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Nota de Apertura	04
Editorial	05

50 años de descolonización: el proceso del Sáhara Occidental

Historia contemporanea del Sahara Occidental – nuevas cuestiones y resultados

Towards a Counterhistory of the Western Sahara	10
Juan Carlos Gimeno Martín e Juan Ignacio Robles Picón	
Phosphate Mining and Labour in Western Sahara – Dynamics of the Fosbucraa Rent (1969-1975)	32
Maciel Santos	
La memoria saharaui de la visita de la misión de Naciones Unidas al Sahara Español en mayo de 1975. Una indagación en base a testimonios.....	60
Isaías Barreñada B.	
Intervention militaire française au Sahara Occidental <i>opération Lamantin</i> 1977	96
Didi Sidemhamed	
Western Sahara War Archives, between archives and GIS: how to map a war remotely	116
Jorge Teixeira	

Sáhara Occidental – una historia de nuestro tiempo en los debates internacionales

Environmental Reflections of Plundering Natural resources of Western Sahara.	140
Ghali Zber	
«Unwavering Resolve: The Sahrawi Diaspora and the Fight for Self-Determination»	158
Isabel Lourenço	
Beyond hypercriticism and exclusionary rhetoric: Sahrawi sovereignty and ‘ethic of life and future’ against realpolitik	180
Jelena Vicentic and Omeima Abdeslam	

Cuestiones medioambientales en el Sáhara Occidental

Estudio etnobotánico de las plantas de Tifariti	200
Augusto Lança	
Normas editoriales	224

Es con gran placer que presentamos el primer número de la *Revista Tifariti*, la revista científica del Centro de Investigación de la Universidad de Tifariti (CIUT).

Se trata de un viejo proyecto de una universidad joven (la U. Tifariti se fundó en 2012) y de un centro aún más joven (CIUT existe desde 2022). Se justifica porque la experiencia de la investigación científica llevada a cabo en instituciones como la nuestra, en estrecha interacción con la cooperación internacional, nos mostró de inmediato la importancia estratégica de lanzar una publicación científica. Con ella, pretendemos principalmente dar a conocer y debatir los resultados de las redes de investigación que coordinamos o en las que participamos en asociación.

La interdisciplinariedad y la internacionalización forman ya parte del consenso metodológico. En el caso de la Universidad de Tifariti, con muy pocos recursos materiales y humanos, no son una opción: constituyen las vías básicas para nuestra consolidación como institución científica.

Tifariti refleja esta realidad: más que un plan editorial autónomo, deberá seguir las prioridades de investigación coordinadas por la Universidad de Tifariti y el CIUT. Puede publicar dossiers muy diversos (en ciencias sociales, como el del número 1, o cualquier otro), ya que está abierta a todos los campos científicos. No condiciona la publicación de resultados de investigación a la existencia de vínculos o colaboración institucional con CIUT. El criterio fundamental de su organización **es, como el de cualquier publicación científica, contribuir al progreso del conocimiento.**

Naturalmente, todos los trabajos que se publican son evaluados por un Consejo Científico internacional, que los valida mediante revisión por pares en las respectivas áreas de conocimiento.

La elección de las lenguas de trabajo de Tifariti refleja su grado de internacionalización: publicaremos materiales en las lenguas oficiales de África escritas en alfabeto latino (inglés, francés y portugués), así como en español. Pronto indicaremos cómo darlos a conocer íntegramente en árabe.

La publicación estará disponible en abierto desde el primer número, facilitando así su amplia difusión y el libre acceso a la ciencia de acuerdo con las tradiciones saharauis de libre intercambio de conocimientos.

Bienvenidos a la *revista científica Tifariti*, una voz del conocimiento y de la reflexión crítica desde la República Árabe Saharaui Democrática.

Por la Universidad de Tifariti y por el CIUT

Bachir Zergan

Presentar, en nombre del equipo internacional responsable, el primer número de la revista Tifariti es una de las experiencias gratificantes que los protocolos de cooperación proporcionan al CEAUP (¡pero no siempre!).

