



## Nationalism, identity and citizenship in the Western Sahara

Pablo San Martin

To cite this article: Pablo San Martin (2005) Nationalism, identity and citizenship in the Western Sahara, *The Journal of North African Studies*, 10:3-4, 565-592, DOI: [10.1080/13629380500336870](https://doi.org/10.1080/13629380500336870)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629380500336870>



Published online: 24 Jan 2007.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1077



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 15 View citing articles [↗](#)

# Nationalism, Identity and Citizenship in The Western Sahara

PABLO SAN MARTIN

---

This article explores the processes of development and naturalisation of the Saharawi national identity that emerged during the 1970s under the leadership of the Frente Polisario and argues that in order to understand the Western Sahara conflict it is necessary to analyse the hegemonic policies implemented by both the Polisario and Morocco. The article shows that in the areas under Polisario administration the Saharawi subjectivity is actively and effectively promoted by the institutional structure of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic. On the contrary, in the areas under Moroccan control the same Saharawi subjectivity promoted by the nationalists acts as a successful way of subverting the attempts to hegemonise Moroccan identity, or, in other words, as a destructive force undermining Rabat's efforts to normalise the situation in the 'southern provinces'.

---

## Introduction

Three decades after the Green March, the Western Sahara dossier remains open in the United Nations. It is in fact the only decolonisation file still open in Africa. The poisoned territorial dispute over the former Spanish colony continues to represent one of the main, if not the main, threat to the stability of the North African region, obstructing dangerously the relations between Morocco, Algeria and Spain and making virtually impossible the development of the *Union du Maghreb Arabe* (UMA). In addition, the stagnation of the current peace process represents a blow to the already damaged credibility of the United Nations, which after 14 years of unsuccessful negotiations and several millions of dollars invested, seems unable to find or impose a definitive solution to the dispute. In many respects, it is not exaggerated to say that the political future of the area (from the regional hegemony to the very survival of the current Moroccan Monarchy) depends on the resolution of this low-intensity but persistent conflict.

When Spain withdrew hastily from the Territory in 1976, few analysts could predict the resistance of the Saharawi nationalist movement, lead by the Frente Polisario, against the much more powerful forces of Rabat and Nouakchott. Then,

---

Pablo San Martin is Lecturer in Spanish at the University of Leeds. He studied at the Universities of Deusto and the Basque Country in Spain, and held research positions at the Universities of Aalborg (Denmark) and Newcastle before moving to Leeds. He has published widely on nationalism, identity politics and linguistic identities in the Spanish context. Currently, his main area of research focuses on the exploration of the Western Sahara conflict. He is at present working on a book provisionally entitled *The Refugee Nation. Identity, Culture and Society in the Western Sahara*.

The Journal of North African Studies, Vol.10, No.3-4 (September-December 2005) pp.565-592  
ISSN 1362-9387 print/1743-9345 online  
DOI: 10.1080/13629380500336870 © 2005 Taylor & Francis

the Polisario was only a group of a few hundred badly armed and trained guerrillas, overwhelmed by the number of refugees leaving the cities and seeking their guidance and protection. When in February 1976 the Polisario proclaimed the birth of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), the infrastructure of the state was limited to one doctor, a few primary teachers, and few thousand exhausted refugees completely dependant on external aid. At the time of writing (June–July 2005), 30 years later, Mohamed Abdelaziz, President of the SADR and Secretary General of the Frente Polisario, is in the Libyan city of Sirte, participating with other continental leaders in the sixth African Union summit. In the previous weeks, Mohamed Salem Ould Salek, the Foreign Affairs Minister of the Saharawi Republic, toured nine African Anglophone states, among then Kenya, the most recent state to recognise the SADR (June 2005), and Tanzania, where the Saharawi Republic will be opening an Embassy in the coming months.

It sounds like the normal sort of diplomatic activities carried out by any government. But the state, represented by Mohamed Salem and Mohamed Abdelaziz, only has effective control of approximately one quarter of the total territory it claims to comprise. The rest of the territory, which includes the main cities and most of the useful areas, is under Moroccan control and appears on Moroccan (and most French) maps as ‘the southern provinces’ of the Kingdom. The United Nations does not recognise the sovereignty of either Morocco or the SADR over the disputed former Spanish colony. The conflict between the contenders to normalise their control over the territory and gain full international recognition still continues, three decades after the beginning of the hostilities. To some extent, both sides have at the same time succeeded and failed in their nation-building attempts.

In this paper, I explore the transition between the initial image of the Polisario guerrillas leading exhausted refugees to their Algerian exile and the current image of Mohamed Abdelaziz meeting African leaders in Libya. Or, if one prefers, between the overwhelming entrance of the Moroccan and Mauritanian forces into the Western Sahara and the current nationalist demonstrations in El Aaiún. The aim is to explore the way in which the emergent Saharawi nationalist subjectivity has sedimented and reproduced in the refugee camps of Tindouf and the areas under Polisario administration and in the Territory under Moroccan control, while analysing the different strategies in both areas.<sup>1</sup> In the areas under Polisario control, Saharawi subjectivity was promoted and sedimented by the structure of the Saharawi Republic, which became the routinised and hegemonic identity formation. In the areas under Moroccan control, on the other hand, Saharawi nationalist subjectivity acted not as an hegemonic formation but, on the contrary, as a way of subverting the attempts to hegemonise Moroccan identity and as a destructive force undermining Rabat’s efforts to ‘normalise’ the situation in the southern provinces.

In the first part of the article, I explore the emergence of Saharawi subjectivity and the early process of nation-building in the refugee camps. I then focus on the possibilities for the sedimentation of Saharawi national identity opened up by the period of ‘neither peace nor war’ that commenced with the 1991 ceasefire. In the third section, I look at the situation in the territory controlled by Rabat, paying attention to the way in which Saharawi nationalism acts as a constant reminder of the failed Moroccan

nation-building process in the area. Finally, I analyse briefly the current situation and the future prospects of the dispute, taking into account both these previous considerations and the present geopolitical circumstances.

### **The Storm: from ‘Unusual Refugees’ to Saharawi Citizens**

In 1975–76, as the Moroccan and Mauritanian troops advanced into the former Spanish Sahara, overwhelming the poorly-armed guerrillas of the Frente Polisario, thousands of Saharawis left their homes to seek temporary refuge in the desert. As the Spanish historian Alejandro García ironically points out:

Hassan’s army didn’t exactly enter the city [El Aaiún] in a friendly manner, it being more of a military than a fraternization campaign. For the hardened professionals of the RAF [Royal Armed Forces of Morocco] all the Sarahawis were [perceived as] collaborators of the ‘terrorists’.<sup>2</sup>

‘In Echederia, a Moroccan soldier ordered me to say “God save the King”. I did not. And he sprayed my eyes with smoke, like the smoke of the planes ...’, a helpless Saharawi woman with burned eyes related to one of the few TV crews that witnessed the Saharawi exodus in early 1976.<sup>3</sup> ‘I came from Farsia’, continued another woman, ‘my two sons died on the way and I arrived here [at the refugee camps] alone. My husband was taken to jail because he had a photo of the martyr Abderrahman Abdalahy and an issue of *Free Sahara*’.<sup>4</sup> Agaila Mohamed remembers with sadness: ‘There was a feeling of total confusion, of indecision among the people, ... the majority of us decided to escape ... but we didn’t know where to go. All those who were able to walk tried to flee’.<sup>5</sup> ‘The panic produced by the Moroccans was so overwhelming that there was a psychosis to escape at any price. [W]hen [we] saw the tanks and the deployment of the enemy forces in the streets, [we] escaped with nothing ... We thought we were going to be away for only a few days. We left with nothing. We left behind all that we had. We closed the doors of the house and put the keys in the bag’.<sup>6</sup>

At the beginning of 1976, after being bombed with napalm in Um Dreiga and other temporary camps located within the Western Sahara territory, the growing numbers of refugees ‘finally fled to the Tindouf region of western Algeria where the women, children and old men found sanctuary, while the able-bodied men returned to the Western Sahara to fight ...’.<sup>7</sup> In Tindouf, they were safe from the Moroccan planes, but there was nothing in that inhospitable part of the Hamada and very soon they realised that their stay was not going to be only ‘for a few weeks’. The immediate problem that the refugees faced was simply to survive, under the very hostile circumstances of the winter, exhausted after the exodus, crowded in improvised lines of tents, with only one doctor for the whole refugee population and little food. As Briones, Liman and Salek point out metaphorically, during the first months of exile, ‘there were not enough men [in the camps] to dig enough graves’.<sup>8</sup>

But from the early days in the Tindouf camps, the Saharawis, according to Sven Lampbell, a field representative of the League of Red Cross Societies, seemed to be *the most unusual refugees* he had known in his years of work with such groups.

He recalled early food distribution operations where there was not enough to go around and noted that he saw 'no fighting, no pushing, no theft, no corruption'.<sup>9</sup> What surprised him, as well as many other commentators, was the refugees' level of social organisation, the level of solidarity and coordination of displaced persons from very different backgrounds. In Tindouf, there were students from El Aaiún and Villa Cisneros-Dahkla, workers from the Fos Bucraa mines, former members of the Spanish army (*Tropas Nómadas* and *Policía Territorial*), nomads from Tiris, members of the Erguibat, Izarguien or Ulad Delim, *chiuj* and former *laabid* (black slaves). But instead of disordered crowds, there were ordered queues.

