

The Case of the Western Sahara and its Struggle for Independence

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ANNA MURPHY, OCT 18 2015

The Western Sahara is Africa's last colony. The movement for independence of the Western Sahara began over forty years ago as the indigenous Sahrawis struggled for liberation from its colonial power Spain. In the time since, Morocco has claimed control of the Western Sahara, exercising hegemony over a large portion of the territory. Morocco annexed the Western Sahara in 1975, following the Madrid Accords in which Spain divided control of its former colony between Morocco and Mauritania. To symbolize the assumption of the Western Sahara into Morocco's boundaries, King Hassan II led the *Green March* during which 350,000 Moroccans marched into the territory. Prior to Morocco's *Green March*, the International Court of Justice deemed the Madrid Accords invalid thus delegitimizing Morocco's claim. Following four years of conflict between Mauritania and Morocco and the Polisario Front, the Saharawi liberation movement, Mauritania seceded from the conflict thus giving Morocco control of the entire territory and the task of controlling the Polisario Front. In 1979, the Moroccan government constructed the Berm, effectively separating the Sahrawi population into either the Moroccan controlled territory or the "liberated zone," the zone not under Moroccan hegemony, in which the population resides in refugee camps in the Tindouf region of Algeria (Smith, 2005). The Berm is a massive 2,700 km long-structure that is manned by thousands of Moroccan troops and littered with landmines. A protracted civil war lasted until 1991, when the United Nations brokered a cease fire between the Moroccan government and the Polisario Front. A referendum on independence of the Western Sahara was scheduled for 1992 and again in 2002, but it remains delayed (Boukhars, 2012).

Today, the Sahrawi population is divided among three predominant categories: Sahrawis inside the Berm, refugees in and around Tindouf, and the diaspora. This essay will focus on the Sahrawis living under Moroccan control and refugees residing in Tindouf. Both these groups face stagnant political and economic situations manifesting in a lack of self-determination from a delayed referendum, economic inequality, and poverty. Based on this, I ask the question: to what extent do the stagnating and often deteriorating political and economic situations in both areas of the Western Sahara, the population sects residing within and outside the Berm, foster radical and/or violent cooptation of the self-governance movement? I argue that, first, the protracted refugee situation in Tindouf, coupled with both economic and political stagnation, increases the potential for criminal activity, such as weapons and drug smuggling, and extremist-ideology. Second, economic inequality and political stagnation within the Moroccan controlled portion of the Western Sahara escalates social mobilization and political instability, which together boost large scale protests and violent incidents in the face of repression.

Patterns of both emigration and immigration in the Western Sahara drive the ongoing conflict. In reference to the Tindouf-bound emigrant population, the Sahrawi refugee population exploded in 1975 after Morocco's invasion of the Western Sahara as the Polisario Front encouraged people to flee the country. Approximately 155,000 refugees, according the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic's (SADR) estimates, reside in the southwestern Algerian camps today. The Polisario Front declared these camps as part of the SADR, and thus these camps are under control of the Polisario rather than an international aid organization. The SADR has a constitution, police force, military, parliament, as well as a national library, laboratory, and memorials. The SADR also has official diplomatic relations with over 70 countries globally, although it is not recognized by the United Nations.

Despite independent governance, Sahrawi refugees rely on international assistance to combat malnutrition, health

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deficits, and economic inactivity. According to UN estimates, the camps require 130 million USD annually to operate successfully but only receive roughly 70 million USD (Eptako, 2013). As a result, malnutrition and anemia plague the camps, education and healthcare suffer, and employment is limited. Sahrawis depend on food assistance from the World Food Program and other organizations, and the majority of employed Sahrawis in the camps do not receive salaries but rather stipends from the UNHCR. Life in the Algerian desert region presents few options, and the inability of Polisario leaders to curb these circumstances or secure governance in the Western Sahara reaps increasing frustration among Sahrawis and particularly the disenfranchised youth—making the camps susceptible to crime and extremism.

According to a Carnegie Endowment Report in 2012, the Tindouf region increasingly participates in a regional drug and weapons trade characterized by growing violence, disputes among rival trading groups, and cooptation by Al Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). The report explains that the monetary benefits of illegal trade provide relief to the poverty and frustration experienced by the refugees, making this black market trade an alternative to the protracted economic situation plaguing Sahrawi refugees. The consequences of this illegal trade are mainly twofold: increased violence between Sahrawi traders and their Malian counterparts and among different Sahrawi drug and weapon's gangs as well as a growing presence of AQIM in the refugee camps. The proliferation of Gadhafi-era weapons and seasoned fighters in the fall-out of the Libyan conflict, coupled with regional instability, exacerbates AQIM's foothold in the region and increases the potential for the group to secure relationships with Sahrawis. And, while relationships between AQIM and Sahrawis may not be ideologically based, AQIM provides Sahrawis with alternative means of employment, monetary resources, and a substitute direction for reclaiming control of the Western Sahara (Boukhars, 2012).