Se trata de una historia sencilla. Como institución asociada al CIUT, el CEAUP había asumido la responsabilidad de transformar el material del coloquio internacional *50 años de descolonización: el proceso del Sáhara Occidental* en una publicación conjunta. Tras la reunión, celebrada los días 8 y 9 de noviembre de 2023, se acordó entre los investigadores participantes que esta publicación se hiciera en forma de dossier temático en el primer número de una revista científica del CIUT.

No se trataba de ceder al ídolo de las conmemoraciones, como diría Simiand, porque había razones pragmáticas y de estrategia científica que justificaban la decisión de abrir la Tifariti con un tema de este tipo. Durante el coloquio se habían presentado resultados de nuevas investigaciones sobre la historia reciente del Sáhara Occidental, que era urgente dar a conocer. Por otra parte, al repartirlos entre posibles publicaciones individuales, se perdería la visión de conjunto y la complementariedad de estas aportaciones. Además, la decisión de publicar una revista de la Universidad de Tifariti pretendía – y pretende – consolidar sus redes de investigación. Debido a la naturaleza específica del Sáhara Occidental – un conflicto colonial con una segunda guerra de independencia en curso –, los investigadores hoy dedicados a esta área de estudios proceden principalmente de las ciencias sociales. Por tanto, estaba garantizado que iniciar la *Tifariti* con el tema de la descolonización cumpliría simultáneamente los objetivos de movilizar investigaciones ya avanzadas y, al mismo tiempo, de dar visibilidad científica a un proceso *político* que los circuitos académicos dominantes querrían echar por la puerta grande (aunque entre regularmente por su ventana).

Debido a las limitaciones de lo presupuestado para el primer número, sólo fue posible seleccionar ocho de los trabajos presentados en dicha reunión. El resto se publicará progresivamente en el sitio web del CIUT. Los ocho artículos casi se ordenan a sí mismos ya que encuadran en el plan que ya había conducido a la organización del coloquio de 2023.

Cinco de ellos, que realizan nuevas aportaciones historiográficas basadas en problemas y fuentes poco explorados hasta ahora, componen la sección I, titulada *Historia contemporánea del Sahara Occidental – nuevas cuestiones y resultados*.

Esta sección se abre con una oportuna reflexión epistemológica de **J.C. Gimeno Martín** y **I. Robles Picón** que, junto a investigadores saharauis y españoles, analizan siglo y medio de relatos obliterados por el discurso hegemónico. Las versiones coloniales de «bandidos» como Wayaha Uld Ali y sus seguidores, que movilizaron la resistencia anticolonial en los años veinte, se enfrentan a la memoria colectiva saharauí. ¿Cómo no iba a abrir Tifariti con una

versión tan bien fundamentada de la contrahistoria, precisamente uno de los puntos clave de su programa editorial?

El trabajo de **Maciel Santos** se centra en la relación entre los ingresos de la empresa estatal Fosbucraa y las contradicciones de la última fase de la administración española. Si, por un lado, la renta de los fosfatos consolidó grupos económicos en España y la administración del Territorio, por otro, desarrolló fuerzas sociales y políticas en el Sáhara que progresivamente fueron quedando fuera del control colonial. Los archivos del Archivo General de la Administración tienen mucho que aportar para profundizar en estas hipótesis.

Isaías Barreñada muestra cómo la historia oral puede revolucionar hechos convencionalmente conocidos. La confrontación de versiones (*media* españoles y marroquíes y memoria colectiva saharauí) sobre la visita del Comité de Descolonización de la ONU al Territorio en 1975 no solo muestra las diferencias esperadas. A través de testimonios orales, nos permite comprender cómo esta visita, a menudo presentada como un episodio político entre otros del proceso de descolonización, correspondió en realidad a la refundación del POLISARIO como movimiento de masas.

En la sabiduría convencional que la diplomacia gusta de citar desde Clauswitz, la guerra continúa la política (léase diplomacia) por otros medios. Sin embargo, la experiencia de las guerras «olvidadas» del siglo XX, como la Primera Guerra del Sáhara (1975-1991), demuestra que lo contrario también es cierto: que la dinámica de la guerra puede llevarse por delante la política. Los dos estudios finales de la sección I se inscriben en esta línea de demostraciones.

