SAHRAWI REFUGEE YOUTH BETWEEN AMBITION AND IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

Through 17 interviews with Sahrawi youth in the Algerian refugee camps, I find that Sahrawi youth have come to individually embody the national cause, naming national liberation as their personal goal. They see themselves as self-reliant and individualistic in certain ways, but are willing to sacrifice the individual identity for the sake of the collective. This is most evident in these interviews in the way they sometimes consider opportunity to leave the camps for an easier life: many Sahrawi have been prone to reject them, preferring to stay in the camps because leaving may be viewed as betrayal of the national cause.
Sahrawi refugees in Tindouf, Algeria have long been noted as unique among the world’s refugee groups for their political consciousness (Mundy 2007a), the elevated status of women relative both to other refugee groups and other Muslim societies (Wallace 1994), and their high level of self-organization and a future-oriented national narrative (San Martín 2005). The conflict between the Sahrawi and Moroccan governments over the control of Western Sahara has now spanned decades, and an entire generation has grown up in the refugee camps with experience neither in the homeland nor of the war for its liberation. Yet nationalist feelings are as strong in the youngest generation as they were in earlier generations, and some would say even stronger.

Through analysis of 17 interviews conducted with Sahrawi youth in the Smara camp, I hope to add insight to some into some of the unique features of Sahrawi refugees. I find that collective and individual identity in Sahrawi youth have yielded conflicting preferences in Sahrawi youth, and that the decision to accept or decline opportunity to study or work abroad is met with consternation. To live in Western Sahara is a pervasive personal ambition, and national liberation has gone from being a collective goal to a ubiquitous personal goal as well. The occupation of the homeland is a personal obstacle to individual ambitions. The decision to remain in the refugee camps is one made seemingly more often than it is among other refugee groups, and to do so is perceived as a deliberate act of defiance of the Moroccan occupier and adversary, rather than one of desperation or helplessness. This is yet another way in which Sahrawi refugees contrast with other refugee groups.
HISTORY AND CONTEXT

Several invaluable exhaustive overviews of the background, evolution, and enduring results of the conflict over Western Sahara have been written (Hodges 1982, 1983a; Jensen 2012; Zunes and Mundy 2010), but a short background is still helpful here. Though the conflict began in 1975, the Sahrawi national cause originated in 1973, when Sahrawi national liberation movement emerged in the form of a military front formed called the Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguía el Hamra y Río de Oro (Hodges 1983b), abbreviated to the “Polisario”. Before the Polisario formed, there had been different Sahrawi national liberation groups, and since the Spanish had begun exploring Western Sahara’s mineral resources in the 1960s, many Sahrawis had already begun to feel the need to claim and protect the land they had long lived in. What the Polisario managed to do was to unite them into a single political will, and eventually a Sahrawi liberation army (Hodges 1983a). The national story has it that the esteemed founder and martyr of the Polisario, al-Wali Mustafa Sayyid, went first to the nomads of the desert to promulgate the cause of liberation, and then expanded to the more sedentary populations of villages and cities. The Polisario had the unique task of transforming the allegiances people had to their families and tribes into one to the national struggle, rooted not in “imported political and ideological frameworks,” but in “indigenous culture” (Farah 2009).

It did not take long for the ideal of a free Western Sahara to take root, and the Polisario came to encapsulate the Sahrawi struggle against Spain. It pressed politically and militarily for the Spanish government to withdraw until 1975, when it finally did. Unfortunately, when the Spanish withdrew, they left Western Sahara without completing a legitimate transfer of power. The Moroccan and Mauritanian governments both claimed historical ties to the land and each
deployed its military to claim and defend the land. Morocco was so confident in its claims to the former Spanish Sahara that it brought the case before the UN International Court of Justice (ICJ) (Farah 2009). The ICJ decided that the fate of the land could only be decided through a referendum conducted among those who lived in the disputed territory (ICJ 1975), thereby discrediting any historical claims either Morocco or Mauritania had had concerning Western Sahara unless they came to fruition through plebiscite.

In 1975, at the Madrid Accords, a tripartite agreement between Spain, Morocco, and Mauritania divvied up the land between the latter two, contradicting the ICJ’s decision and even breaking one of Spain’s own laws (Boletín Oficial 1975). Among the four parties involved at this point, no part of the land was left undisputed. Very soon after both the ICJ decision and the Madrid Accords, a three-way war engulfed Western Sahara. Thousands of Sahrawis fled for their lives, leaving behind property, career, and even family to escape the violence, most walking and riding donkeys through the desert, some chased by brigades of Moroccan troops and targeted by Moroccan bombers, others left to flee by Moroccan forces, who at first considered their evacuation as a victory (Personal Interview 2010). Most Sahrawis were able to reach the Southwestern Algerian military outpost of Tindouf, where a space had been set aside to host their refugee camps, a temporary space that would become an increasingly permanent home for many Sahrawis. Also, in November 1975, in an event known as the “Green March”, 350,000 unarmed Moroccan civilians crossed the disputed border (Mundy 2006) into Western Sahara and began the process of what has become known in Sahrawi history as a second colonization and occupation of the territory, and the most recent era of their long-lasting struggle for national independence. For years, driven by its characterization of the conflict as a rebellion, the Moroccan government denied experiencing Polisario attacks and loss of control of certain parts
of the territory, denied Moroccan casualties, and even denied the existence of Moroccan prisoners of war. The Moroccan government went so far as to imprison Moroccan soldiers who were POWs released by the Polisario in order to keep them from talking about the war (Shelley 2004:56). Morocco wanted the international community to operate under the idea that there was no war, only a few bands of rebels in the desert in one of its southern provinces attempting to “secede” and violate its territorial integrity.

During the French and Spanish decolonization projects, the Moroccan government entertained vast historical claims over parts of Mauritania, Algeria, and Mali, in addition to those over Western Sahara (Jensen 2012). The ICJ roundly rejected Morocco’s historical claims to the land and people: “…[they] do not establish any tie of territorial sovereignty…of such a nature as might affect…the principle of self-determination through the free and genuine expression of the will of the peoples of the territory” (ICJ 1975). The UN has passed over one hundred resolutions calling for fulfillment of self-determination (Jensen 2012). Still, Morocco has continued to maintain that the rule in question here is territorial integrity.

