouali Mustafa Sayid and became the Polisario Front’s first major backer (the Mauritanian Kadihin, as an underground movement, had far fewer resources), the connection between Arab nationalism and the Sahrawi cause was complicated by Arab nationalism’s emphasis on the need for supranational political formations to combat imperialism and Zionism. This former Nasserist student-activist was unmoved by the cause of Sahrawi independence despite coming of age in Nouadhibou, mere kilometers from Spanish Sahara, in the 1970s:

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463 The first attempt to overthrow Hassan II, by Moroccan military officers in 1971, has been described as an attempt to replicate Qaddafi’s successful 1969 coup; Polisario’s government in the refugee camps in Algeria, established after 1976, was modeled after Qaddafi’s. On the latter, see Wilson, Sovereignty in Exile, 65–66. Basic People’s Committees, involving direct participation in popular assemblies tasked with a range of services, were replicated in the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic’s early revolutionary governments.


465 As one interlocutor put it, “The young people of Mauritania were influenced a lot by Qaddafi and his comrades. It spread through all of the high schools, the length of Mauritania.” Written interview response, Nouadhibou, Mauritania, June 13, 2015.
The Saharan liberation movement wasn't a big deal to me – I believed that the period of fragmentation [al-tafriq] ought to end with the expulsion of the Spanish colonial invader/occupier. But as for establishing an independent country, for me, as an example of a separatist movement, I was not for it. That was my conviction.\footnote{Written interview response, Nouadhibou, Mauritania, June 13, 2015.}

The emphasis was even stronger among members of Mauritania’s active Ba’ath Party, whose connections to Ba’ath Party leadership in Baghdad provided them with resources that other groups lacked, but whose support for Sahrawi liberation was mitigated by the Baghdad leadership’s refusal to support Sahrawi independence on Arab nationalist grounds.\footnote{A Mauritanian former Ba’ath Party member put it this way: “Polisario wanted to create an extra, new, little state [dawila] which goes against the principles of Arab nationalists, who want to reduce the number of new states and, if possible, incorporate/unify two or three of them to make them disappear…so that was the conflict between us and between the leadership of the Ba’ath Party around the subject of the Polisario Front. The leadership of the Ba’ath Party was a leadership of Arab nationalists [qiyada qawmiya, qiyada ‘arabiya].” Interview, Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 3, 2015.}

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Between the protest in Tan Tan in May, Qaddafi’s speech in Atar in June, the UNEM Congress led by leftist radicals in Rabat and the attempted coup d’état in August, and the formation of the Kadihin in October, the summer and fall of 1972 were, indeed, politically “hot.” In this sense, I suggest that the movements involved in these events constituted a constellation across western Sahara and the Maghreb, subtended by an imminent horizon for change. From interviews and oral histories conducted with people who lived through this time, from Rabat to Nouakchott, and from Tindouf to Nouadhibou, two features of this constellation are particularly striking. The first is the indeterminate future portended by an open horizon of expectation, and the widespread debate that this engendered. An older man from northern Mauritania who joined Polisario during this time describes the discussions that would take place at Polisario’s office in Zouérate:

The ones with political posts would present, like Shahid El-Ouali [Mustafa Sayid], and other leaders [l-kibar] from the Front. They would present to us, and
we would continue (the discussion): what do we think about Mauritania [shinhu tekhmam fins fi al-muritan]…what do we think about Morocco, and what does Algeria have – what are our thoughts (about them)?

And they would present (these questions) and we would discuss them. And we would discuss like this, “what about this, and that,”…and that was how the discussion went: each and every day, discussion/debate, discussion/debate.  

This account of the discussions taking place in Zouérate involving direct interaction between the leaders of Polisario, Mauritanian-Sahrawis, members of Kadihin, Arab nationalists, and others, covered the range of political actors and possibilities and precipitated the convergence of people from different movements. In this sense, it is remarkably similar to the description of the contemporaneous debates taking place in Rabat.

The other striking feature of this constellation is the degree to which Western Sahara itself became the object upon which different visions for the future could be projected. For the 23 Mars movement in Morocco, the Sahara held the potential to serve as the first of several dominoes that could topple authoritarian regimes and transform the Greater Maghreb toward radical democracy – but only if that process began with the affirmation of the “marocanité” of the Sahara. For the Kadihin, the Polisario Front represented a movement that was kindred in spirit, and which would enable the decolonization of Spanish Sahara to occur in tandem with the reinvention of Mauritania, like “two eggs in one nest.” For Arab nationalists, the independence of Western Sahara simply represented the further fragmentation of anti-imperial, anti-Zionist power, a position which Morocco would exploit in order to undermine support for the Polisario Front in the Arab League. For Ila al-Amam and the Polisario Front, meanwhile, self-determination was a clear goal but this, too, was foreseen as an outcome to be achieved by armed struggle, and not by legal process.  

Even Qaddafi, who embraced El-Ouali Mustafa Sayid and

468 Interview, F’derik, Mauritania, June 9, 2015.
469 One of Polisario’s first slogans was “we will obtain our freedom with the gun” [nunal al-hurijja bil-bunduqijja].
the Polisario Front from the outset, was engaged with the Sahara as one of many projects across Africa and the Middle East to foment regime change, from the Canary Islands to the Dhofar liberation movement in Oman, with Mauritania and Western Sahara in between.\(^\text{470}\)

The capacity for Western Sahara to absorb a variety of political projections for the future can also be connected to Spanish Sahara’s isolation of the people and territory during this time. The Zemla uprising in 1970 was the only visible puncture of this blackout that brought Sahrawis in Spanish Sahara in contemporaneous relation to the constellation of surrounding movements across the region. But precisely because Spain maintained such tight control over the territory, the future of Western Sahara became increasingly tied to a range of political projects and possibilities that were emerging along with this constellation of movements in Mauritania, Morocco, and further afield. Moreover, as noted in the *Anfas* article, the populace would need support from the outside even if a political movement within the territory were in evidence.

**Section III – The Generational Noncontemporaneity of Decolonization, from the 1950s to 1970s**

The regional constellation of movements that became particularly visible across northwest Africa in 1972 formed in relation to a horizon of imminent but indeterminate change. This horizon for change was largely filled by plans surrounding the decolonization of Western Sahara and yet, this chapter has shown that the political projects anticipating these futures were largely taking place outside of Spanish Sahara itself, thanks to the territory’s isolation under Spanish rule. The “center” for decolonization of Western Sahara in 1972 was as much Morocco, Mauritania, Algeria and even Libya - in Zouérâte and Rabat, Tan Tan and Tindouf, Nouakchott and Tripoli – as it was in El Aaiún. This dispersion conveys the degree to which the politics of

\(^{470}\) Mustafa Baddreddine, the Kadihin delegate at Polisario’s 2nd Congress in 1974, recalls El-Ouali singing Dhofari revolutionary songs during the assembly. Interview, Nouakchott, April 5, 2015.
Western Sahara’s decolonization has always entailed and depended upon processes that surpass its territorial boundaries. This is precisely why I have found the concept of a constellation to be useful, both because it captures the simultaneity of these movements’ emergence, as well as the disaggregated political geography of decentralized connectivity which they constituted.

One feature of this constellation was its sense of connection, not necessarily between each movement (the Kadihin movement, for example, appeared to have little direct communication with UNEM or other student groups in Morocco), but with political developments from around the world. Principle among these were the Six Days War in 1967, and the student movement in France that culminated in the Paris protests of May, 1968:

A period of heightened awareness [marhala idhka’ al-wa’yi] emerged with two fundamental events: the first event is the War of ’67, Palestine, and the second event is the French student movement in ’68. They had an influence on the region, generally, in mobilizing political awareness in the region. Everyone in the region interacted [tefa’il] with the war in Palestine, but also everyone - especially in Algeria, Mauritania and Morocco - lived the events that France went through in ’68, with that student revolution. It provoked a questioning of (one’s) consciousness.

A new generation appeared, no longer traditional or religious, which considers Hassaniya the sole connection, or religion as the sole connection (between people). Instead, political thinking began to crystallize [ytabalwar]. And from there, the first movement that came to the Sahara, was established in ’68.471

My interest here is less in exploring the significance of the Six Days War or the Paris student movement from the present moment, or from the perspective of northwest Africa.472 Nor am I trying to single these two events out from others as an argument for their decisive role in shaping the history of decolonization in the region. These were only some of the political developments that my interlocutors cited as being particularly influential in shaping their political subjectivities. The Cultural Revolution in China, the Vietnam War, and Maoist-inspired

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472 For work that does this in different ways, see Ross, May ’68 and Its Afterlives.; Olivia C Harrison, Transcolonial Maghreb: Imagining Palestine in the Era of Decolonization (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).
revolutions in Cambodia and Laos also came up several times in interviews among activists in Mauritania and Morocco. To cite just one example of another event, a former member of the Kadihin mentioned the emotional effect \( al-ta \ 'thir al-wujdani \) that the guerrilla wars taking place in Vietnam and elsewhere across southeast Asia had on him, along with Palestine.\(^\text{473}\)

However, the Six Days War and the May ’68 protests and strike in France were not only referenced most frequently, they also most clearly bore the signature of world-historical events that marked a generation’s sense of political becoming. Therefore, I single out the Six Days War and the May ’68 protests in France as representative events that indexed a sense of coexistence and simultaneity for a certain generation marked by an awareness of global political futures.

In another important sense, the emergence of this constellation took place not only in relation to the open horizon for the future, but also in temporal relation to the past. When the interviewee notes that “a new generation appeared” concomitant with the developments in Palestine and Paris, he is distinguishing this emergent consciousness from a previous generation. In relation to western Sahara, in particular, I suggest that this awareness of global political developments distinguished the generation coming of age during the late 1960s and early 70s from a previous generation’s “nonsynchronism” with world-historical events in the 1950s. As outlined in Chapter 3, the effects of this experience of nonsynchronism during the 1950s left many Sahrawis discouraged during a prior moment of decolonization, specifically through a sense that the Moroccan Liberation Army failed – or, worse, “tricked” – them. From this perspective, the isolation of Sahrawis during the 1960s was not only an effect of intensified Spanish rule, but the result of fallout from disillusionment with the MLA a generation prior. The sense among Sahrawis of having been tricked or betrayed by the MLA contributed to a turn

\(^{473}\) Interview, April 16, 2015. Nouakchott, Mauritania.
inward and away from “politics” – a turn which, in the spatial imaginary of the Sahara, entails a return to the desert, or badiya.

By contrast, for those who participated in Sahrawi nationalist movements beginning in 1968 with Mohamed Basiri and the Vanguard Movement, and then later with the formation of the Polisario Front, the horizon for change was imbricated with events in Paris, Damascus, Vietnam, Palestine and Guinea-Bissau. This experience of contemporaneity with global Third Worldism constituted a break with the politics of a previous generation. The following is from a former member who contrasted the politics of Basiri’s movement with what motivated Sahrawis who joined Morocco’s Liberation Army in the 1950s:

There is no comparison (between Jaysh al-Tahrir of the 1950s and the Vanguard Movement), not even in their thinking. The thinking of Jaysh al-Tahrir was jihad in God’s name [fi sabil allah] and to expel the colonizer from the Sahara, but not to call for a state or for independence. The latter (Vanguard Movement) came via an experienced man [rajl muhanik] and a nationalist – an Arab nationalist and Nasserist – following the East.⁴⁷⁴

There are multiple distinctions made here between the politics animating the moment of decolonization in western Sahara in the 1950s, from those at play in the late 1960s. Here, a sharp distinction is made between the traditional or religious politics of jihad from the modern consciousness of nationalism. The former, it is claimed, is what mobilized tribesmen to join the MLA in large numbers to expel the Christians [nasara] in the 1950s; the latter, having coming from a reliable source (“the East,” i.e., Cairo, Damascus, the Levant), is validated by someone whose authority comes not only from moral goodness, or shaykh-ly lineage, but from political experience.

In many contexts, the distinction between generations is understood either in terms of disillusionment and frustration, or, as in the excerpt above, as a break between tradition and

⁴⁷⁴ Interview Laâyoune/El Aaiún, June 29, 2014.
modernity, which reflects a secular idiom that denies coevalness to non-secular modes of rationality. However, the setting of Rabat circa 1972 again provides a concrete example for conceptualizing this debate about the future as a dialogue between generations, when veterans of the MLA were a part of discussions with radical Sahrawi university students in Rabat:

The subject (of the Sahara) was an issue related specifically to Sahrawis, (that involved) perhaps a small number of people. There was a kind of togetherness [luhma] between individuals that surpassed political ideas, much of the time…Before [Intifadat al-Zemla], there was a kind of sluggishness [al-khumul] after what happened with Jaysh Tahrir, from shock, there was shock, there was an apprehension of trust [intiza‘ al-thiqa] toward others. Meaning, there was no longer a desire to support someone: the south claims you, and the north claims you, and Algeria’s not interested – so, there were those in the country just trying to live, and that’s it. But with Zemla, the clouds cleared [ihqasha‘ al-dabbab] and (there was) a reopening of the discussion anew. This discussion would not be limited to a specific group, nor to a specific idea.

This recollection, from a man who was a university student participating in these discussions and was later forcibly arrested and jailed without trial for 13 years, frames the debate less as a confrontation precipitated by a break in consciousness, and more as a dialogue between generations.

David Scott’s thinking about generation provides another means for thinking through this distinction, one which does not assume the kinds of rupture or break often conveyed by social memory. By Scott’s conceptualization, generation, as a temporal concept, marks a certain noncontemporaneity between cotemporal groups, and that “mere copresence in historical time does not make for contemporaneity.” In borrowing from Scott, the contemporaneity of the generation that formed Polisario was tied to an awareness of and connectivity with regional and global political developments that was not shared by a previous generation. At the same time,

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and in following Scott again, the dialogue between generations illustrates how intergenerational tradition constitutes the grounds through which shared horizons of expectation emerge. In the context of Rabat in 1972, two generations of Sahrawis were making sense of a changing horizon of possibility – metaphorically suggested by the former student’s phrase “the clouds cleared” – in relation to their disparate spaces of experience.

Section IV – “A Nation of Refugees:” Humanitarian Nationalism and Postcolonial Sovereignty in the Global Space-Time of the 1970s

Despite this constellation of emergent leftist movements across northwest Africa in 1972, the open horizon of possibility regarding Western Sahara did not last long. On the one hand, the end to Spanish colonialism never seemed nearer: Portuguese revolution and regime change in 1974 led to the immediate decolonization of Mozambique, Angola, Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde and Sao Tomé. Likewise, the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) was growing, as Algeria hosted the largest NAM Summit to date in Algiers in 1973. These developments did not, however, necessarily bolster the anti-imperialist movements in Mauritania and Morocco. As noted earlier in the chapter, the second coup attempt in Morocco was quickly followed by a crackdown on the student left, which began with the formal dissolution of the Moroccan student union, UNEM, in January 1973. State arrests of leftists continued throughout the year following the attacks on Moroccan police outposts by a radical group based out of Algeria, and in November 1974 over 100 more activists were imprisoned, including Abraham Serfaty, a founding member of Ila al-Amam. In Mauritania, meanwhile, 1973 was marked by a year-long student strike, another miner’s strike in Zouérate, and the growing influence of the Kadihin movement, which was

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479 Prashad, 132.
escalating demands for the state to nationalize the mining concern based in northern Mauritania, MIFERMA.

Maneuverings at the state and international level would soon outpace the leftist movements. In February, 1973, Spain warned neighboring countries not to allow Polisario to operate on its territory, putting additional pressure on a Mauritanian government that was contending with both growing internal opposition and severe drought conditions across much of the country. At the same time, just as the Kadihin movement was ascendant, Mokhtar Ould Daddah’s government moved swiftly to meet several of the movement’s demands. In 1972, Mauritania ended its mutual defense agreements with France; in 1973, the government established a national currency for the first time; and, most substantively, in 1974 the Mauritanian state nationalized MIFERMA. That same year, the government invited members of the Kadihin movement to a conference with government ministers. This precipitated tremendous debate within Kadihin leadership and ultimately led to a split as certain, key members of the movement, compelled by Ould Daddah’s reforms, joined the government. This schism proved decisive, depriving the Kadihin movement of much of its leadership and leaving those who rejected joining the government to reorient their activities toward rural activism and away from state-oriented demands (such as nationalization of MIFERMA) that had previously anchored the movement’s political activities. As several former members put it, the government had “pulled

1973-74 were drought years throughout the Sahara and Sahel. See “Governing Famine,” 170-209, in Gregory Mann, From Empires to NGOs in the West African Sahel: The Road to Nongovernmentality (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

Those former Kadihin members who joined the government became known as “chartists” [al-mithaqiyin] for signing on with Mauritania’s ruling party (Hizb al-Sha’ab).
the rug out from under our feet,” effectively coopting the movement just as it had arrived on the national scene.\textsuperscript{482}

A shifting political landscape in Mauritania did not slow Polisario’s activities, however, throughout 1973 and 74. As noted previously, the Polisario Front officially formed in May 1973, carrying out its first operation, an attack against a Spanish military outpost. In May and June of 1974, a United Nations convoy visited the region and Polisario, outmaneuvering Spanish and Mauritanian authorities, organized strong displays of support at each stop that the envoy made in Spanish Sahara and surrounding areas (Tan Tan, Zouérate). Two months later, Spain declared support for organizing a referendum, but Polisario, after holding its second congress in the desert in August 1974, did not let up. In October 1974, Polisario cells formed by workers at the Bucraa phosphate mining operation in Spanish Sahara sabotaged the open-air conveyor belt that transported extracted mineral from the mine to the coast. Again in May and June of 1975, new attacks on Spanish posts in Guelta-Zemmour succeeded in drawing Sahrawi recruits from the ranks of the Spanish military. Throughout this time, Qaddafi was trucking arms and other supplies from Libya to Polisario’s base of operations in southwest Algeria. Where the Kadihin in Mauritania and leftists in Morocco were in retreat, Polisario was asserting itself: by May 1975, Spain declared that it had no intention of prolonging its colonial presence in the Sahara.\textsuperscript{483} And, on October 12, 1975, in a village in northern Mauritania known as Ain Ben Tilli, at the home of Ba ould Dkhil, a judge who had fled southern Morocco in 1956 because of a political dispute, an intergenerational group that included members of the Spanish representative council, \textit{al-Jem’a}, voted to recognize Polisario as the legitimate representative of the Sahrawi people.

\textsuperscript{482} \textit{\textit{suhibat al-zirbiya min that ‘aqdamina.”} This phrase was used several times by former members reflecting upon al-Kadihin. Interviews: Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 30, 2015; April 1, 2015; April 16, 2015; April 23, 2015; April 24, 2015.

\textsuperscript{483} Assidon, \textit{Sahara occidental, un enjeu pour le Nord-Ouest africain}, 59.
Just days after the meeting at Ain Ben Tilli, the International Court of Justice issued an Advisory Opinion regarding Morocco’s and Mauritania’s claims to sovereignty over Western Sahara. Citing proof of historical political ties, the ICJ’s opinion nonetheless denied that these historical ties constituted sovereign ties.\(^{484}\) Within Morocco, the regime promoted the ICJ Opinion as a victory, disregarding the opinion’s rejection of Morocco’s claim to sovereign ties. By the end of October, Moroccan armed forces were encroaching on Western Saharan territory, preparing to enter the towns of Smara and El Aaiún.\(^{485}\) Also during this time, the Moroccan military transporting hundreds of thousands of unarmed civilians to Morocco’s border with Western Sahara, to march into the territory as a symbol of national reclamation. This took place on November 6, 1975, in an event of mass mobilization that has become steeped in Moroccan national mythology, known as the Green March.\(^{486}\) Some 350,000 civilians wielding Qur’ans and Moroccan flags marched into the territory, and then withdrew.

Then, most crucially, on November 14, 1975, Morocco and Mauritania negotiated a trilateral agreement with Spain, known as the Madrid Accord, to transfer Western Sahara to the two countries: Morocco would annex the northern two thirds, Mauritania the rest. This was done while General Franco was on his deathbed, and with his military advisors allegedly divided between supporting Sahrawi self-determination, and the terms of the Madrid agreement.\(^{487}\) After solidifying its control over the cities and completing Spanish withdrawal during the final months of 1975, Morocco then expanded its military sweep of the territory during January and February, 1976. During these two months, the army indiscriminately killed civilians, precipitating an exodus among Sahrawis who fled east. The Moroccan air force strafed camps that were set up in


\(^{485}\) Paul et al., “With the Polisario Front of Sahara,” footnote 1, page 16.

\(^{486}\) Spadola, “‘Our Master’s Call’: Mass Media and the People in Morocco’s 1975 Green March.”

\(^{487}\) Hodges, Western Sahara, 214–25.
the east of Western Sahara with napalm, forcing Sahrawis into a remote part of the desert in southwest Algeria, outside of Tindouf.\footnote{Smith, “Africa Rights Monitor”; Paul et al., “With the Polisario Front of Sahara”; Hultman, “A Nation of Refugees: Western Sahara”; Anne Lippert, “Emergence or Subemergence of a Potential State: The Struggle in Western Sahara,” \textit{Africa Today} \textit{Africa Today} 24, no. 1 (1977): 41–60.}

From 1976, the rupture was profound: Morocco occupied most of Western Sahara militarily, and violently repressed any dissent among Sahrawis in the territory. Meanwhile, on February 28, 1976, from refugee camps in Algeria, Polisario announced the establishment of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). During this time, Polisario also mobilized supporters from across the region to come to the camps and bolster their armed force. One man remembers the voluntary exodus of Mauritanians leaving F’dérïk and Zouérâte in northern Mauritania to join:

They left all of their belongings. Really [\textit{ga’a}]! They left the house - the car wasn’t theirs, it belonged to the company (SNIM)\footnote{Société Nationale Industrielle et Minière de Mauritanie, the name of MIFERMA following Mauritanian nationalization.} - but those who owned their houses left them as well. This house of ours [where the interview’s taking place], we left it and went. This house here, we left it and went to the Front. And we stayed with them; we went to battle with them [\textit{nakhubtu m’ahum}], until peace was settled and we came (back) to our house. This is our house, and none of us remained in it…we went to fight with our brothers…\footnote{Interview, F’derik, Mauritania, June 15, 2015.}

The decisive series of events in late 1975 and early 1976 precipitated several major changes. Where Polisario had previously been waging a battle against Spanish colonial rule, it suddenly had to pivot toward simultaneous armed struggle against Morocco and Mauritania. The annexation by Morocco and Mauritania, which had seemed unlikely just a few years earlier, also precipitated a realignment in the ongoing regional struggle between Morocco and Algeria. This led Algeria, which had heretofore treated the Polisario Front with a level of distrust, to embrace the Sahrawi national liberation movement.