Didi Sidemhamed saca a la luz una intervención secreta francesa, la Operación Lemantin de 1977, que supuso un cambio en la política del gobierno francés *tras* el éxito de la guerra de guerrillas del Polisario contra Mauritania. A partir del proyecto colectivo lanzado por CEAUP en 2021 para el seguimiento de la Segunda Guerra del Sáhara, **Jorge Teixeira** resume el estado del conocimiento militar sobre este conflicto, que comenzó en noviembre del año anterior. Utilizando no sólo información oficial publicada en internet (y para la que el proyecto CEAUP sirve de archivo digital) sino también metodologías que por primera vez se aplican de forma sistemática a esta guerra (estadísticas y cartografía de datos militares), las conclusiones actuales (provisionales) muestran cómo con ellas el conflicto puede ganar una inteligibilidad diferente.

La segunda sección, *Sáhara Occidental – una historia de nuestro tiempo en los debates internacionales*, incluye tres artículos que enlazan los procesos que comenzaron con una descolonización fallida hasta nuestros días.

Ghali Zber ofrece una especie de historia natural de los últimos 40 años de expolio del Sáhara por la ocupación marroquí, haciendo balance de la situación del agua, de la fauna marina,

del medio ambiente y de la arena. La evaluación medioambiental incluye también una breve historia del famoso «muro» marroquí.

Isabel Lourenço también se centra en un nuevo objeto historiográfico -las diásporas saharauis presentes en tres continentes-, periodiza su expansión y las analiza funcionalmente. Es un ejemplo más de una problemática poco conocida, renovada, sobre todo a través de la historia oral y que abre perspectivas innovadoras para futuros trabajos monográficos.

La Sección II se cierra de forma similar a la apertura de la Sección I: mediante una retrospectiva de segmentos del discurso dominante sobre el conflicto del Sáhara,

Jelena Vićentić y Omeima Abdeslam muestran la carga ideológica presente en muchos estudios «objetivos». Esta vez la atención se centra en la conceptualización de la identidad saharauí y su manipulación por la *realpolitik*.

Los próximos números de Tifariti tendrán sin duda una estructura editorial más completa. Tenemos previsto incluir entrevistas y secciones autónomas de los principales dossiers para que en ellas se pueda dar a conocer y debatir la diversidad de las investigaciones llevadas a cabo por el CIUT y sus socios. Pero este primer número, cuya orientación pragmática intentamos justificar más arriba, incluye sólo una de las secciones que esperamos permanentes: la sección *Cuestiones medioambientales en el Sáhara Occidental*.

Aquí se abre con uno de esos breves informes, de **Augusto Lança**, que, basándose en una misión sobre el terreno en Tifariti, propone prioridades de política medioambiental.

También esperamos iniciar una sección de Notas de lectura en el próximo número, para la que ya estamos movilizand o la atención de nuestros socios investigadores. Además de reseñas bibliográficas, en esta sección también se pueden publicar breves informes, actas de eventos científicos, etc. que sean relevantes y oportunos para la discusión de resultados.

Por el equipo de Tifariti nº 1

Bachir Zergan

Carla Delgado

Isabel Lourenço

Jorge Teixeira

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**Historia contemporanea
del Sahara Occidental
– nuevas cuestiones y resultados**

TOWARDS A COUNTERHISTORY OF THE WESTERN SAHARA¹ ☐

*'If history is made in the short run by the victors,
historical gains in knowledge stem in the long run
from the vanquished.'* Koselleck, 2001, p. 83.

¹ This text is a version of the article: Juan Carlos Gimeno Martín and Juan Ignacio Robles Picón, "Hacia una contrahistoria del Sahara Occidental", The Cahiers d'EMAM [Online], 24 | 2015 URL: <http://emam.revues.org/872>.