The Sahrawi refugees in Algeria have spent 39 years in these camps at this point, 16 of which involved ongoing warfare. In 1991 however, a ceasefire was reached between the Moroccan government and the Polisario as part of a plan that included a referendum, the solution to the conflict long championed by the UN. That referendum never happened, and the several talks held since then have always failed to produce a viable outcome (Jensen 2012). So for 23 years now, those in the camps have remained in a state of limbo, unable to actively engage the popularly perceived enemy but also unwilling to accept a fate which excludes them from the governance of their homeland. Residents of the Sahrawi camps have an open invitation to return
to Western Sahara so long as they publicly claim Moroccan citizenship, but few exercise this right, and those who do are perceived as having done so insincerely (Personal Interview 2010).

It is not necessary to describe in detail the history that surrounds the building of the Tindouf camps. To put it quite briefly, for the Sahrawis, the camps represent many things. Their construction and development represent an important national trial that forged so many aspects of the Saharawi collective identity today (Hodges 1983b). The years between 1975 and 1991 were a time during which Saharawi women were empowered, because they singlehandedly designed and built the structures, physical, societal, and governmental, that were to host the nation for so long (Wallace 1994). The camps represent the kindness of foreign powers, especially the Algerian government, which has supported the Saharawi national cause in a way they will never forget. And as difficult as life in the camps is, they represent the ability for many Saharwis to defy the Moroccan government without fearing for their lives: they defy it every day by doing nothing more than living in the camps, a testament to the commitment most feel for the national cause. The camps also represent self-governance for the Saharwis, and they thus embody a very important demand Saharwis for their national future. This self-governance takes place through their democratically elected government, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), which oversees the administration of the camps and distribution of the foreign aid among the refugees. It should be noted that these are the only refugee camps in the world administered by the refugees themselves (Mundy 2007a).

Physically, life in the camps is excruciating. Summertime temperatures easily reach 50ºC, sandstorms blast through the camps at least once a week, water and food must be trucked in and rationed off, and many health and sanitation facilities demand improvement and further development. Having inherited their ancestors’ pastoral lifestyle, many Saharawis also concern
themselves with providing for their animals. Since no grass grows in the desert, the primary make-up of their animals’ diets is food waste and any edible scraps of trash, cardboard, or paper they might find blowing around in the desert winds.

It should suffice to say that the majority of Saharawis have found themselves living in these refugee camps for far longer than they expected to. The first generation that came to the camps, fleeing the violence of the Moroccan invasion, did not expect to see their children raised there. They certainly did not expect to see their grandchildren raised there, but that is exactly what has happened, and the 23-year impasse has meant that a new generation has grown up in refugee camps, knowing their homeland and the war for its independence only through the stories told them by their parents and grandparents. Since nearly every Saharawi family lost members to the war, the conflict with Morocco has always been felt as much on the personal and individual level as it has on the collective and national level. In other words, this is everyone’s cause and everyone feels it as such. This, of course, will be explored throughout the discussion of the collective and individual identities that make up this research.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In this study, I hope to contribute not only to the healthy literature on the Sahrawi conflict, nation, and identity, but also to broader theories about politicized identity, especially in refugee populations. For a general understanding of politicized collective identity, I look to Simon and Klandermans (2001), whose spell out the importance of collective identity in decision-making patterns in youth. In times of conflict, group identity is founded upon memory of a grievance, relations to a known adversary, and attempts to reach out to third parties for support. Decisions
made by individuals toward their own ambitions to embody collective causes when their identities have been highly politicized. Duncan and Stewart (2007) explore the extent to which the “personal political salience” of certain issues and kinds of identity inspire life decisions, noting the close connections between the tendencies to attach personal meaning to social events and to politicize collective identities. Polletta and Jasper (2001) note, “collective identities can supply criteria for making decisions that compete with instrumentally rational ones” (293). Together, this set of hypotheses about involvement in political activism well anticipates some of the stronger findings in this study.

The literature specific to the Sahrawi situation and evolution of the collective identity is full and rich. Hodges (1982, 1983a, 1983b, 1984) generated much of the early knowledge on the background of the conflict, including the important players and actors, paying close attention to the birth of Sahrawi nationalism. Bontems (1987) provides a full account of the construction of the SADR, including key decisions made in deciding its governmental form, constitution, and international posture. Since the 1991 ceasefire, Jensen (2012, 2005) has outlined the politics in the Moroccan, Algerian, and Sahrawi governments that has repeatedly stalled attempts at peaceful resolution of the conflict. Shelley (2004) has focused on the political and identity dynamics vis-à-vis the Moroccan government among Sahrawis who reside in the occupied territory. Among her diverse contributions (2009, 2010a, 2010b, 2013), Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2011) provides an exhaustive description of Sahrawi educational migration, placing particular focus on the tension youth face regarding returning to the camps or seeking work abroad once they finish their education. The “reverse culture shock” (San Martín 2009:255) faced by “Cubarauis”—Sahrawi youth who have spent many years in Cuba—is known to include troublesome divergence of values on religion, gender roles, family life, and individual ambition.
This has been further bolstered by conscious efforts by the Polisario from the beginning to stamp out family and tribal loyalties and replace them with nationalist modes of thought (San Martín 2009), reflecting Calhoun’s (1993) notion that “the modern idea of nation, despite its roots in notions of descent, has been nearly always such a category of equivalent persons.”