Immigration into the Moroccan controlled portion of the Western Sahara creates a separate and uniquely challenging political and economic situation. Immigration began in 1975 as King Hassan II aimed to develop the territory of the Western Sahara by importing teachers, healthcare workers, civil servants, etc. In the mid-1980's, unemployment plagued Morocco, creating a new wave of migrants that would enter Western Sahara in search of economic opportunity. The Moroccan government also offered subsidies and tax breaks to Moroccan citizens in the Western Sahara, further incentivizing immigration. In both these instances, Moroccan policy favored native Moroccans over the Sahrawis, offering Moroccans better employment and education opportunities as well as more individual and political rights. Social cleavages manifested quickly, and ethnically divided neighborhoods arose (Boukhars, 2012), constructing noticeable divides between native Moroccans and Sahrawis, which fuels the tensions that persist today.

In the early 1990s, following the UN ceasefire and prior to the scheduled referendum of 1992, tens of thousands of Sahrawis immigrated back to the Western Sahara in order to vote. They inhabited what were supposed to be temporary tents and makeshift housing around Laayoune, but after continuous delay of the referendum, these squatter settlements became permanent fixtures in Western Sahara's urban landscape, creating further economic and political divides between Moroccans and Sahrawis. In the 2000s, the Moroccan government transplanted the inhabitants of the squatter camps into permanent housing. This sect of the Sahrawi population remains completely dependent on the Moroccan government for electricity and food. This dependency, some Sahrawis note, allows certain sects of the population, who align themselves closer with the Moroccan government, to absorb more economic opportunities and handouts (Boukhars, 2012). Therefore, not only are there economic divides between Moroccans and Sahrawis but among Sahrawis as well.

On the political side, independence of the Western Sahara is now a forty-year-old issue. Despite the ICJ ruling, proposed referendum, and UN support for the referendum, Morocco still asserts the Western Sahara has no claim to independence and continues to delay the referendum (Herrera, 2014). The duration of this conflict results in the frustration of the Sahrawis, especially those who immigrated back to the Western Sahara to vote in the 1992 referendum that never occurred, and are now facing an economic situation similar to the refugee camps. This seemingly never ending wait for independence, or at the least self-determination, drives political instability through contention between Sahrawis and the occupying Moroccan government. For example, agitated by Moroccan police repression and violence during a 2010 non-violent protest against the Moroccan occupation and the stagnating economy, protestors engaged in violent acts. The Peace Review argues that remaining non-violent in the face of repression poses the greatest challenge to movements (Naomi, 2014); and therefore, as Morocco continues to

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suppress these movements and delay the self-determination process, the likelihood that violent engagements between protestors and police will occur magnifies. For example, protests occurred again in 2011 and 2012 in Laayoune and Dakhla and embarked on a similar path of escalating violence (Boukhars, 2012).

According to interviews, the predominant grievances of Sahrawis are resource distribution and self-governance (Boukhars, 2012). As evidenced by the continued occupation and economic inequality, the Sahrawis have yet to receive either demand. Commemorating the 39th anniversary of the Green March on November 6, 2014 King Mohamad VI affirmed that the Western Sahara will remain under Moroccan control “until God inherits the earth and all living things within it” (MEM, 2014). And, while Algeria’s President Bouteflika continues to assert the Western Sahara’s right to self-governance, international dynamics between Western Powers, such as the US, UK, and France, with Morocco and Algeria, reduce the potential for political resolution in the near future (Zoubir, 2007). The possibility of an economic solution through reducing inequality and stagnation is also unlikely. First, clientelism, inherent to Moroccan politics, propagates economic inequality in the Western Sahara, and, because clientelism is deeply-rooted (Benstead, 2010), its practice is unlikely to cease. As well, economic stagnation plaguing the refugee camps is almost irreversible because of isolation, low funding, and a lack of resources, among other reasons. Ms. Ahmed, a Sahrawi refugee, explains, “No one wants war... but if there is no result from peace, then I will give all my children to achieve independence” (Gall, 2015). Moreover, as a result of limited solutions for Sahrawi self-determination, the capacity for violence, criminal activity, and radicalization persists and will likely climb.

The future of the Western Saharan and Sahrawis is unknown, but at differing likelihoods, many potential situations exist from large scale uprisings to Algerian intervention. In constructing further studies of this conflict, important factors to address include analyzing the potential of persistent, large scale uprisings (similar to Arab Spring protests in Egypt, Tunisia, or Libya) from occurring. Addressing the possible Moroccan government responses to large scale uprisings in the Sahara would then be a follow up to this. If Morocco responds with a heavy fist, could the conflict morph into a Syrian style Civil War? As well, assessing the ability for AQIM to cross the Berm and infiltrate parts of the Sahrawi population is notable because this could generate support by international actors, who are concerned with stability and curbing extremism, for continuing Moroccan governance. In fact, the Moroccan government in 2011 dismantled an AQIM cell in Laayoune (Boukhars, 2012). And, it is also worth questioning Algeria and its allies’ tolerance for instability, radicalization, criminal activity, and violence within the refugee camps; as this tolerance expires, Algeria is likely to attempt to curb such activities and may exert more pressure on Morocco to resolve the conflict so that Sahrawi refugees leave Algeria’s borders.

This paper offered analysis on the effects of political and economic obstacles plaguing the Sahrawi population. In the refugee camps, stagnation feeds criminal activity, violence, and extremist ideology, and inside the Moroccan controlled Western Sahara, rising political instability and violence occur as a result of occupation and economic inequality. As the conflict persists, economic problems continue, and self-determination remains unachieved, the potential of violence, instability, and extremism mounts across both areas. In response to these findings, this paper also proposed directions for future study to offer a more comprehensive, in depth analysis of the Western Sahara and the Sahrawi’s future.

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