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Nonviolent Resistance in the Western Sahara

Naomi Dann

In November of 2010, Moroccan news media reported on the violent riots taking place in Laayoune, the capital city of Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara. The television coverage focused on violence enacted by the protesters. Heavily edited, shaky video footage shows young Sahrawi men, their faces obscured by traditional desert turbans, attacking security vehicles, setting fire to banks and businesses, throwing stones, and fighting with Moroccan settlers and security forces.

The Moroccan media's focus on the violence of the resistance obscures the fact that this violence was provoked by attacks from Moroccan security forces who forcibly dismantled and destroyed a tent camp that had been the site of a month-long peaceful protest known as Gdeim Izik. The protest camp and its aftermath have been considered by some as the first in the series of uprisings that are now known as the "Arab Spring." International media has long overlooked the conflict in the Western Sahara. The coverage in Western and Moroccan media that the region does receive focuses on instances of violence and thus obscures the story of the nonviolent resistance movement active in the region.

Gdeim Izik is a useful case study in which to examine the possibilities for and the challenges facing nonviolent protest movements. Most important for this analysis will be the challenge of attracting supportive media attention, the role of the international community, the strategy of occupying a public space, and the challenges of sustaining a commitment to nonviolence, especially in the face of violent repression. In the Western Sahara, the opportunities for, and in fact, the imperative, for a principled and pragmatic commitment to nonviolence is and will be crucial for the future of the Sahrawi cause.

The history of the Western Sahara can be told by several different competing and overlapping narratives from various perspectives. Each of these tellings, be it from a Moroccan, pro-resistance, or outside perspective,

overlooks and delegitimizes the role of Sahrawi civil society and the nonviolent resistance movement. The Moroccan narrative sees the region (a former Spanish colony) as a "reannexed" part of an idealized "Greater Morocco" and refuses to recognize the legitimacy of native, Western Saharan nationalism. Morocco invaded the Western Sahara in 1975, marking the commencement of a violent war in the Sahara caused nearly half of the Sahrawi population to flee to refugee camps in Algeria. In 1976, a rebel government known as the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) declared the Western Sahara to be an independent nation and themselves as its government in exile. Throughout the 1980s, Morocco fought an unacknowledged war against the Sahrawi resistance movement under the leadership of the Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguía el Hamra y Río de Oro (known as the Polisario, a militia group originally formed to resist Spanish colonization in 1973).

In 1991, the United Nations brokered a ceasefire agreement that included a provision for an UN-mandated mission to conduct a referendum to allow the Sahrawi people to vote on independence, integration, or autonomy from Morocco. The promised referendum has never taken place and the Western Sahara situation has continued as a stalemate for 20 years, with the Sahrawi population perpetually divided between refugee camps in Tindouf, Algeria and those under Moroccan occupation in the cities of the Western Sahara. The rebel government and army are based in the Algerian refugee camps that are supported by the Algerian government and international humanitarian aid. Under Moroccan occupation, Sahrawi individuals and their families who are known to support independence or self-determination are targeted on a daily basis by surveillance, harassment, and the threat of forced disappearance or arbitrary arrest by Moroccan security forces. Over the years, the resistance of Sahrawi civil society against the Moroccan occupation has been constant, though underreported due to Morocco's intensive control of media relating to the region. Several large nonviolent demonstrations, notably in 1999, 2005, and 2009, provided the context for the events of the Gdeim Izik protest camp in late 2010.

On October 9, 2010, a group of Sahrawi activists began to set up tents in a highly organized protest camp known as Gdeim Izik, approximately 12 kilometers outside of Laayoune. Sahrawi families from Laayoune, and throughout the region, gathered in the desert to protest against the debilitating economic and social discrimination and marginalization that they face under what they term as the Moroccan "occupation" of their homeland. This protest camp was a demonstration of nonviolent resistance to the Moroccan occupation on a new scale, enacted to bring to light the continuing human costs of a longstanding conflict. At 6:30 a.m. on the morning of November 8, 2010, Moroccan police surrounded the camp and demanded that the protestors disperse, while simultaneously commencing to destroy the tents and confront protestors with water cannons, batons, fire, and tear gas.