In this respect, many experts (both academics and practitioners) point out that far from the usual images of refugees as helpless, desperate and scared 'subaltern subjects' that survive thanks to a new 'colonialism of compassion',<sup>10</sup> the Saharawi refugee camps are an 'admirable example of social engineering, of how the humanitarian aid can be successfully administered' by the refugees themselves;<sup>11</sup> an example of participatory governance and, since the late 1990s when a limited cash economy was introduced in the camps, also an example of an imaginative social entrepreneurialism. Tindouf is indeed a central cross-point for several trade routes of the Sahara and the refugee camps have become in recent years one of the main 'tourist' destinations of Algeria. Even Alejandro García, a very critical author of the Polisario in many respects, praises the social achievements in the camps. In his own words, the Saharawi exiles managed to generate

unknown levels of human development in the African context . . . The Camps became an educative experiment with spectacular results: 100% of the population have access to education . . . Cuba has fostered, educated and given a university degree to more than 5,000 Saharawis, including 200 doctors. With a rate of one doctor to every 800/1,000 inhabitants, the Tindouf camps have an optimum level of medical care. . . . And moreover, the Polisario offers its medical services to all those who need them, Saharawi or not. [Polisario's] clinics and military hospitals, distributed along the territory east of the wall [that divides the Western Sahara], have become centres for the assistance of thousands of Mauritanian, Algerian and Malian nomads . . . No one is denied medical assistance . . . Definitely, the Camps are a focal point that expands a progressive and cosmopolitan logic in the enigmatic life of the deep desert.<sup>12</sup>

To some extent, despite their explicitly provisional nature, persistent lack of material resources and the dependence on external humanitarian aid, the Saharawi refugee camps are cities like any other city in any other state. As Brahim Motjar points out, the camps represent the materialisation of 'a *normal state* within an immense abnormality'.<sup>13</sup> The state he is talking about is the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), founded by the Polisario in February 1976 to fill the legal void created by the Spanish withdrawal from the territory.<sup>14</sup> The hospitals and clinics mentioned in the previous quote are not run by foreign doctors from *Médecins sans Frontières*, but by Saharawi doctors and nurses working for the SADR Ministry of Public Health. From the early days of exile, the Frente Polisario tried to organise health, education and food distribution committees not merely as a management

strategy for the camps, but primarily as a political and ideological strategy for progressively establishing the basis of a future Saharawi state.

The structure of the refugee camps was inspired in many respects by the traditional spatial organisation of the nomadic camps (*frics*). The camps – mainly inhabited and run by women, as most of the men were in the battlefront – also connected with the mythical narratives of the old *ghaziân* (raids), which were re-inscribed in the emerging nationalist imaginary as symbols of the Saharawi secular resistance against any sort of domination. The (meaning of the) camps, in that respect, did not arise from a discursive vacuum, but connected to a series of traditional narratives that facilitated the integration of the dramatic circumstances of the exile in a new coherent historical plot, constructed around the central idea of the Saharawi nation; an *absent* nation, in Lacanian terms, threatened, occupied and violated by new colonial powers. Set up in an inhospitable environment where there was nothing, and everything had to be done, the camps were a blank space on which to write a new historical narrative based on the desire of an independent nation-state. If, on the one hand, the camps represent the ultimate impossibility of the present, on the other, it is that very impossibility (of a territory, of a ‘normal state’, of peace, private property, wealth, etc.) that generates a radical desire for the different future incarnated by the Saharawi state.

In that sense, the development worker Jean-Claude Bruffaerts noted after a visit to the camps in 1984 that ‘the [Saharawi] struggle is based on a plan for a future society . . . Unceasingly the discussions one has with the Saharawis have to do with what will follow the war, the projects of reconstruction that they must prepare for’.<sup>15</sup> The struggle in the camps was not only for survival. The camps provided the (temporal) spatial fix of where to develop a social revolution and build a new state, based on the new revolutionary principles of the Saharawi nationalism launched by Bassiri and Luali.<sup>16</sup> In fact, most Saharawi refugees recall the first years in which the camps took shape as the time of the ‘Social Revolution’ or ‘Saharawi Revolution’. ‘The . . . focus on projects for education and technical training for all Saharawis, the experience of working together as equals, the training provided in self-management and self-expression, have all been part of their nation building’.<sup>17</sup> James Firebrace emphasised among the factors explaining what he considered to be the ‘success of the Saharawi community in exile’ that the ‘Saharawi leadership consciously developed a political ideology emphasizing political unity and a new social order’ and that ‘[t]here is a total orientation [in the camps] to a future in which *Saharawis are no longer refugees but citizens* in their own land’.<sup>18</sup>

This is probably one of the main reasons why the Saharawi exiles in Tindouf became, in the words of Lampbell, ‘the most unusual refugees’. The Tindouf camps cannot be dissociated from the political project of the SADR and the narratives of desire fostered by the war and the forced displacement. The aim of the camps was not only to provide temporary shelter to the displaced civilians and logistical support to the Saharawi Liberation Army (SLA). On the contrary, as I mentioned before, they were planned as a scenario in which the creation of the new Saharawi subjectivity that emerged out of the ashes of the former pre-colonial and colonial identities could be explored. From the Zemla massacre in 1970<sup>19</sup> to the proclamation of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic in February 1976 and the death of Luali four months

FIGURE 1  
SAHARAWI REFUGEE SHOWING SADR ID CARD



Source: 'Fotografías del Sahara Occidental' Data Bank, in Ayudemos al Pueblo Saharaui:  
<http://www.lasonet.com/sh-83.htm>

later, the inhabitants of the Spanish Sahara faced a dramatic overlapping of critical events that contributed decisively to the collapse of the former collective identities (both tribal and supra-tribal – i.e. the diffuse identity of the people of the *Trab Al-Bidan*)<sup>20</sup> and, therefore, the opening of a discursive space for the emergence of a new political subjectivity. The times of storm, crisis and radical social dislocation have negative and positive effects. If on the one hand they threaten and destroy former sedimented identities they also generate the need for new forms of identification, opening the space for the emergence of new communitarian projects.

The nationalist project of the Frente Polisario, led by a young generation of militants influenced by 'the ideological movements of the time (Nasser, Cabral, Guevara, Mao Tsetung, etc.)', envisaged not only an independent future but also a 'democratic, egalitarian and *new society*, . . . abolishing slavery, eradicating inequality and eliminating tribalism . . .',<sup>21</sup> and the camps became the spatial fix in which to implement such a political communitarian project. The Polisario enforced, from the early days of the exile, the creation of an 'ordered society' (against the expectations of fighting, pushing and disorder of the development worker mentioned before), that replicated the structure of a projected Saharawi nation-state, mainly inspired at the beginning by the Libyan and Algerian revolutions and the fashionable readings of the time. As Brahim Motjar acknowledges, 'all [the young leaders of the OVSL – Bassiri's

group – and the Frente Polisario] read Franz Fanon and Ché Guevara’ and were influenced by the anti-colonial and revolutionary experiences of Mozambique, Angola, Cape Verde, Cuba, Vietnam, etc.<sup>22</sup> Although, as most of the Polisario leaders emphasise, their project was never strictly socialist or communist, the result was a nationalist project that, integrating some ideological elements from the revolutionary traditions, envisaged (and implemented the policies towards) a society based on the principles of radical communitarism, social equality and group loyalty.

The Polisario was much more than a political party or a national liberation movement, it was a state, an exiled state that assigned a particular role to everyone, decided the place of residence, took care of the children, provided medicines and gave food, clothes and shelter. All the [refugee] population lived at the rhythm of its slogans and dictums. Such a uniform and closed world comprised the optimum conditions for attempting the new mode [of society] that replicated politically, according to the interpretation of the FP [Frente Polisario], the classic lines of the revolutionary left: primacy of collectivism over individualism, and democratic centralism, *Markasía Demokratía*.<sup>23</sup>

A central element of the new order was its emphasis on equality, although in fact it came naturally. In the camps, due to the circumstances, more than equality there was a radical communism: all ate the same, they lived in identical tents and no one had money.

‘For 15 years there was no money . . . . When from the 90s onwards money started to circulate again . . . , we didn’t know either the value of things or the notes . . . . There were young people who at the age of 20 had never used a note’.<sup>24</sup>

But on many occasions, the contours of this new social order collided, in the words of Fadel Ismail, with the beliefs of a ‘society that was still fundamentally conservative’.<sup>25</sup> One of the main clashes was:

the radical decision of the Frente Polisario of eradicating tribalism. In everyday life it was necessary to create a new language and to develop a new and artificial behaviour. It was prohibited to mention the name of the father because that would inform about the tribal origin. “I don’t have father, I have a people”. . . . “Who are you? Ahmed. Son of . . . ? Son of the Saharawi people. What tribe are you from? From the Saharawi people”.<sup>26</sup>

According to the interpretations of some influential leaders, the role of the war during the first decade and the need to keep a cohesive society against the threatening radical ‘other’ incarnated by Morocco, prevented any criticism and legitimated the purges of those perceived to be a danger to the revolution. However, as García explains, most of these internal purges seem to have been related to internal power struggles among the leadership of the Polisario and were used as a strategy to deactivate potential competitors.<sup>27</sup>

At the end of the 1980s however, the social tension that had been growing in the camps exploded, generating, according to some accounts, demonstrations, protests and the open questioning of the direction that the Saharawi Revolution had taken,



the role of a number of leaders and the excessive authority of the small and powerful *Political Bureau*. Although internal dissent had been persecuted, the new order had encouraged the political (and mainly administrative) participation of the refugees in the public life of the camps. They were not only displaced persons depending on external aid but also citizens, members of political cells and administrative committees. As citizens they had the in-group legitimacy to put into question some of the principles of the revolution. What the refugee camps witnessed during the late 1980s was a *revolution within the revolution* – a ‘Saharawi perestroika’, in the words of Toby Shelley<sup>28</sup> – that redefined the basis of the Saharawi state in waiting. This Saharawi *transition* coincided with the negotiations that preceded the ceasefire and the peace plan brokered by the UN in 1991 (known as the Settlement Plan). With a pause in the armed hostilities, a new phase opened in the everyday life of the camps. The storm, the time of war, the fear of bombardment, the time of waving of flags when the fighters returned to the camps and paraded Moroccan prisoners and weapons captured in the last *ghazi*, had finished. At least temporarily.