Since the conflict is primarily protracted as a result of activities outside the territory itself, much more work has been done in the camps and abroad. Bhatia (2001) gives a full overview of the camps’ political structure. Mundy (2006, 2007a) focuses on dynamics of national identity at play within the camps and provided a general understanding as to how the Polisario have been so successful in cultivating and transforming Sahrawi nationalism into resistance and “rehearsal” of an independent state. The Polisario have managed to “map” the Sahrawi camps onto a “new historical narrative” in a way other refugee governments, such as the PLO, have not (Farah 2009). It recognized early on the futility of utilizing the Islamist anti-colonial agenda in light of a Muslim colonial occupying power (Bontems 1987), and generally paid close attention to the developments within the PLO and its failures to mobilize cohesively and effectively (Bontems 1987; Farah 2009). The Polisario has focused on building the state “at the symbolic level” (San Martín 2005:574), “pre-figuring” it to assume control the moment the occupied territory is liberated (Mundy 2007a). The camps are the Polisario’s “controlled experiment” (Mundy 2007a:294).

The Sahrawi nationalist project has been built upon a supposed natural cohesiveness of Sahrawis in the camps from the camps’ beginnings in 1975, which stands unique among other refugee groups. Sahrawi women, for example, have “managed to avoid [sexual oppression] by maintaining a social cohesion through upholding social traditions and customs…and controlling the day-to-day running of the camps” (Wallace 1994:51). The Sahrawi camps have been
recognized as different in several other ways. Experienced aid workers have noted the especially high levels of political awareness among Sahrawis (Mundy 2007), self-organized and proactive in their management of the camps, “future-oriented” (rather than past-centered) in their nationalist agenda (San Martín 2005), and generally tending not to “behave like refugees waiting to be rescued by international charity” (Bontems 1987:185). In fact, the refugee label is not even necessarily self-applied (Farah 2009). To refer briefly back to social psychological research, this adheres more generally to expectations about any label of “victim”, another identity label that is often not self-applied (Holstein and Miller 1990). Still, with the growing prevalence of access to international television, Sahrawis have been more apt to view themselves as politically and nationally deprived, comparing themselves with Kosovars, Timorese, and Palestinians (Bhatia 2001).

The refugee identity is often first fully realized by youth when they study abroad, by both contextual process and conscientious exercises upon their identity. Chatty (2007) notes that “Many [Sahrawi students abroad] linked their status as refugees to a sense of marginality and exclusion from their original homelands and also, at times, from full legal, social, and civil participation in the communities that ‘host’ them” (277). Polisario activities with Sahrawis abroad have not helped students with these feelings; it has politically utilized the scores of Sahrawi youth studying abroad in Spain, Cuba, Syria, and Algeria as agents of the national cause (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2013). It has not been alone in so doing, either, as Spanish civil society organizations and even the Moroccan government have also spent considerable efforts constructing alternate views of the conflict through the narratives of Sahrawi youth abroad and in the camps (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2009).
The need for comparative work on youth living in prolonged situations of displacement has been vividly noted (Chatty, Crivello, and Hundt 2005; Chatty 2007), and several studies focusing on identity and decision-making processes of refugee youth have been carried out in recent years. Sahrawi youth have been compared to Palestinians (Farah 2009; Chatty 2010) and to Afghan refugees in Iran (Chatty 2007; Chatty 2010). Chatty (2007) notes that Sahrawi refugees in Algeria stand out in their marked preference to return to the homeland one day, relative to Afghan and Palestinian refugees in Jordan and Iran, respectively. This is true even as scores of Palestinian youth are politically involved in the fight for the “right to return” to their Palestinian homeland. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2010a) finds that Sahrawi students in Cuba, expressed less desire to return to the refugee camps than other Middle-Eastern students did to their respective places of origin. Instead, the tendency was to prefer to find work in Europe and support their families in the camps through remittances. She finds this to be in stark opposition to common Polisario claims that Cuban educated students tend to prefer to return to the camps (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2009). Malkki’s (1995) study on Hutu refugees in Tanzania finds a much more clearly demarcated line between refugee groups: those who are relegated to camps and those who work in the host country’s main towns. Refugees in camps maintain close ties to their Hutu identities, while town-dwellers quickly shed theirs. The literature outlined here finds this generally to not be the case of Sahrawis, who may “express a strong desire (secondary to national liberation, but complementary to it) to study and work in Europe…and earn money to support their family in the camps, perhaps to educate their own children in Europe, but to return home if needed for war or independence” (Mundy 2007a:289). Though the literature on Sahrawi identity is full, what it still lacks are accounts similar to Fiddian-Qasmiyeh’s (2010a) and Chatty’s (2007) based on interviews with youth who have chosen to return to or remain in the
camps, as a result of their own decisions or of extraneous circumstances, even after spending several years studying abroad. This study begins to fill in that gap.

Finally, in anticipation of one of my most troublesome findings, I wish to include mention of one last minor development in literature on the Sahrawi situation, that of a burgeoning preference to return to arms. Seddon (2000) notes that in light of repeated Moroccan appeals delaying the UN referendum and of ever-present concerns about human rights in occupied Western Sahara, the Polisario began reconsidering the ceasefire. One Polisario commander noted in 2001, “We have made a lot of effort to follow the orders of the UN, but they do nothing, and we do not trust them at all. We gave the UN the possibility to solve the problem, and Morocco took advantage…If we see there are some positive suggestions, we can continue; if negative for us, we have to return to war” (Bhatia 2001). Most recently, Mundy (2007b) warns the international community that the UN is squandering its last chance for peaceful negotiations concerning Western Sahara, and that war is imminent. As overly urgent as these statements may seem in retrospect, they do reveal something of a universal sentiment among Sahrawi youth today, as I will argue.

METHODS

I conducted 17 interviews with Sahrawi youth ages 18-25 (with one exception) living in the Smara refugee camp near Tindouf, Algeria and one who is still studying abroad. To ensure an accurate sample, subjects were chosen through a Sahrawi assistant on the bases of race, gender, age, and experience studying or working abroad. Interviews were conducted with English or Spanish; if the subject did not feel comfortable using either of those languages, the interview
went forward in their language Hassaniya with the help of an interpreter. It should also be noted that one interviewee in my sample was 30 years old; he was chosen for his unique perspective as a Sahrawi who had grown up and been educated in Mauritania, rather than in the refugee camps like most of the other subjects.