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After Spain withdrew from the Sahara by December 20, 1976, Morocco and Mauritania moved quickly to establish control over the annexed territory, surrounding the cities with barbed wire to pen residents in. Chapter 1 of this dissertation begins with the account of a woman who remembers, as a girl, a violent encounter with a Moroccan soldier on the roof of her home in Laâyoune/El Aaiún during this time. Concurrent with laying siege to the cities, Morocco conducted sweeps through the Saharan badiya. According to journalistic reports from this time, these military campaigns were brutal, with eyewitnesses recounting soldiers killing, raping and torturing their family members. As Sahrawis fled east, preliminary desert encampments in Galtah Zemmour and Um Drayga were strafed by the Moroccan air force, which dropped napalm on fleeing civilians on four known occasions. Meanwhile, Sahrawis living throughout Morocco who had any familial connection to Polisario or were believed to harbor sympathies, were rounded up and sent to the remote Moroccan prisons of M’gouna and Agdz. One interlocutor quoted throughout this chapter was apprehended in Rabat without warning in 1976, and spent 13 years imprisoned in the remote fortress/prison of M’gouna. Many of those forcibly disappeared died in prison during the war. Although I could not find exact figures for the death toll from this campaign, “it is likely that several thousand Sahrawi civilians died” between 1975 and 1980, with several hundred still unaccounted for and mass graves that have recently come to light.

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491 Following the terms of the Tripartite (Madrid) Agreement, Morocco was granted the northern two-thirds of the territory, including Saguia al-Hamra, and Mauritania the southern third, known as Rio de Oro or Tiris Gharbiya. When Mauritania withdrew from Tiris Gharbiya in 1979, Morocco occupied that as well.
493 Zunes and Mundy, Western Sahara, 114.
494 Smith, “Africa Rights Monitor,” 62. WSC/16, Western Sahara Campaign, Archives and Special Collections, SOAS, University of London, UK. (On the number of those still unaccounted for, this footnote is from Ch 1: Estimates of the numbers of disappeared Sahrawi civilians vary, but Abdesslam Omar, director of AFAPREDESA, the Association of Families of Sahrawi Prisoners and Disappeared based in the refugee camps, claims that there are “over 400.” [Interview, Jan 24 2016, Rabouni, Sahrawi refugee camps.] Omar provided a similar figure to the New
The aerial attacks at Um Drayga and elsewhere pushed fleeing Sahrawis further east, where many settled outside of Tindouf, a market town in southwest Algeria. Polisario scrambled to provide a network of Land Rovers relaying people to the camps, not only from Moroccan- and Mauritanian-occupied territory, but from across northern Mauritania. As the camps grew, Polisario formalized its alliance with Algeria during its Third General Congress held in Algiers in August, 1976, which allowed leadership to set up the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic as a state-in-exile in the camps. In the early years, women predominantly organized daily life in the camps, since most men were fighting with Polisario as it engaged in war with both Morocco and Mauritania. As Alice Wilson points out, this period shifted the locus of political subjectivity from the tent to the public domain, where Qaddafi-inspired Popular Committees, composed predominantly of women, administered education, health care, justice, and Red Crescent matters (which constituted much of the camp’s economy). A Mauritanian who visited the camps during this time recalled a remarkable sense of purpose and collective sacrifice:

I felt a strong sense of dedication [al-ikhlass al-shadid]. There was a spirit of sacrifice and patience, patience, patience at the beginning, at the hunger. And there was nothing: people endured [nas tatahamel]. By God, (there was) dedication. There was mutual support and I didn’t see anyone at odds. There was deep dignity… There was no tribalism at that time, and they were fighting against tribalism. Far from Marxist thinking, they were simply Sahrawi nationalists.

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495 Algeria supported the camps financially – reportedly at a cost of $50,000 per day, at first – with additional provisions provided by Libya, and the UN Commission on Refugees. Anne Lippert, “Emergence or Submergence of a Potential State: The Struggle in Western Sahara,” Africa Today 24, no. 1 (1977): 52.

496 Wilson, Sovereignty in Exile, 65–73.

497 Interview, Nouakchott, Mauritania, April 23, 2015.
Social memory about the hardship and purpose of the early revolutionary period, and women’s pivotal role in building and running the camps, remain foundational to the Sahrawi national narrative of resistance and exile.\footnote{Wilson, \textit{Sovereignty in Exile}, 72. Fieldnotes, May 1-8, 2015, F'derik, Mauritania; January 10, 2016, El Aaiún refugee camp, Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, Algeria. (See also Chapter 5)}

Much has been written about the Sahrawi refugee camps, with particular attention to the political operations of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, or what Wilson calls Polisario’s “state-movement,” within the camps.\footnote{Zunes, “Participatory Democracy in the Sahara”; Anne Lippert, “Sahrawi Women in the Liberation Struggle of the Sahrawi People,” \textit{Signs (Chicago, Ill.)}, 1992, 636–51; Pablo San Martín, \textit{Western Sahara: The Refugee Nation} (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2010); Wilson, \textit{Sovereignty in Exile}.} My interest is not to contribute to this literature, but, rather, to note the integral role of the refugee camps in making Sahrawi nationalism intelligible to an international audience. In focusing on early reports of the refugee camps, some of them journalistic and propagandistic, I will examine two tropes of this literature, primarily conducted during the time of war between 1976 and 1989, in order to relate these tropes to significant shifts in global politics that coincided with the rise of Sahrawi nationalism during the 1970s.

The first trope is organization. Initial reports from the camps marveled at the comprehensively organized political life of the camps, and the widespread, active participation of refugees in these processes. In reporting to the African Studies Association annual meeting 1978, Anne Lippert, who made several visits to the camps in the 1970s and 80s, described the highly organized camp conditions by listing the popular, administrative committees that organized daily and political life, as well as the camp’s spatial organization.\footnote{Some version of the camp’s spatial and administrative organization is repeated in nearly every subsequent journalistic account, and remains a common element in recent literature on the camps. Herz, \textit{From Camp to City}; Martin, “Nationalism, Identity and Citizenship in the Western Sahara.”}

The 23 camps of refugees, each carrying the name of a city or village in the S.A.D.R., are divided into three wilayas: Smara, El Aaiun, and Dakhla. Every person over 12 in the camps belong to one of the nine camp committees (education, health and sanitation, crafts, commerce, guard duty, herds, pediatrics, social affairs, supplies) and also belongs to a political cell (group of 11 people
who meet daily to discuss politics, the war, etc.). Popular meetings in the camps are held to discuss problems of the camps, the progress of the war, plans for the future. Every one in the camp has a chance to have his say.\textsuperscript{501}

Tami Hultman, who published several articles from the camps as well as the front soon after the outbreak of war, related this committee life to a spirit of mobilization:

The atmosphere in the frontier camps is so energetic and purposeful that it often is difficult to remember that the people are there under duress, living in the most extreme conditions of deprivation. Each unit has several thousand people and is run by an administrative committee, an economic committee, an education committee, and a sanitation committee.\textsuperscript{502}

Lastly, this trope of organization and participation provided the basis for a discourse on the exceptionalism of the Sahrawi camps. This report, prepared by members of a donor organization promoting agricultural projects in the camps during the 1980s, emphasized the uniqueness of Sahrawi refugees in relation to other situations of forced displacement:

All the refugees, men and women, participate at all levels of camp activity in services and institutions, in production workshops, in the system of justice and in the political organization. Other refugees often sink into alienation and apathy. The Sahrawi leaders, while recognizing their dependence of external supplies, have organized the camps to harness and maximize the energies, commitment and hope of the Sahrawi people.\textsuperscript{503}

As Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh has demonstrated through her in-depth study of Sahrawis in the refugee camps, this discourse has a gendered dynamic in singling out female Sahrawis as “the ideal refugee.”\textsuperscript{504}

The accompanying trope to “the ideal refugee” is one of suffering. This is true in a basic, material sense, in that the distribution of international NGO aid through the Sahrawi-run Red Crescent has always been the camps’ lifeline:

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\textsuperscript{501} Lippert and Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association, \textit{The Struggle in Western Sahara and Foreign Intervention}, 8. \\
\textsuperscript{502} Hultman, “The Struggle for Western Sahara,” 28. \\
\textsuperscript{503} James Firebrace and Jeremy Harding, \textit{Exiles of the Sahara: The Sahrawi Refugees Shape Their Future} (London: War on Want, 1987), 39. WSC, Box 15. \\
\textsuperscript{504} Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, \textit{The Ideal Refugees: Gender, Islam, and the Sahrawi Politics of Survival} (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2014).
\end{flushleft}
Disease, particularly bronchitis, pulmonary tuberculosis, diarrhea, and other intestinal illnesses, is rampant. The children are afflicted by measles as well, and the lack of refrigeration as well as the lack of vaccines and medicines have resulted in many infant deaths. The refugees are also suffering from burns and other wounds as well as from malnutrition. Their plight is serious, and will become even more serious as the winter months continue. Tents, warm clothing, and medicines are major needs, not to mention food supplies...Additional help is hoped for as more people become aware of the plight of this people.  

While health conditions improved along with the establishment of a working national hospital and with medical support from Cuba, in particular, the refugee camps as a situation of humanitarian need remains central to their operation. Beyond this fundamental observation about the camps’ operation, however, I suggest that the humanitarian appeal has also been what made Sahrawi nationalism legible as a compelling political formation. A 1979 Algerian publication entitled “Western Sahara: a people in struggle” illustrates how representations of the Sahrawi as a people took form through the exodus of forced displacement:

> From the moment Morocco entered the war and later Mauritania, massacres and torture accompanied each village occupation initiating a mass exodus to the zones controlled by the Polisario Front. In a few days time, the Sahraoui people became a nation of refugees.  

If the martyred figure of the nationalist hero El-Ouali Mustafa Sayid continues to personify the negation of Sahrawi national liberation (Chapter 1), then Sahrawi nationalism in its realized form emerged through the figure of the refugee – or, collectively, as “a nation of refugees.”

In this way, Sahrawi national liberation militants, not unlike their Kadihin compatriots, had “the rug swept out from under their feet.” By this I mean not only that Polisario was victimized by Moroccan irredentism and international complicity, which remains as salient and

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505 Lippert, “Emergence or Subemergence of a Potential State,” 52.
506 “Western Sahara: A People in Struggle” (Algiers: Rencontre et Developpement/CCSA, 1979), 27, WSC/15, Western Sahara Campaign SOAS Archive. WSC/Box 15.
true today as when it took place forty years ago. But, also, even as Polisario’s emergence as a national liberation movement coincided with a regional constellation of anti-imperial movements, it still existed in disjunctive relation to decolonization more generally. Sahrawi national liberation as a political project emerged just as human rights eclipsed anticolonial self-determination as a mobilizing political principle. In this way, decolonization in the Sahara during the 1970s remained in disorderly relation to global politics. With a global shift in the politics of anticolonialism away from supporting Third World self-determination and toward a global ethic of humanitarianism, the bases of support for Third World liberation movements quickly eroded just as Sahrawi nationalism emerged.

Because of the contingencies of Sahrawis’ escape from Moroccan invasion, and Algeria’s subsequent support, Sahrawi national liberation has perdured through the convergence of these two forms. On the one hand, Morocco’s invasion brought Polisario enduring support from the Algerian regime, once celebrated by Amilcar Cabral as the “mecca” for national liberation movements. Crucially, however, Polisario/SADR has remained intelligible as a political project through the space of the refugee camps, and the figure of the refugee. This political formation, which relies upon humanitarian aid from a range of multilateral organizations and NGOs, is both a space of national liberation and humanitarian politics.

Parallel to this point, then, is that the refugee camp is simultaneously a space of humanitarianism and sovereignty, which builds on Miriam Ticktin’s observation that

humanitarianism “allows for the recombination of bare life and political life in new ways, such that the political dimension of human life is never lost.”\textsuperscript{510} Similarly, the Sahrawi refugee camps combined national self-determination with humanitarianism in concurrence with the demise of Third Worldism as a political project. Not simply an anomaly, however, the Sahrawi refugee camps might be considered within a spectrum of postcolonial political formations, each of which may be distinguished by varying degrees of compromised sovereignty. Or, returning to Robert Jackson’s formulation, as “consisting not of self-standing structures with domestic foundations – like separate buildings – but of territorial jurisdictions (supported from above) by international law and material aid – a kind of international safety net.”\textsuperscript{511} In this sense, the Sahrawi refugee camps appear much less as spaces of exception, than representative of the tensions of autonomy and dependence inherent in post-World War II political formations, more generally.

Framing depictions of the Sahrawi refugee camps in this way is not meant to justify Morocco’s violent invasion, nor to explain Sahrawi national liberation in terms of “success” or “failure.” Rather, this demonstrates, again, the “nonsynchronism” of decolonization in the Sahara through the disjunctive temporal relation between Sahrawi nationalism and shifting global politics of the 1970s. While too many studies of the Western Sahara conflict have uncritically celebrated these camps as a space of experimentation, organization, women’s liberation, and autonomy, their emergence and durability are also effects of 1970s shifts in the global space-time of decolonization and postcolonial sovereignty. In this manner the words of Elsa Assidon, sister of the Moroccan leftist Sion Assidon, are particularly prescient. Writing in 1978, while the war between Morocco, Mauritania and Polisario was raging (and while her brother was in Moroccan jail), Elsa Assidon suggested that Polisario’s reliance on Algeria and humanitarian aid left the

\textsuperscript{511} Jackson, \textit{Quasi-States}, 5.
movement with very little autonomy, given that international solidarity was increasingly mobilized by an ethic of humanitarianism, rather than Third World liberation:

This aid only leaves a narrow margin of autonomy to the Polisario Front relative to the Algerian regime and one no longer clearly sees which strategy the Sahrawis have given themselves on this point, besides constant efforts to capitalize on international solidarity in their favor beyond the Algerian wake and the political work of ‘consciencization’ undertaken in the camps.\(^{512}\)

Nearly four decades later, Sahrawi political autonomy remains dependent in much the same way. The role of human rights, however, has changed significantly and will be the subject of Chapter 5 of this dissertation.

\(^{512}\) Assidon, *Sahara occidental, un enjeu pour le Nord-Ouest africain*, 75.
Chapter 5 – Human Rights in Conflict: The Figure of the Huquqi in Western Sahara

On February 16, 2017, the Roosevelt House Public Policy Institute at Hunter College convened an event entitled “Watching Western Sahara: Human Rights and Press Freedom in the Last Colony in Africa.” The panel featured several experts on human rights in Western Sahara, including Mohamed Ali Arkoukou, President of the Sahrawi Association in the USA; Katlyn Thomas, a former high ranking member of UN-led efforts to hold a referendum in the 1990s; Sandra Lynn Babcock, a scholar of international law; Eric Goldstein, the deputy director of the Middle East and North Africa division of Human Rights Watch; and Madeleine Bair, manager of WITNESS Media Lab’s Western Sahara project. The presenters addressed ongoing Moroccan violations of human rights in Western Sahara, situating these violations within the history of conflict between Morocco and Sahrawi nationalists that dates back to 1975. Although the official Moroccan state perspective was not represented on the panel, several members in the audience of 50 or 60 spent the time throughout the panel busily typing into their phones and conferring with one another in Moroccan Colloquial Arabic, or darija, as the presentations unfolded. It did not seem far-fetched to think that they were keeping their embassy, if not officials back in Morocco, apprised of what was being said. Even as it informed a mostly foreign audience in New York about human rights abuses in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, the panel itself was part of the political terrain – constituted by human rights, diplomacy, and publicity – which has become the focal point of struggle between Morocco and Sahrawi nationalists since a ceasefire in 1991 ended armed conflict.

As the event’s title promised, the panel discussion included the presentation of eyewitness footage shot from Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara. The footage depicted scenes of Moroccan security forces in action. Certain clips showed plainclothes members of Moroccan
security forces disrupting street protests, sometimes kicking and dragging protesters as uniformed police looked on, while the protesters screamed and shouted. The police, sometimes helmeted in riot gear, other times indistinguishable from civilians in their clothing, were also shown breaking and entering homes. The footage was usually shot from above, apparently from the window or rooftop of a neighboring building across the street from where the confrontation was taking place. When the footage became wobbly or abruptly cut off, one understood that the videographer risked becoming interpellated as a target of the same kinds of raids and interventions that they were depicting.

Madeleine Bair contextualized these videos by noting that Morocco continues to block freedom of expression in the territory of Western Sahara that it controls. Notably, Morocco restricts the entry of journalists to the territory, frequently expelling those whom it deems politically sympathetic to Sahrawi nationalists and Polisario/SADR.513 Forced to contend with a media blackout, the videos attest to the fact that Sahrawis have taken matters into their own hands, forming media activist teams and documenting human rights violations of political expression by uploading this footage to the internet. An English-speaking Sahrawi I met during fieldwork described their role as “citizen media, digital militant, cyberactivists.”514 During fieldwork in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, they were typically referred to, neutrally, as huquqi (“human rights activist”), or, supportively, as munadil (“militant”). As Managing Editor of the recently formed website, “Watching Western Sahara,” Bair noted in her talk that, although these videos were readily available online and continued to grow in number over the last several years, they remained largely unseen. The purpose of “Watching Western Sahara,” Bair said, is to

513 Bair reported that 85 foreign journalists were arbitrarily expelled in 2016. See also “Morocco Continues the Arbitrary Expulsion of International Observers from Western Sahara.” The number expelled during 2014, according to fieldnotes recorded during the month of December, reached into the 60s.

“curate and contextualize videos to make them more accessible.” She went on to screen an edited series of clips showing protests interspersed with interviews with activists. Following the video, Bair characterized the situation in Western Sahara as one that suffers from a lack of visibility and said that the purpose of making the videos available is for outsiders to “witness what [Sahrawis] witness." In curating these videos in order to facilitate the “witnessing” of human rights violations in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, Bair emphasized the lack of visibility several times in her presentation, raising the rhetorical question, “Why is [Western Sahara] invisible?”

Bair’s presentation at the 2017 event “Watching Western Sahara” touches on several well-known aspects of human rights. The suggestion that footage documenting police violence allows viewers to “witness what [Sahrawis] witness” relies upon a presentational trope through which human rights violations are meant to draw attention, generate empathy, and translate to political action transnationally. It has long been noted that human rights are made meaningful as a moral discourse through the trope of witnessing, and the testimonial has become the standard genre through which the documentation of human rights violations are typically communicated. In providing a first-hand account, the testimonial is meant to both document human rights violations and elicit empathy in a witnessing public audience. As a means of political communication, the testimonial as genre rests upon the hope or expectation that a receptive public, in witnessing the testimonial, effectively takes note of the violation and is moved to respond. Regardless of form, whether as written report, or video clip, the framing of human rights in this manner mediates between the fact of the violation, and the construction of an audience whose reception makes the fact of the violation morally meaningful and politically significant. As Meg McLagan notes, “[i]t is in this sense that a transnational ‘witnessing public’

515 Fieldnote, February 16, 2017, New York, NY.
around human rights trauma is constituted through testimony (McLagan 2003).”

McLagan also notes that the expansiveness of human rights as a moral and political project can lead to tensions between the realist conventions of documentation, the enframing devices used to convey testimony, and the acts that constitute human rights violations. For example, the widespread effects of militarized occupation may well be apparent to anyone who visits Laâyoune/El Aaiún, but if the security forces are trained to avoid and minimize violent confrontations as much as possible, then these events must be provoked in order to be classified as a human rights violation. As testified by the growing archive of documented abuses compiled by Watching Western Sahara and others, activists in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara do not seem to have much difficulty in producing material. Efforts by the state to prevent the recording of the violent breakup of protests, for example, have not succeeded, although these efforts have escalated the risks involved for those activists who attempt to document these events, as will be discussed later in this chapter. As perhaps an added layer of complication, the work performed by the WITNESS Media Lab’s website “Watching Western Sahara” in organizing, archiving, curating and contextualizing already-produced videos foregrounds how the mediating infrastructure of the internet must also be harnessed in order to make these videos – and, by extension, the conflict – accessible for a human rights audience. In these ways, Madeleine Bair’s presentation at the “Watching Western Sahara” event in New York City drew attention to the problems of publicity and audience in the documentation of human rights

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517 WITNESS’s “Watching Western Sahara” website compiled protest videos from April 2016 to April 2017: https://lab.witness.org/projects/citizen-video-in-western-sahara/. It does not appear to have been updated since. Another example, recorded by Norwegian activists traveling in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara in 2015, documents rock throwing between Moroccan security forces and Sahrawi activists: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zFU2wgCfnWI.
violations.

While the “Watching Western Sahara” event at Roosevelt House in New York City suggests that the plight of the Sahrawi national cause suffers from a lack of visibility internationally, within the field of conflict in Western Sahara, human rights are everywhere. This chapter will trace the emergence of human rights discourse as a political terrain, its more recent proliferation in this field of conflict and, in particular, the broader effects of human rights operating in close relation to publicity. From New York City to Geneva to Marrakesh to the Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria and, of course, back to Laâyoune/El Aaiún in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, human rights have become a major focus in the ongoing conflict. And although this discourse may have displaced armed conflict and national self-determination as the primary terrain upon which the political future of Western Sahara is waged in the present, the discourse remains embedded in the broader conflict’s ultimate aims.