### **The Calm: from Waved to Unwaved Flags**

After the signature of the Settlement Plan in 1991, morale in the camps was high, despite a lack of trust in the diplomatic route among significant sectors of the Saharawi military. Most refugees expected that, after concluding the identification of the eligible voters in a period of approximately six months, the self-determination referendum – the central point on which the peace plan was based – would take place and they would return to the Western Sahara in no more than one or two years. However, the identification of the eligible voters soon became the major obstacle to the implementation of the plan. While the Frente Polisario provided a list of native inhabitants of the territory, based on the Spanish census of 1974, Rabat attempted from the outset to introduce large numbers of settlers.<sup>29</sup>

Disagreements over the census initiated a new period in the Western Sahara conflict in which confrontation was no longer on the battlefield but around negotiating tables. The role of the military became defensive, as the new ‘fighters’ returning to the camps with victories were the network of Saharawi diplomats, bureaucrats and politicians. In this respect, during the 1990s, the (strategic) tension that had always existed between the structure of the Frente Polisario, as a movement, and that of the Saharawi Republic, as an institutional structure, seems to have been partially resolved in favour of the latter, although in fact it is almost impossible to trace a clear dividing line between the two. The situation of ‘neither peace nor war’ that began with the ceasefire contributed to a normalisation of life in the camps. It facilitated the relaxation of the social codes imposed during the previous years (allowing, for example, some degree of ‘tribal revival’) and the strengthening of the political and administrative structures of the Saharawi state that had been set up during the previous decade under very different circumstances.

The following story, which I experienced in April 2004 while undertaking fieldwork in the refugee camps, illustrates the changes in the Tindouf exile since the ceasefire and the opening of the diplomatic phase of the conflict. In Rabouni – the political

and administrative centre of the camps – I had a very interesting conversation with a Spanish man who was visiting the camps. He had come to the camps for five days to visit ‘his child’, the Saharawi boy that he and his family had fostered during the previous summer in Spain under the auspices of the cooperation programme *Vacaciones en Paz* (Holidays in Peace).<sup>30</sup> This is the story that he told me:

On the last day of his stay in Smara camp, he went with his Saharawi host family to one of the new commercial districts of the camp to buy some crafts. The shopkeeper spoke little Spanish, so his Saharawi ‘guides’ (‘his boy’ and some relatives) did the translation and the negotiation. The final price of what the Spanish man wanted to buy was 27,000 Dinars. He thought that it was a little bit expensive, but as he was looking into his wallet and trying to calculate how much it was in Euros, his Saharawis companions told him to pay with two (Algerian) notes of 1,000 Dinars. He did not understand, but he gave the shopkeeper the two red notes on which ‘1,000’ was clearly printed. To his surprise, he was given back some coins by the smiling merchant. He was confused. ‘I’ve paid him with two notes of 1,000 Dinars . . . but the price was 27,000 Dinars . . . and he gave me some change back . . .’, he told his companions helplessly. His confusion increased even more when he was told by his companions: ‘Oh, no! Forget about the “1,000” written on the note, it’s part of the design; it’s only a drawing. The red notes – ignore what is printed on them – are worth 20,000 Dinars’. The Spanish visitor let the matter drop, thinking to himself that he didn’t understand the transaction, but that if it was a ‘con’, he didn’t really mind as it was only a few Euros and they need them more than he.

He was relieved when I explained to him that everything had been a misunderstanding about the currency. The Saharawis were talking in Saharawi Dinars, but the physical notes they were using were Algerian Dinars (Euros are also widely used in the camps). The printed value – 1,000 – was that of the Algerian Dinar, but the exchange value in the economic context of the camps was that of the imagined Saharawi Dinar, officially called Saharawi Peseta (whose value, based on the old Spanish Peseta, is approximately 20 times less than the current Algerian Dinar). There is, of course, nothing new about the value of money being socially constructed. But this anecdote goes further than being simply an example *par excellence* of the socially constructed character of money, in as much as the nominal value of the notes used by the Saharawi refugees is not even printed on the notes. There is no visual reminder of how many units of currency they had agreed to symbolise with ‘the red notes’. The exchange value is explicitly imagined, explicitly constructed at the symbolic level.

As for Saharawi coins, the only ones that exist (Figure 2) have been coined in very limited numbers to commemorate certain events of recent Saharawi history. They are not used in everyday exchanges, but kept as symbolic reminders of the will to have a ‘proper’ Saharawi currency. Thus, the coins and notes that are used in everyday life are the ‘wrong’ ones.

The Saharawi (revolutionary) subjectivity that emerged during the 1970s, the nationalist identity and the concept of citizenship associated with it, is sedimented in the everyday life of the camps in a whole range of symbols, spaces, practices and stories. National currencies have been traditionally a very important symbol of

FIGURE 2  
XX ANNIVERSARY OF THE SADR COMMEMORATIVE EDITION OF 200 SAHARAWI  
PESETAS COINS (1996)



Source: 'Fotografías del Sahara Occidental' Data Bank, in Ayudemos al Pueblo Saharaui:  
<http://www.lasonet.com/rasd-8.htm>

the sovereign nation-state and play a central role in the routinisation of identity as an unnoticed remainder of belonging to a certain socio-political community. The Saharawi currency is a marker of the political identity promoted by the Polisario's nationalist project and incarnated in the Saharawi Republic. The Saharawi state, in that respect, is a state like any other. However, the situation is not, as Motjar has already explained,<sup>31</sup> of 'normality' but of an 'abnormal normality' which is defined in the context of exile, conflict, dependence on external aid, displacement and deprivation. This leads us to another crucial point illustrated by the currency story: the Saharawi's 'borrowed' notes exemplify not only the scarceness of material resources and means, but also the provisionality of the spatial fixation of the state. In other words, because circumstances do not permit the construction of a 'normal' state, it is built more explicitly at the symbolic level.

The problematic relation between the signifier and the signified (note vs. value, sign vs. meaning) is broken and even, to some extent, subverted. In other words, the socially constructed and agreed value of 20,000 Saharawi Dinars is represented through a 'wrong' signifier (whose hegemonic meaning in the surrounding contexts is a different one, '1,000 Algerian Dinars'). In that way, what the Algerian note

represents in the camps is not only 20,000 Saharawi Dinars but the absence of Saharawi printed notes. The Saharawi currency is therefore, through the presence of its (physical) absence, elevated to the place of an object of desire for the refugees. There is a continuous tension between the process of nation-building, carried out in the camps through the symbolisation of identity, and its inherent impossibility. The note, for instance, represents the achievement of a national currency (at a purely discursive level) while at the same time symbolising its very impossibility, thus symbolising that the materialisation of the Saharawi currency will not be possible until circumstances change. And it is precisely that routine encounter with the impossibility that generates the desire to change the situation. This is probably what one senior Polisario member meant when he spoke of a 'normalisation of the [everyday] life without losing the will', or what I call 'the founding desire'.<sup>32</sup>

In the period that was opened up by the ceasefire, in which the role of the refugees was reduced to waiting patiently for the celebration of the referendum, the leadership of the Polisario realised the need to create the conditions in which, as Mojtar remarked,

these people, who have suffered so much . . . can live a little bit better. It is necessary to create the minimum conditions for a dignified life . . . We should provide education for their sons and daughters, healthcare for everybody. It is necessary to create all the conditions of a modern and decent life in a free, independent and sovereign country.<sup>33</sup>

This aim to 'normalise' life and improve the conditions of living in the camps has had, in my opinion, two major consequences. On the one hand, it has strengthened the public sector, that is, the institutions of the Saharawi Republic and the public services it provides for the refugees/citizens and, on the other, the emergence of a flourishing private sector in the camps. As Shelley observed:

In the camps the relaxation has brought the development of petty commerce and some artisan work. Small shops selling basic groceries and household goods have sprouted, as have rudimentary repair sites for private vehicles, the number of which has increased enormously. Jewellery and leatherwork, much aimed at the solidarity and NGO market, is made and sold locally. There are some basic restaurants. Families own livestock. An estimated 4,000 young men have left the camps for migrant work in Spain. Their remittances, pensions from those employed by Spain before 1975 (and donations from Spanish families and organisations), allow many of the mud-brick houses that supplement or replace the tents to have electricity generated by solar panels.<sup>34</sup>

This development of the public and private sectors was captured visually by the refugees when, as part of my research on everyday life in the camps, I gave cameras to a pilot group of eight refugees from Smara camp and asked them to take photos of whatever they liked about their own lives or life in the camps in general, while giving them no hint of what I was looking for.<sup>35</sup> In broad terms, the photographs that they chose to take can be grouped in three main blocks

(see Figure 3). The first group (top row) focuses on family life and social relations: the members of the family, the house and its contents, tea ceremony, guests, leisure activities, etc. The second set of photos (middle row) is directed to the sphere of labour, mainly through portraits of Saharawis performing different jobs and activities. These photos represent both the private and the public sector, comprising pictures of shopkeepers or builders as well as nurses, doctors and teachers working for the state. The third group (bottom row) comprises photos of official buildings of the SADR: schools, administrative centres, hospitals, food distribution centres, etc.

The general and first impression that one has when looking at this series of images is that the life of the refugees is relatively normal, although within an exceptional context. This normality, as some Polisario senior members concede, might imply that the situation of exile 'could become acceptable in certain circumstances' and, therefore, damaging for the Saharawi struggle.<sup>36</sup> In fact, for many young refugees the camps are to some extent 'their homeland'. As Fadala ment Mahammud admits, 'A child of the exile? Yes ... But I have been born here and I'm from this world. Yes, I like it, life is not so bad, ... as in any other place ... The camps are a place like any other'.<sup>37</sup> The first and second rows of images seem to illustrate this sort of normality in the everyday life of the camps. However, what is surprising is the amount of photos of official buildings, of buildings of the

FIGURE 3  
EVERYDAY LIFE IN SMARA CAMP



Source: Pictures taken by Maimina Abderrahman, Saleh Brahim Lbujali, Halifa Abderrahman, Gaishmula Bahal, Saleh Mohamed and Lehbib Said, Smara refugee camp (Tindouf), April 2004