Interviews typically lasted about one hour and they were divided into three sections. First, I asked about the subject’s family history: what their families’ lives were like in the homeland before leaving; the process of leaving; the process and challenges of arriving in and building the refugee camps. Then I asked about present issues: comparing past and present circumstances in the camps; describing any experience studying and living abroad; describing Sahrawi cultural distinctions. Finally, I asked about the future: what are their goals and obstacles; how do they address those; what they see as the ideal state for their nation to be in. Very few of my questions required deep thought or consideration since they were based on immediately present knowledge.

I also distributed 62 surveys among Sahrawi of many ages, with each gender constituting about half of the surveys. The manner in which the surveys were approached by many Sahrawis, though, meant that they would become more useful as a supplementary tool than as a source of quantitative data. It was still a very educational and engaging process, and it allowed me to meet many potential subjects, but ultimately, the data gathered through the surveys would not represent well the opinions of individuals. The process of distributing the surveys actually served to reinforce one of the main points I draw in this research, which will be demonstrated later.
THE COLLECTIVE AND THE INDIVIDUAL

The entire dataset that came out of these interviews can be viewed through the balance that is struck by Sahrawi youth between collective and individual identity. I argue, as Simon and Klandermans (2001) do for young political activists, that collective and individual identities in Sahrawi youth have implied conflicting personal directions for their futures and generally complicated the way Sahrawis in the camps interpret opportunities. Though the precise location of the line between the two modes of identity is difficult to locate, the tension therein has nevertheless deeply influenced the way Sahrawi youth in the camps view the conflict, their future plans, and the future of their nation.

First it may be useful to consider the general make-up of the identity in question. Sahrawis consider themselves not as a refugee group, but as a nation in exile (Farah 2009). Some young Sahrawis do not think of themselves as refugees until they are so labelled when they study abroad. One 25-year-old woman explains the challenges surrounding this realization:

I felt like a foreigner [in Algeria]…At the beginning, it was a little hard to engage in the Algerian society, but little by little, we get to engage in their society and understand each other and became friends…the first thing I learned [about myself] is that I’m a refugee.

Other interviews reflect the difficulties, described by Chatty (2007), that young Sahrawis abroad face as the like their status to “marginality and exclusion” both from their homeland and from host countries. A 21-year-old male notes of his time in Algeria:

The Algerian people were looking at us like occupied people, like repressed people, like we have no strength…
A strong Sahrawi identity has been encouraged as the youth study abroad, in part by a constant Polisario presence in youths’ studying Algeria, noted by Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2013). This has been a huge part of the success the Polisario and SADR have had in persisting as a legitimate national struggle. In the same way, the loyalty instilled in individual Sahrawi youths is able to persist through times of isolation, such as going to Algeria or Spain to study and work, and no matter where Sahrawis may wind up, there is still a direct connection between themselves and the national cause. The strong collective bond spans the mine-laden berms laid between occupied Western Sahara and Algeria, it spans the expansion of desert between the Tindouf camps and Algeria, and it spans any ocean or continental divide that physically separates people.

This is because, for all but one of the interviewees, family and friends have played a much more central role in the development and reproduction of national identity than has education. All were asked how they first came to realize they were part of a nation in conflict. Here was the response of a 22-year-old man,

I felt Sahrawian, or a part of this nation from the beginning, from the time I was born, even though I was born in Algerian land in the camps. I think that God knows that I already knew of the conflict of Western Sahara from my mother’s breast. From the beginning, I was thinking about my situation.

And a 22-year-old woman,

I think since I started to learn, since I started to know the world, I noted that I am Sahrawi. I went to Spain in the age of eight, I knew that I am Sahrawi; I knew that I am not Spanish. And I knew that my country is going on in something…I was very young, and I didn’t know anything about conflict, war, but I knew that I’m not on my land, I knew that Morocco is my enemy, and I knew that I’m not Spanish and I’m not Algerian, and I’m Sahrawi…Anyone who asked me, “Where are you from?” I say, “Sahara, Sahrawi.” So Sahrawi. And the first Spanish family I stayed with, they wanted to take me, to take me there to study and to live with them, and I said no; even though I was eight, said, no I can’t leave my family. I am Sahrawi, I am not Spanish. I am not from
Spain, I am from Sahara, so I need to go back to Sahara. So I think it’s something that our parents, our mothers give us with milk. Because I see every Sahrawi child is aware of Sahara…You can go out to the streets and ask any child, where are you from? Who are you? And they say, I am Sahrawi.

This account is useful because in one paragraph, it demonstrates in three of the points I make in this analysis and brings them nicely into one account. Concerning her sense of self, by eight years old, this Sahrawi girl knew exactly what distinguished her, even after spending several school years outside of the camps. She claims that at eight years old, she had already begun to feel the division between pursuing further opportunity abroad and maintaining loyalty to the Sahrawi cause. It demonstrates how deeply the cause is embedded at such a young age.

One of the central questions in the interview protocol asked whether a youth thought that their family or school had had a greater effect on the development of their Sahrawi identity. This question may seem to require a little more reflexivity than what is expected of the average person, but almost no one had a problem answering it. “Family” was the answer given by the majority, though two said education was on par with family. As with the 22-year-old quoted above, many claim to have recognized their distinction as Sahrawi from the beginning. School has provided facts and historical accounts to support what they already intrinsically know. One unique perspective on the role of education in identity reproduction came from a 30-year-old Sahrawi man who grew up and went to school in Mauritania. He answered that school played a much more prominent role in his own development but when questioned why, he revealed that it wasn’t the content of the lessons but rather his interactions with Mauritanian teachers and peers.

I realized that I don’t belong to the Mauritanian society in 1991. That time, I was studying and a teacher was teaching us…And when he saw me, he treat me in a different way, he always called me ‘Rgaibi’. Rgaibi, just to make you know, is the biggest tribe in Western Sahara. So in that way, many Mauritanian students who were my classmates, they followed or they listened to what the teacher was telling me and they followed these,
the teacher’s treatment. And even in the street and other places, my classmates called me the Sahrawi, the Rgaibi. So, in that time I felt that I am not from that society…Not because of classes or the teachers or someone or subjects that was teaching me my history. But the school influenced me and the teachers with me, because all the time they were calling me with a different national name.

