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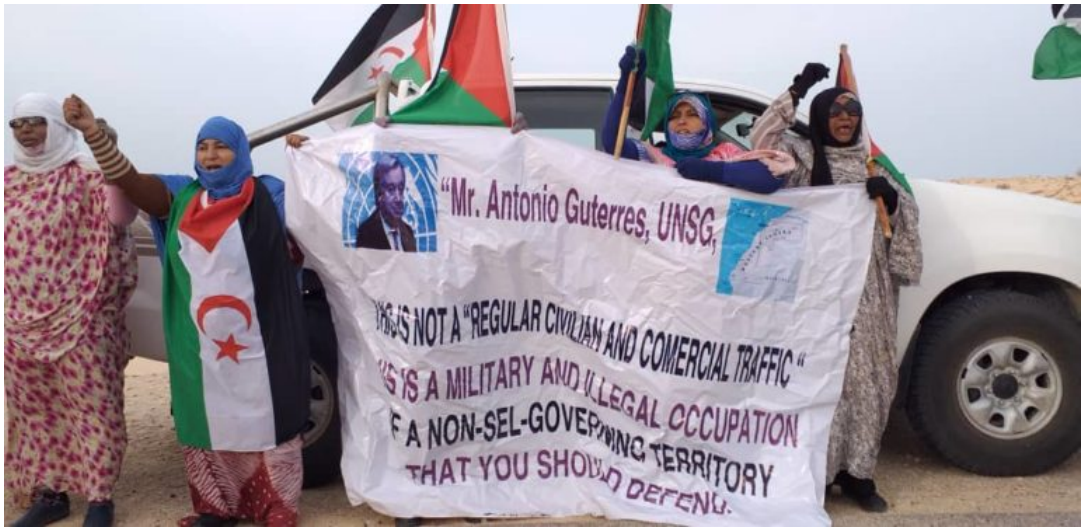
An Invisible War in Western Sahara

Vivian Solana *In:* 298 (Spring 2021)

War has broken out in Western Sahara and few have heard the news.