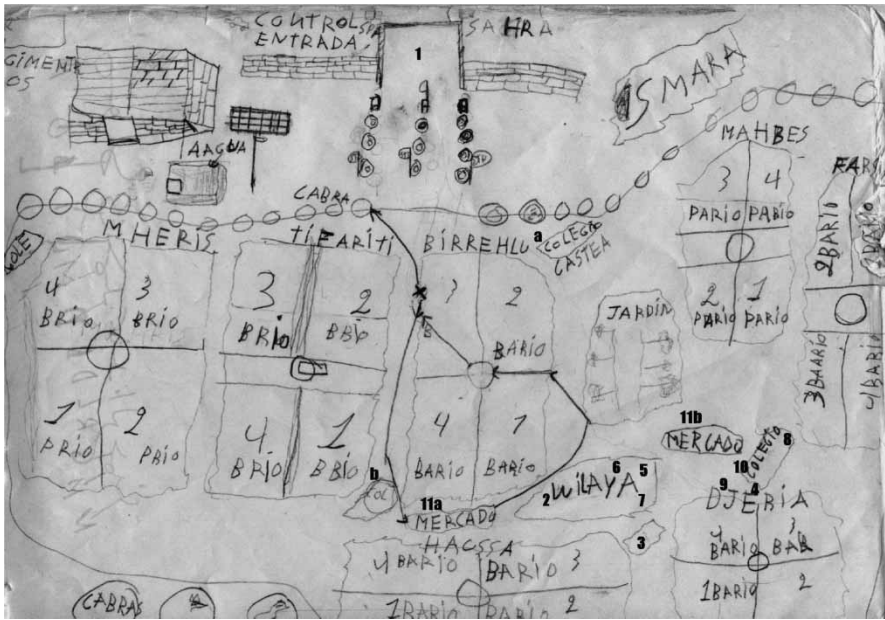
SADR. Why did they decide to take photos of schools, medical dispensaries, food distribution centres, etc.? According to their own explanations, there are several reasons. On the one hand, it is because they (or their friends and relatives) work there and, in addition, that these buildings allocate some of the basic services in the camps (the very services that contribute to the normalisation of life early mentioned). Therefore such sites are part of the everyday life, routines and itineraries of the refugees, as both workers and users. But, on the other hand, they also spoke insistently of how proud they were of such 'achievements'. These official buildings represent all that the Saharawis were able to do despite the circumstances; they symbolise the existence of the Saharawi state. Thus, these images might be interpreted as a statement of political citizenship made by the refugees as members of the SADR.

The photos were not taken by the refugees for internal consumption. On the contrary, they were explicitly produced as a research material for a foreign researcher who was investigating the life in the camps. In that respect, the choice of images responds to a certain discourse that the refugees want to project about themselves, about what they are and, especially, about how they want to be seen by others. This is why the official buildings acquire a special significance. It's not only that they are important in their everyday life, but also that they want me – as researcher – to be aware of the centrality of the state; to be aware of the fact that they are not merely refugees living thanks to the new colonialism of compassion. Consequently, it seems plausible to think that what became accepted – sedimented and routinised – is not only the situation of exile, but also a Saharawi political identity based on the desire to overcome their current restrictive circumstances.

This centrality of the state is also represented in the landscape of the camps. In Figure 4 we can see a map of Smara camp sketched by a refugee boy, where the well-ordered and rectangular urban fabric can be appreciated. Each of the four camps (Smara, El Aaiún, Ausserd and Dahkla) is a *wilaya* (province), containing several *dairas* (towns), all named after localities in the Western Sahara (Tifariti, Birrehlu, Mheris, etc.). Each *daira* is divided into four *barrios* (numbered from 1 to 4) and in the middle there is a central plaza. The *dairas* have a rectangular grid and both the borders of the *dairas* and its *barrios* are marked by roads and main streets (the space separating two *dairas* being wider than the space dividing two *barrios*). At the main entrance of each camp there is a Saharawi Police control post of the (1, in the map), which marks officially the end of Algerian jurisdiction and the entrance into the territory under Polisario/SADR control.

In the landscape of the camps the main landmarks are the official buildings, usually located at the exterior border of the *dairas* or *barrios* (or close to the central plazas), acting as visual points of reference that can be seen from many points. The boy who drew the map stressed the location of the schools in his area (a and b), perhaps because from his perspective these were the most representative buildings. The centre of the camp also appears displaced to the lower right of the map, and his *daira* – Birrehlu – acquires a more central position, displacing the geographical centre. We can see, however, the central spaces of the camp – situated below the Garden – where many of the main official buildings are concentrated. It is the area

FIGURE 4  
MAP OF SMARA REFUGEE CAMP



Source: Mulay Ahmed Abderrahman, Smara refugee camp (Tindouf), April 2004

named 'wilaya' on the map, which, although it appears as a single element, is, in fact, a complex of several constructions. The 'wilaya' is the provincial government, where the offices of the *wali* of the camp and other public institutions are located (2). Very close is the central hospital (3), a sort of small museum (4), the telephone points (5), the provincial Court of Justice (6), the visitor's reception centre (7), a police station (8), a centre for disabled children (9) and the first primary school of the camp (10). On the right and left sides of this 'central district' stretch the two main markets (*mercado*) of Smara (11a and 11b), where most of the new small shops and businesses are located. This central space is a 'visual hub', not only where the main roads and streets converge, but also a nodal point in the social, political and economic life of the camps. And it is also a place marked by the presence of the SADR, by the presence of its edifices and the un-waved flags that hang (or are painted) everywhere, silently reminding the refugees of the nation to which they belong.<sup>38</sup>

Flags are the near-sacred symbols that dominate demonstrations, parades and official ceremonies. They are the symbols that are saluted by soldiers on days of national commemoration. 'The passionately waved flags are conventionally considered exemplaries of nationalism. [On the contrary], routine flags – the flags of our environment – slip from the category of "nationalism"' in most studies, and do not receive attention.<sup>39</sup> However, they are as important as the waved flags, since they point

precisely towards the way in which the nation is routinely reproduced and sedimented. The unwaved, unsaluted (and usually dirty) flag that hangs unnoticed on the flagpole of an official building is the clearest example of what Michael Billing calls 'banal nationalism': the ideological habits and routines which enable nations to be reproduced; that is, the daily practices through which 'the nation is indicated, or "flagged", in the lives of the citizenry'.<sup>40</sup> The unwaved flag corresponds to the moment of sedimentation of an ideology – a nationalist ideology in our case. It is the moment when the nationalist myths about the frontiers of inclusion/exclusion become the hegemonic social imaginary that informs the collective identity of a group. The time of 'neither peace nor war' that started with the ceasefire of 1991, with the relaxation of the revolutionary social codes and the improvements of the living conditions (provided by the state, although dependant on external aid) created the (banal) conditions of possibility for the sedimentation of a Saharawi nationalist project. The times of apparent calm are as important as the times of storm, fervour, martyrs and great battles for the reproduction of a national identity.

### **Clouds in El Aaiún**

The central element of the peace plan (Settlement Plan) brokered by the UN in 1991, which was based on previous negotiations initiated by the Organization of African Unity, was the celebration of the referendum of self-determination to decide the future of the disputed territory. However, due to disagreement over who was eligible to vote and the incapability of the UN to impose a solution, the peace process stagnated until 1997. This situation generated a growing sense of frustration among the refugees and, to some extent, reinforced the position of those who from the outset had questioned the diplomatic strategy. According to many members of the Saharawi military, the ceasefire came precisely when they were again starting to recover the initiative in the war against Morocco. The construction of the Moroccan defensive walls between 1980 and 1987 had forced the Polisario to adopt a different military strategy. The walls divided the Western Sahara into two parts and had made it virtually impossible for the guerrillas to attack the main cities and specially the so-called 'useful triangle' formed by El Aaiún, Smara and Fos Bucraa. However, as many senior guerrillas claim, with a mixture of sadness and rage, by the late 1980s, after an initial period of disorientation, they had found a way of breaking the walls and inflict heavy losses on the static Moroccan forces. The drawn-out years of unfruitful diplomacy that followed the ceasefire convinced many of these critics, as one senior Polisario member explained menacingly, that 'if we have learnt anything after more than 10 years of negotiations, it is that a bullet is always more productive than a thousands words'.<sup>41</sup>

The peace plan was reactivated in 1997, when the former United States Secretary of State James Baker was appointed by Kofi Annan as his Personal Envoy to the Western Sahara. As a result of his mediation, the Houston Accords of 1997 (completed in 1999 with the introduction of some amendments) defined clearly the conditions of eligibility to vote and the practicalities of the self-determination referendum. After an intricate process in which almost 200,000 applicants were interviewed, the Identification



Commission of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) published in January 2000 a definitive list of 86,000 persons eligible to vote. Rabat, however, blocked the implementation of the referendum, lodging more than 120,000 appeals. As James Baker pointed out later,

when we got right to having identified the people who were entitled to vote, the Moroccans then walked away from the plan. Why did they do that? You'll have to ask them but I would assume it was because they were worried that they wouldn't win the vote . . . The closer we got to implementing [the plan] the more nervous I think the Moroccans got about whether they might not win that referendum.<sup>42</sup>

The unwillingness of the UN to deal with the Moroccan appeals and to impose a solution opened a deep crisis in the peace process, only partially overcome with the presentation in 2003 of the 'Peace Plan for Self-Determination of the People of Western Sahara',<sup>43</sup> known as Baker Plan II, which was endorsed by the Security Council in July as the 'optimum political solution' for the long enduring conflict.<sup>44</sup> The Plan consists of a transitional period of autonomy under Moroccan administration of four to five years, followed by a referendum of self-determination in which the future of the contested territory would be definitely decided.<sup>45</sup> Those eligible to vote, separately but in a single election, for the Legislative Assembly and Chief Executive of the Western Saharawi Authority (WSA) are those identified by the MINURSO Identification Commission (86,000) – (based on the Spanish census of 1974) – and those included on the UNHCR's (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) repatriation list of October 2000 (unknown list that comprises refugees from Tindouf and Mauritania). Those included on these two lists are expected to vote overwhelmingly for nationalist candidates, giving control of the transitional WSA to the Frente Polisario.

However, the list of voters for the final self-determination referendum would be the result of the sum of three lists: the MINURSO list, the UNHCR repatriation list and, finally, a third list that would include all the persons, not included in the other lists, who resided continuously in the Western Sahara territory since 30 December 1999 (that is, the 'Moroccan settlers'). Thus, a large number of Moroccans, attracted to the territory by subsidies and benefits offered by Rabat in its attempt to alter the demography of the Western Sahara, would be allowed to vote in the final referendum. The Plan seems clearly favourable to Morocco since it finally gives Rabat international recognition as the 'administering Power' over the Territory<sup>46</sup> and allows a significant number of Moroccans to take part in a toned-down self-determination referendum.<sup>47</sup> Morocco, however, rejected the Baker Plan II, while the Polisario, in a surprising and very risky diplomatic move to isolate Rabat, accepted it.