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Summary: This article is the product of research in co-labor between Saharawi and Spanish researchers. It proposes a first approach to the construction of a counter-history of Western Sahara, dating from 1884, the date of the arrival and installation of the first Spaniards on the coast of the territory, until the “pacification” of 1934. This counter-history Demands a post-colonial and decolonized look to review the hegemonic stories about the region. This revision is, on the other hand, the necessary condition to undertake in parallel a counter-history of twentieth-century Europe.¹

Sumario: Este artículo es el producto de una investigación en co-laboración entre investigadores saharauis y españoles. En él se propone una primera aproximación a la construcción de una contra-historia del Sahara occidental, desde 1884, fecha de la llegada e instalación de los primeros españoles en la costa del territorio, hasta la “pacificación” de 1934. Esta contra-historia exige una mirada postcolonial y descolonizada que revise las historias hegemónicas sobre la región. Esta revisión es por otro lado la condición necesaria para emprender de manera paralela una contra-historia de la Europa del siglo XX.

Introduction. Hegemonic stories and counter-history

In this article we explore the production of an alternative history of Western Sahara, a counterhistory, based on a critical dialogue with the hegemonic stories about the region and the use of a perspective from the Saharan society on its own dynamics and transformations. We take the term counterhistory from the *Genealogy of Racism* by Michel Foucault, in his critique of history as a discourse of power and the fascination it exerts, and proposing counterhistory as the ‘discourse of those who do not possess the glory, or of those who having lost it lie in darkness and silence.’ (Foucault, 1976, our translation from Spanish). The question we ask is: how do we contribute to getting these Saharawis² out of the shadows, taking their words and beginning to tell their own story?

¹ Violeta Ruano realizó la traducción al inglés del texto al inglés.

² The term “Saharan” will be used here to define the populations of the territories of the Sahara desert, and in particular of the Western Sahara (referred to in this article), according to the boundaries set by the colonial powers. On the contrary, the term “Saharawi” will be used to define the present inhabitants of the Sahara who claim their right to decolonization and self-determination, based on the historical existence of a society that has its own identity and shares a common past. The names of the characters, the tribes and the Saharan place-names are written, by joint decision of the authors, according to their transcription in Spanish (the original language of this article).

We start from the consideration of history as story and invention. The Sahrawi people can be seen embodying an invented historical tradition; in the same sense that we speak of the invention of the tradition of the Spanish, French, Moroccan people, if we take into account the arguments of Hobsbawm and Ranger (2002). Invented traditions enable modern nations to claim to be rooted in the remotest of antiquities, in a way that communities appear that are seen as so “natural” that they need no further definition (Hobsbawm, 2002, 21). The element to emphasize here is the political character of this construction. Who can build / invent stories? Who has that power? Empires, states, people?

The term “invention” of peoples, traditions and histories can also be related to Mudimbe’s (1988, p. XI) ideas when he proposed ‘to study the topic of the foundations of the discourse on Africa ... (how) African worlds have been established as realities for knowledge’ in Western discourse. Mudimbe emphasizes that the writings that have contributed to the invention and the idea of Africa have been basically produced by Europeans during the colonial period, a fact that has produced a “colonial library” of reference. This library would trace the contours of an epistemological territory inhabited by concepts and visions of the world inherited from the West (Mudimbe 1988, p X, 1994, page XV), which would not only conform to the views of the Europeans but also of the Africans about themselves.

There is an important difference in the two meanings of the term “invention.” If the former refers to the historical story that a society makes about itself to account for a sense of belonging to what has been and what is to come, the “invention” in Mudimbe puts the attention on the capacity of the power of the West to invent the history of other people around the world, especially those that were placed under its dominion in the 19th century.

Can colonized peoples invent their own traditions, or should they conform to the place they occupy in the story of the historical production done by the imperial metropolis? It is this situation that we are interested in exploring in Western Sahara through the consideration of a counterhistory, which, on the one hand, calls into question the foundations of a colonial library, while, on the other, explores the interrupted historicity of the Saharan society and its claim as people who are protagonists of their own history. It is a complex task.

The conditions for the production of a counterhistory that faces the colonial library constitutes a challenge that must be addressed by epistemic coloniality and cultural dependence. African authors, such as O. Kane (2011), argue that on the African continent there is no single epistemological order, but multiple “spaces of meaning”. We understand the “spaces of senses” in Koselleck’s terms (1993) as the result of the tense and dynamic articulation of the spaces of experience of societies and their horizons of expectation.