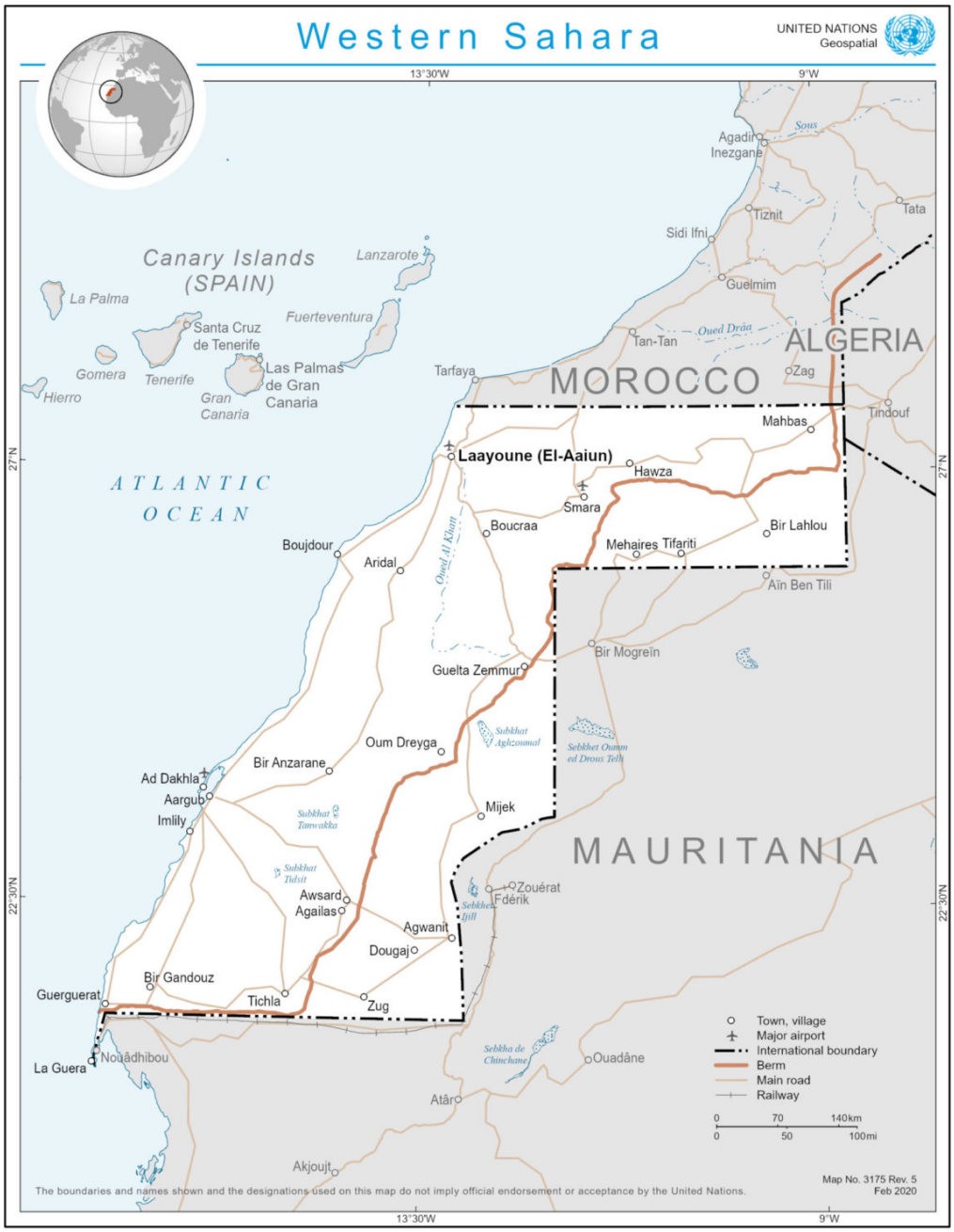


Sahrawis participate in the sit-in blocking the road at the Guergarat crossing from Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara to Mauritania, through the UN buffer zone. October 2020. Photo by Liman Bachir.

At a crossroads between sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa, the Saharan desert has long been misconstrued in colonial discourses as a largely unpeopled geography deemed culturally marginal and largely assimilable to Maghrebi post-colonial nation-states. As a result, Saharan political identities occupy a blind spot in social scientific area studies. Partly for this reason, the political demands of hundreds of thousands of Sahrawis who support the Polisario Front—an anti-colonial national liberation movement established in 1973 to recover sovereignty over Western Sahara—are systematically sidelined in global political agendas and mostly ignored in mainstream media.

The events that brought an official end to the ceasefire of 29 years between Morocco and the Polisario Front took place in Guergarat, a town along Western Sahara's southern border with Mauritania. The town is situated outside of the 1,677-mile military berm that Morocco built to shield its occupation of Western Sahara from the Polisario Front. Guergarat lies in a United Nations (UN) monitored buffer zone. As such, Morocco violated the terms of the UN-mediated

peace process, which both parties had agreed to in 1991, when it first opened a passage through the berm in 2001 and started building a road across the zone to Mauritania in 2016 without Sahrawi consent. To Morocco, this road is a key piece of infrastructure in its ambitious development goals to improve regional connectivity and position itself as a major Maghrebi power. To Sahrawis, the road represents one of Morocco's latest efforts to profit from the illegal commercialization of Western Sahara's resources, further encroaching upon their right to determine the political status of the non-self-governing territory. The fact that this road was built under the passive watch of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) only served to heighten Sahrawi indignation.



A map of Western Sahara by the United Nations with the berm marked in brown.