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This chapter will situate the emergence of human rights as a political terrain in Western Sahara since the end to armed conflict between Morocco and Polisario in 1991, giving particular attention to the period of 2014-17, when the use of human rights as a tactic in the conflict escalated. In doing so, I will be focusing specifically on the struggle to document and publicize human rights violations in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara. While human rights violations committed by Polisario/SADR in its governance of the refugee camps have also been documented, these largely took place before the 1991 ceasefire, and the grievances associated with these violations come largely from ‘a'ïdin, who were discussed at length in Chapter 2.\(^{518}\)

Nor will this chapter be addressing the hundreds of Sahrawis whose disappearances under Moroccan occupation remain unaccounted for. Instead, I will focus on the struggle over the production, documentation and publicity of human rights violations in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara which, in contrast to the violations alleged to have taken place in refugee camps, have become increasingly pivotal to the broader conflict over the past decade. Specifically, the discourse and practice of human rights revolves around the documentation of human rights violations in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara as a means of drawing attention to the illegitimacy of Morocco’s rule there. Struggles over documenting and publicizing these violations have only intensified since Polisario/SADR initiated an effort to broaden the mandate for the UN peacekeeping body in Western Sahara, MINURSO, to include human rights monitoring. Debated annually each spring during the UN Security Council’s renewal of MINURSO’s mandate, Morocco has – successfully, thus far – fought this initiative tooth and nail.

In discussing human rights in this chapter, then, I am focusing almost exclusively on human rights activism – often called human rights discourse – rather than law. This is because human rights law, whether seen as emanating from United Nations covenants such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, or from the Moroccan National Human Rights Council (CNDH), have little bearing under Morocco’s militarized rule in Western Sahara. In this respect,

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519. AFAPREDESA, a Sahrawi civil society organization based in the refugee camps, tracks these cases. The numbers are cited in Chapter 1.


Madeleine Bair’s talk at Hunter College reveals a particularly prominent dimension of human rights activism in Western Sahara: the need for publicity and audience. At the same time, the publicity requires not only an audience, but also a subject. The mobilization involved in documenting human rights violations has generated a new figure populating the landscape of political conflict in Western Sahara: the huquqi, or human rights activist. The huquqi (pl. huquqiyyin), is a subject position that has emerged from the shifting terrain of conflict in Western Sahara following the ceasefire in 1991, and has subsequently proliferated since the Sahrawi intifada began in 2005. As this chapter will explore, the subject position of huquqi takes on particular features from different locations across the transnational networks that make human rights activism about Western Sahara possible, both inside and outside the territory. Since human rights remain subsumed within the field of nationalist conflict, huquqiyyin are subject to manipulation by the exigencies of Moroccan state security, and the particular political rationality of national-humanitarian sovereignty in the Sahrawi refugee camps. In this way, I suggest that the figure of the huquqi is particularly revealing of how human rights have emerged and shifted across time and space in the Western Sahara conflict.

The label “huquqi” requires some clarification, in particular because of its expansive use in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara. The term derives from “al-haq” in Arabic, meaning “right.” “Al-haq” can refer to “right” in both its formal, legal sense (to have a right to something) as well as its moral sense (to be correct, or “in the right”). In Western Sahara, huquqi refers to anyone involved with a human rights-based NGO, including organizations working in fields (such as disability rights, rights of migrants, etc) unrelated to the politics of the dispute. As we will see in Marrakesh, huquqiyyin from the Sahara involved with state-sanctioned human rights associations working across a range of fields attended the World Human Rights Forum in large
numbers. However, in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, *huquqiyin* also, and increasingly, refers to anyone involved in activism around the politics of the dispute. This includes activists for some of the highest-profile human rights organizations sympathetic to Sahrawi nationalism, such as CODESA, a collective of Sahrawi human rights defenders and ASVDH, Sahrawi Association of Victims of Grave Human Rights Violations Committed by the Moroccan State. Members of these organizations are the quintessential *huquqiyin* in Western Sahara, in that they are human rights activists involved in leveraging transnational connections to organize around the right to political expression in Moroccan-occupied territory. In this respect, the *huquqi* is at least somewhat distinct from the *munadil*, or militant, who is associated more with “on the ground” activism in the streets of Laâyoune/El Aaiún. In practice, however, I found that any Sahrawi engaged in activism around the dispute was labeled *huquqi*, whether involved as a media activist, participating in demonstrations, or working with a formal organization. And, finally, a pro-Moroccan human rights worker would be known as a *huquqi*, as well, reflecting the universal, non-partisan terrain of human rights discourse. In this sense, *huquqi* refers to both NGO employees working in the “human rights industry,” to use Lori Allen’s term, and activists engaged in political activity surrounding Western Sahara.\(^{522}\) In tracing the proliferation of the figure of the *huquqi* throughout this chapter, I will be using the term as I heard it used during fieldwork, in all of its expansiveness.

This chapter will first provide an historical overview of the formation of human rights as a political terrain in Western Sahara: its emergence following the UN-brokered ceasefire

\(^{522}\) Allen, *The Rise and Fall of Human Rights*, 4. Allen distinguishes between human rights principles, and the human rights industry. Of the latter, she writes, “the term human rights industry (or regime, system, or structure) refers to the material and financial infrastructure that buttresses human rights work (see also Goodale 2009: 97; Sewell 1996: 842). Broadly, it is the complex of activities and institutions that function under the label human rights, including the professionals who work within those organizations, the formulas they have learned in order to write reports and grant applications, and the funding streams that this industry generates and depends on.” Italics in the original.
between Morocco and Polisario in 1991, its renewal with the first Sahrawi *intifada* in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara in 2005, and its proliferation with recent efforts to expand the peacekeeping mandate of MINURSO to include human rights monitoring after 2011. This historical overview will also serve to trace shifts in the figure of the *huquqi*, as well as certain defining features that have characterized human rights discourse over time in the context of Western Sahara. First and foremost, human rights have developed as an instrument, or tactic, in a broader conflict where the primary aim remains sovereignty and self-determination. Regardless of the increased prominence of human rights in Western Sahara, the discourse remains embedded in a struggle over sovereignty and self-determination. *Huquqiyyin* themselves recognize and embrace the reality that human rights are subsumed by, and do not transcend, the political field. In this sense, conceptions of human rights as an “ethical theory in social practice,” or as a moral initiative existing in tension with the instrumentality of politics, are not terribly applicable to this context.⁵²³ Nor, however, can human rights be characterized as a depoliticizing discourse – the escalation of human rights-inspired protests in Laâyoune/El Aaiún between 2011 and 2015 attests to the role of human rights activism in amplifying, rather than displacing, the locus of conflict.⁵²⁴

Nonetheless, human rights as an instrument of political conflict in Western Sahara highlights a number of features of human rights discourse derived from a number of other ethnographic contexts. As in many other situations, human rights in Western Sahara have emerged through the development of and reliance upon transnational networks, while human rights activism involves a process of the “vernacularization” of universal rights concepts into

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particular contexts. Oral histories and interviews with activists in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara confirm these insights, revealing a process of sensitization and “conscientization” to human rights language and practice – most notably in the form of non-violent civil disobedience, as well as an appreciation for transnational support as a bulwark against Moroccan oppression. In understanding how the “vernacularization” of human rights has played out in the context of Western Sahara, the insights from two anthropological studies of human rights practice conducted in the context of longstanding political conflict are especially salient. The first insight comes from Jennifer Curtis and her characterization of human rights as “war by other means.” In the context of Northern Ireland, Curtis notes that “[r]ather than transforming divisions, human rights discourse has helped reproduce them,” in ways that have the potential to create new instabilities in the peace process there. Whereas human rights activism in certain contexts may be seen to produce or reflect an emergent ethical subjectivity, in Western Sahara the discourse remains bound to the friend/enemy distinction that structures nationalist conflict. The second insight comes from Lori Allen’s study of human rights activism in Palestine, and her focus on the cynicism that developed as human rights practice became decoupled from the political goals of Palestinian nationalism. Borrowing from McLagan, Curtis and Allen, this chapter will pay

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525 Sally Merry, Human Rights and Gender Violence: Translating International Law into Local Justice (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 2; Goodale, Surrendering to Utopia an Anthropology of Human Rights; Winifred Tate, Counting the Dead: The Culture and Politics of Human Rights Activism in Colombia (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007). Merry’s influential concept in the anthropology of human rights, claims that human rights concepts only work through processes of translation, or “vernacularization”: “…global law is translated into the vernacular, highlighting the role of activists who serve as intermediaries between different sets of cultural understandings of gender, violence, and justice.” Tate’s account suggests an inverse dynamic of “professionalization,” through which the documentation of human rights abuses get tailored to meet the narrative demands of transnational human rights organizations.

526 Curtis, Human Rights as War by Other Means, 22. Curtis explains at greater length: “The combination of consociational institutions and collective rights politics has not transformed Northern Ireland’s ethnopolitics. Instead, post-conflict rights discourse extended its function as war by other means. The incorporation of human rights discourse into the peace process and the minimal peace being promoted produce other vulnerabilities. These contribute not just to present divisions but to the broader contradictions that both human rights law and discourse create regarding past and future violence.” (Curtis, 25)

527 Allen, The Rise and Fall of Human Rights.
particular attention to human rights as a political terrain defined in part by its relation to publicity, conflict, and cynicism.

This will be explored through several ethnographic scenes that demonstrate the regional and transnational dynamics of human rights discourse concerning Western Sahara. From New York City, we will move to Marrakesh, Morocco. There, I describe the disorientation that accompanied my efforts to make sense of human rights activism amidst the spectacle of Morocco hosting the 2014 World Human Rights Forum. The second scene takes place in the Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria, the hub for publicizing human rights violations in Moroccan-occupied territory, both regionally and transnationally. These efforts guarantee that human rights publicity is mediated by Polisario/SADR’s “state feminism,” and by the particular political rationality of humanitarian-nationalism in the refugee camps. And, finally, the chapter concludes by describing encounters with huquqiyyin in Laâyoune/El Aaiún, in Moroccan-occupied territory. Recounting the challenges that accompanied these meetings, I discuss how huquqiyyin engender both tremendous admiration and cynicism, connecting these contrasting responses to the notion of “plural vernacularization” articulated by Daniel Goldstein. This will, finally, leave us where the dissertation started: situating human rights activism within the layered history of decolonization across the disaggregated political formations of western Sahara.

Section I - A Brief History of the Emergence, Deployment and Proliferation of Human Rights in Western Sahara, in Three Stages

A. 1991-2005: Emergence, Conscientization


529 Daniel M. Goldstein, “Whose Vernacular? Translating Human Rights in Local Contexts,” in Human Rights at the Crossroads, ed. Mark Goodale (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 120. For Goldstein, the fact that human rights discourse can be taken up by competing parties (in his case, both disenfranchised urban residents and the police in Bolivia), “indicates the ways in which the production of local vernaculars - in the plural - emanate from different sources with different, sometimes competing, sets of agendas, resulting in a vernacular plurality that is highly contested and strained.”
Concerns about human rights violations immediately followed from Morocco’s invasion and annexation of Western Sahara, with journalists and academics reporting on the disappearances of hundreds of Sahrawis living under, or attempting to escape from, Moroccan occupation.530 While the armed conflict between Morocco and Polisario reached a stalemate by 1984, the war continued to structure the political landscape throughout the 1980s.531 While Polisario/SADR began welcoming journalists to the refugee camps to establish international support and humanitarian connections, and to promote its viability as a governing entity, Moroccan-occupied Sahara remained largely sealed off. Teresa Smith’s account from 1987 provides one of the few windows into the conditions in Laâyoune/El Aaiún during wartime. Relying upon reports from the European Parliament and the SADR-run Sahrawi Red Crescent, Smith reported that “[t]he secret police maintain an eminent watch over the city,” and that “Moroccan authorities directed a powerful campaign of terror against the Sahrawi people during the autumn of 1987. This occurred prior to and during the visit of a United Nations team to the territory of Western Sahara.”532 A number of interlocutors referred to the period of war as a time of complete militarization. One man from Smara, the city in Moroccan-occupied territory closest to the Sahrawi refugee camps, recounted how Moroccan soldiers, serving as his schoolteachers, brought their arms with them into the classroom.533 A younger man remembered that, growing up, his parents scrupulously avoided political references of any kind – including, and most importantly, listening to SADR radio broadcasts from the refugee camps – save for the occasions when the family was spending time in the badiya, safely distanced from urban-based, state

530 Teresa K. Smith, “Africa Rights Monitor,” 62. Smith wrote that between 1975 and 1980 “it is highly likely that several thousand Sahrawi civilians died at Oum Dreiga, Tifariti, Guelta Zemmour, nad Gleibat el Fula.” Hultman, “The Struggle for Western Sahara”; Lippert and Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association, The Struggle in Western Sahara and Foreign Intervention. WSC/16
531 Stephen Zunes and Jacob Mundy, Western Sahara: War, Nationalism, and Conflict Irresolution, 1st ed. (Syracuse N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2010), 3–29.
533 Fieldnote, November 7, 2014, Smara, Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara
security surveillance. Several younger activists mentioned how the disappearances and pervasive surveillance during this period instilled a deep fear in their parents. In turn, several reported that their parents, out of a sense of self-preservation, avoided discussing the history of the conflict, or Sahrawi nationalism, in the hopes of discouraging them from political activity of any kind.  

With the war having stalemated to Polisario’s disadvantage, the period from 1988 to 1991 saw a transition away from armed conflict. In 1988, major uprisings in the refugee camps against the impunity of SADR’s rule there led to the first defections of Sahrawis leaving the refugee camps. From these defections emerged the figure of the ‘a’id, or “returnee,” the subject of Chapter 2. For the first time since 1975, this established movement and communication between the refugee camps and Moroccan-occupied territory. The UN-brokered ceasefire in 1991 between Morocco and Polisario also included agreements for the release of political prisoners. Hundreds of civilian Sahrawis who had been “forcibly disappeared” in the southern Moroccan prisons of M’gouna and Agdz were released, many of them returning to live in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara. Unsurprisingly, their place in society was at first unsettled. One of the formerly “disappeared” [mukhtatef] Sahrawis described the disorientation that followed when he was released along with two other fellow prisoners:

> We three, we were in the same group but after we went out in the street, in reality not much changed, because what shocked and surprised us after spending between 4 and 16 years [in prison] - the problem that we faced was that the State [al-sulta] wanted to make the blame fall on “the others” [i.e. us],…so that they would be afraid of [us], and [decide it was] better not to deal with us…And, [so we were] incapable of la intégration in a natural/ordinary way, because people were ostracized [menbudhin] within the society.  

The Moroccan state tried to determine the path of re-entry for those Sahrawi civilians detained and disappeared during the war. And while this account observed that “not much changed,” by

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the early 1990s the social dynamics in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara were undergoing tremendous transformation after fifteen years of full-scale militarization and isolation.

Along with ending armed conflict, the UN-brokered ceasefire agreement had established a peacekeeping agency, MINURSO, tasked with holding a referendum on self-determination. While expectations at first were to hold the referendum within a year or two, disputes between Morocco and Polisario/SADR over determining the list of eligible of voters led to protracted negotiations and delays. As the two parties continued to contest the criteria for establishing a voter roll, the logistics of screening potential voters became increasingly contentious and time-consuming.\textsuperscript{536} Delays to the referendum worked in Morocco’s favor, as the state could now invest in the territory, and it moved quickly to resettle large numbers of Moroccans from the interior of the country to the cities of Laâyoune/El Aaiún, Dakhla, Boujdour and Smara. As described in Chapter 1, many of those resettled had no prior connection to the territory, save for sizable contingents of Sahrawis who resettled to Western Sahara from the southern Moroccan region of Wed Nun. In addition to transforming the demographics, cities and regional economy, the influx of new “settlers”\textsuperscript{537} to Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara also generated new, sometimes unanticipated dynamics between longtime residents and the new transplants. In the years following the UN-brokered ceasefire, Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara underwent tremendous changes, with state investments, an influx of new residents, the re-entry of Sahrawi civilian prisoners detained throughout the war, and the establishment of new lines of connectivity between the camps and the rest of the territory. Amidst these changes, Sahrawi nationalists found new space for protest, but the idiom of human rights was not immediately apparent. Rather, the


\textsuperscript{537} I use “settlers” in quotations because it was not a term used by my interlocutors. By contrast, see Mundy, “Moroccan Settlers in Western Sahara.”
referendum was the locus of conflict.

According to an interview with a former political prisoner, the first Sahrawi human rights organization formed in 1994 under the name The Committee for the Coordination of the Forum on Sahrawis, only at that time “There was no awareness of human rights, we didn’t know anything… We didn’t know law, we didn’t know the potential, I mean at all… At that time it had been two and a half years since we had been let out of prison.” Nonetheless, the formation of the group occurred contemporaneously with the stirrings of a human rights movement across Morocco. Spurred by a reckoning with the repressive “years of lead” under King Hassan II – which largely overlapped with the years of war in the Sahara – a nascent human rights movement emerged in Morocco during the 1990s. This movement, through the demands of human rights organizations in Morocco, was augmented by a public sphere captivated by the published memoirs of Moroccan former political prisoners (primarily leftists, or relatives of members of the military that carried out coup attempts in the early 1970s). The coronation of the new King Mohamed VI in 1999 gave further impetus to redress the injustices of the past decades through some form of restorative justice. This galvanized human rights organizations across Morocco as well as Sahrawis who, according to one activist, joined the movement for restorative justice “in numbers.” In 1998, a group of Sahrawi former political prisoners went to Rabat. At a time when phone calls from the Sahara to “inside” Morocco were still routed through state security services [al-’ajhiza], this marked a renewed point of connectivity that dissolved some of Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara’s isolation:

due to ignorance or a lack of understanding, we decided to participate in everything that had to do with human rights, regardless of [it being] Moroccan, foreign. Meaning, every protest having to do with human rights, we’ll go there

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538 Interview, December 5, 2014, Laâyoune/El Aaiún, Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara.
and spread our issue. We’ll spread our issue, and we’ll benefit from getting closer to others. Following some months – not many – we began establishing relationships – Amnesty International comes to mind, but we must also mention and thank a bunch of Moroccan activists who helped us.\(^{540}\)

In a trajectory that bears remarkable parallels to the early 1970s (Chapter 4), this first group of activists circulated through Rabat and Casablanca at a time of social and political ferment in Morocco. As in the early 1970s, people living in Western Sahara were emerging from a period of socio-political isolation and disconnection. And, as in the early 1970s, Sahrawi activists emerged from this isolation by negotiating with members of Moroccan political parties and civil society – particularly on the left – for support over the future of both Morocco and the Western Sahara.

It would be reductive to view this reconnection between Sahrawi political activists and Moroccan civil society simply as a matter of political bargaining, however. As one activist pointed out, these interactions during 1998 and 99 introduced Sahrawi activists to the lexicon of human rights talk and reconfigured their own sense of political subjectivity as activists:

…the other principle thing, was greater familiarization, as some of the terminology took root [tarsikh]: the matter of “Western Sahara,” and “forced disappearance” and “torture” and “killing outside of legal convention”: all of that terminology, for us, was new. It was new, and it was necessary to use it for its efficacy. It was effective with respect to a bunch of assistance, effective because it intensified the Sahrawi victimization. We didn’t [even] know that we were victims. When someone pointed out that here was a group of people, they would – imagine, when you say “You’re a victim,” [a Sahrawi activist] would say to you, “No, I’m a militant and committed,” they’d say to you, “No, fine, you’re a committed activist, but by law, and by these specifications [tawssifat] and the conditions that you [get] from them, these are crimes against humanity, war crimes, these are considered such-and-such.\(^{541}\)

In this sense, during the late 1990s the “disappeared” began to adopt the idiom of human rights discourse. This “familiarization,” or “conscientization” occurred through the re-connection with Moroccan civil society at a moment when human rights discourse was on the rise.

\(^{540}\) Interview, December 5, 2014, Laâyoune/El Aaiún, Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara.

\(^{541}\) Interview, December 5, 2014, Laâyoune/El Aaiún, Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara.
While Sahrawi human rights activists were familiarizing themselves with human rights discourse and establishing “transnational” connections with human rights organizations in Rabat, and beyond, the phenomenon of human rights remained confined to a small vanguard in the context of the Sahara. Moreover, while the push for restorative justice resonated with former political prisoners, rapid urbanization was transforming the demographics, built environment, and local economy on the ground in Moroccan-occupied territory. Tremendous investment and immigration to the territory had transformed the cities of Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara. Entire neighborhoods – some so quickly formed, they were comprised of tents – doubled and tripled the size of these cities. Moreover, the dispute over voter eligibility for the referendum showed few signs of resolution after Morocco continued to contest the results of a laborious vetting process. In this context, restorative justice did not necessarily mobilize Sahrawis experiencing frustration with the political and socioeconomic context of the late 1990s. In 1999, Sahrawis motivated by socioeconomic marginalization organized a large sit-in in a central plaza of Laâyoune/El Aaiún, Sahat Dcheira (“City Place”).\(^\text{542}\) Though not explicitly concerned with either human rights or self-determination, the very act of public protest was a landmark event given the history of military rule in the Sahara, and Laâyoune/El Aaiún, in particular. Moreover, the form of the 1999 protest – a sit-in – has enabled it to be retrospectively incorporated by human rights activists into a longer history of non-violent resistance in the Sahara.\(^\text{543}\)

As frustration in the territory rose with a sense of social marginalization and a constantly deferred referendum, former political prisoners became increasingly disillusioned with the Moroccan state-led initiative to build on human rights movements and compensate victims from Morocco’s “years of lead.” While a number of former prisoners were offered material

\(^{542}\) Interview, December 26, 2014, Laâyoune/El Aaiün, Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara. “The sit-in was, honestly, at its root social. A group of unemployed from the region protesting their daily marginalization.”