In Africa, relations between experiences and expectations were affected by colonialism, which led to drastic changes in the continent (Boahen, A. 1987). We argue that these dramatic changes occurred in societies with their own histories, societies loaded with experiences that then

projected their expectations for the future on the horizon. Contrary to this reality, the colonial encounter with African societies produced “spaces of foreign senses”. Colonialist metropolis won the monopoly of naming and regulating. Naming the past experiences, rewriting them through a history that undervalued and despised them: turned into traditions, frozen in time. Normalizing their lives, as colonized subjects, through specific regulations that created spatial and social boundaries whose object was to divide the populations, to articulate them in a way dependent on the market economy. Thus, the horizon of future expectations was transformed, implementing devices designed to inscribe progress, if or not, in their future, and completely separating future expectations from past experiences.

The spaces of sense rooted in the traditions are absent from colonial hegemonic histories; they are neither fully captured in African national histories, centered on an anticolonial resistance constructed from a teleological tendency, which only serves to counteract the other. If the liberal (Eurocentric) perspective of African history tends to see the colonial conquest as the event that incorporates the continent’s societies into History, nationalist histories see the anticolonial struggle as the process that makes it possible to restore the integrity of its national past with the present struggle for independence, and imagine the future of the independent states that emerges from the struggle linked to narratives oriented by modernity; they are projected into the future as modern states. The national history of the Saharawi independence is not an exception³. In African national histories the historical continuities linking the present, the past and the future are emphasized, not the discontinuities introduced by the colonial encounter (Burke III, E., 2009).

A counterhistory of Africa and Western Sahara should focus not on the spaces of experience and the horizons of expectations introduced by European imperialism, but on the experience of a meeting of Africans with Europe, inscribed in a long history. This is the aim of this article, which focuses on the various histories related to the colonization of the Sahara and the resistance it met between 1884 and 1934.

The production of a counterhistory requires postcolonial (Guha, R. 1982) and decolonized (Smith, L.T., 1999) methodologies. Guha wonders about the way we can pick up the story of the subalterns from the trail left by the writings of power over them; Smith wonders: how to see human subjects in our research?⁴ The answer to these questions is not easy. It requires a decolonization of knowledge and forms of co-labor in the conduct of social research and different writing strategies.

³ The book of the diplomat Ismail ould Es-Sweyih, M.F. (2001) represents a good approximation to the nature of this story and the role that resistance plays in it.

⁴ ‘One thing we must have learned from the past is that when, to start with, the subjects of research are not considered human, when they have been dehumanized, when they have been marginalized from “normal” human society, the human researcher does not see human subjects’ (Smith, L, T. 2012).

This article is a result of the collaboration between Saharawi and European researchers who have since 2003 shared two projects: a project to recover the oral memory of the Saharawi history of Saharawi elders (project: “Tell me, grandfather / grandmother”), promoted by the Saharawi Ministry of Culture⁵; and an investigation whose objective is the recovery of the (Saharawi and Spanish) memory(ies) of the colonization of the Sahara⁶.

We advocate here for a type of research and another type of writing, which includes co-writing (writing with) and writing in the presence of others about / from which we write, which is what we are trying to practice now. The challenge is to agree with our collaborators an autonomous textual space; where they transcribe their testimonies, their contributions are long enough, to speak for themselves, and resist the textual tactics of those who use them from the outside, making them say, quoting their own words, what they do not say. Only then indigenous / local statements will make sense in different ways from those of the historians and ethnographers who normally manipulate them. Our commitment is therefore to collect, as much as we can, the voices of the Saharawis and take their words on their own terms. That is why we present long, unusual statements in academic work. With them we seek to maintain a dialogue with the authors and characters that are presented here, trying to collect not only what they say, but also the way they say it. In this sense, not only the contents of what is said, but also the languages that transmit and disseminate this co-produced knowledge are relevant. It cannot be forgotten that a fundamental part of the historical episodes of Western Sahara are and have been transmitted orally by their native protagonists⁷.

Finally, we want to reflect on the distance we take. We, as European researchers, are joined by a common history with Western Sahara and with Africa; a history of violence that we cannot call pleasant. As Spaniards we also recognize ourselves as part of a society that, being the *de jure* administrator of the territory, has been unable to contribute to its decolonization; and therefore must be held responsible, for the production of a pain, which from a justice perspective, can only be indignant. Certainly, this is a part of the history of Europe that needs (an)“other” history to be told. Addressing the counterhistory of the Sahara means to also address the counterhistory of Europe.