According to international human rights organizations, the protest camp began with 34 tents and about 60 people, and by the time the Moroccan security forces began the destruction of the camp it consisted of 4500 *haimas* (traditional Sahrawi tents) and over 20,000 people. The number of people residing in the camp varied greatly, because many participants worked in Laayoune during the week and rejoined their families in the *haimas* on the weekends. On the morning of the Moroccan dismantlement, which some activists have termed a "violent military attack," it is estimated that 2700 people were present in the camp. With the exception of a Moroccan attack in which a 14-year-old Sahrawi boy was killed while bringing provisions to his family in the camp, the month-long encampment was entirely peaceful. In the days prior to the dismantlement, representatives of the camp were involved in direct negotiations with the governor of Laayoune and other ministers in the regional government. They had been making progress in the peaceful negotiations and had just reached some agreements. According to activists who participated in the camp, the early morning violent "dismantlement" took them by surprise.

The rhetoric of Moroccan officials in regards to the camp sought to highlight real or fabricated ties to the Algerian-backed Polisario. In an interview with a human rights organization, the Moroccan Interior Minister Taieb Cherkaoui, claimed that the camp was under the control of criminals and Polisario members who were holding women and children hostage. He claimed that the decision to dismantle the camp was taken to free the hostages from the control of organized crime and save them from Polisario members who were politicizing the camp. This attitude is typical of the tactics of Moroccan discourse on the region, which highlights violence, radicalization, and the need for regional stability. Moroccan discourse views the Polisario as a tool of a sinister Algerian government that seeks to undermine Morocco, and denies the existence of native Sahrawi nationalism.

It has been easy (for the Moroccan government, media, and outside observers) to classify the Gdeim Izik protests as a Polisario-manufactured demonstration in support of independence or self-determination, but this characterization obscures and polarizes the demands of the protestors. Although most of the Sahrawis who participated in the camp also support self-determination, the demands were focused on ending discrimination against Sahrawis in the areas of housing and employment opportunities. This focus made the cause broader, more relatable, and relatively depoliticized. While activists in the region identify forced disappearances, arrests without cause, and marginalization as the major problems facing their people, the protest camp was specific to the complaints of economic and social discrimination. While some participants in the camp may have had ties to Polisario, the rebel army did not organize the camp. The constant association with

the villanized Polisario in Moroccan and international media portrayals of actions in the occupied territory has made it more difficult for the nonviolent resistance movement to attract the international sympathy that it strives for.

Human rights organizations in the Western Sahara have organized themselves around addressing the economic, political, and social needs of Sahrawi civil society. Activist groups such as the Association Sahraoui des Victimes des Violations Graves de Droits du l'Homme Commisés par l'État du Maroc [Sahrawi Association of Victims of Serious Human Rights Abuses Committed by Morocco] (ASVDH) and the Collectif des Défenseurs Sahraouis des Droits du l'Homme [Collective of Sahrawi Human Rights Defenders] (CODESA) are lead by former political prisoners. Their leaders, who identify as human rights defenders, declare their commitment to the principles of nonviolence. Elghalia Djimi, vice-president of ASVDH, is one such leader. She was "disappeared" by Moroccan security forces from 1987–1991, held in a secret prison in Laayoune. Well-educated and well-read, Ms. Djimi is familiar with the international history of nonviolent movements, but also emphasizes the role of peaceful and nonviolent methods in traditional Sahrawi culture. Leaders of both organizations express their commitment to nonviolence, yet stress the ever-increasing difficulty of maintaining nonviolent tactics as the decades of political stalemate and repression continue.

Activists in the Western Sahara view international media coverage of their nonviolent actions as the key to producing empathetic and pragmatic support from the international community. Their belief is that drawing attention to the plight of their people through nonviolent activism will produce the international solidarity that will pressure Morocco and its supporters in the United Nations to change their policies toward the region. They want the long-delayed referendum to go forward and Morocco to be held accountable for its human rights abuses in the region. The role of the media is therefore tied to the role of the international community, and both are seen as crucial to the Sahrawi resistance.