In October 2020 a group of Sahrawis stopped traffic across the road for 22 days—not the first time that the border between Western Sahara and northern Mauritania has taken center stage in this territorial conflict. The Polisario Front has called attention to this illegal passage many

times before, including through its refusal on several occasions to allow the Africa Eco Race (also known as the Monaco-Dakar Rally) to cross through it. Anti-colonial resistance in and around this border can be traced back to when it was first built by European colonizers in the early twentieth century. Responding to Shaykh Ma'lainin's 1905 fatwa against French and Spanish colonial intrusions, Sahrawi warriors staged attacks on a border that was blocking their access to pastures and trans-Saharan trade networks. At the time, European powers criminalized these actions, dismissing them as banditry. Today the Polisario Front explicitly identifies these early warriors as their predecessors.[1] More than a century later, on November 13, 2020, Morocco's army forcefully removed the Sahrawi protesters blocking the road. In response to this new violation of the 1991 UN-mediated ceasefire, the secretary general of the Polisario Front, Brahim Ghali, acquiesced to the popular will of Sahrawi refugees by making the long-awaited announcement that the Sahrawi People's Liberation Army (SPLA) would resume its armed struggle.

The contrast between the anxious exhilaration with which my Sahrawi friends and contacts (most of whom are refugees, as opposed to residents of occupied Western Sahara) celebrated, publicized and took stock of their nation's return to war and the hesitance of outside observers to name the war, could not have felt starker. As a Spanish-Canadian anthropologist, my account of the significance of Western Sahara's resumed war is heavily influenced by the many relationships I formed with Sahrawis while carrying out long-term ethnographic research in the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR).[2] The SADR is a polity in southern Algeria where close to 173,000 Sahrawi refugees live under the Polisario Front's leadership. Since the war's declaration, the SADR's official news agency has been sharing regular news of missile strikes against military positions along Morocco's berm. At the same time, patriotic images of mothers waving goodbye to their sons dressed in military fatigues as they jump onto the back of trucks heading for the battlefront in Western Sahara, rumors of injured and deceased soldiers, footage of decimated camel herds and reports of rampant policing of Sahrawi activists who live under Moroccan occupation have began circulating through Sahrawi social media pages in abundance. A new burst of energy is palpable online as young Sahrawi men and women organize livestreams and post regular images of demonstrations in the SADR and in the diaspora. They are using online video messages, poems and memes in different languages to bring attention to their resumed armed struggle and to share information and perspectives among themselves. When outside observers declare their concern for these "escalating tensions," "latest skirmishes" and a "re-ignited conflict," few choose to utter the far more sobering label that Sahrawis themselves are using to describe the latest expression of their political resistance: war.

In the Margins of the Maghreb

To those of us who study and follow news about the conflict over Western Sahara closely, the scant and distorted coverage that Sahrawi political expression receives is far from unfamiliar. When the Maghreb was consuming much of the world's attention due to the wave of popular uprisings that took place in and around 2011, the anthropologist Alice Wilson asked why a

month-long Sahrawi mass demonstration in Western Sahara's Gdeim Izik failed to achieve visibility within the narrative frame of the otherwise much publicized "Arab Spring."[3] After all, nearly 50 percent of Sahrawi residents in occupied Western Sahara carried out a non-violent, extended sit-in that was comparable in both form and substance to the actions of protesters who similarly demanded a greater distribution of political and economic power across the region (and beyond). This Sahrawi uprising was forcefully dismantled by the Moroccan government only a few weeks prior to Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation in Tunisia, an event which is often considered the beginning of the Arab uprisings.

Compared to the over 50,000 protesters who congregated in iconic public squares such as Tahrir in Cairo, the absolute number of Sahrawi protesters was small (around 15,000–20,000). Relative to the Sahrawi population, however, the scale of the mobilization was even more significant in Western Sahara than elsewhere and, as such, it immediately became an important event in Sahrawi history. As Wilson argued, the fact that Gdeim Izik took place in "make-shift camps in the desert" contributed to the neglect of this Sahrawi uprising within the overall narrative of the Arab Spring.