\(^{543}\) Fieldnote, October 23, 2014, Agadir, Morocco.
compensation for having been political prisoners, many saw this as the Moroccan state’s effort to buy out their calls for justice. Indeed, according to one account, several of the most prominent current-day Sahrawi human rights activists, including Aminatou Haidar, Ali Salim Tamek, and Ibrahim Dehan, participated with committees involved with the process of restorative justice that culminated in the formation of Morocco’s Truth and Reconciliation Forum (IER) in 2004. By this time, the referendum had been all but abandoned. On May 7, 2005, the initial cadre of activists educated in human rights in the late-90s formalized their association under the name ASVDH. ASVDH announced its presence at a conference convened under the title “Response to the Forum of Equity and Reconciliation: No Equity without Truth, No Reconciliation without Comprehensive Solution.” The conference title referred to the state-led IER’s attempts to compensate Sahrawi political prisoners without investigating the hundreds of disappeared civilians during the war, on the one hand, while attempting to impose a resolution to past injustices without addressing Sahrawi demands for self-determination, on the other. From this point, the activists’ familiarization with human rights discourse enabled them to deploy human rights as a tactic in the broader struggle over Western Saharan self-determination.

B. 2005-2010: Deployment

In 2005, with the collapse of negotiations between Morocco and Polisario/SADR over a peace

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544 According to Zunes and Mundy, the Sahara branch of the Truth and Reconciliation Forum, in which the aforementioned human rights activists participated, was the only Sahrawi human rights organization recognized by the Moroccan state at the time in 2003. Zunes and Mundy, *Western Sahara*, 160. IER: L’instance d’équité et réconciliation.

545 ASVDH stands for “Sahrawi Association of Victims of Grave Human Rights Violations Committed by the Moroccan State.”

settlement and the prospect of holding a referendum long diminished, Sahrawi’s living in
Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara launched what became known as an intifada.\textsuperscript{547} The
uprising began among youth across the territory under Moroccan control, calling for the removal
of Moroccan security and intelligence officers from their schools.

\textit{Munadi1:} 2005, there was a student movement without any relationship with the
[Polisario] Front. It was a group of people-

\textit{Munadi2:} Students.

\textit{Munadi3:} Students, organized through institutions [i.e., schools]. That was the
time of [cough], meaning the years of adolescence - from 2005, to be exact, or
from 2004, to we’ll say 2007. The situation was a little fluid. After the intifada of
2005, the situation moved from the institutions to – in each institution, you found
some mobilization. And in each institution, at 12 and 6 in the afternoon, there was
mobilization. Each time, the number of police increased. Because each institution
has police. The young people confronted the police after…

\textit{Host:} The Moroccan state, after the creation of youth, student organizations, they
monitored them and blockaded the institutions [tehasir].

\textit{Multiple:} They blockaded the institutions.

According to Zunes and Mundy, these protests spread throughout Moroccan-occupied Western
Sahara and into southern Morocco, as well as universities that host large numbers of Sahrawi
students, in Agadir, Marrakesh, Casablanca, Rabat, and Fes. The protests continued for months,
with “almost nightly clashes between Sahrawi youths and Moroccan police,” culminating in the
death in October, 2005 of protester Hamdi Mbarki, since memorialized as a nationalist martyr, at
the hands of Moroccan security officials.\textsuperscript{548}

In addition to incorporating a new generation of activists into the experience of political
struggle, the protests ushered in a more public era of civil disobedience among Sahrawi’s in

\textsuperscript{547} While \textit{intifada} simply means “uprising” in Arabic, since the term is so closely associated with the Palestinian
uprisings against Israeli occupation in 1987-91, and 2000-05, this appears to be one of many instances in which
Sahrawis have drawn upon both the tactics and symbolism of the Palestinian struggle. (Another example: the
Western Sahara national flag closely resembles the Palestinian national flag.)

\textsuperscript{548} Zunes and Mundy, \textit{Western Sahara}, 154–56.
Western Sahara, making the role of human rights much more prominent within the framework of the conflict. While human rights activists had been gathering and forming committees since the armed conflict between Morocco and Polisario ended in the early 1990s, the focus on human rights had been, as described above, on restorative justice. Meanwhile the center for Sahrawi nationalist action in its visible form – military or otherwise – had until 2005 been the refugee camps. In this sense, the intifada of 2005 represented a new phase in the role of human rights in Western Sahara now used as a tactic, or instrument, in the broader struggle for self-determination.

Looking back on the changes since 2000, one activist noted:

_Huquqi:_ The subject of human rights during the last 15 years, has been a pivotal _[mihwari]_ subject/matter in the conflict/struggle. Of course, not that each party has been defending human rights – that has not been the goal – but [each party] was working with it as, how do you say–

_Friend:_ Instruments? [al-ʿadat]

_Huquqi:_ ...instruments in the struggle. 549

Using human rights as a tactic through public, regular protest in cities such as Laâyoune/El Aaiún, foregrounded the fact that Morocco’s rule operated without popular consent. Additionally, the uprising in Moroccan-occupied territory gave expression to Sahrawi nationalist sentiment that, once displaced from the refugee camps, was less directly dependent upon Polisario and its ties to Algerian security forces and state funding. And, finally, a decade and a half after the ceasefire in 1991, the deployment of human rights had effectively re-instantiated conflict between Sahrawis and Moroccans. Whereas human rights are sometimes conceptualized as an ethical means of transcending the stasis of competing political parties, their use in the 2005 intifada demonstrates the usefulness of human rights activism for Sahrawi nationalists in producing confrontation with the Moroccan state, thereby publicizing the friend/enemy relation of the nationalist conflict. In other words, since 2005 human rights has become the means

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549 Interview, December 5, 2014, Laâyoune/El Aaiún, Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara.
through which Sahrawis make politics visible – to themselves, to their families and compatriots in the refugee camps, and to a transnational audience.

Certain dynamics of the confrontations produced by human rights activism warrant particular attention. The confrontation produced by human rights activism differs from previous iterations of conflict in two ways. The first, of course, is that the confrontation occurs between state and subject. This asymmetry, however, was not absent from Morocco’s military invasion and annexation in 1975-76, when hundreds of civilians were killed and “disappeared.” The second, and perhaps more consequential, distinguishing characteristic of human rights as a political terrain in conflict is the imperative for treating violence as an object of publicity and transparency. Each violation, after all, is meant to be documented. As one longtime activist observed, this differs significantly from the history of violence in the 1980s, which an older generation, victimized by state violence, generally sought to conceal these conditions from younger Sahrawis who did not experience them directly, or were too young to remember:

For us, during the time when forced disappearances were taking place and all of the [other] atrocities that we lived through, once you emerge from them, we don’t tell our children about them. And they don’t know anything about that.

“Small children who were in school, for example – our generation kept quiet about the atrocities, we were participating positively in agreement between – because we believed in the future of the unity of the people of a Greater Maghreb. And this land must be a land of peace among the people where they could live together in peace, connecting people. But now, I believe that with things this will be difficult in the future, because the young children, now, when you ask a small child, you find that he will talk with a kind of resentment [al-kurahiya] and hatred [al-haqd] for Morocco and Moroccans because of what he’s seen in the streets and what is done to the children, women and men – but to the women, in particular.550

The rise of human rights activism in Moroccan-occupied Sahara has reflected its utility as a

550 Interview, December 5, 2014, Laâyoune/El Aaiún, Moroccan-occupied territory. A younger activist’s words “When [Moroccan state agents] beat women as in 2005, during the intifadat al-qiyada – I mean, Sahrawis here, for them the woman’s sanctity should not be touched [la temtiss dhik al-hurma]. One doesn’t…hit one’s wife. Elsewhere, a foreigner might torture or kill her, but in 2005 [this happened] to the extreme. Sahrawis, generally, whether unificationists with Morocco or not - don’t accept this matter. The harassment of women.” Interview, December 26, 2014, Laâyoune/El Aaiún, Moroccan-occupied territory.
tactic, or instrument, in drawing attention to the Moroccan state’s illegitimacy in the Sahara. As one activist put it, the shift with the 2005 intifada allowed activists to “transition from a position of defense to a position of attack in terms of human rights.” However, the public, asymmetrical, and gendered dimensions of the violence produced by human rights activism in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara have particular ramifications. Embedded in a context of political conflict, human rights as a political terrain in Western Sahara has amplified the moral repugnance between Sahrawis and Moroccans to a level that concerns even some of the activists at the center of this struggle. Jennifer Curtis noted that, in functioning as “war by other means,” rights discourse can “contribute not just to present divisions but to the broader contradictions that both human rights law and discourse create regarding past and future violence.” Although Western Sahara differs from the context of Northern Ireland in certain key respects, Curtis’s main insight still applies: when functioning as an instrument of confrontation in political struggle, human rights activism has the capacity to elicit and exacerbate potential violence in the future.

C. 2010-Present: Proliferation

As efforts to publicize Moroccan detention and abuse of Sahrawi political prisoners grew, the role of the videographer in capturing the physical abuse of protesters became all the more important and small groups of mostly young men with names such as Intifada May Network, or Equipe Media, became increasingly pivotal figures in the terrain of political conflict. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the son in Batimat related a litany of arrests and confrontations with police that occurred while filming protests, usually from a nearby rooftop or window. This

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552 Curtis, Human Rights as War by Other Means, 25.
access comes with great danger, however, and the focal role of publicity in making human rights violations “count” in the conflict became most apparent following the breakup in 2010 of Sahrawi protest encampments in an area outside of Laâyoune/El Aaiûn known as Agdim Izik. After months of protest, Moroccan security forces laid siege to the tent encampment, estimated to include 6000 tents and upwards of 10,000 Sahrawis. 553 During the siege, carried out the morning of 8 November 2010, eleven members of Moroccan security forces, as well as two civilians, were killed. In rounding up suspects to bring to trial over these deaths, Morocco targeted militants involved in media teams, rather than seeking the perpetrators. The accused were tried in military court using confessions that observers claimed were extracted through torture, and the group of 25 were given sentences ranging from 20 years to life imprisonment. Although this verdict was overturned on appeal in 2016 (trial by military court having become illegal in the intervening years with the ratification of a new constitution), in July 2017 the Rabat Court of Appeals convicted 23 activists to sentences ranging from two years to life imprisonment. 554

The increasingly important and visible role of human rights in the conflict over Western Sahara over the last decade can be seen in the proliferation of huquqiyyin, or human rights activists, and the discourse around them. Since the intifada of 2005, longtime activists who had been operating largely underground have been able to form organizations, the most prominent being the Collective of Sahrawi Human Rights Defenders (CODESA), and the Sahrawi Association of Victims of Grave Human Rights Violations (ASVDH). Operating in Moroccan-

553 Mundy, “Western Sahara’s 48 Hours of Rage | Middle East Research and Information Project”; Human Rights Watch, “Morocco,” April 1, 2013.
occupied Western Sahara, these organizations have managed to connect with international organizations such as the UN High Commission for Human Rights and members of European Parliament, even as Morocco refused to recognize them as human rights organizations. In forging these connections, which provide important leverage in piercing the media blackout that Morocco had managed to maintain through decades of military occupation, these activists have increasingly fashioned themselves as human rights activists, or huquqiyyin. When the Moroccan authorities refused re-entry to the activist Aminatou Haidar at the airport in Laâyoune/El Aaiún in 2009, ostensibly because she refused to declare her nationality as Moroccan, her subsequent hunger strike drew international media attention, elevating her profile as a human rights activist, and of human rights activism among Sahrawis more generally. But with international connections and a higher profile for human rights, the surveillance of huquqiyyin in Moroccan-occupied territory has intensified.

With this emerging influence, human rights activists and Polisario’s diplomatic corps have devoted substantial efforts since 2011 to broadening the mandate of the UN mission in Western Sahara, MINURSO, to include human rights oversight. Each April, as MINURSO’s mandate has come up for renewal before the UN Security Council, protests and repression intensify in the Occupied Territory and the focus on human rights reach a fever pitch. In 2013, this campaign succeeded in gaining the backing of the US Department of State, which recommended to the Security Council the expansion of MINURSO’s mandate to include human rights oversight, only to withdraw the recommendation when a diplomatic crisis with Morocco

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555 In 2015, Morocco recognized ASVDH.
556 Rice, “Western Sahara Activist on Hunger Strike at Lanzarote Airport.” Haidar has been awarded several medals and awards from international human rights groups, including the Solidar Silver Rose Award, the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award, and the Civil Courage Prize.
557 Since efforts to organize a referendum had been all but abandoned since the early 2000s, MINURSO’s role had been reduced to monitoring the ceasefire. Its efforts in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara are closely monitored by the Moroccan government, and MINURSO staff have minimal interaction with the populace at large.
ensued. In 2014 and 2015, while I was conducting field research, tremendous hope among Sahrawi nationalists in Moroccan-occupied territory was placed in breaking through with what almost was achieved in 2013, but to no avail. Given these failures, the burgeoning role of human rights issues in the Morocco-Western Sahara conflict may be reaching its apogee, as the failure of recent campaigns have taken their toll. In the Spring of 2014, there was a genuine sense that the Security Council could cause real change. Following failed campaigns in both 2014 and 2015, the rhetoric coming from Sahrawi nationalists has increasingly deplored UN inactivity and called for the expulsion of MINURSO peacekeepers from the refugee camps.\(^{558}\) In 2016, in an unprecedented move in the conflict’s history, Morocco expelled MINURSO peacekeepers from Laâyoune/El Aaiún in response to then Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon’s use of the term “occupation” in reference to Western Sahara during a recent trip to the refugee camps, and have been pre-emptively cracking down in the occupied territories.\(^{559}\) Whether this means that human rights have reached certain limits as a useful instrument in the nationalist conflict, or will take on new forms in the shifting terrain of political struggle, remains to be seen.

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From the intifada of 2005 to the international event involving Aminatou Haidar in 2009 through to the ongoing attempts to lobby the UN Security Council to append human rights oversight to the UN peacekeeping mission, human rights and civil disobedience have been mobilized as key strategies for drawing international attention to the abuses of political rights taking place in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, as well as for the broader political aim of achieving self-determination and establishing an independent Sahrawi nation-state. With their proliferation in the last decade, however, both parties to the conflict have used the discourse to,

\(^{558}\) Fieldnote from Zouérate, Mauritania, May 5, 2015.

in the words of one activist, move “from a position of defense to a position of attack.” This, in turn, has blurred certain distinctions regarding human rights activism, and heightened certain features of the practice in the context of Western Sahara. I will explore these ambiguities and specificities through an ethnography of the *huquqi* across several contexts of the disaggregated geography of conflict. Having started in New York, we now move to Marrakesh, followed by the Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria, before returning, at last, to Laâyoune/El Aaiún.

**Section II – Marrakesh, Morocco. 2014 World Human Rights Forum**

On Saturday evening, at the conclusion of a musical concert by a Lebanese quartet, two friends and I stand on the steps outside of the downtown Marrakesh theater La Colisée, amidst a crowd bubbling with positive energy and excitement. The concert marked the end of the international day of solidarity with Palestine, itself the culmination of the four-day long World Human Rights Forum, a sprawling event hosted in Marrakesh that convened hundreds of panels and brought together thousands of delegates representing human rights organizations from around the world. As we stood on the steps, a group of young people, sporting *kefiyas* and still inspired by the concert, broke out in song, waving Palestinian flags and jumping in unison with their arms wrapped around each other. Passing cars honked from the boulevard below, galvanizing the singers to continue with even greater verve and excitement. The effervescent expressions of transnational solidarity in the name of human rights and social justice seemed both boundless and, in garnering attention from the passing nightlife in Marrakesh’s cultural district, glamorous, at one and the same time.

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The celebration in support of Palestinian rights that evening in Marrakesh would seem to
capture something essential about the spirit of transnational solidarity that animates and characterizes human rights as a moral and political project, more generally, and that justifies a gathering on the scale of the World Human Rights Forum, which reportedly involved over 5000 participants from 94 countries, more particularly.\(^{560}\) And yet, preoccupied as I was with making sense of Moroccan-occupied Sahara, I couldn’t help but think about how the event had gone off as planned with effectively no mention of the human rights situation in Western Sahara. Despite the fact that Marrakesh is less than 1000km from the northern border with the territory (referred to in Morocco as the “Southern Provinces,” or, for Sahrawis traveling in Morocco, “the region”),\(^{561}\) the four-day event had taken place without – as far as I knew – any public protest drawing attention to Western Sahara, nor any panels devoted to the subject.\(^{562}\) This was not necessarily a surprise, as a number of the most high-profile Sahrawi human rights organizations, including CODESA, ASVDH, CPSRON, the Forum for the Future of Sahrawi Women, and a group known as the Gdim Izik Families of Political Prisoners, had announced a decision to boycott the event weeks before the World Human Rights Forum began. The boycott extended beyond Sahrawi organizations, and took place amidst an increasingly hostile environment for Moroccan human rights organizations, in general.\(^{563}\) However, given the parallels between the situation in Western Sahara and the Palestinian cause, including everything from the claim to national self-determination to the national flags that closely resemble one another, the marked

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\(^{561}\) Al-mintaqa or, both more and less specifically, “the Sahara” (al-sahra’). These latter two terms are general enough to conveniently elide the sovereign matter of naming. Uttering “Southern Provinces” is distasteful for anyone who doesn’t support Morocco; uttering “Western Sahara,” or “occupied territories” (al-aradi al-muhtalla) anywhere in public in Morocco can draw unwanted attention.

\(^{562}\) As the boycotting organizations plainly understood, the politics of naming in Morocco would prevent any discussion under the title of “Western Sahara,” but any topic that might bring Morocco’s sovereignty into question (or the human rights violated in the history of establishing such sovereignty) would never see the light of day, either.

contrast in visibility was particularly striking. On the steps of the concert hall that evening, instead of imparting inspiration, the song and dance of human rights left me bewildered.

This bewilderment stemmed not just from that evening’s events, but from my full experience of the Forum. It should come as no surprise that the Moroccan state would not allow discussion of an issue that it considers a threat to national sovereignty. Likewise, Sahrawi human rights groups supporting the right to self-determination recognized that participation in the Forum would only burnish Morocco’s image as a regime that respects human rights, and so boycotted the event. And yet, like so many of the dynamics of the politics of the Sahara in Morocco, what was happening on the ground at the Forum was at once more confusing and more disturbing than the newsworthy developments of boycott and exclusion. As I found out, Sahrawis were not so much barred from the World Forum as they were selectively invited, coopted, rewarded or manipulated into attending. And their responses ranged from active participation to wary acceptance to completely ignoring the event. It was, in short, a microcosm of everyday life in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, where the discourse of human rights proliferates and sometimes almost everyone, it seems, claims to be a huquqi, or human rights activist.

Almost from the moment I arrived in Marrakesh for the World Forum on Human Rights, I started running into friends and acquaintances from “the region.” Not every encounter came as a surprise: students whom I’d met at the Sahrawi Studies graduate program at Mohamed V University in Rabat, for example, staffed a booth representing their program. But, soon after visiting this booth, I encountered a Mauritanian English teacher, who was one of the first people I had met during my preliminary research trips to Laâyoune/El Aaiûn. This man had been exceptionally gracious in accommodating me during times when I knew very few people in the
city, inviting me to his apartment for meals and out for coffee with his friends. For that reason, I thought that I knew him fairly well, and yet, he had never expressed any involvement with human rights organizations of any kind. If anything, he displayed a strong aversion to anything that might be construed as political, since his wife had lost a family member during the Morocco-Mauritania-Polisario phase of the war in the 1970s. Of course, it was entirely possible that he could have been a member of a human rights organization – although, if this were the case, I would assume that he would be involved with a state-associated group working in a less politicized realm. If that were the case, then perhaps he was here to attend panels and network with people from similar organizations, I thought. I was even more surprised, then, when he told me that he had just presented a talk with the title “Social Change for a Society Living in the Shadow of Human Rights.” On what authority, I wondered, was this man presenting on human rights at an international forum?

I was curious and confused but, before I could ask him questions, we encountered an acquaintance to whom the English teacher friend had introduced me years earlier at a café in Laâyoune/El Aaiún. If it seemed unlikely for my English teacher friend to be presenting on human rights at an international conference, this acquaintance’s presence at the World Forum seemed even more far-fetched. On the occasion when we first met, this acquaintance told me that he was a businessman involved in commerce in Dakar. How did English teachers and businessmen in Laâyoune/El Aaiún somehow become human rights activists in Marrakesh? I didn’t get to talk to either one of these two to learn more about their involvement in the Forum, but the presence of Sahrawis in Marrakesh began to emerge like mirror images in a kaleidoscope: they were the same, in appearance, as the people I knew in Western Sahara, but here in Marrakesh, on the other side of the border, they inexplicably occupied new subject
positions.564

I soon learned that the Moroccan state had transported a contingent of people from the Sahara to attend the World Forum in Marrakesh. Flown free of charge, this Sahrawi contingent was housed on a property owned by one of Morocco’s public unions.565 Compact and private, the property included a hotel, bungalows and outdoor swimming pool – the landscape and setting of a Moroccan middle class summer vacation spot. Vacant and largely unstaffed in the wintry off-season, the slightly worn property, combined with the cold, rainy weather, made the arrangement feel like an impromptu occupation. For a few nights of the World Forum, I stayed in a bungalow on this property with two friends, and each evening seemed to reveal new insights – and confusions – into who was attending this event, and why. Yet, like most of the dynamics involving politics of the Sahara in Morocco, it was difficult not to sense the Moroccan state operating the kaleidoscope and bending the will of its subjects to meet the interests of state security and intelligence.