The educational system’s diminished role also came up strongly when questions about youths’ future were asked. Getting a university education is still, of course, considered a valuable use of time, but this is a generation that knows its history. That history has seen a movement that was born in the minds and actions of the original educated few, but that was eventually carried on in military form. This generation knows of the territorial gains made in the 70s and 80s—about a third of the disputed territory is “liberated,” or under the control of the Polisario—through war. It has also seen peaceful, diplomatic means of conflict resolution fall victim to international political manipulation, ultimately coming to no gains at all. Put more simply, this generation has observed force working and diplomacy failing. Part of this can be seen through this 21-year-old woman’s account,

Many of the young people, students, they’re not interested anymore to study because they prefer to go to a military school and learn about army and to be prepared to fight against the morocco.

The reason this is brought up here is to explain why, as this dataset shows, the general value on higher education is diminished. Many youth do not see higher education as a realistic means for reaching their goals. Whether or not this represents a change or diversion from the ideas of their parents’ generation cannot be discussed conclusively, since this dataset did not include people above 25.
Also starkly visible in the above account is the loss of confidence in international negotiations techniques. More and more often, they see UN or other foreign-brokered talks not as opportunities to resolve their situation, but as stalls to allow the Moroccan occupation to further solidify and normalize. Many youth also see themselves as more willing to fight for the national cause than they perceive their parents to have been. According to one 20-year-old woman, “Each generation that comes is more willing and more strong [sic], more decided to fight and get its independence.” By far the most diplomatically stated comparison between generations was given by a 24-year-old man:

And I think the Moroccan chance for a peaceful solution is with the old generation of Polisario. I think day by day, I think Sahrawi will be more tight, more convinced, more concerned about what happens in the occupied territory and more ready to give anything to sacrifice, to fight for their rights, even to pay any price, whatever it costs, for freedom.

Once again, this generational gap, though perceived by the interview subjects, cannot be stated conclusively without interviews with older Sahrawis, but it certainly serves to add emphasis to another trend. Some aspects of the national identity, including its history and values, have changed from one generation to another. One especially notable development has been Spain’s gaining some luster over the course of passing history between generations. The original conditions of oppression in Spanish Sahara prior to 1975 have been somewhat lost from the collective memory. It should be said though, this was by no means on a unanimous basis. Sentiments like “There is nothing positive under any kind of occupation” were repeated on more than one occasion, but overall the conditions that led to the original formation of and push by the Polisario seems to have faded from many youths’ collective memory. The Spanish were viewed by some as having “respected Sahrawi customs” while the two groups interacted, and one woman asserted that the Spanish “never jailed Sahrawis” the way that the Moroccan forces do.
Records show that hundreds of Sahrawis were jailed by the Spanish the same way the Moroccans now jail Sahrawis (Hodges 1983a). In the minds of at least some young Sahrawis, though, the collective memory of Spanish-occupied Sahara has changed. This is doubtlessly somewhat as a result of the shift in the sentiment held by the general Spanish population, which has largely come to embrace the Sahrawi cause as its own. Many Spanish NGO’s operate in the camps, and on a regular basis, Spanish crews go to occupied Western Sahara or to the camps to make films and other media about the plight of the Sahrawis. This view of the Spanish as preferable to the Moroccans is also partially due to the fact this it is the Moroccans who occupy Western Sahara now, and it is at the hands of the Moroccan government that Sahrawis perceive their occupied brothers and sisters to be mistreated.

TENSIONS OF IDENTITY

A key finding is the tension between the collective and individual identity felt by many Sahrawi youth. It seems to influence the decisions made by many as they strive to find the balance between bettering their own situation and fighting for the betterment of their nation. Here, one must consider the personal ambitions and goal-making tendencies among the youth. For many young Sahrawis, the national cause, that is, seeking a free and independent Western Sahara, no matter what the cost, has been internalized. A good portion of the interviews focused on questioning the subjects about the personal goals they held for themselves, for their own life trajectories, and the collective goals they held individually, for their nation’s future. At first look, it appeared as if they were one and the same. Many young Sahrawis answered the question
‘What do you want to do when you’re older?’ not with a personal plan but with a collective statement. For example, one 25-year-old woman answered,

I don’t know, but, all I know is I want to be a voice for my people and the fight for the freedom, the independence. So, if that’s through diplomacy, then I’m working it. If that’s through business, then I’m working it. My main goal is that I’m helping my people.

Another, a 25-year-old university man, answered,

Of course, the first thing I would like to do when I’m old is to make a big push on our generations to move or to mobilize themselves to put our land in freedom. And of course to try to bring all the Sahrawi families back to their own land and principally, my family… It’s my personal goal.

A third, a 21-year-old woman’s, immediate response was a question.

Here in the camps or in my homeland? I hope that what’s left of my life will be there, not here.

The point I would like to draw out of this is that the question of what an individual would like to do over the course of his or her life was very often interpreted as where he or she would like to be. The “what” was not as important as the “where”. It can be seen, as well, in the response of the 25-year-old that the concern of the future, even his own future, necessitates an answer that assumes a collective form. Like many other subjects, he defined the national struggle for the homeland as his personal goal. His education, his career, and any other aspect I inquired about concerning his personal, individual future were all incidental. What was important is that he returns to Western Sahara within his own lifetime.

Of course, the desire is not simply to return, but to do so under an independent Sahrawi government. At this time, any Sahrawis in the camps who wish to live in the occupied territory
may do so, as long as they claim Moroccan citizenship, but this is rarely done. One 22-year-old woman explains:

[Sahrawis wanting to travel to the occupied territory] will have two choices: to go through Mauritania or to cross the wall. Cross the wall in two ways: you cross in secret, and maybe you die because of land mines; or another way, you go to the checkpoint there and say “I am Moroccan”. And you go, you give this thing, your fingerprint, and you say, “I am Moroccan” so you can go in.

RESEARCHER
So, not too many people do that?