In the case of Western Sahara, media access is extremely limited, a fact that activists have cited as severely inhibiting to the success of their work. Morocco has imposed an effective "media embargo" on the region—restricting access from foreign journalists, stripping journalists of their accreditation, and forcibly evicting journalists from the region. New media, such as Facebook and Youtube, have become crucial for disseminating amateur photos and videos, often from camera phones, depicting protests and human rights abuses. While the official Moroccan media presents a limited perspective to the Moroccan public and the foreign press has very limited direct access to events in the region, the Internet has allowed activists to share their plight with the outside world.

The work of Sahrawi activist Aminatou Haidar has been the most successful at garnering positive media attention. Her work as president of the human rights defender organization, CODESA, has made use of nonviolent tactics such as marches, demonstrations, hunger strikes, and engagement with international solidarity groups. The most effective and well-known of these nonviolent acts of resistance is the 32-day hunger strike that she underwent in November 2009. Ms. Haidar was returning from receiving a prize in Spain for her work when she was detained at the Laayoune airport, her passport was confiscated, and she was forced to return to the Canary Islands. The Moroccan officials refused to allow her return because she had identified her citizenship as Sahrawi, rather than Moroccan, on her customs form. Her hunger strike and non cooperation drew strong international support from activists and celebrities. The media attention and Ms. Haidar's extremely deteriorated condition eventually forced Morocco to relent and allow her to return home. While this act of noncooperation did not force any broad changes to the Sahrawi situation, it was successful at bringing the Sahrawi cause to the attention of the international community and for placing pressure on Morocco.

The Catch-22 dilemma facing activists is that they need the international media spotlight to protect them from serious repression in order to undertake larger acts of nonviolent resistance and noncooperation, but this media attention will only come from first taking actions with great personal risk of repression. The nature of the modern culture of news consumption means that newsmakers focus on sensational violence, destruction and death rather than peaceful, nonviolent activism. Activists in the Sahara cite this culture as part of the set of obstacles facing the nonviolent independence movement, saying that the international community and media only pay attention to conflict. The success of the nonviolent tactics of the movement is dependent on the circulation of knowledge about the resistance work through various forms of media.

One of the most innovative and successful tactics that Western Saharan activists have reinvigorated is the occupation of public space. The act of setting up tents to physically occupy a space in order to express discontent and demands for change has special symbolism and significance for Sahrawis. A historically nomadic people, the Sahrawi have a long history of retreating into the desert to live in tents to escape from the political problems of the city. Participants in the establishment of Gdeim Izik cite the lack of freedom of expression and the constant surveillance and harassment by Moroccan police as the "fatal push" that led them to leave Laayoune for the camp. Now, according to one CODESA activist, it is forbidden to set up *haimas* in the desert and therefore the tents have become a symbol of resistance and noncooperation, a refusal to accept a situation where there is no freedom and no dignity. The nonviolent tactic of occupying public space is an effective

and powerful tool for the Sahrawis because of its historical and cultural significance, and has helped to draw parallels between Gdeim Izik and other contemporary movements with similar tactics and similar repression from Tahrir Square to Zucotti Park.

While the tactic of occupying public space has had some success, it has also faced many challenges and has its limitations. In response to the lauding of the "occupy" tactic, peace scholar Stephen Zunes suggests that, "[m]ore important than the popular contestation of public space is the withdrawal of consent, of delegitimizing the state through massive non-cooperation and making it clear that the people can effectively shut down the economy and other basic activities until their demands are met." In the case of Gdeim Izik, the protests succeeded in occupying the public space by withdrawing from the space of Moroccan control (the city of Laayoune). The protestors at Gdeim Izik needed more support from international media attention in order to succeed in delegitimizing and shaming the Moroccan occupation. The Gdeim Izik protests did not manage to shut down the economy or basic activities, one can only speculate what the effects of the protest might have been if they had managed such a feat. Disruption, an effective tool in a nonviolent repertoire, is difficult to achieve in a situation of occupation where the Sahrawis are already marginalized to the point that their participation is not allowed or necessary for the main industries of the region.