One evening over dinner in the hotel dining room, I met women and men representing different sectors of civil society groups from Laâyoune/El Aaiún, working with or on behalf of people with disabilities, immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa, and so on. For representatives of these civil society groups, the World Forum appeared to be a genuinely unique occasion to connect with and learn about discussions and best practices taking place among colleagues working in similar fields elsewhere in the world. The disorienting experience of unexpectedly

564 In writing this, I realize that this could represent another example of what Karen Strassler terms “paranoid visuality,” or a relation between state and subject predicated on identification as threat under surveillance. Karen Strassler, Refracted Visions Popular Photography and National Modernity in Java (Durham [NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 138.
565 Moroccan labor unions have a long history of supporting the welfare of people from the Sahara, but in a manner that aims to incorporate or assimilate them into the Moroccan nation. In the aftermath of the Moroccan Liberation Army and the Spanish-French counterinsurgency known as Ecouvillon (discussed in Chapter 3), when many Saharans had been displaced to the Wed Nun region in and around Tan Tan, a leading Moroccan labor union backed the education of young Sahrawis at a converted mansion in Casablanca known as Dar Touzani. Ait Iddr, Safahat Min Melhamat Jaysh Al-Tahrir Bi Janub Al-Maghrib, 118–19.
encountering people I had previously met in Laâyoune/El Aaiûn would recur, however, after dinner when people gathered in the hotel’s ground floor. After encountering multiple acquaintances of my Mauritanian English teacher friend during these leisurely evenings, I began to discern a cohort of participants distinct from the members of civil society described above. The cohort of friends connected to my English teacher friend did not appear to have any organizational affiliation and were attending, I suspected, as a favor for some service rendered to the state intelligence services. For this group, the “politics” of attending the World Forum on Human Rights was no different from any other trade conference, where people are rewarded for their work with an all-expenses-paid trip to a nice place—on this occasion, cold, rainy Marrakesh.

I eventually learned that there remained yet another group of “attendees,” distinct from the first two. One evening during the Forum, my friends and I visited a group in a neighboring bungalow to where we were staying on the property. As soon as we walked in, the ambiance felt a world apart from the rest of the hotel and conference. A group of several young men and women had gathered in a bedroom of the bungalow and were drinking tea. Like so many gatherings I’d been to during the course of fieldwork in the Sahara, the cycle of boiling, steeping, pouring, sweetening, re-pouring, percolating, distributing, cleaning and re-starting pots of tea was the focal point of the room. There, on the floor and with the aid of an electric kettle and the ubiquitous accouterments of metal serving containers arranged on a metal tray, yet another round of tea was brewing. Those gathered had wrapped themselves in thick comforters to ward off the penetrating damp cold from the unrelenting rain, warmed as well by the uniquely pungent steam of Chinese tea fortified with sugar.⁵⁶⁶ Conversation and energy ebbed and flowed, pulling

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⁵⁶⁶ Historically heavy rains that November had caused flooding throughout southern Morocco and in the Sahara. The World Forum took place in the midst of those rains.
conversation deeper into the night with each new round of tea. While I have no record and little recollection of what we talked about that evening, I do recall that the World Human Rights Forum never came up. No one mentioned their interest, much less their involvement in the conference, in any way. Rather, the ambiance was reminiscent of countless gatherings I’d experienced with Sahrawis in a variety of locations: with ‘a’idin on a beachfront in Nouadhibou, Mauritania, with Sahrawi university students in their apartment in Agadir, with refugees in the camps in Algeria, and in numerous settings on the floors of sparsely furnished, carpeted rooms in homes throughout the peripheral urban neighborhoods of Laâyoune/El Aaiún. Although everyone in the room of this bungalow had been flown in to Marrakesh for the occasion, and were housed with the rest of us on the campus of the retreat facility, the World Human Rights Forum was of little to no interest, and so, symbolically, the space was transformed into a gathering typical of any other across northern Mauritania, southwest Algeria, southern Morocco, or the Moroccan-occupied territory. Indeed, it was as if we were back in Smara, or Laâyoune/El Aaiún, where these folks were from. As I later learned, many of the younger functionaries whose trip was paid for, spent their time in Marrakesh visiting friends at university, shopping in the medina, clubbing in the fashionable quarter of Gueliz – or, as I learned that evening, simply staying in their bungalow, ignoring and unseeing the broader political context in which they were embedded.

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On the last day of the World Human Rights Forum, on the afternoon before the Lebanese music performance, I sat with a few other men in a gravel-strewn space outside the massive tents

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568 Fieldnote, Marrakesh, Morocco, December 3, 2014.
set up for the event. The passing stream of people leaving the tents from one of the last panel sessions of the Forum gradually thinned as we took advantage of one of the first clear afternoons in what felt like weeks to brave the chill and reflect on the experience. Appropriate to the World Forum’s transnational reach, conversation began by lamenting the lack of representatives from Syria, Iraq and Libya – all in the throes of civil war and proxies to regional and international conflicts, in some form or another. Eventually, the violent conflict gripping many other Arab countries led to some reflection on and appreciation for the UN-brokered framework that has structured the Morocco-Sahrawi conflict since a ceasefire between Morocco and Polisario in 1991. In contrast to my encounters with younger media activists in Laâyoune/El Aaiún, no one in this group, comprised of middle aged, professionally accomplished Sahrawi men working in different parts of Morocco, was pining for a return to armed conflict.

Having established a general appreciation for this peace-in-conflict, one man articulated a new problem produced by this state of perpetual irresolution. Having worked at a fairly high level in the central administration of the Moroccan government, in Rabat, he described a particularly demoralizing experience. During 2011, a time when the revolutionary horizon of the Arab Spring was galvanizing protest throughout the region – including the 20 February student movement in Morocco – King Mohammed VI ordered the drafting of a revised constitution to put before the people of Morocco for ratification. This man was a functionary in government during this time and, in the office one day, a French-language Moroccan newspaper was lying around with the headline “Si les Marocains disent non?” (“If Moroccans Say ‘No’?”). Upon seeing this headline, his boss looked at him and said, “You will be the ones to say ‘No.’” By “you,” his supervisor meant Sahrawis in general whom many Moroccans regard as lazy,

569 Stephen Zunes and Jacob Mundy, Western Sahara: War, Nationalism, and Conflict Irresolution, 1st ed. (Syracuse N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2010).
ungrateful and – worse yet – disloyal, for not responding appropriately to the largesse spent by the Moroccan state to “improve” their standard of living. As a government functionary working on major state initiatives, this man regarded his boss’s statement as both an accusation and an assumption. Beyond simple stereotype or mere slight, this man understood that no matter how much loyalty one expresses, as a Sahrawi in a context of ongoing nationalist conflict, one’s essence as a political subject remains in doubt. As a Sahrawi in Moroccan society, one is, he said, “A traitor until the reverse can be proven.”

This story clearly touched a nerve with the rest of the group, and as we drove to drop the storyteller off at the train station for him to return to Rabat, a cascading series of stories revealed that almost everyone in this party had been approached, at some point, to serve in some agency of the Moroccan intelligence services. The man who had worked in government (not directly related to security, as far as I knew), told a story before we dropped him off about how, while in college, he was approached to by a member of the DST to provide information about pro-Polisario classmates. The story made everyone in the car laugh, because this man not only refused the offer, he later pointed out the operative who recruited him in an effort to shame him before friends. But the laughter came also from the unhappy awareness that everyone shared a similar experience. For Sahrawis who grew up in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, this rite of passage usually took place once they reach university campuses in Marrakesh, Safi, Agadir, or elsewhere in Morocco proper, which are known as environments of intense student politicization. As one man put it, this leaves Sahrawis with a certain level of education always in a “double bind:”

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572 “Bayn ikrahayn,” is what the interlocutor said.
be construed as “political,” and still face suspicion and coercion of disloyalty by both sides in the conflict; or, capitulate and cooperate with the Moroccan security state.

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As the World Human Rights Forum was winding down, these stories confirmed that, in order to become a certain type of human rights activist in Morocco – the kind that gets invited to speak in Marrakesh for example or, more significantly, before the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva, a Sahrawi first had to prove their loyalty, and worth, to the state security and intelligence services. These guys then named several individuals whom we had seen at the World Human Rights Forum as examples – an undistinguished classmate at university who, somehow, a year later, appeared on video speaking as a representative of Morocco at a conference in Geneva. The stakes, then, were clear: to become a *huquqi*, as human rights activists were known, required first a willingness to serve the interests of Moroccan sovereignty. For me, after four days of confusion, this was finally clarifying: the proliferation of human rights – as a practice of non-violent protest, as a means of publicizing Sahrawi resistance and Moroccan oppression, and as a subject position in the terrain of political conflict – was structured by the terms of loyalty and betrayal that permeate everyday life in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara. And, as we will see, Sahrawi activists who are for self-determination also struggle against a rising cynicism that to be a *huquqi* – whether Sahrawi nationalist, or not – entails “selling oneself” to one side or the other. For the men in the car, however, I sensed that sharing these stories was, like so much else concerning everyday life at the locus of Morocco-Sahrawi conflict, a matter of carving out a space of dignity, relief and privacy in a context of pervasive suspicion, surveillance, and political polarization.
Section III: Human rights activism in Sahrawi refugee camps, Algeria: gendered publicity

If my experience at the 2014 World Human Rights Forum in Marrakesh suggests that human rights practice in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara is invariably subsumed by the structures of Morocco-Sahrawi nationalist conflict, this does not in any way preclude transnational networks and publicity from shaping human rights practice in the region. The human rights activism that I encountered in the Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria involved elements of the human rights discourse described in New York and Marrakesh: publicity, and the ways in which human rights reinforce a project of sovereignty. Although Polisario/SADR has recently established a national human rights council with the mandate to monitor human rights in the camps, interest in human rights in the refugee camps remains overwhelmingly focused on the human rights violations against Sahrawi nationalists that take place in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara. Polisario/SADR’s Ministry for the Occupied Territories and Ministry of Information coordinate with media activists in Moroccan-occupied territory to record protests, devoting significant time on its daily SADR tv and radio broadcasts to disseminating news of these reports. Publicizing human rights violations through satellite and radio media aims to constitute and maintain transnational “witnessing” publics not only in places like New York, but among refugees in the camps in Algeria. As described in the opening scene to Chapter 1 of this dissertation, Sahrawi nationalists in Moroccan-occupied territory even rely upon SADR tv broadcasts, via satellite, for news of protests that may have taken place in an adjacent

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573 The National Committee for Human Rights was established by SADR in 2014, and includes members both from the refugee camps, Moroccan-occupied territory, as well as representatives from Sahrawi communities abroad (mainly, Mauritania, and Europe). This committee meets once per year; the National Association for Human Rights operates under its aegis. Aside from the composition of the Committee reflecting the Sahrawi diaspora, its mandate fits the template of a typical National Human Rights Institution. Interview, January 23, 2016, Rabouni, Sahrawi refugee camps, Algeria.

574 I repeatedly heard the claims, while in Moroccan-occupied territory, that children are paid to throw rocks, and women are paid if they are pictured bleeding during a protest. Fieldnote June 17, 2014, Laâyoune/El Aaiún, Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara. I could not confirm this, and all of the activists I spoke with said they were paid very little, if at all.
neighborhood to their own in Laâyoune/El Aaiún.

In this way, certain forms of human rights activism are encouraged by Polisario/SADR in order to promote the cause of national sovereignty. Polisario/SADR has, since its founding, promoted – required, even – the active participation of women in the governance of the camps. This governing practice has foregrounded an idealized “Sahrawi woman” whose role was foundational to the formation and survival of the camps during the 1970s and 80s, and who remains authorized to speak for an international audience. With the rise of human rights, and the camps’ increasing reliance upon humanitarian aid from the West (and Spain, in particular), Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh notes the added dimension of international audience in eliciting the discourse of a female Sahrawi “ideal refugee.” In other words, the particular political rationality in the camps of humanitarianism, national sovereignty and international recognition intersects with human rights discourse to produce a gendered citizen-activist, in certain contexts, and a gendered victim of human rights violations, in others. In the rest of this section, I will explore how human rights amplify certain dynamics of gender and publicity through, in borrowing from Laura Bier, its intersection with what I am calling Polisario/SADR’s “state feminism.”

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576 Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, The Ideal Refugees.
577 Bier, Revolutionary Womanhood, 79. Bier’s “state feminism” concerns a facet of Nasser’s “state socialism” wherein she argues that “the figure of the working woman became a site of debate, discussion, and intervention, not because traditional mechanisms and practices of exclusion made women’s work problematic but in fact because state feminism was predicated upon women’s inclusion and participation in public life.” This emphasis (insistence, even) on “women’s inclusion and participation in public life” is very similar to what Alice Wilson and others have reported on during the “revolutionary” phase in the late-1970s and early 1980s, when Polisario/SADR’s governance of the refugee camps was inspired by Qaddafi’s People’s Committees. Wilson, Sovereignty in Exile, 66.
One afternoon during my brief stay conducting research in the Sahrawi refugee camps, I was walking with an employee of SADR’s Ministry of Information through El Aaiún refugee camp in order to meet a man who had taken part in the 1950s Moroccan Liberation Army in the Sahara. Walking among the modest, mud brick homes and tents of the camp, we greeted an older woman in passing. Before continuing on her way, the woman launched into a speech about how she and other women of her generation had built the camps with their own hands and run them throughout the 1970s and 80s. In the Sahrawi refugee camps as well as among Sahrawis living in northern Mauritania, I regularly encountered women from the generation that had fled Morocco in the 1970s who regaled me with this same narrative of the pivotal role that they played in running the refugee camps while the men were at war. The similarities from one telling to the next were apparent: I heard women recount how they built and ran the camps themselves, constructing mud-brick houses, organizing medical care for the wounded, educating children, and making military uniforms. In multiple instances, the exact phrase, that this prodigious effort was undertaken “with one baby strapped [to the back], and another in the belly,” was repeated verbatim.580

I took the repetition of this narrative to reflect the tremendous sense of pride, both individually and collectively, that women of this generation maintain in having participated in the collective epic of Sahrawi national struggle and exile, and the sense of solidarity fostered from such hardship and sacrifice.581 The consistency of these statements indicated to me that

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578 I spent four weeks in the refugee camps in January, 2016.
579 Polisario/SADR named its original camp settlements after cities in Western Sahara (all of which are under Moroccan occupation): El Aaiún, Smara, Boujdour, Dakhla and Aouser. Whereas the spelling of most place-names are the same, Polisario/SADR uses Spanish transliteration for El Aaiún, whereas Morocco uses a different transliteration (Laâyoune).
580 Fieldnote, F’derik and Zouèrate, Mauritania 5/1-5/8/15. “wahid mutahezem wa thani fi kersh.”
581 The prominent role of women in running the refugee camps is well documented in the literature from humanitarian workers, journalists and scholars who first visited the camps in the 1970s and 80s.Harrell-Bond, *The Struggle for the Western Sahara*; Lippert, “Sahrawi Women in the Liberation Struggle of the Sahrawi People.”
members of a certain generation of women were authorized to speak of this experience as representatives of the nationalist project, and that, with time, the narrative has become embedded in popular Sahrawi national discourse. Through the construction of a courageous, strong woman whose active participation in the revolution differentiated the “Sahrawi woman” from both the recent colonial past and women in other Arab societies, the groundwork for this authorization began at the level of Polisario official discourse dating back to the 1970s. As Joanna Allan has noted in her archival research, this construction of women has served the revolutionary project in multiple ways:

It reinforces and links to the POLISARIO’s leftist and socialist ideology, it works with constructs of masculinity to recruit young men to the army and encourage a strong defensive nationalism as well as promoting the active, powerful role of women in order to ensure the effective organization and running of the nation in exile, it differentiates Saharawi society from the usual Western conception of Muslim, Arabic societies and it distinguishes the Sahara from Morocco.  

Complementing Allan’s insights, Alice Wilson’s ethnography set in the refugee camps confirms that this revolutionary “Sahrawi woman” was the subject of both official discourse, and structures of governance, in the form of active participation in the popular committees that ran the camps during the war. In a telling account, Wilson notes that women were so heavily involved in refugee camp committee work during the “revolutionary period” before 1988 that two committees operating in the same district were effectively unable to meet at the same time, as practically all of the women in a given camp were involved in both committees. In this way, the mass participation of women in administrative and political governance of the refugee camps reflects the centrality of “state feminism” to the project of sovereignty under Polisario/SADR.

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582 Allan, “Imagining Saharawi Women,” 199.
583 Wilson, Sovereignty in Exile, 67–68. Wilson notes that, if not compulsory, “in practice participation was universal.”
The terms of this “state feminism” have changed, however, with the increased role of human rights in the political conflict.

What was particularly striking about the way in which this woman presented her story in the El Aaiún camp that morning was its performative aspect. She initiated the story, unprompted and at full volume, in the middle of the neighborhood following what was otherwise a passing interaction. I could not help but be aware that my presence made the encounter propitious for this particular kind of gendered political discourse, and an international audience, even of one, could be the catalyst for this genre of impromptu speech. Nicola Cozza has shown that the Sahrawi refugee camps have long constituted a technology of power that relies upon humanitarian resources, mediated by state-like institutions, to produce a political rationality of nationalism.584 Since foreign aid workers, volunteers, Spanish solidarios, and other visiting delegations are regularly cycling through the camps, this international presence is not an incidental or occasional part of the camps’ public sphere, but a constitutive element, much the way that international legal recognition is not only an aspiration for the people and institutions of the refugee camps, but a constitutive element of the camps’ existence.585 Next, I move on to discuss how Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh’s concept of the “ideal refugee” helps to grasp the degree to which the politics of human rights and international publicity figure into everyday “state feminism” in the Sahrawi refugee camps.

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When not among residents of the refugee camps conducting interviews, I passed time during my stay in the camps in the administrative center, known as Rabouni, (where SADR governmental ministries, the Sahrawi Red Crescent, and NGOs such as the World Food Program,

585 During my brief stay in the camps in January 2016, a delegation of staffers for United States members of Congress came through the camps.
among others, are all located). Most of my time in Rabouni was spent waiting at the Association of Families of Sahrawi Prisoners and Disappeared (AFAPREDESA) a Sahrawi NGO that monitors Sahrawi political prisoners in Morocco, and records the number of disappeared people who remain unaccounted for since the beginning of Morocco’s invasion and occupation. I usually passed the time during these intervals with AFAPREDESA’s staff – predominantly single men, known as multahiqin, (from al-iltihaq, meaning “enrollment,” or “joining”) who had fled the repressive political climate in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, and “joined” their compatriots in the refugee camps. These men welcomed me cheerfully with conversation and tea whenever my presence around AFAPREDESA’s office coincided with their downtime.

One morning, as I was hanging around AFAPREDESA’s office, a group of eight or ten university students from Spain were in a nearby conference room, watching video clips of Moroccan police attacks on Sahrawis in Moroccan-occupied territory. I recognized some of the clips from having watched SADR tv via satellite when I was in Laâyoune/El Aaiún. The montage depicted a familiar pattern of police violence in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, not unlike what Madeleine Bair showed the audience at Hunter College in New York City a year later: plainclothes police and security people hitting, kicking and dragging women in the street; police kicking at a house door; police in riot gear swarming a group of protesters and pushing a woman around until her melhafa\textsuperscript{586} became unraveled. At one point in the presentation, when a video clip appeared to depict a particularly brutal hit, a student in the group audibly gasped.

Because the student group was multinational, their Spanish-Sahrawi guide was narrating in Spanish as the montage played, while a European woman dressed in melhafa provided translation in English: “[The Moroccan police] are in plainclothes so that it is not reported that

\textsuperscript{586} A loose-fitting garment worn by Sahrawi women that wraps them from head to toe.
the military is hitting people, which would warrant MINURSO’s\textsuperscript{587} intervention - which doesn’t happen anyway.” At one point a female student raised a question about the victims in the series of video clips: “Why are they all women?” The narrator responded with a cultural generalization: Sahrawi women feel particularly out of place in Moroccan society, he said, because of “their openness and tolerance,” and so are more likely to protest. This cultural difference, he explained, translates to the political realm of international support for Sahrawi nationalism: “[Sahrawi] society is naturally open and democratic, and for this reason they don’t get very much support from Arab countries.” One of the female students asked for clarification on this last point, to which the narrator responded: “These [Arab] countries, which are hierarchical and have different roles for women, they do not want to see an open, democratic country like this succeed. 95% of the aid [for the refugee camps] comes from Western countries. Of the eighty-five countries that have recognized Western Sahara at any given time, only four (Algeria, Libya, Mauritania and Syria) have been Arab.”\textsuperscript{588}

The heavy-handedness of this presentation seemed to elicit some skepticism even among a student group still learning about the conflict. As Joanna Allan’s research shows, however, this is a gendered discourse of Polisario/SADR’s that dates back to its founding in the 1970s. I present it here to demonstrate that this “state feminism” intersects with the humanitarian imperative to amplify the cultural difference, and victimization, of Sahrawi women, for the purpose of documenting human rights violations in an attempt to elicit empathy from a transnational witnessing public. The significance of an international audience adds another dimension to this figure of the gendered Sahrawi citizen-activist. Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh

\textsuperscript{587} The UN peacekeeping body for the Western Sahara conflict.
\textsuperscript{588} Fieldnote, Rabouni. January 20, 2016. At present, 44 countries recognize the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic. (Significantly more support the Sahrawi right to self-determination, but do not recognize SADR.) This number has fluctuated significantly; the lecturer here appears to be using a high-water mark when 85 countries recognized SADR.
suggests that an international audience increasingly shapes the formation of this idealized, Sahrawi gendered subject:

Fundamentally, the idealized Sahrawi women…are re/created for the audience as 'free' specifically through distancing them from (specific understandings of) Muslim identities and practices. Beyond asserting the 'uniqueness' of Sahrawi women through comparing them with Other Arab women (and at times with Western women), the association that is thus strategically re/created is a synecdochic relationship between the liberal, 'free' and 'secular' nature of Sahrawi women and the liberal and 'secular' nature of the Sahrawi 'nation'.