While Morocco's rejection of the Plan surprised many commentators, it pointed to the Moroccan belief that the Saharawis included in the MINURSO and the UNHCR lists would vote overwhelmingly for independence, but also Rabat's growing suspicion and mistrust of the 'Moroccan settlers'. The discontent of many Moroccan subjects, both in the Sahara and in Morocco, is explained by widespread disappointment at the lack of political reforms that had been heralded at the start of Mohamed VI's

reign. Little has been done to address such critical issues as the social exclusion of very significant sectors of the population; the lack of transparency and accountability of the public administrations; the very restricted freedom of speech and press (with strict suppression – ‘red lines’ that cannot be crossed – of such issues as the ‘Saharan question’ and ‘the Monarchy’) and, in general, the structural socio-economic crisis that currently pervades Morocco and which has been further aggravated by high oil prices and the likely devaluation of the Dirham. The Moroccan journalist Ahmed Benchesi summed up in three short sentences why people in both the ‘free’ and ‘occupied’ territories favour of independence [of the Western Sahara]: ‘one, Morocco has let them down, two, Morocco has let them down, three, Morocco has let them down’.<sup>48</sup>

This emphasis on the socio-economic origins of the discontent in the Western Sahara territory is, in fact, the official line of the Moroccan government.<sup>49</sup> As Toby Shelley explained, ‘Depoliticisation of Saharawi actions – describing them as criminal or as motivated by economic rather than political factors – is part of Morocco’s strategy of minimising support for independence both to its own citizens and to outsiders’.<sup>50</sup> For example, a demonstration that took place on 22 June 2005 in Assa, in the Tarfaya Strip, only a few days after the detention of the Saharawi human rights activist and nationalist leader Aminatou Haidar (see Figure 5),<sup>51</sup> was described by the *Maghreb Arabe Press (MAP)* as an ‘hour-long sit-in . . . by some fifty pupils, who were requesting access to their marks after failing to pass their high school exam (*baccalaureat* in French)’.<sup>52</sup> The ‘separatists’ are usually portrayed as a very marginal group. For example, Charki Draiss, the newly appointed *wali* of El Aaiún-Bojador-Saguía El-Hamra, claimed in his first interview with a Spanish newspaper that in El Aaiún ‘they are a minority . . . [The demonstrations] are organised by [only] 150 persons’.<sup>53</sup>

According to these accounts (which are hegemonic in the Moroccan media), separatism is but a radical way for some young people to express their frustration with the difficult socio-economic conditions and their uncertain future. A recent article in *Maroc Hebdo International* on ‘*Les raisons d’un malaise*’ in the Western Sahara opens by quoting the pessimistic words of a Moroccan businessman based in El Aaiún: ‘Our area currently suffers an unprecedented economic crisis. We have a very high rate of unemployment, limited incomes, . . .’, followed, a few paragraphs later, by the journalist’s own diagnosis: ‘While official sources try to minimise the magnitude [of the problem], the associations and active members of civil society talk about rampant levels of unemployment as high as 50 per cent of the population’.<sup>54</sup> From this perspective, the events of ‘October 1999 and May 2005, which engendered the anger of the population’ in El Aaiún and other cities of the Territory, are not to be understood as ‘support for the Polisario . . . but as a denunciation of an economic and social situation that became unbearable. The young people don’t find employment, [and] because of that they adopt the rhetoric and claims of the separatists as a means of expressing their anger against the state’.<sup>55</sup>

There are therefore two main discursive strategies in respect to the Western Sahara. On the one hand, official sources tone down and depoliticise the evident discontent in wide sectors (both Saharawi and Moroccan) of the ‘southern provinces’,

FIGURE 5

## 2005 SAHARAWI 'INTIFADA'

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT, TOP-DOWN: SAHARAWI NATIONALIST LEADER AMINATOU HAIDAR, WOUNDED AFTER A DEMONSTRATION IN EL AAIÚN (17/06/2005). SHE WAS DETAINED DAYS LATER. DEMONSTRATIONS IN EL AAIÚN (26/05/2005) AND (10/06/2005) AND DAKHLA (31/05/2005). CONFRONTATIONS BETWEEN SAHARAWIS AND MOROCCAN POLICE IN DAKHLA (27/06/2005). DETENTION AND BEATING OF SAHARAWI ACTIVIST IN EL AAIÚN (LATE JUNE, 2005).



Source: <http://www.arso.org/intifada2005s.htm>

explaining these 'maladjustments' as simply social problems that have to do with the economic development of the province. On the other hand, and usually from more critical sources, there is an implicit acknowledgment of the existence and significance of separatist groups in the Territory, but whose foundations are also presented as an extreme consequence of the socio-economic crisis. Both perspectives

depoliticise the events. But both discursive strategies are based on the acknowledgment of the structural crisis in the Western Sahara territory under Moroccan control (and in Morocco, in general); a structural crisis that as such might even question the very nature of the hegemonic political system, including the Monarchy. In fact, despite the Monarchy being one of the 'red lines' in Moroccan politics that cannot be crossed, there has recently been an increase in the number of voices openly questioning it in one way or another. Two examples are the journalist Ali Lmrabet and the Islamist spokeswoman Nadia Yassine, who, in a recent visit to Berkeley, explicitly expressed her preference for a Republic.<sup>56</sup>

For the Saharawi nationalists, the 'October 1999 and May 2005' events were far from being the consequence of the rampant socio-economic crisis, but are part of an ongoing 'Saharawi *Intifada*' in the Territory under Moroccan control. The nationalists, of course, do not deny that the socio-economic situation in the Western Sahara is explosive. However, instead of being considered as an independent variable that explains the growing social discontent, the crisis is interpreted as just one more of the consequences (and visible manifestations) of Morocco's occupation. In fact, '[as] Saharawi nationalists argue, . . . Moroccan rule has entailed the all-encompassing marginalisation of the indigenous population'. They therefore 'see protest over economic issues as a valid expression of their struggle. Indeed, like human rights advocacy, it has been one of the few areas where any form of open activity has been possible'.<sup>57</sup> The opportunity created by the economic situation has thus been used by the Saharawi nationalists as a strategic space of mobilisation and protest, and as a constant reminder that Morocco has not yet got the situation under control. In so doing, it undermines Rabat's attempts to present the situation in the 'southern provinces' as stable and unproblematic.

One of the objectives of the defensive walls constructed during the 1980s was to isolate the Territory from the influence of the Polisario and thus create the space in which to implement a strategy of nation-building aimed at the creation (and sedimentation) of popular attachment to the Kingdom. The presence of Moroccan flags and other symbols – which is much greater in El Aaiún, for example, than in any Moroccan city – is intended to be a constant reminder of belonging to Morocco. The Saharawi nationalists, in contrast, through their constant demonstrations demanding such things as jobs, the release of prisoners or respect of human rights, while wearing Saharawi *derraas* and *mehlfas* and using Spanish in banners and graffiti, not only disrupt and deny such alleged normality, but make it quite explicit that the Western Sahara is neither 'normal', nor yet under control.

Since the 1999 wave of protests in El Aaiún, the level of social mobilisation has constantly increased. In fact, many senior Polisario members now acknowledge that under the current circumstances of 'neither war nor peace', the initiative in the Saharawi struggle lies predominantly with the nationalists in the areas under Moroccan control, whose leaders (Ali Salem Tamek, Mohamed Deddach and Aminatou Haidar, to mention a few) have already become iconic figures in the social imaginary of the refugee camps, along with the martyrs of the war. In May 2005, the transfer of the Saharawi prisoner Haddi Ahmed Mahmoud, known as El Kainnan, triggered the beginning of the most recent wave of protests, quickly baptised

by the Polisario and its European support network as the 'Saharawi *Intifada*'. The beginning of this revolt took place two days after the celebration at Tifariti<sup>58</sup> of the thirty-second Anniversary of the creation of the Frente Polisario. The commemorative acts, attended by several foreign delegations and mass media (specially Spanish and Algerian), included a march to the defensive Moroccan wall, military parades and the presentation of the credentials of the new South African ambassador to the SADR. Mohamed Abdelaziz, President of the SADR and Secretary General of the Polisario, also laid the first brick of the future Saharawi Parliament building.<sup>59</sup> In his speech, Abdelaziz directed a message to both external and internal audiences. While expressing 'solidarity and firm support to our compatriots in the occupied territories', he stated that the 'Saharawi people cannot stay inactive for ever. They will fight to defend their national rights with all legitimate means, including armed struggle'.<sup>60</sup>

Among the congratulations received by the Polisario during these celebrations, two had special relevance. The first one, sent by Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, in which he reiterated the Algerian support of the right of self-determination of the Saharawi people, angered Rabat and was the reason for the cancellation of the participation of Mohamed VI in the meeting of the UMA that was scheduled to take place in Libya a few days later. The meeting was finally suspended, demonstrating the impossibility of developing a Maghreb Union while the Western Sahara dossier still remains open. The second message was sent from El Aaiún by a recently created Committee for the Self-Determination of the Western Sahara, presided over by former prisoner and winner of the RAFTO<sup>61</sup> Human Rights Prize, Mohamed Deddach, which announced the determination of the group to continue the struggle 'using all legitimate means in [its] possession'.<sup>62</sup>

Two days later, on the 22 May, a demonstration El Kainnan's relatives and nationalist activists outside the Black Prison of El Aaiún to protest against his transfer to Agadir was violently broken up by the police. El Kainnan, condemned to seven years gaol for 'crimes against the sacred values of the Kingdom', had caused outrage in Rabat a few weeks before by announcing to the media his rejection of Moroccan citizenship and formally asking the SADR to send him his Saharawi identity documents to prison.<sup>63</sup> Following several days of demonstrations, clashes with the security forces and court appearances, a senior human rights activist explained that 'the world was witnessing the expressions of a new generation that had freed itself from the fears of 30 years'. This was a generation, he explained, that was 'deeply frustrated by the social situation, the lack of political reforms, the stagnation of the peace process and the apathy of the international community ... Thanks to the TV and the Internet, they are in contact with the outside world and see with their own eyes what is going on in Palestine ... They are not scared because they have nothing to lose'.<sup>64</sup> 'They are willing for the Polisario to take up arms again', concluded the nationalist leader Aminatou Haidar, in an interview that took place less than two weeks before her detention.<sup>65</sup>