SAHRAWI WOMAN
No, no. Very few, very few. Just people who like, but when they do it, they just say it’s not important if I say I am Moroccan…They don’t forget they are Saharawi. It’s just a way for them to go to their land…But I will never do it. I prefer to cross the wall than doing that…I say if I had to choose to do it, I would [cross the berm] rather than saying that I am Moroccan, even to go to Sahara. I will go to Sahara only saying that I am Saharawi.

Also demonstrated in the first two interviews quoted above is the concept of working, dedicating one’s life and career to the national cause. Several interviews answered the question of career quite open-endedly, and it was clear that exactly what sort of work they may eventually settle in would only be important once their conflict has resolved and they lived in a free Western Sahara, or once it was established that they were working exclusively for the national cause. Thus, as one would expect, the obstacles they named as in their ways, were also defined in collective terms. The Moroccan occupation can be easily said to stand in the way of a person’s personal goals, as well as their national goals. Indeed, there were questions regarding both of those aspects, but in most cases they produced duplicate answers. The result was that many perceived the Moroccan occupation as the primary obstacle to their personal ambitions, even if those cases in which they were defined more individually with specific answers.
Something else that emerged in these interviews, but much more subtly, was a tension with the collective identity itself. This can be demonstrated beautifully in the interview of the same 25-year-old woman earlier quoted, who is a student at a Western university. When asked about personal obstacles, she answered,

Sometimes, it’s really hard to find the balance going on with building a future as an individual and trying to help my people…Knowing that my people are suffering and Morocco is killing them and I’m here studying. So it’s really hard to just sit and just study without thinking about it.

This struggle of balancing personal ambitions and loyalty to the cause was shown to affect many youth. Pursuing personal goals very often necessitates leaving the camps for any youth. The paradox here is that the decision to leave the camps so often reached through collective processes, usually consulting family and close friends, is often compromised by loyalty to the cause. It can be seen here in this excerpt of a 22-year-old man,

When I decided to go to this country [Algeria] to study, I was elected by myself. So they [my family] asked me if I want to go or not. I went, with my decision and with my father’s decision, and when I got there, I found a lot of opportunities to study there and to work there and to live there; but I felt that I have a big compromise with my family and my people, that I have to do something for them and go back…always I was thinking that back home, I have people who are waiting for me.

This [decision to return and stay in the camps] is my decision, is not my family’s decision. Of course, my family, they wanted me to go and study and learn more…but also, my parents all the time were advising me, if I go and stay, that’s betraying the family and the Sahrawi issue and all the Sahrawis. So it’s not a good thing.

In the first case, the young Sahrawi woman actually elected to continue to spend her time abroad in a university, even if tormented to an extent by the thought that she is somehow abandoning the cause. In the second case, he reached the decision to study outside of the camps through a collective decision-making process involving his family. His decision clearly received
mixed reception from his family members, who seemed to have been a driving force in both the
decision to go in the first place and that to return to the camps in solidarity.

In all of the above responses to answers, the well-developed collective aspect to the
individual identity can be clearly seen. The two are closely bound. In these cases, that internal
conflict in the individual is shown through the decision to sacrifice individuality, defined here as
personal goals and ambitions, for the sake of the national cause, the collective identity. This act
may take a concrete form like a decision to remain in the camps, even despite attractive
opportunity elsewhere, or it may simply manifest as the guilt an individual feels when they
pursue opportunity.

As a testament to the collective aspect of decision-making of individuals, an anecdote
may be useful. Originally, I planned to include several surveys as part of the dataset. I distributed
62 among people of all ages in the Smara camp, but after only a few, I realized I could not rely
on the data they yielded because the way the surveys were received would not meet the
quantitative standards required. What happened is that very often, when I gave a survey to
someone to complete, it became a group project. People called over friends and family members
to contribute to the answers they chose, especially concerning questions regarding opinions on
politics and culture. Likewise, often my decision to give a survey to one person necessitated that
I also give one to the many others who were now part of the process. The result was that I wound
up with several surveys with identical answers to questions that were based not on individual
opinions, but rather on informal group discussion, which inevitably involves pressure to conform
with the majority opinion. I also wound up with a very poor sample. The reason that I think this
is a useful anecdote is that it shows generally how decisions, even small ones, are approached by
many Sahrawis. Trivial as it may be, the decision of how to answer an individual question is one
that is made collectively. Just as a point of contrast, many subjects expressed dismay when I told them that their answers were to be confidential and that no one would know which survey was the one they filled out. One participant insisted on putting her name on the survey, no matter the consequences.

When decisions are made that pose some sort of threat to maintaining the collective identity, certain strategies have to be employed to ensure the integrity of its continuity. Many of the youth who left the camps to study reported taking part in activities that celebrated their Sahrawi identity. Sometimes this was orchestrated by a group of Sahrawis, but it could also be something sponsored by whatever school or family that was hosting them abroad. In the same way, the connection of families across the border between occupied Western Sahara and the camps is often maintained by regular phone calls enabled by the presence of international NGOs. The maintenance of a concordant collective identity is approached both consciously and unconsciously, and it is fair to say that the majority of the Sahrawis interviewed recognized the importance of maintaining a united national identity that includes Sahrawis in both the occupied territory and the camps, as well as those abroad.

In the same way collective Sahrawi identity affects the decisions of individuals, so too can the actions taken by or towards Sahrawi individuals spur strong collective responses. The Sahrawis who live in the camps consider themselves to be fully in solidarity with those who live in occupied Western Sahara. Many families were directly split in the 1975 Moroccan invasion, and all but one of my subjects claimed to have family members who live in the occupied territories, usually whom they have never met personally. Still, what happens in the occupied territories can easily spur strong collective reactions in the refugee camps. For example, in November 2010, outside the Western Saharan capital of El-Aaiun in an area called Gdeim Izik,
upwards of 20,000 Sahrawis gathered to protest the Moroccan government’s treatment of Sahrawis living there. The Moroccan government tolerated it for a little while, but on November 8, military and police forces descended on the camps and the resulting clashes resulted in no fewer than 11 Sahrawi deaths and several hundred injuries and arrests (Mandraud 2010). According the Moroccan sources, the Moroccan military police also lost ten. These numbers are, of course, disputed by both sides of the conflict. The emphasis here though is not on how many of either side were killed in the clash, but the way in which the Sahrawis living in the Tindouf camps reacted. According to one interview thousands gathered at Polisario headquarters and began demanding that their government react to the Gdeim Izik “massacre”. It has not been emphasized yet in this paper how much support the Polisario receives from Sahrawi nationals, but the extent to which Sahrawis trust and support their government would be something enviable to similar governments, such as the Palestinian governing bodies. Thus, the collective gesture of thousands of Sahrawis gathering to protest their government’s inaction is a rare event, demonstrative of the extent to which camp Sahrawis are willing to defy themselves for the sake of homeland Sahrawis’ welfare.