Fiddian-Qasmiyeh’s attention to the role of international audience implied by the promotion of a particular “women’s role” in the Sahrawi national project, past and present, foregrounds the mutual imbrication of the camps with international politics of humanitarian recognition.

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In the Polisario/SADR-run refugee camps in southwest Algeria, human rights discourse is driven by the imperative to publicize violations in Moroccan-occupied territory, both to the international community, and to the citizen-refugees of the camps. As argued in Chapter 4, a humanitarian discourse has been constitutive of Sahrawi nationalism since the establishment of refugee camps in Algeria in 1975. This distinguishes Sahrawi nationalism from the anticolonial nationalisms that emerged in the immediate post-World War II moment, which themselves were distinct from the racialized, imperial nationhoods (Germany, France, Japan, United States) that manifested themselves throughout the 19th century. As Manu Goswami notes in historicizing the modularity of the nation form, each shift indicates that for emergent nationalisms at different historical conjunctures “their temporal simultaneity, structural similarities, and competitive logic was conditioned by their location within a single, increasingly interdependent, hierarchically organized global space-time.” I assert that the logic of Sahrawi nationalism has been

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590 Goswami, “Rethinking the Modular Nation Form,” 788.
conditioned by its disjunctive location amidst the shift in “global space-time” between anticolonial nationalism ascendant in the late-1960s, and the global ethics of humanitarianism that emerged in the second half of the 1970s. As discussed in the previous chapter, the emergence of Sahrawi nationalism in the late 1960s, and its “translation” into a state-in-exile based in refugee camps following Morocco’s 1975 invasion, coincided with this shift.

As Fiddian-Qasmiyeh notes, this “ideal refugee” is emblematic of the Sahrawi national project’s “politics of survival” given its increasing reliance upon humanitarian – and, particularly, Spanish – aid. However, the rise of human rights as a terrain of struggle in the Morocco-Sahrawi conflict has displaced the locus of this struggle from the camps to the Moroccan-occupied territory. AFAPREDESA’s presentation to Spanish university students visiting the Sahrawi refugee camps suggests that Polisario/SADR’s “state feminism,” which emphasizes a politically active, culturally distinct Sahrawi woman, remains alive and well. Where a previous generation demonstrated their courage by building, managing and provisioning the refugee camps “with one baby strapped [to the back], and another in the belly,” today’s “Sahrawi woman” is not in the camps but in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, and demonstrates her commitment to nationalism by getting bloodied – or worse – by a Moroccan security agent’s baton or steel-toed boot. In this way, the gendered victim of human rights violations has in some ways displaced the gendered refugee as the “ideal” subject of Sahrawi humanitarian nationalism. Both figures, however, foreground the importance of transnational audience and publicity in shaping the gendered politics of human rights and humanitarianism in

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591 Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, *The Ideal Refugees*, 12. “By 'politics of survival,' I refer to the interconnected struggles fought by the Polisario and Sahrawi refugees to ensure that support is obtained from a range of non-Sahrawi state and non state actors. Such support both protects refugees' continued physical existence in the camps and the physical and political survival of the camps as a 'national' project.”


593 One female *huquqiya* lost an eye from attacks by Moroccan security agents.
Western Sahara.

Section IV: Huquqiyyin in Laâyoune/El Aaiún

When I arrived in Laâyoune/El Aaiún in March 2014, protests were occurring within view of my apartment window on Tan Tan Avenue on a regular basis. With the run-up to the United Nations Security Council meeting to renew MINURSO’s mandate that April, most afternoons a demonstration or confrontation of some kind took place. Occasionally, something would transpire at night, taking the form of either rock throwing with the police, or a brief, raucous rally of vehicles roaring up and down the avenue and waving the Sahrawi national flag. Daytime protests, on the other hand, tended to unfold following a familiar pattern: kids walking home from school for lunch gathered on a side street and, accompanied by some of their mothers or other female relatives, began cheering and whistling. The women might ululate; the children, usually middle school age or younger, might chant “La badil, la badil,” the slogan for the Sahrawi independence movement. They do this to gather attention and prepare for the culminating gesture: raising a Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic flag in the middle of the busy avenue. The display is usually brief, however, because everyone knows that the police are coming: if the protest is small, the kids will scatter after a few rocks are thrown. If a protest attracts further attention, the confrontation might play out a while longer. In these instances, the protesters toss trash barrels and chunks of concrete into the street to block both lanes of the

594 “No alternative, no alternative.” The full slogan is: “No alternative, no alternative to self-determination!” The chant is so ubiquitous that enunciating the second half “an taqrir al-masir” (“to self-determination”) has become almost superfluous. The unspoken second half also reflects how closely policed protests are. By the time someone chants “La badil, la badil,” chances are that police will be on the scene to break things up, leaving “an taqrir al-masir” as the unenunciated, unrealized goal. Of course, something that has been chanted repeatedly for so long invariably gives rise to parodies, including but not limited to: "La badil, la badil, ‘an ilahm wa dissir” (“No alternative to meat and dessert!”), or “La badil, la badil, ‘an tasdir ila Agadir” (“No alternative to getting sent to Agadir!”). These and other spoofs point to an undercurrent of pessimism and cynicism: i.e., the suggestion that people take part in protests for the sake of getting some immediate reward, like a meal, or getting sent to Agadir, the economic hub of southern Morocco and location of the nearest university.
avenue, and light scattered trash on fire for the same purpose.\footnote{Principled, non-violent protests of civil disobedience took place at regular intervals on Avenue Smara throughout 2014. These demonstrated a higher level of organization and planning carried out by organizations in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara that supported Sahrawi’s right to self-determination, and would not involve any rock throwing or blockading the street. I never saw one of these protests first-hand, but they tend to be videotaped by media-activist groups, such as Equipe Media http://www.emsahara.com/. See also https://lab.witness.org/tag/western-sahara/} When the protest reaches this level, Tan Tan Avenue, which serves as a central corridor connecting several popular neighborhoods of Laâyoune/El Aaiún, comes to a halt. Shops up and down the street shutter their metal doors until the confrontation has passed. Helmeted policemen, baton-wielding soldiers and a handful of plainclothes men – members of Moroccan intelligence services such as the DST or the Direction Générale d’Études et de Documentation (DGED)\footnote{DGED, Direction Générale d’Études et de Documentation, is the Moroccan counterintelligence agency established in 1973. DGED is distinct from the aforementioned DST, the domestic intelligence agency. In addition, each military branch has its own intelligence operations. The coordination between these agencies is unknown to me.} – emerge from the police vans, rocks in hand, and return fire. In one instance, I saw police and soldiers turn on a group of young men passing by, and arrest them.\footnote{Fieldnote June 6, 2014.}

After the climax of the UNSC decision regarding MINURSO and human rights oversight in Western Sahara, these protests became less frequent, and so, too, did my direct encounter with the kinds of activism that I had been repeatedly warned – by friends and acquaintances – to avoid. Although as time went on the frequency of protests on Tan Tan Avenue decreased, the pervasiveness of human rights discourse never dissipated. Whether this involved the events, people or places that I was told to avoid, or news of an arrest, protest, or, less directly, a contingent of foreigners expelled from the territory, talk pertaining to human rights and the activities of \textit{huquqiyyin} – whether at the level of street protest of transnational connection – was ubiquitous. Though spontaneous confrontations often broke out in various quarters of Laâyoune/El Aaiún, the most regular street protests during my fieldwork took place on the 15th
of every month. Organized by the Collective of Sahrawi Human Rights Defenders (CODESA), the Agdim Izik Coordination Committee, ASVDH, and other high-profile Sahrawi human rights groups, this protest took place at Sahat al-Zemla, the site of the famous 1970 intifada that is considered the birthplace of Sahrawi nationalism. Although I received word of these protests via local online news sites and, occasionally, by word of mouth, I never witnessed them firsthand. As I recounted in Chapter 1, the one time I walked toward Sahat al-Zemla on the 15th at the appointed time, I found myself confronted by two security officers who appeared seemingly out of nowhere, interrogated me, and then quickly ushered me away from the protest and into a supermarket. I never witnessed the protest myself. As a result, I had to settle for second-hand accounts, usually through the news.598 One activist I met who was regularly taking part in the mid-month protests told me that the tactic evolved through training sessions in non-violent resistance that had been hosted by Sahrawi human rights organizations, at which European human rights lawyers presented. He also compared participation in the monthly protests on the 15th to the cathartic experience of playing in a soccer match: he would get a bit nervous in advance, excited in the moment, and felt sore afterward from the physical beating, but also cleansed by the experience.599

The pervasiveness of human rights discourse and its ethnographic inaccessibility meant that, like the Moroccan security state, I only experienced this political terrain in mediated, refracted, oblique form. One encounter with this discourse came in the form of the “taxi speech.” Because a cabdriver’s views in Laâyoune/El Aaiún, as elsewhere, ran the gamut of political persuasions, periodically I would hop into a cab and be greeted with something like “bienvenido à Sahara occidental.” The choice of language (Spanish) indexed the driver’s affiliation with the

598 The local news source I referenced most frequently: https://saharanow.ma/
599 Footnote, May 26, 2014, Laâyoune/El Aaiún, Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara
nationalist cause, while the sovereign name staked a claim to independence (Western Sahara). On one particularly memorable occasion, the driver launched into his background, which included a year in prison following his involvement in the 2005 intifada. He continued to provide a description of the activist group that he had been involved with, expressed his view on the importance of receiving support from international NGO’s, primarily in Europe, and stressed the need for more human rights monitoring in Morocco. The speech continued uninterrupted until just before dropping me off, when he said, “this is the Sahara, not Morocco.” Moments like these contributed to my sense, articulated in Chapter 1, of a city comprised of competing, if overlapping, spaces of sovereignty. Though the taxis appeared uniform from the outside, once inside the car, I could be in either of these sovereign spaces depending upon the driver’s political persuasions. If I encountered a neutral driver, or a Moroccan-friendly one, I was in the “Southern Provinces,” or “Moroccan Sahara.” Anyone discussing the importance of human rights, such as the driver described above, meant that I was in the Sahara, i.e. Western Sahara – and for a short ride I would fully be in occupied territory. In this way, the project of human rights discourse in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara carves out spaces – in taxi cabs, inside homes, on the rooftops of buildings – that constitute a sovereign “field of force” for Western Sahara, within the machinery of militarized Moroccan rule. Though these encounters, I came to see the huquqi as creating these spaces through the display of symbols, private conversations, writing graffiti on walls – or, occasionally, participating in and videotaping non-violent protests.

Given the pervasiveness, yet inaccessibility, of human rights discourse in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, when I finally met with huquqiyin through interviews near the end of my fieldwork, the experience was charged. The covert logistics created a sense of secrecy and heightened risk – on one occasion, a friend drove me to meet with an activist on his family’s
property outside of Laâyoune/El Aaiún, under the premise that this man, whose arm had been
injured during a recent protest, was under too tight surveillance to conduct an interview inside
city limits. In the very last week of my research, I met with huquqiyyin on the outskirts of
Laâyoune/El Aaiún, in a neighborhood known as Hay al-Raha. There, a group of a dozen or so
young activists had gathered in the second floor of a home. Many of them had participated in the
2005 intifada, which led some of them to be expelled from school. All remained involved in
Sahrawi nationalist activism. Some had just recently been released from prison. One of them was
part of a group that had renounced their Moroccan citizenship, torn up their documentation and
unsuccessfully sought asylum in the Spanish embassy. In addition to recounting their
experiences of torture in prison, these activists described the process of receiving doctored
charges in Moroccan court that avoid any legal reference to political activity:

Munadil1: [The Moroccan state] knows that Sahrawis are not going to retreat
from their political positions or to the right of self-determination for the Sahrawi
people. To the extent that even if [Moroccans] put them in prison, they are not
retreating from their political positions. The militants [munadilin], they always
want to hear “liberation.” They’ll bring charges against you that don’t have
anything to do with you: vandalism, or arson. You stand there peacefully, and you
even have proof on the internet -

Munadil2: They don’t prosecute you for your political position, they prosecute
you with hypocritical accusations/charges [al-tuhma al-munafaqa]. Criminal
charges. Like arson.

Munadil3: For participating in protests [al-waqafat].

Me: Now I understand: in the court proceedings, they announce a non-political
charge/accusation so that it is not apparent in the court records that -

Munadila1: That there is a political position (involved).

Aside from the charged atmosphere of these encounters with huquqiyyin, it increasingly struck
me that what we were discussing had less to do with a practice specifically tied to human rights,
and more to do with their commitment to Sahrawi nationalism. Unlike the activists who related
the experience of “conscientization” of human rights during the 1990s – many of whom were considered the “elites” in the world of Sahrawi nationalist activism – for this group that was indoctrinated into the conflict through the intifada of 2005, human rights are less of a privileged political tool than the idiom into which their political struggle has been translated in order to overcome Moroccan media isolation.

In this sense, huquqiyyin in the Sahrawi national struggle has become synonymous with munadilin, or militants. Huqui is a figure of the partisan (which is why Moroccans call them “separatists” [infissaliyin]): Sahrawis committed to the nationalist struggle. For these munadilin described to me as the “foundation of the resistance” to Moroccan occupation, their engagement with human rights protest and documentation leaves them at the very center of conflict. As engaging as this sounds, one young media activist recounted once getting flushed out of a building from which he was filming by Moroccan security forces. The story of the close escape sounded exhilarating and dangerous, epitomizing the high-stakes confrontation between two competing sovereignties, until he simply stated that “really, filming the same thing every time, seeing people getting beaten up, is boring,” adding “I’d rather go back to war.”

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I am back at Batimat, where I was dining in the scene described to open Chapter 1. This time, I have returned by daylight, and am visiting a neighboring building in the complex, to see Mohamed Salek. In the 1990s, when the conflict between Morocco and Polisario shifted from war to political negotiations with a focus on carrying out a referendum for self-determination, the demographics of Laâyoune/El Aaiûn shifted dramatically yet again, with a major influx of settlers from the interior of Morocco. In addition to these settlers, some of whom were drawn by economic opportunity, Morocco also organized the resettlement of Sahrawi people living just to

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the north in a region that since 1958 was part of Morocco, known as Wed Nun. Many of these people were resettled under the premise that they would be eligible to participate in the planned referendum. Those coming from further north underwent “re-education” about their identity by Moroccan school teachers and other functionaries in an awkward attempt for them to pass before the UN identification panels as Sahrawi. In Laâyoune/El Aaiún, however, the vast majority of these settlers coming from Wed Nun were themselves from Sahrawi tribes such as Reguibat as well as the group of tribes known as Tekna. This has had far-reaching ramifications on the geography of Laâyoune/El Aaiún as a center for the political struggle over the future of Western Sahara: whereas many Moroccans who came in what is sometimes called the Second Green March in the 1990s later moved back north, a great many of those settled in tents in what became known as Khaymat al-Wahda, or Tents of Unity, stayed in Laâyoune/El Aaiún. Benefiting from free basic goods such as flour, sugar and oil, and with the promise of future free housing (which was ultimately provided during the 2000’s) these families stayed in Laâyoune/El Aaiún and effectively doubled the city in size. Meanwhile, in an attempt to lure Sahrawi’s living in the Polisario-run refugee camps following the ceasefire, Morocco built a series of large concrete housing projects in anticipation of what Morocco termed “returnees” or people defecting from Polisario. Among these projects were Batimat, which, because the large number of returnees initially did not materialize, became housing for whoever was opportunistic and needed housing. This includes Sahrawis coming from Khaymat al-Wahda who occupied apartments in Batimat when they were living in tents during a particularly rainy winter and the rains washed their free provisions away.

Mohamed Salek’s in-law’s occupied their apartment during the rains that winter in 1992, and have stayed ever since. When I visit them one day over lunch, Mohamed Salek speaks
excitedly about the high-profile human rights activist, Aminatou Haidar, who is scheduled speech before US Congress the next day. The UN Security Council’s annual meeting regarding MINURSO is coming up, (this was in 2014) and the push to introduce human rights oversight is going strong. Aminatou Haidar’s speech is seen as an important diplomatic intervention as part of this campaign. In his excitement, Med Salek mentions that in an online poll for the greatest woman in the Arab world, Aminatou Haidar had been in the lead, outpolling Queen Noor of Jordan, before internet was cut off across the region on the last day of voting. He says, admiringly of Haidar’s diplomatic campaign in the US, “human rights, those are life.” But as we continue talking and the subject of the protests, which are bound to escalate over the coming month, comes up, Med Salek suggests that these protests are all “propaganda” put on by organizations representing the “Sahrawi regime,” or Polisario, which he considers as corrupt as Morocco.  

Mohamed Salek’s ambivalence touches on a tension underlying the Sahrawi nationalist movement’s strategic use of human rights, and the figure of the huquqi in Western Sahara. In deploying human rights as a strategy to further their cause of gaining national independence, the campaign seeks to expose the ongoing torture, abuses and violations of political rights taking place in the occupied territory. And, indeed, Morocco has long deployed these repressive policies, charging anyone believed to have Sahrawi nationalist sympathies with treason, torturing political prisoners, and refusing them fair trial. They are, in effect, treated as enemies within the state. In their attempt to make these violations visible, however, human rights activists come to be seen as not simply suffering abuse, but in actively seeking to instigate violations for the sake of publicity and the escalation of conflict. Many of the protests that I observed while in Laâyoune/El Aaiún (which were only those that took place outside of my apartment window), were led by women

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and children. This increasingly appears to be part of a strategy to capture a more acute sense of violation and suffering, whether for an international audience, or for the viewship of Polisario-run SADR tv, which play these tapes in heavy rotation, broadcasting them from the refugee camps and back into the Occupied Territories via satellite.

In addition to the aspect of publicity and audience, Sahrawi’s who are as suspicious of Polisario as they are of Morocco suggest that becoming a human rights activist in the service of Sahrawi nationalism is the easiest way to get paid in a context where political economic processes are dominated by the logics of political conflict. (Or, in some cases, get a visa and gain asylum to live somewhere else.) As one man put it, anybody who gets caught with hashish can raise two fingers (the “victory” sign serves as an emblem of the Sahrawi nationalist movement), claim to be a political prisoner, and get paid. While these claims about payment by Polisario are difficult to substantiate – most militants will emphasize that given the risks of torture, imprisonment and surveillance, payment is irrelevant to what they are doing – the association of human rights activism with publicity for a specific political end means that, for some, the figure of the huquqi in Western Sahara signifies, as one Sahrawi from the Wed Nun region put it, a “mercenary making a profit off of other people’s blood.”

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In this sense, the rise of human rights in Western Sahara – and its potential fall, should the conflict continue to get more volatile – provides a case study in the use of human rights as a strategy within a collective political struggle for self-determination. The use of human rights as an “instrument” to instantiate conflict toward broader political (and sovereign) ends, does not relate to conceptions of human rights as an ethical ideal in social practice. Far from transcending nationalist conflict, human rights remain embedded within political terrain, adding a dimension

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602 Fieldnote, April 7, 2014, Laâyoune/El Aaiún, Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara.
of visibility and publicity to the displaced politics of decolonization, and to the diplomatic struggle over publicity. Nor, conversely, do they inherently constitute a form of depoliticizing governmentality. However, its specific uses in the context of the conflict over Western Sahara may lead to a certain cynicism, precisely because the proliferating figure advocating for human rights, the *huquqi*, can blur the distinction of what those rights stand for, politically. As in the context of Palestine, where human rights also feature in the production of both legitimacy and illegitimacy of competing projects of sovereignty, this can lead to cynicism surrounding human rights activism more generally. In giving rise to multiple, competing practices and figures, human rights in Western Sahara reflects what Daniel Goldstein – in building upon Sally Merry’s concept – terms “plural vernaculars,” which “emanate from different sources with different, sometimes competing, sets of agendas, resulting in a vernacular plurality that is highly contested and strained.” In considering the “plural vernaculars” that emerge across different settings in the Western Sahara conflict, human rights practice appears as a means through which Sahrawis make the political visible – to themselves, to each other, and to transnational “witnessing” publics.

Conclusion: An Anthropology of Decolonization

Every spring, the intensity of demonstrations across Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara increases, as does Moroccan state repression. Flag-waving, and, sometimes, rock-throwing, protests pop up across the different neighborhoods of Laâyoune/El Aaiûn “Thulathi” – the neighborhoods that, through resettlement, expansion and coercion, have doubled the city’s size since the 1991 ceasefire – on an almost daily basis. But so, too, do pre-emptive efforts by Moroccan state police and Auxiliary Forces to swarm intersections and prevent Sahrawi activists from assembling. The state’s coercive apparatuses operate with even greater impunity than during the rest of the year, targeting for arrest media operatives suspected of broadcasting protests, and violently breaking up those protests that do arise in the cracks of this machinery. Concurrently, the diplomatic machinery that drives the conflict’s political maneuvering at the level of international community shifts into overdrive: New York-based events that attempt to draw attention to human rights abuses in Moroccan-occupied territory usually take place in March and April in an attempt to make the conflict visible to a public audience. As noted in Chapter 1, diplomatic maneuvering constitutes a constant terrain of struggle, but in the spring months these efforts on both sides intensify. The timing for this intensification, as mentioned in Chapter 5, relates to the United Nations Security Council’s annual debate to renew the mandate for MINURSO, the UN’s peacekeeping body based in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara as well as the refugee camps since 1991.