The main novelty of this wave of protests in the Western Sahara is probably that, as nationalist leader Ali Salem Tamek clarifies, while the 'precedents of the 1990s [were] systematically denied and kept from view by the Moroccan regime, [this

time] it has been filmed live by the mass media (see Figure 5). The whole world has been able to see [it]. [It is an] undeniable reality: the Saharawi *Intifada* is not a dream, but a fact'.<sup>66</sup> Despite the restrictions imposed on the media in the field,<sup>67</sup> some TV and newspaper reports from the field were widely reproduced by the Spanish media. However, more than the work of reporters, it has been the work of the nationalist activists themselves that has produced a vast amount of audio and graphic records of the events. Using mobile phones, digital cameras and the Internet, the 'separatists' managed to produce materials with which to illustrate their reports of an '*Intifada*' and their accusations of torture and repression, circumventing the attempts of Rabat and the official Moroccan media to tone-down and depoliticise the events.<sup>68</sup> The repercussion of these images in the former colonial power, where the support network of the Polisario is very influential, activated the organisation of Spanish self-appointed human rights 'observation committees', composed by elected MPs (mostly regional), local councillors and members of the 'Friend of the Sahara' associations. At the time of writing, six delegations have attempted to enter the Territory 'to monitor the respect for human rights on the ground'. All of them have been denied entry and expelled to Spain from El Aaiún airport, accused by the Moroccan authorities of being pro-Polisario delegations who only want to encourage more riots. One delegation from Norway, which managed to get into the Territory by road, was deported on 5 July. The message from the expelled Spanish delegations was clear: if we are not allowed into the Territory, it must be because Rabat has something to hide. As the Moroccan journalist Ahmed Benchesi reflected, the restrictions imposed by Rabat will generate a very worrying message: 'If journalists are not allowed to do their job, it is because the situation is grave'.<sup>69</sup>

Three decades after the Green March, Morocco has not yet managed to 'normalise' its presence in the Western Sahara. The image of El Aaiún and other cities in the 'southern provinces' is still very cloudy. The message to the Western powers from Polisario's diplomats, who show them pictures of demonstrations and allegedly tortured prisoners, Spanish MPs protesting their expulsion from El Aaiún and critical reports from *Reporters without Borders* and *Amnesty International*, is one of increasing irony: 'Are you really sure Morocco is a source of stability in the region?'

### **Final Remarks: Towards a New Tempest?**

James Baker resigned as UN Secretary General Personal Envoy to the Western Sahara in June 2004, due to the lack of means for imposing a solution on the conflicting parties. In the initial draft of the Security Council resolution that endorsed his peace plan, the Plan could be imposed on the parties. However, in order to avoid the French veto, the final text stressed the approval of the parties as a requisite for its implementation. Once the Plan was accepted by the Polisario, the ball was in the Moroccan court. But the final version of the Security Council resolution (no. 1495) and the lack of political will of the permanent members (together with the French active support of Morocco), meant that Rabat could block the peace plan that had been defined by the Security Council as the 'optimum political solution' without receiving any legal sanction. This situation was aggravated after the

Spanish elections of March 2004 and the unexpected victory of the Socialist Party. The position of the new government of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero departed radically from the (hesitantly pro-Polisario) direction of his predecessor, Jose Maria Aznar. Among the first points on the new Spanish agenda was to rebuild damaged relations with Morocco. Messages from the new Spanish government became openly pro-Moroccan. Foreign Affairs Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos went as far as to say that the celebration of a self-determination referendum would be negative since it would generate a crisis in the whole Maghrib. Without the diplomatic support of Spain, the former colonial power, the possibilities of the Baker Plan seemed nil. It was in this new and adverse context that James Baker presented his resignation.

Morocco regarded the news of Baker's resignation as a victory. Foreign Affairs Minister Mohamed Banaisa announced exultantly that 'Baker's resignation [had been] the result of the persistence of Moroccan diplomacy and its rejection of certain principles that undermine Morocco's integrity'.<sup>70</sup> The new situation seemed very favourable to Morocco, which, from its more powerful position, radicalised its arguments and moved from a strategy of theoretically accepting the referendum, while blocking its implementation, to the rejection of the principle of self-determination around which the whole peace process of the last fourteen years had been constructed. The only realistic solution, according to Rabat, was the integration of the Western Sahara into Morocco, with the offer of an ambiguous regional autonomy within the Kingdom, the details of which remained unspecified. In other words, Rabat's proposal was the consolidation of the *status quo*, on the grounds that most of the disputed Territory is already under its control.

The Polisario faced a very difficult situation. At the end of 2004, the diplomatic front seemed irremediably blocked. With no visible sign of a way out, the frustration in the refugee camps increased dangerously. Many voices, especially among the military, started to call for the resumption of hostilities. Despite the Algerian pressure on the Polisario leadership not to break the ceasefire and the general view of analysts that the Saharawi Liberation Army was not in a position to challenge Morocco's improved defences, the view of many guerrillas was very different. When asked about their military capabilities, the answer on many occasions was a rhetorical question: 'what arms did we have back in 1973 when all this started? What support did we have then? . . . Well, 30 years later here we are'. The objective of a new war would be to destabilise Morocco, to generate chaos and aggravate the crisis and the social unrest in the Kingdom, not to enter triumphantly into El Aaiún. In other words, it would be to demonstrate that the situation in the region is not stable and will not be stable until there is a self-determination referendum that includes the option of independence.

However, despite the internal pressures, those among the Polisario who advocate the diplomatic path managed to gain some time and have launched a new offensive. The main objective of Polisario's manoeuvres in recent months seems to be aimed at undermining the Moroccan assertion that the Territory is under its control and that the only realistic solution for the international community is to acknowledge that fact. That will be unlikely, especially now that the SADR has strengthened its position in Anglophone Africa. In September 2004 the Saharawi Republic was recognised by South Africa and in June 2004 by Kenya. That month also announced the

opening of an embassy in Tanzania. In addition to reinforcing its position with Anglophone Africa, the SADR also seeks to improve its credentials in London and Washington. Relations with the US have been relatively fluid and despite Morocco's strategic importance to the US, it is not yet clear how Rabat fits into America's design for a security space in the Sahara (under US patronage).

The SADR is therefore trying to demonstrate that it is a state like any other, with institutions, citizens, flags, national festivities, bureaucrats and diplomats, and that if it is allowed to be a 'normal' state it can also be a source of stability in the region. At the same time, this emphasis on asserting the institutional side of the Saharawi state and its presence in the Territory, converges with the aim of the nationalists in the areas under Moroccan control to show that the *status quo*, the *de facto* situation, is chaotic and that Rabat is very far from 'normalising' its control over the disputed land.

As I have shown in this article, in order to achieve a better understanding of the Western Sahara conflict, it is necessary to focus on the hegemonic politics developed by both the Frente Polisario and Morocco. It is not only a (military or diplomatic) dispute about the control of the Territory, but a dispute to hegemonise a collective social imaginary about what it is to be Saharawi, who the Saharawis are and who the 'others' are that delineate the frontier of 'our Sahara'.

The time of 'neither peace nor war' provided the Polisario with the opportunity to normalise and sediment a Saharawi nationalist identity and a sense of political citizenship that identified with the project of the Saharawi Republic. Despite the frustration and despair at the uncertainty of the future, the camps have generated the conditions for the sedimentation of the Saharawi nationalist project. This hegemonic strategy supports and fuels both the emphasis on the diplomatic path described above as well as the aim of strengthening and institutionalising the Saharawi Republic as a mean of keeping the conflict alive and thus counteracting Morocco's attempts to 'normalise' its control over most of the Territory.

In the areas under Rabat's control, the Saharawi nationalists cannot develop the same hegemonic politics as in the Tindouf exile. The strategy, perfectly exemplified by the current '*Intifada*', is the adverse. Through demonstrations, sit-ins, riots and the development of a cyber-*intifada*, the 'separatists' attempt to show that the routine in El Aaiún is not that of a 'normal' city, but that of a city under siege, of a city in conflict, where, after three decades of rule, Rabat has not yet managed to win the 'hearts and minds' of the local population.

The future of the conflict is uncertain. But at present it seems clear that Morocco has failed in its attempt to convince the international community that the only solution is to recognise the current *status quo*. The *status quo*, as the Polisario has managed to show, is that of dispute, conflict and contending projects. It is, in other words, that of an unfinished decolonisation process.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper is part of an ongoing research project about nationalism and identity in the Western Sahara. The fieldwork conducted in the refugee camps was possible thanks to the funding of the Basque Research Council and a small grant from Newcastle University. Special thanks to my research assistant in Smara, El Mehdi Mustapha, to the family of Nina Abderrahman with whom I spent a wonderful time in Birrehlu,



to Brahim Mojtar for his support in the hectic Rabouni, to Bachir Salek for the help with the organisation of the trips, and to all the Saharawi refugees (in Tindouf and in Europe) and humanitarian workers who shared their time and experiences with me. My gratitude, as well, to Nick Randall, Sara González and Jeremy Keenan for their linguistic advice and constructive comments. Needless to say, I am solely responsible for this article.