The Sahrawi identity is a source of pride for the individual, even after spending years outside of the camps. Almost any Sahrawi outside of Western Sahara would be considered a refugee, and often the tendency of refugees who wind up not in camps, but in cosmopolitan areas of their host countries will tend to try to find a way to integrate. In Malkki’s 1995 study of Burundian refugees in Tanzania, she found it was actually very difficult to locate her subjects in the towns, as opposed to camps. Most of them had chosen to identify themselves neither as refugees nor as members of their ethnic group, Hutu. Instead, they had adopted an identity that allowed them to more easily to integrate into the cities in which they lived. In many cases, the
very history the town refugees held as their own had been strikingly altered compared to that of the camp refugees.

The data from the Sahrawi refugees seemed to show quite a contrary tendency. This 22-year-old man spent much of his primary and secondary education in Algeria and Libya. When asked how he would have responded when someone mistook him for an Algerian, he stated,

We make sure that we get the right information to them. Say, “No, we are Sahrawi.” We are like them. We escaped to your country, but we are Sahrawi. We were colonized by Morocco. We explain everything. We also have celebrations of our country, but we make it there; so more people can know, we sing our Sahrawi songs. [The women] wear *malhfas* so that they can know that we’re not Algerian.

And a 24-year-old man recounts of Sahrawi girls studying in Algeria,

[Sahrawi girls] are satisfied and more comfortable when they wear malhfa…The foreigners, they find it a very nice thing to have your origin and your traditional clothes, wearing them in this different community, Algeria. They start asking about the issue and things like that.

Another 25-year-old woman,

When a couple of us met last year to go to the UN speaking, they were students from the camps…We all met through emails, but we didn’t really know each other, but we really united to fight for our freedom…The sense of brotherhood, I think, no matter that we didn’t know each other, no matter that we’ve never seen each other, we are Sahrawi, which that means, you are automatically my brothers and sisters.

These excerpts do not demonstrate the pressure to assimilate that refugees often face when spending extensive periods of time in foreign countries. They do, however, establish some of the strategies Sahrawi youth adopt to maintain their connections to the national cause. One might expect a Sahrawi youth traveling by herself to sort of shed her national expression for those long periods of time in which their well-being, social and perhaps economic, depended on reaching
some state of integration. This is not the case with the Sahrawis I interviewed who have spent time abroad. The Sahrawi identity and the national cause are sources of pride and distinction, and quelling them would bring shame. This is a likely part of the reason many youth feel pressure to return to the camps after they spend an extensive period outside.

One final trend worth noting in these interviews is the youths’ preference or sense of inevitability for a return to war as means of regaining their homeland. I asked all the subjects about their thoughts about the non-violent activism of Aminatou Haidar, the so called “Sahrawi Gandhi”, and her relative success in generating international awareness of the Sahrawi national cause. Even when primed with an example of successful nonviolent activism, all but one interviewee expressed the view that, for better or worse, only a return to force would yield progress towards national liberation. A few quotes of various levels of cynicism demonstrate this.

What Aminatou Haidar is doing…is a good strategy, but this strategy needs support. If it does not bring us solution, it is because the Moroccan will not change their minds. And I think if this strategy can’t bring a solution to the Saharawi people, the only one strategy we have before us is the war.
- 21-year-old man

[War] is a card, and we need to play it when we need it. And I support it if it’s necessary. But if I could use nonviolent ways, then I will prefer the nonviolent way…But if any point in the future, the Saharawi decide to get back to war, of course I am a Saharawi soldier, and I will be. All the students, they will be as soldiers on the Saharawi side and they will fight for their rights.
- 24-year-old man

I think the only one strategy is to go back to war. During the 16 years that we were fighting, we liberated a lot of our land. And in these 20 years, we did nothing. So I think the only one strategy is to go back to war. And I think, in my personal opinion, what was taken by force should be reclaimed by force.
- 22-year-old woman
The only one strategy is the war…Our leader, al-Wali always said that what was taken by force, the only way is to take it back is by force.

- 30-year-old man

If Gandhi lived where we live, he would throw his stick and exchange it for a gun.

- 25-year-old man

Al-Wali’s adage, paraphrased “What was taken by force must be retaken by force,” was repeated in a quarter of the interviews, prompted only by my question about the best strategy to “reclaim heritage”. The view that only force will be successful has become embedded in the conversation about liberating Western Sahara, and contrasting voices are few and far between in the camps. In light of the Polisario statements indicating willingness to return to arms (Bhatia 2001) and a general acknowledgement of war as the outcome of continuously stalled negotiations towards the referendum (Seddon 2000; Mundy 2007b), the sentiments of Sahrawi youth in the camps are unsettling. As non-settlement drags on, it seems clear that the international community can expect to see a deepening of the sense of inevitability attached to war by young Sahrawis.

TIES TO THEORY

To use the framework of collective identity established by Polletta and Jasper (2001), the Sahrawi identity has long established itself as one in which there is a “cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community” and a “shared status or relation…distinct from the personal identities” (285). The Sahrawi cause has supplied “criteria for making decisions that compete with instrumentally rational ones” (293). The accounts given by these youth how deeply embedded the national cause is in the individual. Additionally, Sahrawi identity formation and decision-making has adhered to Simon and Klandermans’ (2001) general structure: past
grievance and present adversary sit prominently in the motives of Sahrawi youth. It is from this connection that tensions between the collective and the individual arise, often giving rise to decisions made to embody the collective cause.