In a certain sense, the seasonal temporality of intensified conflict serves as just another example of the apparently unusual, if not even peculiar, status of the Western Sahara conflict relative to global politics. News reports from the Sahrawi refugee camps that depict nationalist leaders in military green uniforms organizing a flag-waving march through the desert draw
attention to a national liberation movement seemingly out of the 1970s. Likewise, the prolonged nature of the conflict between Morocco and Polisario/SADR, combined with the absence of state-sponsored armed conflict, renders it largely invisible. When the dispute does become visible, particularly during these spring months, its relative obscurity easily plays into the narrative of a “forgotten” conflict, neglected by global politics and world history. In the first instance, the conflict appears to be out of step with a post-World War II global geopolitics stabilized through a grid of territorial nation-states. In the second image, Western Sahara simply appears to be outside of the movement of history, making an appearance only when intensified conflict between competing projects of sovereignty become heated, rendering it, in the words of George Joffé a “relic from a realist past.”

As argued in the Introduction to this dissertation, however, Western Sahara only appears anomalous in this way through the optic of methodological nationalism. Seen as two nations contesting a single territory, the dispute appears as the remainder of a bygone era of decolonization that has otherwise been resolved into a global community of nation-states. Alternatively, an overemphasis on globalization is also prone to rendering Western Sahara as out of step with the “now” of global political space-time, under the assumption that the dispute over nation-state sovereignty appears from this perspective as the pursuit of a political form that has already been superseded by the processes of globalization. Disorderly Histories argues, by contrast, that Western Sahara is irreducible to nationalist conflict, globalization, or the “ruins” of colonial empire. By contrast, I suggest that the contemporary political situation in the Western Sahara is best understood through the framework of decolonization.

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605 Morris, “In Western Sahara, Women Play Large Role in Forgotten Struggle for Independence”; VICE News, Escaping Moroccan Occupation.
Decolonization has been characterized as a transfer of power from colonizers to the colonized that resulted in a set of newly independent nation-states in the 1950s and 60s. More recent histories that focus on structural upheaval during the post-World War II period suggest that the outcome of decolonization was less overdetermined than the above approach would suggest. Greater critical attention to the dynamics of empire, global political economy, and the intellectual history of anticolonial political leaders has focused on the range of outcomes considered possible at this conjuncture. Frederick Cooper, for example, has examined how labor movements in post-World War II West Africa seized upon wage labor demands to challenge universalist values of citizenship and equality espoused under French empire. Gary Wilder has noted how the “untimely” politics of Leopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire challenged both national autarchy and liberal internationalism through political practices that were both pragmatic and utopian in their aims for a transformative, interdependent end to European empire. And in his detailed study of the decolonization of French Algeria, Todd Shepard notes that the historical category of “decolonization” signifying a “break” or division between the colonizer and colonized only emerged retrospectively as part of French society’s “renarration” of “the Algerian history of France.”

Disorderly Histories contributes to this critical history by revisiting the historiography of decolonization and questioning the methodological nationalism that its outcome has engendered.

610 Shepard, The Invention of Decolonization, 4–11.
In building upon this intervention, however, it notes that the study of Saharan decolonization need not be confined to a specific post-World War II period. Even Wilder’s work, in opening up a host of questions about the futures past of decolonization and their relevance to the present, states that “by [1955] the UN-US order had already defined and circumscribed the political field on which decolonization would play out.”611 From the standpoint of the Sahara, by contrast, decolonization at this point (not to mention colonialism, in Western Sahara) was only just starting in earnest. This is not to say that the processes of decolonization in the Sahara were exempt from the structural constraints of the Cold War, US hegemony, UN internationalism and the politics of Third World national sovereignty that had become entrenched by the mid-1950s. Rather, it is to suggest that decolonization has been producing new forms of political space, time and subjectivity well beyond the post-World War II conjuncture.

Some of this may become more evident if we pivot between African postcolonialism, framed largely by the end of European empire, and the political imaginary of the Middle East, framed largely by anti-Zionism and anti-imperialism. As Omnia El Shakry notes:

I underscore the need to denaturalize the dominant categories and dystopic narratives of Middle Eastern social and cultural history, narratives of awakening followed by catastrophe or triumph followed by despair. Rather than search for the root causes of a present postcolonial melancholia, as tempting as that might be, we might be better served by the reconstruction of the disparate ‘horizons of expectation’ and ‘indeterminate futures’ that decolonization, as a complex series of both historical experiences and ongoing events, offers up. This will require that we attend to archives both shadow and real, and conditions both intellectual and material, as we look to the textured local debates and endogenous forces, and minor literatures of the period of decolonization.612

I quote from El Shakry at some length here because western Sahara would seem to speak rather directly to this call for an examination of the “ongoing events” of decolonization.

611 Wilder, Freedom Time, 95.
612 O El Shakry, “‘History without Documents’: The Vexed Archives of Decolonization in the Middle East,” The American Historical Review 120, no. 3 (2015): 934.
By conceptualizing decolonization as an ongoing process and horizon of expectation, rather than a single event, this framework also draws our attention to how the process has ushered in a series of unresolved political projects with afterlives that continue to haunt the region’s political present. The lasting effects of these projects have produced political formations and subjectivities that continue to structure the region’s fragmented political geography. For this reason, I have labeled this study an “anthropology of decolonization.”

Through the framework of decolonization, certain features of Western Sahara no longer appear anomalous, at all. The anticolonial political project that galvanized bidanis and Moroccans to briefly join forces in the 1950s are indicative of complex relations of autonomy and dependence that do not conform to liberal notions of territorially bounded, sovereign, independent peoples. Likewise, the constellation of anti-imperialist political movements that emerged across the Maghrib and Sahara in the 1970s is suggestive of a moment of decolonization when the future horizon of imminent change animated a political formation that briefly transcended boundaries and notions of national belonging. And, finally, the mobility in confinement of ‘a’idin serves as a reminder that contemporary crises surrounding migrants and refugees return to the border-making processes that began during the period of post-World War II decolonization, and that continually fail to “fix” the locations and identities of nation-state subjects in ways presumably envisioned.

When viewed through the framework of decolonization rather than methodological nationalism, the Western Sahara conflict brings to mind a range of other political formations. Israel/Palestine, for example, serves as an inescapable point of reference, as it has for Sahrawi nationalists since at least 1971 when, in the Marxist-Leninist Moroccan journal Ila al-Amam, a piece was published with the headline “A New Palestine in the Land of the Sahara.” Particularly
when thought of as a geopolitical space that is “simultaneously shared and divided,” Israel/Palestine bears striking parallels to Western Sahara in the sense of both a site of ongoing, violent occupation, but also a political formation that defies neat separation into clearly defined national containers. Or, perhaps, Western Sahara might be understood in relation to Cuba, where a number of my interlocutors were educated, sometimes from primary through postgraduate levels of education as part of a longstanding agreement between Fidel Castro’s regime and the Sahrawi national liberation movement which runs the refugee camps in Algeria. Like Cuba, this “refugee nation,” as it is sometimes called, has transformed society through a revolutionary politics defined by political solidarities combined with a kind of controlled isolation from global political economic processes. A third point of comparison for the Western Sahara would be other trans- and subnational struggles over autonomy and dependence, such as East Timor, Kashmir, West Papua, Tibet, or, even Catalonia and Crimea, each of which raise questions about the contradictions of territorial sovereignty that have been heightened, but left unresolved, by decolonization. In this way, the ongoing conflict over Western Sahara appears as what might be thought of as an archipelago of “frictional surfaces,” irreducible to nation-state sovereignty, that trouble the seemingly stable grid of nation-states.

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If I have focused on the relevance of decolonization as an analytical framework for Disorderly Histories, the use of “anthropology” warrants some commentary, as well. As should be evident from the structure of this dissertation, I do not mean to conflate anthropology with ethnography, and the presentist focus that this method sometimes entails. Rather, in borrowing from Talal Asad, I use “anthropology” here to suggest a broader inquiry into the grammar of


Tomba, Marx’s Temporalities, 177.
concepts – sovereignty, self-determination, autonomy and dependence – involved in the process of decolonization:

In my view anthropology is more than a method, and it should not be equated – as it has popularly become – with the direction given to inquiry by the pseudoscientific notion of ‘fieldwork’…What is distinctive about modern anthropology is the comparison of embedded concepts (representations) between societies differently located in time or space. The important thing in this comparative analysis is not their origin (Western or non-Western), but the forms of life that articulate them, the powers they release or disable.615

Asad’s formulation of anthropology as the “comparison of embedded concepts” correlates to this project’s approach to disembed understandings of decolonization by examining how this process articulated, in practice, with “forms of life” in and across the Sahara.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, Mohamed Ibrahim and Bachir ould Sid Ahmed ould Sidi composed a poem together, sometime between 1956 and 1958, that expresses a sense of longing for Tiris. The translation of this longing across multiple registers – from the 1950s when the poem was composed, through post-1975 exile and nationalist conflict, to today – requires a translation of concepts of political space, time and subjectivity. The moral geography of “Tiris” longed for by the brothers in the 1950s, for example, is not necessarily commensurable to the “Tiris” imagined in relation to the space of national exile, of the 1970s. Nor is a hierarchical, genealogical bidani identity equivalent to Sahrawi nationalist belonging. Though the concepts change, however, their overlapping resonance at multiple levels suggests that these different meanings remain sedimented and overlapping in the poem’s ongoing circulation and reception. In this sense, the poem is a cultural artifact of decolonization, and its circulation in the present reflects the region’s disaggregated political geography.

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In a modest house in the southern Moroccan city of Tan Tan, father and son pause before reciting the poem that was originally composed by two relatives in the late 1950s. The pause is not for lack of familiarity: both father and son have the poem memorized. Indeed, the son, who initially introduced me to this poem in Laâyoune/El Aaiún, has accompanied me on the day-long trip north specifically to consult with his father. For additional reference, a recording in the voice of one of the two brothers who originally composed the poem had been uploaded to the internet a year earlier by cousins living in Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria. The son keeps this recording downloaded on his phone, and here in Tan Tan it serves to supplement the collective memory in case there is lingering doubt or uncertainty over a specific word. From my introduction to the poem in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, to the voice recording uploaded to YouTube from refugee camps in Algeria, to the father and son reciting its meaning to me in Tan Tan, in southern Morocco, my encounter with this poem in 2014 was also an encounter with the disaggregated geopolitical space of western Sahara.

As an object of cultural production that both traces the region’s disaggregated political geography in its contemporary circulation, and contains the sedimented layers of past political projects in the present, the poem represents many of the qualities of political time and space engendered by decolonization in this region. And, as just mentioned, in its expression of longing, transformations from *bidani* to Sahrawi subjectivity can be translated through the poem’s multiple layers of meaning. As an example of the “textured local debates…and minor literatures” of decolonization mentioned by El Shakry, through which the qualities of political space, time and subjectivity engendered by decolonization in the Sahara are embedded, this poem is also illustrative of what I mean, then, by an anthropology of decolonization. For this reason, I will leave the final words of longing to Mohamed Ibrahim:
Return me, without any dissembling
To my land, oh God
Until I see the mouths of the riverbeds
And I’ll stop and pull up with a tin can/metal barrel
A kettle of water from Bir Inzaran
To break, if [only] I were [there], a bit of wood
Appendix: Western Sahara (1975) and the Limits of “Orderly Decolonization”

It might be surprising that Western Sahara (1975) – a non-binding legal document that was essentially disregarded by the concerned parties as soon as it was issued – is given a prominent place in the historiography of international law. International legal scholarship considers Western Sahara (1975) integral to a larger corpus of UN-based decisions and resolutions during decolonization that contributed to the development of an international legal doctrine defining the right to “external” self-determination.616 The operative part of the decision reads:

Thus the court has not found legal ties of such a nature as might affect the application of 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.617

One scholar, writing soon after the decision was published, asserted “the Western Sahara case marks the clearest judicial statement to date with regard to self-determination as a legal right.”618

A more recent analysis lists Western Sahara (1975) first among “the major international decisions on the meaning of self-determination.”619 In this vein, Catriona Drew suggests that Western Sahara (1975) helped to define self-determination as a legal doctrine specifically in formal, rather than substantive, terms. According to Drew, Western Sahara (1975)’s operative

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616 “External” self-determination, or the right to become a member in the international community of sovereign states, is associated with the achievement of sovereignty. This aspect of self-determination is often distinguished from the “liberal” concept of “internal” self-determination, associated with the consent of the governed. The latter is sometimes traced back to Woodrow Wilson, or to Rousseau. By this distinction, self-determination as developed during decolonization under international law pertains largely to “external” self-determination; the “internal” element of self-determination in relation to decolonization was, from a legal standpoint, left undefined, but dimensions of “internal” self-determination can be found in the development of transnational law pertaining to indigenous rights. Antonio Cassese, Self-Determination of Peoples: A Legal Reappraisal (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 74; Karen Engle, The Elusive Promise of Indigenous Development: Rights, Culture, Strategy (Durham, [NC]: Duke University Press, 2010), 122.


619 Knop, Diversity and Self-Determination in International Law, 109.
decision guarantees a people’s right to the exercise of free and fair choice over their political
destiny.  

Seen as a sort of capstone to several decades of the customary practice of
decolonization by self-determination, *Western Sahara* (1975) gave definition to this customary
law as the right to a formal process (such as a referendum or plebiscite) enabling the expression
of “free will” during the process of decolonization.

On the other hand, historiography of the Western Sahara conflict reduces the decision to
a tactic wielded amidst an escalating power struggle between regional powers, Morocco and
Algeria. In this historicization, *Western Sahara* (1975) is typically characterized as “a brilliant
time-buying stratagem” masterminded by the savvy Hassan II. The genesis of *Western Sahara*
(1975) – as a tactic of realpolitik that forestalled a UN-referendum on self-determination – and
its subsequent failure to impact the outcome of Western Sahara’s decolonization, makes for a
seemingly contradictory lesson in legal and political terms. The decision’s contributions to the
definition of self-determination in international law can be difficult to reconcile with the
conflict’s complete departure from this legal definition at the moment of its promulgation.

Writing in the immediate aftermath of the ICJ Opinion, and amidst ongoing armed
conflict between Polisario, Morocco and Mauritania, Thomas Franck decried the yawning gap
between the legal decision and the unfolding political events. For Franck, *Western Sahara* (1975)
affirmed “the paramountcy” of the right to self-determination as legal means of decolonization.
And yet, the conflict over Western Sahara supplanted the exercise of this formal right and, in
doing so, departed from “a clear pattern of orderly decolonization.”

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Introduction, Catriona Drew captures the bitter irony of this seeming contradiction while referencing Franck’s article (entitled “The Stealing of the Sahara”) three decades later:

The Western Sahara Advisory Opinion of 1975 did more for the legal fortunes of the right of self-determination of peoples than it did for the political fortunes of the people of the Western Sahara.  

If Franck saw the order of decolonization ruptured by the outbreak of armed conflict in Western Sahara, Drew retrospectively situated *Western Sahara* (1975) in “a more certain legal past,” one before the end of the Cold War caused the principle of self-determination to descend into “legal indeterminacy.”

In this sense, *Western Sahara* (1975) emerges as pivotal to both the consolidation and disruption of the “pattern of orderly decolonization.” A broader reading of *Western Sahara* (1975), along with a broader contextualization of the history of Western Sahara’s decolonization, however, raise questions about this “orderly” decolonization. What constituted this “pattern,” or process? And why do the conflict and Court decision appear to mark its end? By questioning the assumed historical complementarity between the end of “orderly decolonization” and the origin of the Western Sahara conflict, this appendix will discuss some implications of *Western Sahara* (1975) based on a reading of the case that goes beyond the conclusion quoted above, by engaging with the operative text of the advisory opinion, as well dissenting opinions, and certain oral pleadings by lawyers representing the parties to the case: Morocco, Mauritania, Spain and Algeria.

In doing so, I argue that *Western Sahara* (1975) provides important insights into the conceptual dilemmas that have served to produce Western Sahara as a geopolitical object of dispute. These dilemmas revolve around sovereignty, constructions of the political subject, and

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626 Drew, 87.
627 A lawyer representing Zaire also participated in the oral pleadings. Like Algeria, Zaire was not a direct party to the dispute. Unlike Algeria, Zaire was not involved in the *realpolitik* of the conflict.
temporality. Throughout *Western Sahara* (1975), Jurists repeatedly encounter, discuss and sometimes evade theoretical dilemmas concerning the relationship between past, present and future, on the one hand, and between people, polity and territory, on the other. The remainder of this appendix will address these questions in much the same order as *Western Sahara* (1975) itself: first, by discussing *terra nullius*, jurisdiction and the Court’s deliberation over whether to take up the questions as presented; and, second, by considering the Court’s treatment of Morocco’s and Mauritania’s distinct claims to pre-colonial sovereign ties in Western Sahara.

*Western Sahara* (1975): *terra nullius*, legal ties, sovereign “entities”

*Western Sahara* (1975) deserves both contextualization and a closer reading because some of the unresolved dilemmas of sovereignty underpinning the Western Sahara conflict emerge through the legal language of reasoning and argumentation from the Case’s operative and dissenting opinions, as well as international legal scholarship surrounding the Case. Take, for example, the questions posed by UN General Assembly Resolution 3292, which framed the ICJ’s response:

I. Was Western Sahara (Río de Oro and Sakiet El Hamra) at the time of colonization by Spain a territory belonging to no one (*terra nullius*)? If the answer to the first question is in the negative,

II. What were the legal ties between this territory and the Kingdom of Morocco and the Mauritanian entity?628

Two central doctrines of international law – *terra nullius* and sovereignty (implicit in the question about legal ties) – serve to frame the Advisory Opinion. Underlying these questions,

however, remain theoretical dilemmas about time, evidence and authority that keep cropping up throughout the text’s operative and dissenting opinions.\textsuperscript{629}

Given the contested nature of the matter, the Court first had to justify taking up the questions proposed by Morocco and Mauritania, and presented by the UN General Assembly. Because they are framed in terms of Western Sahara’s status “at the time of colonization by Spain” in 1884 it was suggested that neither question had any bearing on the territory’s decolonization, circa 1975. By this argument, the Court had been presented with academic questions of no legal significance that were therefore unrelated to its jurisdiction. To this, the Court responded that the questions pertain to “a broader frame of reference than the settlement of a particular dispute and embrace other elements. These elements, moreover, are not confined to the past but are also directed to the present and the future.”\textsuperscript{630} In grappling with the broader significance of the Case, the Court brings questions of pre-colonial authority within the purview of decolonization, implying that colonialism does not cause complete rupture with pre-existing legal and sovereign ties. In asserting the Court’s jurisdiction, \textit{Western Sahara} (1975) articulates a relationship between past, present and future that leaves open the possibility for the need to historicize legal ties in order to determine sovereignty.

Spain objected to the Court’s involvement on the premise that sovereignty, concerning the past and present, and decolonization, concerning the future, involve separate sets of facts, concern distinct legal-temporal frameworks, and should be treated as such. Any attribution of sovereignty by international law, Spain contended, would inherently violate its own sovereignty

\textsuperscript{629} Several studies of \textit{Western Sahara} (1975) have also taken into account the Oral Arguments, which were presented by representatives for Morocco, Mauritania, Spain, Algeria, as well as Zaire. The Oral Arguments are an important aspect of the complex language of argumentation that constituted this Case but, with one exception, will not be addressed here. For detailed analyses that engage with records of the oral pleadings at greater length, see Burgis, “Determining the Limits of Law in the Western Sahara Case”; Knop, \textit{Diversity and Self-Determination in International Law}; Shaw, “The Western Sahara Case.”

over Western Sahara.\textsuperscript{631} Spain objected that the questions posed to the ICJ invite the Court to determine Western Saharan sovereignty when “[t]he attribution of territorial sovereignty…usually centres on material acts involving the exercise of that sovereignty.”\textsuperscript{632} In this sense, Spain’s position echoes that of Carl Schmitt, for whom the founding act of sovereignty is the “material act” of land occupation.\textsuperscript{633} As the constitutive means of naming, legitimating, and ordering, sovereignty (or what Schmitt terms nomos) derives from a material act of occupation, and therefore can be supported, but never attributed, by law. For Spain, the fact of the matter, in the Schmittian sense, was materially self-evident: Spain exercised sovereignty over Western Sahara, and had done so since 1884 through an occupation sanctioned by international law.

The resonance between Spain’s objection and Schmitt’s conception of sovereignty draws our attention to the relationship between sovereignty, international law and imperialism. For Schmitt, international law was generated by European imperial expansion, first in the New World and then elsewhere.\textsuperscript{634} Founded on the acts of discovery and occupation, jus inter gentes served to establish equilibrium between imperial powers (for Schmitt, a self-evident category based primarily on criteria of European civilization). In this sense, international law facilitated imperial expansion through the mitigation of warring powers, but it could not preempt or alter the sovereign order of states. By the late-19\textsuperscript{th} century, however, Schmitt considered the principle of legitimacy irreparably compromised by various uses of international law to establish sovereignty. Spain’s position on Western Sahara (1975) parallels Schmitt’s critique in this sense. In addition to distinguishing the “material acts” of sovereignty from international law, Spain’s

\textsuperscript{631} ICJ., 28.
\textsuperscript{632} ICJ., 28.
\textsuperscript{634} Schmitt, 83.
objection seeks to ensure that the question of past sovereignty remains separate from the present question of decolonization.