## NOTES

1. Following Ernesto Laclau and the Political Discourse Theory school, I use the metaphor of 'sedimentation' to refer to the process through which a given social construction (a collective identity, for example) is naturalised and, despite its socially constructed character and contingent origins, becomes so embedded in a certain society that it appears as something 'objective' and therefore unquestionable. E. Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London: Verso 1990), pp. 33–35.
2. A. García, *Historias del Sahara. El Mejor y el Peor de los Mundos* (Madrid: Los Libros de la Catarata 2001), p. 159.
3. Taken from the documentary *La Fuga del Infierno*, filmed by an unknown Arab TV crew in 1975–76 and restored (but not edited) in November 2004 by RASD-TV. Copies of the documentary are available from [rasd-tv@rasd-tv.com](mailto:rasd-tv@rasd-tv.com).
4. *Ibid.*
5. Personal interview with Agaila Mohamed Lamin Lamyad, Smara refugee camp (Tindouf), April 2004. Agaila Mohamed joined the Frente Polisario in 1973 and, during the 1990s, was president of the National Union of Saharawi Women (NUSW).
6. Liha ment Emahmed, quoted in García (note 2), pp. 160–61.
7. A. Lippert, 'The Saharawi refugees: origins and organization, 1975–85', in R. Lawless and L. Monahan (eds.), *War and Refugees: The Western Sahara Conflict* (London: Printer 1987), p. 151. It is difficult to assess how many Saharawis were displaced, but according to the available data it seems reasonable to estimate that between 40 and 50 per cent of the native population of the territory was forced into exile. If the Spanish census of 1974 established the number of Saharawis eligible to vote as 73,497, in November 1975 there were already 9,000 internally displaced Saharawis. In January 1976, the International Red Crescent established the number of refugees as 40,000, growing, according to UNHCR estimates, to more than 50,000 by early 1977 and to 80,000 by the end of that year. Subsequently the numbers increased significantly. Not only were the Saharawis living in the former Spanish Sahara cities displaced, but the extension of the conflict also displaced many Saharawis from the Tarfaya Strip in southern Morocco, as well as a great number of nomads from both the Western Sahara territory and neighbouring areas of Mauritania and Algeria whose herds had been killed and wells poisoned by the advancing Moroccan and Mauritanian armies. The current number of Saharawi refugees is somewhere between 150,000 and 200,000. On the other hand, after a tortuous process, the UN's Identification Commission published in January 2000 a list of 86,381 persons eligible to vote in a self-determination referendum (based on the Spanish census). Of these 86,000 native Saharawis, approximately 48,000 live in the territory under Moroccan control and 38,000 in the refugee camps. The estimate of 40–50 per cent of the population being displaced therefore seems reasonable.
8. F. Briones, M. Liman Mohamed Ali and M. Salek, *Luali: 'Ahora o Nunca, La Libertad'* (Alicante: Universidad de Alicante 1997), p. 224.
9. Lippert (note 7), p. 153. Emphasis added.
10. For the concept of refugees as 'subaltern subjects' and humanitarian aid as a new 'colonialism of compassion', see J. Hyndman, *Managing displacement. Refugees and the Politics of Humanitarianism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2000), p.xvi.
11. García (note 2), p. 331.
12. *Ibid.* pp. 331–32.
13. Personal interview with Brahim Motjar, Rabouni (Tindouf), April 2004. Emphasis added. Brahim Motjar is a high-ranking Polisario politician and former diplomat. He is currently the director of 'Protocolo', the office that coordinates the visits of foreign delegations to the refugee camps and the territories under Polisario control.
14. The Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic has been recognised by over 70 states (some of which have in recent years frozen or cancelled such recognition) and is member of the African Union. The Madrid Accords, signed by Madrid, Rabat and Nouakchott in late 1975, and according to which the administration the Western Sahara was temporary transferred to Morocco and Mauritania, were never endorsed

- by the UN. The last states to recognise the SADR were South Africa (September 2004) and Kenya (June 2005). In June 2005, the establishment of relations at ambassadorial level between the SADR and Tanzania (which recognised the SADR since 1980) was announced. Most of the states that recognise the Saharawi republic are African and Latin American.
15. Jean-Claude Bruffaerts in *Sahara Info*, quoted in Lippert (note 7), p. 163.
  16. See notes 19 and 20.
  17. Lippert (note 7), p. 163.
  18. J. Firebrace, 'The Saharawi Refugees: Lessons and Prospects' in Lawless and Monahan (note 7), p. 184. Emphasis added.
  19. The so-called 'Zemla massacre' plays a very symbolic role in the Saharawi nationalism imaginary. In 1970, in the neighbourhood of Zemla in El Aaiún, the Spanish Legion broke up violently a demonstration organised by the *Organización de Vanguardia para la Liberación del Sahara (OVLS)* [*Harakat tahrir Saguia Al-Hamra wa Ued Ad-Dahab*], killing and injuring several demonstrators. The leader of the OVLS, Mohamed Bassiri was detained and after a few days in prison was 'disappeared'. Bassiri was a moderate nationalist leader who advocated progressive independence through negotiation with the colonial administration. His death represents in the nationalist imaginary the end of the 'peaceful' road to independence and the beginning of the revolutionary path that started with the Frente Polisario three years later.
  20. *Trab Al-Bidan*, meaning 'the land of the whites', comprises the Hassaniya-speaking tribes of the Western Sahara, Mauritania, the Tarfaya Strip in southern Morocco, the Tindouf region of Algeria and a small strip of Mali. Initially, the leader of the Polisario, Luali, was open to considering a Saharawi-Mauritanian political federation, but the participation of Mauritania in the Madrid Accords and the occupation of the southern part of the Territory made such an option impossible and contributed to the development of an identified frontier between Saharawis and Mauritians. On the other hand, from its inception Frente Polisario strongly questioned and rejected tribal attachments. In fact, Luali went as far as identifying the promotion of tribal identities as a strategy of European colonialism to divide the Saharawi people. As he pointed out in his famous discourse of the 20th of May, only a few weeks before his death: 'One century of colonialism always [had] the same aim: eliminate the character of the Arab people of Saguia el Hamra and Rio del Oro [the two regions of the Spanish Sahara]; it was because of this aim that we were divided in multiple nationalities, each of them in several tribes, the tribe in a number of branches and the family in various tendencies'. Luali Mustapha Sayed, *Discurso del 20 de Mayo de 1976*, reproduced in Briones, Liman and Salek (note 8), p. 286.
  21. F. Ismail Sayed, *El Primer Estado del Sahara Occidental*. Electronic book, available at <http://www.arso.org/1estadosaharaii.pdf> (last accessed 25 June 2005), p. 54. Original edition: F. Ismail Sayed, *La République Saharaouie* (Paris: Ediciones L'Harmattan 2001).
  22. Motjat (note 13).
  23. *Markasia Demokratía* is Hassaniya for 'democratic centralism'. It was one of the key Polisario slogans.
  24. García (note 2), pp. 241–43.
  25. Ismail Sayed (note 21), p. 54.
  26. García (note 2), p. 240.
  27. *Ibid.* pp. 256–308.
  28. T. Shelley, *Endgame in the Western Sahara. What Future for Africa's Last Colony?* (London: Zed Books 2004), p. 179.
  29. A detailed explanation of the early problems regarding the identification of voters can be seen in E. Jensen, *Western Sahara. Anatomy of a Stalemate* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers 2005), pp. 59–71. Erik Jensen served with the UN Mission for the Referendum in the Western Sahara (MINURSO) between 1993 and 1998; from 1994 as Head of Mission.
  30. *Vacaciones en Paz* is a solidarity programme that every summer organises the stay of Saharawi children aged five to 13 with Spanish families. It has been running for over ten years. Although the number of Saharawi children that spend the summer in Spain varies every year, it is usually somewhere between 7,000 and 10,000. In 2005, for instance, 8,977 Saharawis will participate in the programme. A significant number of the Spanish families that foster Saharawi children travel to the Tindouf refugee camps to visit 'their children'. The camps receive up to 5,000 Spanish visitors every year (not including the vast number of cooperation and humanitarian workers and institutional trips). The Spanish visitors stay with refugee families and move freely in the camps. These trips to the camps, which usually last for one week, take place during December, February and Easter and are organised by the network of Polisario representatives in Spain in collaboration with the 'Friends of the Sahara' regional and local NGOs. The influx of visitors to the camps has contributed decisively to the development of a cash economy and petty commerce in two main ways. Firstly, by generating income for the refugee families

in the form of 'presents'. It is estimated that each Spanish visitor gives to the host family an average of 200 Euros (the same amount approximately that each child brings back to the camps after the summer stay in Spain). Secondly, it has facilitated the emergence of a small craft industry oriented to this 'humanitarian market'. In some respects, the refugee camps are a flourishing 'tourist' destination. In fact, the camps receive a much larger number of visitors than the Western Sahara under Moroccan control.

31. Note 13.
32. Personal interview with senior Polisario member, Rabouni (Tindouf), April 2004.
33. Mojtar (note 13).
34. Shelley (note 28), p. 175.
35. The refugees were given three days to take the photos and were also asked to write a list of the photos they had taken. The photographers were three young women (one of them had only completed primary education, was single and worked as housewife at her family home; the other two had secondary education and worked for the state, one was married with children and the other one was a single mother, only one of them was Spanish-speaking); three young men (with University degrees, single and Spanish-speaking, two worked for the state and the third one had a private business); and two middle-aged men (both ex-guerrilla fighters, now demobilised and living in the camps, one worked for the state and was Spanish-speaking and the other one was a shepherd, who often travelled to the Western Sahara territory under Polisario control east of the wall). This was only a *pilot* scheme aimed at checking a methodology for the future. The refugees that participated do not represent the plurality of social backgrounds of the Saharawis living in Tindouf. Therefore, the interpretations of this photo collection should be treated with caution.
36. Shelley (note 28) p. 178.
37. Fadala ment Mahammud, quoted in García (note 2), p. 335.
38. An office of the UNHCR is also located in this central area, but the physical presence of the UNHCR or other international or humanitarian agencies in the camps is limited. Their role in the management and organisation of the lives of the refugees seems to pass almost unnoticed. This is probably due to the fact that in most cases these agencies do not deal directly with the refugees themselves. The Polisario and the SADR – throughout the Ministry of Public Health, Education, Cooperation, etc. – deal with the major agencies and with dozens of NGOs (mainly Spanish), managing the distribution of the aid to the refugee population and the implementation of the cooperation programs. The Spanish network of NGOs working in the Tindouf camps comprises up to 200 independent organisations (many of them known as associations of 'Friends of the Sahara'). These organisations work alongside the Polisario representatives in Spain, providing aid and funding development programs that are neither controlled nor dependant on any of the major international donor agencies. So important is the aid obtained through these channels in some areas that the SADR has even opened coordination offices in Spain, such as the Ministry of Public Health's Saharawi Health Coordination Office based in Vitoria-Gasteiz (Basque Country). These channels give the SADR a certain degree of autonomy, despite its dependence on external humanitarian aid, and contributes to lowering the social visibility of the major international agencies.
39. M. Billing, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage 1995), pp. 38–39.
40. *Ibid.* p. 6.
41. Personal interview with senior Polisario member, Rabouni (Tindouf), April 2004.
42. Interview with James Baker, Wide Angle, *Public Broadcasting Service (PBS)-TV*, 19 August 2004.
43. The Plan was published in the *Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation Concerning the Western Sahara*, S/2003/565, 23 May 2003, Anex II. It can be also consulted in Jensen (note 29), pp. 159–63.
44. Security Council Resolution 1495, S/RES/1495, 31 July 2003.
45. On the context in which the Plan was elaborated see Jensen (note 29), pp.103–114. A detailed explanation of the Plan can be seen in P. San Martin, 'Briefing: Western Sahara: Road to Perdition?', *African Affairs* 103/413 (October 2004), pp. 651–60 and in C Ruiz Miguel, 'El largo camino jurídico y político hacia el "Plan Baker II": ¿Estación de termino?', *Documentos del Real Instituto Elcano* 74 (2003). Available online: <http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/documentos/74.asp> (last accessed 25 June 2005).
46. Morocco has never been recognised by the UN as the Administering Power of the Western Sahara and is therefore not listed as the Administering Power in the UN list of Non-Self Governing Territories. This official position has been recently reiterated by Hans Corell (UN Under-Secretary-General for Legal Affairs) in respect to the exploitation of natural resources in the Territory. According to Corell, '[t]he Madrid Agreement did not transfer sovereignty over the Territory, nor did it confer