The tendency of global observers to associate political expression with actions carried out in the public spaces of an urban polis—such as the hyper-visible urban squares in which other protests across North Africa were staged—meant that the space where Sahrawis chose to stage their uprising became inconceivably political. Last but not least, the fact that Gdeim Izik took place under the conditions of military occupation meant that a repressive media structure was already in place to silence and deviate attention from the uprising before it even started. The end result, Wilson argued, was that despite the clear resonances between Sahrawi predicaments and that of other protesters in the region, Gdeim Izik was constructed as marginal to the Arab Spring to the point that the entire uprising was made "unseeable altogether."[4]

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Ten years after Gdeim Izik, the latest expression of Sahrawi political resistance is again rendered invisible. Once more, it appears to be in Morocco's interest to deflect attention over the ceasefire's termination. The Moroccan military's numeric advantage over the SPLA certainly contributes to making Sahrawi armed struggle dismissible. Following a guerilla strategy of tenacious harassment, the SPLA's attacks on the wall send clear political messages, even if they are not delivering enough carnage to make headlines. Indeed, the prospect of making Sahrawi political advances through military might alone is highly unlikely. So why return to armed struggle at all?

The Fine Line Between Peace and Pacification

The Polisario Front inaugurated its armed anti-colonial movement with a raid on a Spanish colonial checkpoint at al-Khanga on May 20, 1973. This event followed unsuccessful attempts to peacefully negotiate the independence of what was then known as Spanish Sahara. In 1975, Spain failed to honor Sahrawi demands for full independence: Instead of keeping its commitments to the UN and organizing a referendum on the self-determination of the colony, the colonial power withdrew and authorized the invasion of the territory by Morocco and Mauritania at the Madrid Accords—a secret pact that contravened international law.

The Polisario Front resisted this re-imposition of colonial governance over Western Sahara by continuing its armed struggle. Their movement obtained the support of non-aligned countries, most significantly that of Algeria, which remains the Polisario Front's strongest ally and supporter to this day. In turn, Morocco received the support of its Western Cold War allies for a war that lasted 16 years; Mauritania withdrew from the conflict in 1979. In 1991, a ceasefire agreement was reached on the premise that the UN would step in to mediate the terms of a referendum on the self-determination of the territory. But 30 years after the UN peace mission MINURSO was dispatched to the region, the referendum that Sahrawi people had settled for has not yet taken place. This failure has been mainly due to Morocco's obstruction of repeated efforts to organize the referendum, culminating in the May 2019 resignation of the UN Secretary General's personal envoy to Western Sahara, Horst Köhler.

Throughout much of the ceasefire period, the conflict over Western Sahara has been described as "frozen," "locked" or "stalled" and as a stubborn "zero-sum" game between two parties. This framing, however, misses the fact that the failure to resolve the conflict has never only implicated two parties. The systematic ineffectiveness of the UN mediated peace process can only be explained by examining what Morocco's allies (especially France, Spain and the United States) see as the opportunities and benefits of the on-going occupation of Western Sahara.

The post-Cold War shift in Western foreign policy from containing communism to containing Islamic fundamentalism underscores why maintaining friendly relations with Morocco's regime was prioritized over ensuring respect for Sahrawi political rights and enforcing the application of international law in the region.[5] Throughout the duration of the ceasefire, North American, European and Moroccan corporative ventures have routinely engaged in the illegal extraction of Western Sahara's resources, including exporting phosphates, fish, agricultural produce and sand from the territory, as well as investments in wind energy farms and in the exploration of oil reserves.[6]

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This profitable, tacit compliance with Morocco's occupation has also included France's dependable veto of annual UN resolutions that propose to augment MINURSO's competencies by including monitoring of human rights abuses in its mandate. Instead, it is Sahrawi human rights organizations in the occupied Western Sahara who undertake the dangerous work of documenting Sahrawi activists' routine experience of police harassment, arbitrary detention, military trials, torture and unresolved disappearances. The irony that the violence of ongoing occupation has

coexisted with the practice of international peacekeeping in the territory certainly does not escape Sahrawis themselves. Their lives are marked by the physical, structural and symbolic violence of participating in a peace process that, as the former Secretary General of the National Union of Sahrawi Women once put it to me, "feels like a retro-process."[7]