⁵ The project is coordinated by Mohamed Ali Laman, and carried out in collaboration with researchers in the Department of Social Anthropology of the Autonomous University of Madrid.

⁶ Other results of the project, “Western Sahara (1884-1976): Colonial Memoirs, Postcolonial Looks, (CSO2012-35314), and related to this article are: Gimeno and Robles (2012; Mahmud Awah, B. (2012).

⁷ Counterhistory is also constructed from different forms of telling that facilitate its co-production (Stavenhagen, 2006, pp. 42-43). Visual and sound technologies are ideal formats for this. Since 2010 we have been recording in sound and visual formats historical episodes narrated in the first person by Saharawi people, especially their poets. (Robles, J.I; Mahmud, Ali y Gimeno (2011).

To rescue the voices from the shadows and to translate them into this text, to construct a space to listen to these voices clearly, entails several challenges: the first, a critical approach to hegemonic history (with its colonial precedents) on Western Sahara, as well as a critical position on the ways of building history. A postcolonial perspective will do this. The second challenge is more complex: it is about removing the veils and noises left by the other stories in the shade. The third challenge is to recover those voices and testimonies, avoiding drowning them with the noise of our own words.

Borders in the desert and stories of “bandits”

Moroccan historian Laroui (1987, 127) distinguishes two stages in anti-colonial resistance in the Maghreb and the Sahara: from 1880 to 1912; and from 1921 to 1934 (the intermediate period would be marked by the effects of the first resistances and by the First World War). During the first stage, colonial campaigns followed a model that had been developed by France during the conquest of Algeria, and later adopted by Spain and Italy, characterized by its brutality⁸.

At the end of the 19th century, France entered the Sahara through the deployment of military power and administrative organization charts to convert the Saharan territory, the *Bidan*, into the center of an immense French belt that would run from Algiers to San Luis in Senegal. Using the stick, the carrot and a good sense of diplomacy to manipulate the *qabilas*, they managed to attract some as allies and confront them with others, through a policy of “divide and win.” France dominated the territories of the Sahara that currently correspond to Mauritania and Algeria. The confrontations of the Saharan populations with French forces were constant from the late 19th century until the peace process of 1934. In contrast, the Spanish presence was weak. Between the beginning of the century and the 1930s the Spanish occupation of the Sahara was limited to the coast. Although initially tolerated by the Saharan tribes, they had to resist attacks by armed groups with few forces and resources. French colonization, which attempted to enforce colonial control in the territory under its rule, produced an important anticolonial resistance among the nomadic tribes. The weak Spanish presence in the territory favored the tactics of different Sahrawi tribes who strategically took advantage of the little Spanish presence in the interior to play with the newly drawn frontiers, escaping French repression and control (López Bargados, 2003).

Borders were key areas in the large colonial game. Traced with pencil on the maps, they impeded the transaharan trade; they hindered the free circulation of the nomads in search of pastures,

⁸ In the pacification of Algeria in 1840, Bugeaud used very aggressive tactics that included the burning of crops, the destruction of villages and the confiscation of livestock. He came to order smothering the Arab refugees in the caves.

threatening the basis of their survival. This was especially important in times of no rain, and in periods of pests. López Bargados has shown that the severe drought of 1909 throughout the region forced the Ulad Delim to move south. But after 1906, with the establishment of the colonial frontiers in Western Sahara, the need for displacement caused the Ulad Delim to leave the Spanish zone to enter the French zone, forcing them to negotiate with the French colonial authorities. That provoked the subjugation of some factions of the Ulad Delim to the French, who took advantage of their position to develop a policy of “divide and conquer”, a policy called “domestication”. Colonial domination made nomads dependent on forces that were beyond nature, established laws that threatened to change their way of life, and the possibility of inhabiting the world as they had been doing.