To compare refugee groups, the pressure on refugees abroad to assimilate into their host cultures (Malkki 1995) when outside of refugee camps is of course felt by Sahrawis but resisted on several fronts. Using communication with other Sahrawis abroad, communication with their families and friends back in the camps, and pursuit of careers that demonstrate a commitment to the Sahrawi national cause, many youth resist such pressure to conform and establish themselves as firmly committed to the cause. It can be seen that, given the common decision to return to the camps rather than pursue further opportunity abroad, that the material well-being of any one individual is not the driving force in decision making. This is especially evident in the light of the fact that Sahrawis in the camps can migrate to occupied Western Sahara whenever they want so long as they claim Moroccan nationality and the fact that they almost never do it. Life in the camps is miserable, but to remain in the camps, rather than moving abroad or going to Western Sahara as a Moroccan, is to embody the national cause. This is somewhat at odds with Chatty's (2007) findings about Palestinians in Jordan and Syria, who may fight for a right of return with no actual intention to return if that goal is ever accomplished. No such sentiment appeared anywhere in these interviews, and several subjects even claimed that Sahrawis having lived abroad for years already would move to a liberated Western Sahara as soon as they were given the chance. This difference may reflect the difference between the Polisario and the PLO in politically mobilizing youth (Farah 2009), or it may be a simple function of time since displacement.
Only a perspective that accounts for this materialistically counterintuitive decision-making process can suffice to expound the makeup of the Sahrawi identity. This identity can only be understood as having developed and been constructed and reproduced through interaction with the unique environment of the Tindouf camps, including the interactions an individual experiences with his/her family and friends, educational and administrative institutions, and with other socializing syndicates that invariably affect their conditions, like the international media. Because these interviews all took place with youth who returned to the camps from abroad, I cannot really claim any conclusions about the tendencies in identity among Sahrawis who remain abroad well into adulthood, though my subjects were of the opinion that the vast majority of Sahrawis continue to wear the identity as a badge of honor, donning Sahrawi dress and custom and participating in Sahrawi solidarity protests when they arise.

These interviews reveal a tendency divergent from Fiddian-Qasmiyeh's (2010a) finding that Sahrawi students in Cuba tend to desire to pursue work in Europe and maintain ties to the camps through remittances. It may still be true that such decisions imply nothing about losing or betraying identity, but it does seem to clarify that Sahrawis in Cuba have come not to consider remaining outside the camps a betrayal of the cause. The content of these interviews also begins to highlight the way internalized collective identity shapes self-selection into groups that either do or do not move abroad. Though none of my subjects implied that any of their counterparts working or studying abroad ought to be considered “traitors” (unless they were doing so in Morocco), the fear of betraying identity by leaving the camps for too long, realized in family preferences and internal turmoil, does cause some Sahrawi youth to choose to remain in the camps.
CONCLUSION

Sahrawis living in the camps near Tindouf, Algeria have been subject to a strong but complex bond between the collective identity and individual identity and personal ambitions. Sahrawi youth have come to individually embody the national cause, throughout these interviews naming national liberation as their personal goal. They see themselves as self-reliant and individualistic in certain ways, but are willing to sacrifice the individual identity for the sake of the collective. This is most evident in these interviews in the way they sometimes consider opportunity to leave the camps for an easier life: many Sahrawi have been prone to reject them, preferring to stay in the camps because leaving may be viewed as betrayal of the national cause. Likewise, though Sahrawis in the camps can return to the occupied territory at any time if they accept Moroccan nationality, they rarely do so. This is particularly striking in light of the fact that many youth self-expressedly yearn to “return” to the homeland, which they have never known. This willingness to wait in the camps should thus be considered an act of defiance of the Moroccan occupation, and it is not a passive or desperate decision. It is an individual expression of solidarity, testifying the self-ascribed identity as a “nation in exile,” not as a refugee group.

Individual decisions, as Simon and Klandermans (2001) would predict, have come to embody the national cause, and personal ambitions, when they take specific forms, are usually pursued with the goal of helping the national cause, or at least not hurting it. When asked about career ambitions, most of my interviewees named not a specific job or track they would like to follow, but rather a desire to serve the national cause one way or another: through medicine, art, law, or education. The activity involved in personal ambition is not as important as the ends and eventual location.
National history, especially that of struggle against colonial powers, has been passed on primarily through family and friends. Those sentiments associated with national identity are also passed on primarily through family. Family seems to have had a much greater impact on sense of national identity than education has. Related, priority on gaining a higher education has been diminished by the duration of the ceasefire with no progress towards resolution. Education is sometimes seen in mythico-historical terms as an essential part of the formation of the nation, but as no longer the key element in the national struggle. The conditions of oppression in Western Sahara under the Spanish occupation have also been largely lost from the collective memory. Many youth described the Spanish occupation as much preferable to the Moroccan occupation, and some even described life under Spanish authority as good overall. Life in refugee camps, memory of homeland, and thought of family separated by disputed borders constitute a daily reminder of oppression, making Spain’s historical role seem rosy by comparison.

When abroad, many reported feeling empowered and distinguished by Sahrawi identity, if isolated at the same time. The national struggle ties the community together across long distances and periods of disconnect. Beside the material difference, there is no perceived difference between Sahrawis living in the refugee camps, those abroad, and those in the occupied territory. Feelings associated with national cause appear stronger in youth, who perceive themselves as more willing to sacrifice for national independence than their parents are.

As of three years ago, when the interviews were conducted, confidence in the international community to resolve this situation was all but completely faded. Given the long developing trend for Sahrawis to see a return to war inevitable, it is unlikely that this dynamic has improved at all. Thus, as the stalemate drags on, one can only imagine that the preference for war, even as a last resort, will only grow stronger.
My homeland
Lives inside of me though I do not live in it.
It settled in my heart though I was born far away from it.

-Mohamed Sulaiman Labat, Sahrawi Poet/Calligrapher
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