Indeed, this peace process has provided Morocco with the political advantage of time. Time to continue urbanizing and settling Western Sahara.[8] Time to consolidate a regional administration that attempts to assimilate Sahrawi identity into Morocco's regime.[9] Time to obtain unprecedented overt political support for its occupation, including, as became evident after one of former President Trump's final tweets, from the United States.[10]

Sahrawi refugees who have come of age during the 29 years of this UN-mediated peace process proudly describe their resumed war as "their generation's al-Khanga." In 1973 the Polisario had decided, in Franz Fanon's words, "to give utterance by force," that is, to employ physical violence to make the physical, structural and symbolic violence of Spanish colonialism audible.[11] In much the same way, the Polisario Front's 2020 decision to resume its armed struggle communicates a Sahrawi refusal to continue complying with the terms of a peace process that long ago revealed itself as serving pacification rather than peace.

The war in Western Sahara is being rendered invisible to protect what has been a productive status quo for Morocco and its powerful international allies. But the political determination of the Sahrawi people is not going to disappear simply because it is systematically overlooked. This resumed war communicates the willingness that many Sahrawi people have to die (and to see their loved ones die) before becoming subjects of a regime they did not choose. Approximately half of the Sahrawi population resides in the SADR, which is the result of a social revolution by Saharan nomadic pastoralists to make their longstanding notions of the political commensurate with the form of the nation-state. Although far from being homogenous or devoid of internal tensions, the Polisario Front's movement remains united around the consensus that the Sahrawi people have a right to choose their own form of government. By retaining longstanding nomadic practices and values, their anti-colonial movement sustains and regenerates itself in diaspora, through practices of human mobility and within the sovereign spaces of other nation-states. In this way, like many indigenous peoples worldwide, the Sahrawi have long reproduced their life-worlds in the margins of global attention. The current war in Western Sahara may be invisible to most, but it is leaving its mark on Sahrawi history. Seeking to interrupt a peace process that was providing time to bloat the colonization of Western Sahara, the SPLA's missiles directly target a military berm but, more obliquely, they aim to open up space for Sahrawi futures.

[Vivian Solana is assistant professor of anthropology at Carleton University, Ottawa.]

Endnotes

[1] Juan Carlos Gimeno Martín and Juan Ignacio Robles Picón, "Towards a Counter-History of Western Sahara," *Les Cahiers d'EMAM*, 24/25 (2015).

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[3] Alice Wilson, "On the Margins of the Arab Spring," *Social Analysis* 57/2 (2012).

[4] Ibid, p. 93.

[5] Stephen Zunes and Jacob Mundy, *Western Sahara: War, Nationalism and Conflict Irresolution* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2010).

[6] Raquel Ojeda-García and Joanna Allan, eds., "Why do Natural Resources Matter in the Western Sahara Conflict? Actors and Strategies," *Journal of North African Studies,* forthcoming.

[7] Personal conversation with Fatma Mehdi in the SADR, March 2012.

[8] Victoria Veguilla, "Changes in Moroccan Public Policies in the Western Sahara and International Law: Adjustments to a New Social Context in Dakhla" in Raquel Ojeda García, Irene Fernández-Molina and Victoria Veguilla, eds. *Global, Regional and Local Dimensions of Western Sahara's Protracted Decolonization: When a Conflict Gets Old* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

[9] Laura Feliu and María Angustias Parejo, "The Western Saharan Members of the Moroccan Parliament: Diplomacy and Perceptions of Identity" in Raquel Ojeda García, Irene Fernández-Molina, and Victoria Veguilla, eds. *Global, Regional and Local Dimensions of Western Sahara's Protracted Decolonization: When a Conflict Gets Old* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

[10] Mark Drury, "Sahrawi Self-Determination, Trump's Tweet and the Politics of Recognition in Western Sahara," *Middle East Report Online*, December 22, 2020.

[11] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1963), p 83.

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