The artificial division of the desert created by the colonial partition generated a dynamic that López Bargados defines as “frontier factionalism”, a concept that refers to the political divisions derived from the attitude of patronage adopted by the colonizers towards the different tribal segments on both sides of the border. This becomes a space that gives rise to new political strategies of the nomadic tribes that try to use the borders and the different colonial logics of France and Spain in their favor. In this context, certain figures appeared, with less power within the tribal logics, who took advantage of the situation to promote, from the contraband, the raids or prebends of the colonial agents. The action of these people will be characterized as frontier banditry⁹.

One of these people was Wayaha Uld Ali Uld Cheij¹⁰, the nephew of Ma El Ainín¹¹, who, along with his brother Muhamdil Mamun, played a significant role in the events of the border between 1923 and the peace process of 1934. Wayaha¹² was, according to the colonial chronicles, one of the “characters” that populated the borders of the Western Sahara: they struck hand in the French Sahara and sheltered in the Spanish Sahara.

⁹ The concept of social banditry was popularized by Hobsbawm (1959 and 1969). Their social character was manifested in the bonds of social solidarity: from peasant communities, bandits took refuge in them and were aided in material or symbolic form. The figure of the bandit also had influence in the interpretation of the colonial encounter in Africa and the resistances that provoked, especially in the borders (Crummey, D. (1986), Isaacman, A. and Vansina, J. 1987; van Walraven And Jon Abbink, 2008), where, in general, the resistant were assimilated to the “bandits.”

¹⁰ Among all the ways of registering the name of this historical character, we will use the Wayaha, given that this is what the Saharawi researchers of our team do.

¹¹ Ma el Ainín (or Mā ‘al-‘Aynayn) is a Saharan chej who had lived between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. From Smara, where he built a ribat around 1898, he called the holy war against the colonizers.

¹² We have taken the biographical data and the actions of Wayaha from the archiving and bibliographical work carried out by Caratini. (1989), López Bargados (2003), Martínez Milán (2003) and Portillo de Riquelme, J. (1991).

They took advantage of the denial of the permission of persecution of French troops by the Spanish government (Martínez Milan, 2003).

The appearance of Wayaha in the Atlantic Sahel occurred in 1923, when he organized, together with other members of the resistance, like Ismail Uld Bardi, (Martínez Milán, 2003, 288) a gazi that on November 28 attacked the second Meharist squad of the Adrar in Srayril, near Atar, annihilating them during the battle (Martínez Milan, 288). This combat is famous in the colonial annals (Caratini, 1989, 168). Afterwards, Wayaha, decided to attack Port Etienne; he did that during the night of March 26, 1924. The men that accompanied him were recruited from different qabilas (Swa`ad, Ulad Sih, Arosien and Ulad Delim, according to Caratini, 1989). This time, the result was not favorable to the interests of the group as the garrison of the French fort, alerted in time, could repel the attack, causing five dead and numerous wounded between the components of the gazi. After the frustrated attack the group of Wayaha retired to a safe place in Rio de Oro during the necessary time to prepare a new gazi, which finally fell down on a Meharist detachment in Bu Garn on May 5. This fight was Wayaha's last action. The group being pursued by Captain Thoine, it was intercepted when it went towards the north. During the attack, a bullet hit Wayaha in the head, causing his death (López Bargados, 2003 and Caratini, 1989, 169).



Fig. 1. Tomb of Wayaha, liberated territories of the SADR. | Photo by Juan Ignacio Robles Picón.

Wayaha is just one of the Saharan dissidents of those years, not even the most important, given the brevity of his actions; but his figure is part of the resistance imaginary of the Polisario fighters. After his death, his brother and other companions continued the struggle (Caratini, 1989, 169). In the autumn of 1924 they resumed combat: Ahmad uld Hammadi joined Ismail uld Bardi, Abdallahi uld Abd al-Wahhjab and Mujammad Taqi Allah, Wayaha's own brother, to attack, on October 23, a detachment of the second Meharist platoon of the Adrar. It is the combat known as Lakdaym (or Lekdim), near Wadan; a combat also celebrated in the French annals. The resisters, victorious, took about 200 camels. The deeds of the combatants, particularly Ismail Uld Bardi, are still recounted in the Erguibat jaimas (López Bargados, 2003).