Interestingly, however, Spain’s argument rests not only on bracketing late-19th century sovereignty from informing questions of mid-20th century decolonization; it also calls for the application of self-determination as positive law. Spain’s position before the Court, supported by Algeria, was that, by 1975, the UN Charter and subsequent resolutions had already established a legal doctrine for decolonization by self-determination, obviating the need for any historical considerations.\textsuperscript{635} Taking up questions of historical ties, Spain argued, would undermine an already existing legal framework governing the transfer of power under the framework of decolonization. Spain’s position was supported by Algeria’s representative before the ICJ, Mohamed Bedjaoui, whose oral arguments asserted that, by 19th century standards, Western Sahara would be considered \textit{terra nullius}. As such, Spain’s colonial borders remain the salient markers of the territory. By mid-20th century standards, Algeria argued, self-determination had displaced \textit{terra nullius} as the operative means of establishing new sovereign entities under international law. According to Algeria, any reference beyond these two doctrines – \textit{terra nullius} for demarcating the territory, self-determination for establishing its present and future status – would be superfluous.\textsuperscript{636} Bedjaoui’s argument is premised on the application of intertemporal law, “which applies in cases where the governing legal rules have changed over time so that the original rules and the later rules require different results.”\textsuperscript{637} In allowing for the applicability of \textit{terra nullius} “at the time of colonization by Spain,” intertemporal law upholds a separation

\textsuperscript{635} ICJ., Sahara Occidental. Avis Consultatif Du 16 Octobre 1975 = Western Sahara. Advisory Opinion of 16 October 1975, 29. The UN Charter (1945), which mentions both self-determination and territorial integrity, established the parameters for decolonization. The right to self-determination was reinforced by Resolution 1514 in 1960, and through UN resolutions and customary application throughout the 1960s.

\textsuperscript{636} Knop, \textit{Diversity and Self-Determination in International Law}, 123. “For Bedjaoui, 45 the remedy for this long injustice lay in the development and application of a new international law, which revised the exclusionary concept of terra nullius through the inclusionary right of peoples to self-determination.”

\textsuperscript{637} Knop, 158.
between past and present, implying a kind of rupture between “classic” and “modern” international law.

Although the Court ultimately agreed that the decolonization of Western Sahara warranted the application of self-determination, it did not follow Spain’s or Algeria’s reasoning in order to arrive at this conclusion. As a reminder, in *Western Sahara* (1975), the Court was asked first to apply *terra nullius* as a kind of legal test:

I. Was Western Sahara (Rio de Oro and Sakiet El Hamra) at the time of colonization by Spain a territory belonging to no one (*terra nullius*)?

If Western Sahara “belonged to no one” at the time of Spanish colonization in 1884, it would follow that legal ties could not have existed – with Morocco, Mauritania or any other political entity – because the territory lacked any form of political or social organization. Some judges were clearly uncomfortable that the concept of *terra nullius* even had to be addressed, remarking in their individual opinions on the inapplicability of such a Eurocentric standard in postcolonial times.\(^{638}\) Regardless, the prompt led the Court to find that Spain’s agreements with Sahrawi tribes from “the time of colonization” served as proof of social and political organization in the region: “Western Sahara was inhabited by peoples which, if nomadic, were socially and politically organized in tribes and under chiefs competent to represent them.”\(^{639}\)

In a sense, then, *terra nullius* provided a clear – if discomfiting – test case against which the Court discerned that the existence of some form of political organization in Western Sahara predated colonization.

Deciding that Western Sahara in 1884 could not be classified as *terra nullius* brought the Jurists to the second question:

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\(^{638}\) Forster in ICJ., *Sahara Occidental. Avis Consultatif Du 16 Octobre 1975 = Western Sahara. Advisory Opinion of 16 October 1975.*, 103. : ”It is Africa of former times which is in question, as to which it cannot arbitrarily be required that its institutions should be a carbon copy of European institutions…”

\(^{639}\) ICJ., 39.
II. What were the legal ties between this territory and the Kingdom of Morocco and the Mauritanian entity?  
Devising legal tests to positively determine the more complex claims posed by this second question proved elusive. Unlike the concept of *terra nullius* that framed Question I, the Court noted that an answer to Question II hinged on the understanding of “legal ties,” which “was not a term having in itself a very precise meaning.”  
Despite the term not being a part of international law’s lexicon, one scholar has noted that this question “stimulated a whole range of competing perspectives about the extent to which international law can recognise non-European forms of rule over territory.”  
Based on the basic threshold of *terra nullius* that some kind of political organization existed in pre-colonial Western Sahara, Question II asked the Court to determine the qualitative nature of this organization.  

Conceptually, the inquiry revolved around the analytical gap between legal ties and sovereign ties. If the Court found that Morocco’s and Mauritania’s separate claims to the Western Sahara constituted pre-colonial sovereign ties, then it could recommend that the process of decolonization reconstitute these ties. As one judge wrote in an individual response separate from the operative opinion, this required “a specific criterion by which to differentiate one kind of tie from another.”  
What, then, constitutes a legal tie: a mode of authority, a sense of duty or obligation, a shared sense of ethics? Furthermore, what is it that the tie binds? Is a legal tie the basis for a sovereign tie, or are sovereignty and the law constituted by qualitatively different relations to authority? As we will see, these questions presented fundamental challenges to the regimes of evidence and modes of reasoning upon which the Court relied.

640 ICJ., 14.
641 ICJ., 40; Knop, *Diversity and Self-Determination in International Law*, 132. Knop notes that the term legal ties was “not a term of art in international law.”
642 Burgis, “Determining the Limits of Law in the Western Sahara Case,” 205.
The operative decision in *Western Sahara* (1975) remarks upon the “the very special characteristics” of the territory “which, at the time of colonization by Spain, largely determined the way of life and social and political organization of the peoples inhabiting it.” In its brief summary of these conditions, the Court cites the desert conditions and nomadic routes that encompassed a region much larger than the boundaries of Spanish Sahara. Though by no means unique in this regard, the Sahara historically defies fixed territorial boundaries which, whether literally or figuratively, are largely incompatible with a way of life predicated on long distance movement, and a natural environment of shifting sands. Whether conceptualized as a barren wasteland that divides civilizations, or as a sea of many passages that ties them together, the social and political relations of the Sahara have been predicated on “connectivity” and genealogical “encompassment” more than territorial boundedness.

Nevertheless, in following the phrasing of Question II, *Western Sahara* (1975) focused on political and social organization in territorial terms, even when observing that territorial boundaries had rarely been decisive when it came to organizing political relations in the Sahara.

**Legal Ties, Sovereign Ties I: “Special Characteristics” of Morocco’s Sherifian State**

644 ICJ, 41.
645 Throughout the dissertation, I will refer to this broader region as western Sahara. This region, which encompasses present-day disputed Western Sahara and Mauritania, as well as parts of southern Morocco, northern Mali, and southwest Algeria, is to be distinguished from the geopolitically defined territory of Western Sahara.
In addressing Morocco’s claims to sovereign ties, *Western Sahara* (1975) acknowledged the “special characteristics” of the pre-colonial Moroccan state:

That the Sherifian State at the time of the Spanish colonization of Western Sahara was a State of a special character is certain. Its special character consisted in the fact that it was founded on the common religious bond of Islam existing among the peoples and on the allegiance of various tribes to the Sultan, through their caïds or sheikhs, rather than on the notion of territory.\(^{649}\)

The legitimacy of this state was based on shared religious authority affirmed through the expression of allegiance, known as *al-bay’a*, rather than land occupation. As with its observations about the Sahara, the Court’s remarks on the Sherifian State are also supported by scholarship, in this case on Moroccan sources of pre-colonial political authority.\(^{650}\) In a comparative study on pre-modern sources of political authority, Clifford Geertz noted that the values attributed to sovereign authority were constantly being renewed – not through fixed borders and territorial occupation, but through movement. Referring specifically to a caravan undertaken in 1893 by the Moroccan Sultan Hassan, Geertz suggested that the Sherifian court’s peripatetic nature was crucial to legitimating the Sultan’s political authority: “the realm was unified…by a restless searching out of contact, mostly agonistic, with literally hundreds of lesser centers of power within it.”\(^{651}\)

The significance of this insight forces us to rethink the basis of authority, and the spatial distribution of power, in a pre-modern political entity. The conception of sovereignty in the modern, territorial sense assumes uniform and total occupation. With the divine ruler replaced by the abstract secular authority of the state, the legitimating sovereign principle becomes,

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\(^{651}\) Clifford Geertz, “Centers, Kings and Charisma: Reflections on the Symbolics of Power,” in *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 138. Note: I am not implying that Sultan Hassan entered the territory now known as Western Sahara on this particular caravan; rather, I’m drawing attention to the fact that the mode of authority enacted by the caravan was not necessarily territorial.
tautologically, the state’s ability to maintain control over its territory.\(^{652}\) In the pre-colonial Moroccan context, political authority was concentrated in the religious figure of the Sultan, and regularly renewed through the reinstatement of sovereign ties with his subordinates. While this entailed near-constant movement, the purpose of the Sultan’s caravan was not to establish, defend or move a border, but to renew or establish the allegiance of a subordinate. A further distinction is sometimes drawn between *bilad al-makhzen* and *bilad al-siba*,\(^{653}\) differentiating between regions that paid taxes to the Sultan, and those that did not. Before the Court, Morocco argued that groups in *bilad al-siba* enjoyed greater autonomy, but still paid allegiance to the Sultan.\(^{654}\)

As *Western Sahara* (1975) noted in passing, “legal ties are normally established in relation to people.”\(^{655}\) Through the lens of international law, however, sovereign ties are a territorial matter – and this is where the unstable relationship between people, polity and authority becomes more apparent. After all, Question II asked for the legal ties “between this territory” of Western Sahara, and Moroccan and Mauritanian political entities. This framework is logical within the context of 1975 and an international state system based on territorial sovereignty. However, the Court had set itself the task of analyzing legal ties in the historical and political context of 1884, when neither the Moroccan nor Mauritanian political entities claim territorial sovereignty as the basis of political authority. As one scholar noted in their analysis of

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\(^{652}\) For Schmitt, political theology. Liberal political theory, following from Hobbes, attempts to resolve this dilemma through the conception of the social contract, but naturalizes the concept of society and a certain conception of human nature, in order to do this.

\(^{653}\) Definitions of these terms have shifted from pre-colonial to colonial and postcolonial times. The following, contemporary definitions are attributed to John Shoup. *Bilad al-makhzen*: a “zone of Morocco administered more or less directly by state officials”; *bilad al-siba*: a “zone of Morocco indirectly administered through tribal leaders and/or religious brotherhood.” Dawn Chatty, *Nomadic Societies in the Middle East and North Africa: Entering the 21st Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), xxvii.


the Case, the resulting “reliance on anachronism is startling” as terms such as “state” and “border” are repeatedly utilized to describe 19th century Saharan social and political formations for which these terms are ill-suited. In this sense, the relationship between past and present in Western Sahara (1975) remains a disjunctive one, and the Court finds itself contending with two regimes of evidence that are not necessarily commensurable. As a judge suggests in a dissenting opinion, “the reply, as worded in the operative part…contains an internal contradiction. Mention is made there of the territory of the Sahara, but it is immediately explained, by the cross-reference, that it is the tribes that are meant.” The Court recognizes the “special characteristics” of the Saharan territory and Sherifian State, but the categories that it has to work with contribute to a fragmentary view of the past, producing an internal contradiction in its conception of the present.

The confusion in terms involving people, territory and legal ties relates, then, to questions about evidence, but also time. In addition to the anthropological knowledge that the Court appears to draw from when discussing Saharan nomadic and Moroccan pre-colonial state structure, the Opinion references a number of 18th and 19th century agreements between Morocco and European countries and corporations. Particular attention, for example, is given to letters exchanged between France and Germany in 1911, which discuss the limits of Moroccan rule in geographical terms that refer to Rio de Oro (in Arabic, Wedi Dhahab), a river in present day

656 Burgis, “Determining the Limits of Law in the Western Sahara Case,” 211, 214.
658 France’s 19th century hold on Mediterranean ports, through its Algerian colony, drove prospectors down the Atlantic coast of Africa. Though not referenced in Western Sahara (1975), the accounts of Donald Mackenzie, a Scotsman who established the North West African Company on Cape Juby (now Tarfaya, Morocco) in 1880, provide insight from a merchant’s perspective into the late-19th century regional logic of imperialism. Donald Mackenzie, The Flooding of the Sahara, an Account of the Proposed Plan for Opening Central Africa to Commerce and Civilization from the Northwest Coast, with a Description of Soudan and Western Sahara, and Notes on Ancient Manuscripts... by Donald Mackenzie. (London: S. Low, 1877); Donald Mackenzie, The Khalifate of the West, Being a General Description of Morocco, by Donald Mackenzie,... (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent and Co., 1911).
Western Sahara. Morocco presented this exchange as proof of the external recognition of Moroccan sovereignty. In addressing whether this could be taken as definitive evidence of Moroccan sovereignty in Western Sahara, the Court noted that the geographical description in letters from 1911 contradicted the terms of a French agreement with Spain from 1904, which fixed Morocco’s border by latitude at a point further north. Of course, the function of these diplomatic exchanges, from the standpoint of competing imperial powers, was precisely to keep Moroccan territory vague, so as for each of these powers to maximize their own interests in the region. As *Western Sahara* (1975) notes:

> The various international agreements referred to by Morocco and Spain are of concern to the Court only in so far as they may contain indications of such recognition [of sovereignty]. These agreements, in the opinion of the Court, are of limited value in this regard; for it was not their purpose either to recognize an existing sovereignty over a territory or to deny its existence. Their purpose, in their different contexts, was rather to recognize or reserve for one or both parties a ‘sphere of influence’ as understood in the practice of that time.\(^{659}\)

In this sense, Moroccan attempts to provide proof of territorial sovereignty faced a double bind. The precolonial basis of Moroccan Sherifian authority was not constituted exclusively by territory, and ties of allegiance refer to people more than places. Moreover, as Geertz’s account illustrates, neither the Moroccan Sultan, nor the groups whose allegiance he sought were fixed in place, making pre-colonial territorial ties not only difficult to ascertain, but beside the point. Documentation with Western powers, meanwhile, often purposely avoided making careful geographic references, specifically to undermine Moroccan sovereignty and reserve, as broadly as possible, imperial “spheres of influence.”

**Legal Ties, Sovereign Ties II: the Mauritanian “entity”**

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In discussing Morocco’s Sherifian State, the Court was primarily concerned with the pre-colonial basis of authority and its spatial configurations, rather than legal ties per se. Mauritania’s case, based on the tribe and the tribal confederation, or emirate, involved two, decentralized political forms that entail a different conception of how we understand law itself. In reference to a hub of trans-Saharan trade that also served as a base for the Emir of Adrar, the Court called this entity Bilad Shinguitti, and its basis of political authority shared many of the “special characteristics” used to describe Saharan social and political organization more generally. Specifically, the Court referred to the jema’a, an assembly of tribal sheikhs that reach consensus based on shari’a and customary law. In addition, the Court noted that confederations formed between tribes “either of dependence or of alliance, which were essentially tribal rather than territorial, ties of allegiance or vassalage.”

As in the case of Morocco’s Sherifian State, Bilad Shinguitti highlighted certain defining characteristics of pre-colonial political authority that share little in common with the modern, territorial state structure. In determining the nature of legal ties between the territory and the Mauritanian entity, Western Sahara (1975) focused on the word “entity” in an attempt to clarify. For the authors of Western Sahara (1975), this term “expresses the essential test where a group, whether composed of States, of tribes or of individuals, is claimed to be a legal entity distinct from its members.” Here we have the antithesis to the earlier observation that legal ties are usually between people. Taking the state to be an entity independent of society and the individual, the Court sought proof of sovereign ties in this independent entity. The critical criterion was whether Bilad Shinguitti constituted “an entity capable of availing itself of

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660 ICJ, 42.
obligations incumbent upon its Members.” The tribes and emirates of Bilad Shinguitti with a system of political authority based on an entirely different conception of law, were being measured against the classic criteria deployed by Max Weber to differentiate the modern state from a political association. Unsurprisingly, the Court determines that this pre-colonial set of affiliations based on lineage, shared moral authority and cultural practices, “did not have the character of a personality or corporate entity distinct from the several emirates and the tribes which composed it.”

Responses to Western Sahara (1975): The Imperial Limits of International Law, or the Legal Limits of “Orderly” Decolonization?

In attesting to the Case’s canonical status, legal scholars continue to debate whether Western Sahara (1975) contributed to a more inclusive international law of “overlapping consensus,” or reaffirmed international law’s inability to surpass its exclusionary dependence upon European imperial concepts. Antony Anghie’s Imperialism, Sovereignty and the Making of International Law takes the latter position in tracing international law’s exclusive structure through what he terms “the dynamic of difference.” Like Schmitt, Anghie historicizes sovereignty in order to examine the contradictions that arise amidst shifts in the criteria or normative principles used to define the concept. Unlike Schmitt, however, Anghie suggests that international law has a much

662 ICJ., 63.
665 For a detailed analysis emphasizing Western Sahara (1975)’s role in the emergence of a more inclusive, liberal international law, see Knop, Diversity and Self-Determination in International Law, 116, 128–29, 161, 167. Knop suggests that legal reasoning by the Jurists who authored Western Sahara (1975) incorporated a range of non-European sources and variety of arguments that stood in contrast to previous ICJ decisions. This, together with the Opinion’s decision regarding terra nullius, which narrowed the concept’s definition, reflected the emergence of a more inclusive international law based on a Rawlsian “overlapping consensus” between European and non-European parties to law. This view assumes, of course, that legal recognition can “do” justice. Knop cites Mabo v. Queensland (Part 2) (1992) as an example of a subsequent case influenced by Western Sahara (1975)’s narrowed definition of terra nullius. For a critical view of how liberal legal recognition erases alterity, more generally, while also dealing with Mabo, see “Shamed States” in Elizabeth A Povinelli, The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism (Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2002), 153-185.
longer history of contributing to sovereignty’s indeterminacy through changing criteria of recognition and exclusion that shift with the exigencies of European imperialism. Where Schmitt emphasizes occupation, Anghie suggests that sovereignty is a legal concept and therefore always-already relational. In historicizing the relationality of this concept, Anghie notes that the legal categories and techniques that have come to define sovereignty developed through the exclusion and disempowerment of non-Europeans through international law.666

While Anghie referenced *Western Sahara* (1975) in relation to a much broader genealogy of international law and West/non-West encounters, Michelle Burgis reaches a more nuanced, if similar, conclusion as part of an in-depth analysis of the Case. Engaging in detail with the oral arguments, dissenting opinions, and operative decision of *Western Sahara* (1975), Burgis recognized the relatively novel forms of reasoning deployed by the lawyers and judges in this case. By taking up Morocco’s and Mauritania’s claims to legal ties, Burgis noted that the Jurists were contending with “harmonies and dissonances between European and non-European approaches to authority over territory.”667 In addressing these particular claims to sovereignty, the case was implicitly critiquing the universal basis of international law and opening the possibility for a more “cosmopolitan” international law.668 Despite this engagement, however, Burgis suggested that *Western Sahara* (1975) should be read as “an ambivalent compromise” that evaded the broader questions of authority by affirming a concept of self-determination “that employed Western approaches of territoriality.”669

As important as the postcolonial critique has been for demonstrating how concepts of Western modernity have legitimized and enabled the decimation of other forms of life, I suggest

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667 Burgis, “Determining the Limits of Law in the Western Sahara Case,” 193.
668 Burgis, 216, 224.
669 Burgis, 192.
that it has limited purchase in this context. Take, for example, Anghie’s argument that the presence of *terra nullius* in *Western Sahara* (1975) represents another example of international law’s inescapably Eurocentric “legal grammar.”\(^{670}\)

The doctrine of *terra nullius* is recognized as a fiction, and yet…These doctrines are not so much confronted as evaded through reinterpretation of the relevant facts…in the 1975 *Western Sahara* Case, the judges of the ICJ asserted that the Western Sahara could not have been *terra nullius* because the people who lived there did in fact have a form of political organization. Thus the doctrines consolidated by nineteenth-century jurists continue to establish the framework within which indigenous peoples struggle to assert their rights.\(^{671}\)

The issue with Anghie’s assertion is that it overlooks the stakes in which *terra nullius* was deployed in *Western Sahara* (1975). While Anghie might assert that the mere presence of the term signifies international law’s irremediably Eurocentric essence, an analysis of the Oral Pleadings suggests that the most anti-imperialist party to the Case, Algerian representative Mohamed Bedjaoui, argued for the most expansive interpretation of *terra nullius*, in essence legitimating Spain’s occupation of Western Sahara, and therefore, the territory. This, of course, was a tactical move by Bedjaoui, but it nonetheless highlights an important relation between 19\(^{th}\) century imperialism and post-World War II anticolonial national liberation movements of the mid-20\(^{th}\) century – or, between the territorialization of Schmittian sovereignty and Third World sovereignty. Bedjaoui’s argument, of course, was to assert that *terra nullius* applied to the territory of Western Sahara in 1884 just as much as, by intertemporal law, self-determination applied in 1975.\(^{672}\) Third World Sovereignty, for leaders of the Non-Aligned Movement such as Algeria, was premised on the idea that positive international law ought to uphold *uti posseditis*,

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\(^{670}\) Burgis, 206.
\(^{671}\) Anghie, *Colonialism, Sovereignty, and the Making of International Law*, 112.
\(^{672}\) Knop, *Diversity and Self-Determination in International Law*, 121–29.
or the principle that successor regimes adopt the boundaries of their predecessors. The anti-imperialism of self-determination and Third World Sovereignty depended upon the territorial logic of international law and *terra nullius* to reinforce the sanctity of territorial borders.

Rather than reflecting the imperial limits of international law, I suggest that the “harmonies and dissonances” that emerge from the legal reasoning in *Western Sahara* (1975) indicate a Court confronted not only with the limits of international law, but with the limits of “orderly decolonization.” *Western Sahara* (1975) illustrates certain dilemmas inherent in the concept of territorial sovereignty, but it also shows that this problem lies in the replication of territorial sovereignty through decolonization itself. From this perspective, the ICJ Opinion, and the political crisis of which it was a part, emerge as a flashpoint when the process of “orderly decolonization” encountered a region that has historically defied the territorialization of sovereignty. At the same time, this pivotal moment in the 1970s decolonization of Western Sahara foregrounds a convergence, of sorts, between the disaggregated authority of post-World War II global politics, and the complex relations of autonomy and dependence that characterize political authority in the Sahara.

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