- upon any of the signatories [Morocco and Mauritania] the status of Administering Power'. Letter dated 29 January 2002 from the Under-Secretary-General for Legal Affairs, The Legal Counsel, addressed to the President of the Security Council, S/2002/161, p. 2.
47. The UNHCR repatriation list is unknown and it is therefore impossible to know the total number of persons eligible to vote in the final referendum. However, some estimates point out that the number of Moroccans that would be allowed to vote might be as high as 55 per cent of the total electoral role. In 1999 there were approximately 151,000 persons of at least 18 years of age in the Territory under Moroccan control (the total population is approximately 255,000), out of which 48,000 are Saharawis eligible to vote and included in the MINURSO list (total number of Saharawis, approximately 100,000). The rest of the 100,000 residents of at least 18 years of age would be mainly Moroccans. But in this group there might also be a few thousand ethnic Saharawis from the non-contested Tarfaya Strip in southern Morocco, which for several reasons were not included in the MINURSO list. The Tarfaya Strip was ceded by Spain to Morocco in 1958 and comprises a large Saharawi population. In fact, towns such as Tan Tan and Assa have been among the main centres of Saharawi nationalism. At the beginning of the 1990s several thousand Saharawis from this area were displaced to the Western Sahara to take part in the Identification process of eligible voters, under the assumption that they would support integration into Morocco. Since then, many of them have been living in camps near the main towns of the Western Sahara territory, such as Al-Wahda camp near El Aaiún.
  48. A. Benchemsi, 'Voyage au Sahara: Ouvrond les yeux', *Tel Quel Online* 100, 14 November 2003. Available online: [http://www.telquel-ohhine.com/100/couverture\\_100\\_1.shtml](http://www.telquel-ohhine.com/100/couverture_100_1.shtml) (last accessed 25 June 2005).
  49. This is usually promoted through the dispatches of the *Maghreb Arabe Press* (MAP).
  50. Shelley (note 28), p. 110.
  51. The demonstration set out from a plaza renamed by the Saharawi nationalists as 'Ali Salem Tamek Plaza', a nationalist leader from Assa, who at the time of writing is the spokesman for a group of 36 Saharawi jailed activists on hunger-strike. According to local witnesses quoted by *Sahara Press Service* and some Spanish media, several hundred Saharawis took part in the demonstration, which ended in confrontations between the demonstrators and the Moroccan security forces. See 'Many wounded persons in a Saharawi demonstration in Assa', *Sahara Press Service*, 22 June 2005 (available online: <http://www.spsrasd.info/sps-e220605.html#3>, last accessed 3 September 2005) and 'Twelve persons wounded and two arrested demonstrators in Assa', *Sahara Press Service*, 23 June 2005 (available online: <http://www.spsrasd.info/sps-e230605.html#3>, last accessed 3 September 2005).
  52. 'Southern town figures say much-touted demonstration was but brief sit-in', *Maghreb Arab Press*, 23 June 2005.
  53. E. Del Campo, 'Charki Draiss, Governor of El Aaiun: "Los independentistas son una minoria. No tenemos miedo"', *El Mundo*, 27 June 2005.
  54. A. Amourag, 'Les raisons d'un malaise', *Maroc Hebdo International*, 657, 17–23 June 2005, p.28. The official rate of unemployment in the province of El Aaiún is 25 per cent among the urban population and 17 per cent in the rural areas.
  55. *Ibid.* p. 29.
  56. Nadia Yassine, spokeswoman for the Islamist movement Al Adl Wal Ihsane (Justice and Charity), made these statements – later reproduced by the Moroccan press – speaking at Berkeley, in the United States. The place where she made such statements and the welcome that she seems to enjoy in the USA is highly significant and represents an explicit concern for Morocco. 'Why does Washington flirt with the Moroccan Islamists?', enquired the frontpage *Maroc Hebdo International* (657, 17–23 June 2005). Nadia Yassine's criticism of the current political system found some support in the person of Prince Moulay Hichan, the 'red prince' self-exiled in the USA, which was also widely reported in the media. The week Nadia Yassine's trial for her republican statements was meant to start in Rabat, the US Secretary of State, Condolezza Rice, issued, according to the Spanish newspaper *La Razón*, a public warning to Morocco 'not to continue the strategy of repression against those voices that criticise the lack of freedom in the Moroccan Kingdom and denounce the violation of human rights.' In a strong note, the US State Department declared that 'this case [Nadia Yassine], as well as others in which the regime violates the freedom of press and expression, constitute a concern', adding that 'it is not possible to advance towards democracy without guarantying these freedoms'. P. Canales, 'Rice advierte a Mohamed VI de que no siga por la via de la represión', *La Razón*, 30 June. Available online: [http://www.larazon.es/noticias/noti\\_int62155.htm](http://www.larazon.es/noticias/noti_int62155.htm) (last accessed 10 July 2005). In the light of these elements, some commentators are speculating on the possibility of a strategic change in Washington's traditional position regarding Morocco. That Morocco is strategically very important

- to the US is undeniable. What is not so clear, according to some voices, is whether Mohamed VI is the best guarantor of stability and the best partner for the development of a US-sponsored security programme in the Sahara.
57. Shelley (note 28), p. 112.
  58. Tifariti is in the part of the Western Sahara territory under SADR control.
  59. 'The President of the Republic laid the first brick in the new building of the Saharawi Parliament', *Sahara Press Service*, 22 May 2005. Available online: <http://www.spsrasd.info/sps-e220505.html> (last accessed 25 June 2005). The SADR's new parliament building is located in Tifariti as the prospective capital of the SADR and as an affirmation of the 'presence [of the Polisario] on its homeland of which it liberated one third before the enforcement of the cease-fire' (note 58).
  60. M. Abdelaziz, 'Speech to commemorate of 32nd Anniversary of the Frente Polisario', *Sahara Press Service*, 21 May 2005. Available online: <http://www.spsrasd.info/sps-discourMaaENG.html> (last accessed 25 June 2005).
  61. RAFTO is a prestigious Norwegian Human Rights organisation. See: <http://www.rafto.no>.
  62. 'From occupied city of El Aaiun a Saharawi NGO calls for the organisation of a referendum in Western Sahara', *Sahara Press Service*, 20 May 2005. Available online: <http://www.spsrasd.info/sps-e200505.html> (last accessed 25 June 2005).
  63. 'Un preso saharawi rechaza los papeles marroquies y reclama su derecho a la autodeterminacion', *Sahara Press Service*, 20 April 2005. Available online: <http://www.spsrasd.info/sps-s200405.html> (last accessed 25 June 2005). See also D. Bennani, 'Reportage. Laâyoune. Que s'est-il passé ?', *Tel Quel Online* 179, 10 June 2005. Available online: [http://www.telquel-online.com/179/couverture\\_179\\_1.shtml](http://www.telquel-online.com/179/couverture_179_1.shtml) (last accessed 25 June 2005).
  64. Mohamed Fadel Gaudi, quoted in A. Baquero, 'Intifada en El Aaiun', *El Periodico*, 1 June 2005, p. 20.
  65. Aminatou Haidar, quoted in Baquero (note 64), p. 20.
  66. A. Lmrabet, 'Entrevista con Ali Salem Tamek: "La intifada saharawi es un hecho"', *El Mundo*, 29 May 2005.
  67. 'Reporters Without Borders has called on the Moroccan authorities to put an end to harassment of local and foreign media in Western Sahara and allow them to work normally. At least ten journalists have been attacked, arrested or even expelled from the city of Laayoune ... since the beginning of April 2005.' *Reporters without Borders*, 'Journalists working in Western Sahara face assaults, arrests and harassment', note issued on 16 June 2005. Available online: [http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id\\_article=14119](http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=14119) (last accessed 10 July 2005).
  68. See for example: Arso ([www.arso.org](http://www.arso.org)), Cyberintifada (<http://es.geocities.com/ciberintifada>), Cahiers du Sahara (<http://www.cahiersdusahara.info>), Poemario por un Sahara libre (<http://poemariosahara.blogspot.com>), AFAPREDESA (<http://www.afapredesa.org>), Free Aminatou Haidar (<http://www.arso.org/aminatoucamp.htm>), Western Sahara Online (<http://www.wsahara.net/news.html>), VastSahara (<http://www.vastsahara.org/>).
  69. A. Benchesi, 'Quand l'état communique', *Tel Quel Online* 179, 10 June 2005. Available online: [http://www.telquel-online.com/179/edito\\_179.shtml](http://www.telquel-online.com/179/edito_179.shtml) (last accessed 25 June 2005).
  70. 'Mohamed Banaisa: "La dimisión de James Baker se debe a la persistencia de la diplomacia marroquí"', *Europa Press*, 13 June 2004.