Gdeim Izik has been repeatedly associated with the beginning of the so-called Arab Spring, a series of protests against totalitarian regimes in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Speaking on *Democracy Now* in February 2011, Noam Chomsky asserted that the current wave of protests began in the Western Sahara. While neither the Arab Spring protests nor Gdeim Izik can be characterized as fully nonviolent, there are important parallels. The protests shared similar structural causes (political repression and economic strife) as well as similar tactics. Many of the protests used the tactic of occupying a physical space to highlight their demands. The more important parallels can be seen in the brutality and violence of the state used to repress the protests, and in the response from protesters. Both Gdeim Izik, and many of the protest movements characterized as the Arab Spring, demonstrate the complex realities of sustaining nonviolent methods in the face of state violence.

The violent riots in the streets of Laayoune that occurred in response to the Moroccan dismantlement of the Gdeim Izik protest camp are an important case study to look at the challenges of sustaining nonviolent tactics in the face of violence. While the original demonstration was meant to be fully nonviolent, the violence perpetrated against the demonstrators did produce a violent response. This resulting violence is indicative of a broader challenge to nonviolent movements to maintain a commitment to

nonviolence over time and in the face of repression. One CODESA leader shared his concern that the young people, who have been raised in the climate of occupation and repression, have less patience and less confidence in the nonviolent approach. His fear is confirmed by the attitude of some young Sahrawis who state that, despite the natural pacifism of the Sahrawi people, the irresolution of the conflict, the continued repression, and the lack of support from the international community leaves them with no choice but to take up arms again.

In the aftermath of Gdeim Izik, young Sahrawi men did engage in violent acts in response to the incitement and brutality of the Moroccan security forces. The range of intensity included physical attacks against security forces, intentionally hitting a security officer with a car, throwing rocks, and setting fire to buildings. While the response from the Moroccan security forces was equal or greater in its brutality and violence, the acts of violence undertaken by Sahrawis were harmful to the message and the success of the largely peaceful movement by playing into the continuing cycle of violence.

Both CODESA and ASVDH express frustration at the Moroccan government that prevents them from implementing programs such as workshops on nonviolent activism to teach the youth to have confidence in and to value the principles and tactics of nonviolence. To combat the degeneration into violence, civil society groups could hold workshops on nonviolent resistance to teach discipline in the face of violence, as was done with civil disobedience activists in the Civil Rights Movement and during the struggles lead by Gandhi for Indian independence. Groups like the ASVDH complain that their lack of official accreditation and the repression from the Moroccan government targeted toward individuals associated with the organization make organizing such workshops and encouraging attendance very difficult.

Despite the nonviolent intentions of Gdeim Izik, the memory of the event will be forever tainted by the violence that occurred. In February of 2013, 24 men involved in Gdeim Izik were charged by a military tribunal with "forming criminal gangs," "violence against security forces leading to deaths," and "the mutilation of corpses." They had been detained for the last two years without charges in harsh conditions, facing torture and forced to sign false confessions. Their sentences range from 20 years to life-imprisonment, imposed by what Amnesty International has called a military "show" trial. The prisoners and their families have engaged in hunger strikes in an attempt to gain outside support, but to little avail. The collective memory of the nonviolent protest Gdeim Izik has been, to a large extent, obscured by the violent aftermath and replaced by expressing solidarity with these men.

The case of the Western Sahara and the specific events of the Gdeim Izik protest provide important insights into the challenges of sustaining nonviolent resistance movements. The Western Sahara case depends especially on

the role of media and international solidarity, while relying on both traditional and innovative tactics such as encampment demonstrations and hunger strikes. A continued commitment to nonviolence will help to put the resistance movement irrefutably on the side of the moral "right" in the conflict. Attention to the resistance produced by nonviolent methods can open up dialogue within Morocco and on the international level about the role of the Sahara and the rights of the Sahrawi people. Nonviolent mass protests, such as Gdeim Izik, are empowering tactics that show people their own potential power (when collective) and also demonstrate people power to the world.

The argument for continued commitment to nonviolence is also pragmatic in the Sahrawi case. The Sahrawi resistance groups face brutal repression in the occupied territory, are not a match for the superior military strength of Morocco, are imprisoned by the mined and defended 2000 kilometer-long sand walls dividing the occupied territory from the Polisario base in the camps, and lack the international support that France and the U.S. exhibit unconditionally in favor of Morocco in the UN Security Council. Only an alternative movement, drawing on nonviolent methods to produce support and pressure from the international community, can help the Sahrawi cause to succeed (when they act as a collective).

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