In April 1925 Ismail organized another gazi accompanied by former Wayaha companions (Abdallahi uld Abd al-Wahhab, Ahmad uld Hammadi, al-Bu and Muhtar uld Abayd Allah, to name the most famous), as well as Ali uld Meyara and his Thalât partisans. A group of 300 warriors attacked the first Meharist platoon of the Adrar in the battle of Trayfiyat. This is how the contemporary Gillier narrated it:

This combat is the longest and most relentless of those we have known in Mauritania, and perhaps even in all of our Saharawi territories. It lasted not less than three days and three nights, during which one of our Meharist platoons was surrounded by razzias three



Fig. 2. Tomb of Ali Uld Meyara, liderated territories of the SADR. | Photo by Juan Ignacio Robles Picón.

times superior in number, and had its salvation, after the heavy losses and after having suffered thirst in a cruel way, to the exhaustion of the attackers' ammunition. (Quoted in Caratini, 1989, 169.)

The French administration was aware of the qualitative leap of the activities of dissent in the Mauritanian region. A new strategy was developed based on the conviction, both in the French diplomacy and the Spanish Colonial Ministry, that the only way to end nomadic banditry (Martinez Milan, 2003, 294 and 295) was a convergent action of the French-Spanish forces¹³. Repeated assaults in Mauritania were interpreted with concern (Caratini, 1989, 171):

They are no longer mere thieves forced to live in a troublesome industry that no doubt imposes on them the poverty of their country, but true belligerents who must be treated as such, applying the laws of war to all their rigor.¹⁴

The period of tranquility was not long, since the Saharans counterattacked 'under the command of one of Wahaya's brothers, who had massacred a French convoy,' and whose column of 300 families suffered a severe setback in July: 70 dead and 'survivors flee to Rio de Oro' (Portillo, 1991, 541).

The new French tactic was launched and the mobile group of the *Compagnie de la Saura*¹⁵ entered Western Sahara at the height of Tindouf, attacking the Erguibat camps; an operation that, according to the French, reestablished the Gallic prestige and assured Mauritania a period of tranquility. According to Laroui (1987), the new strategy took old practices used with the intention of the total pacification of North Africa: 'The (French) colonial generals, who during the conquest were easy to hear speak of peaceful penetration, returned after 1926 to Bugeaud's ideas: that the enemy should be destroyed and that many troops were needed to conserve North Africa and to conquer it.'

Rethinking the history of Saharan "banditry"

In the light of archival data, López Bargados (2003) considers that, since 1924, the gazyan no longer constituted a response to the factional activity installed in the different fractions of a qabila, but rather a matter - in the Economic sense of the term - promoted by certain Saharan characters, who operated in the borders that would have professionalized their pillage

¹³ The Franco-Spanish spirit of collaboration to end the Riff resistance enabled us to think about the possibility of joint action also in the pacification of the Sahara. But in practice it was not easy, nor was it possible until 1934 (Martínez Milán, 2003, 301).

¹⁴ Letter from the governor Carde signed on May 26, 1925, quoted in Caratini 1987, 171.

¹⁵ Saura is a desert region of south-west Algeria.

activity transforming it into a kind of banditry. Its primary objectives would no longer be, as before, the herds of the fractions and qabilas subjected to the French administration, but the administration itself.

The work of R. Guha (2002) is useful here. In ‘The Prose of Counterinsurgency,’ he pauses to reflect on the relationship between the production of history and the use of historical documents that contain the archives and on which historical analyzes are based.

According to this author, the archival documents are the result of a process (recording events, making official reports, consulting the historians of these archives), adding the biases derived from the description, analysis and interpretation of the facts from certain positions, which end up impressing the interests of power on the historical reality. The problem of the bias of the sources leads Guha to consider the difficulties of arriving history of the subalterns themselves. In his analysis of peasant movements against English colonialism, he argues that primary sources give rise to the myth that peasant insurrections ‘are purely spontaneous and unpremeditated.’ The truth, he says, is almost the opposite.

We draw inspiration from Guha’s criticism to revise the history of the Sahara border. Starting with the reception of the facts on the field. Laroui (1987, 113), notes that the press of the time, ‘published almost immediately stories of combats seen from the colonial point of view’. The chronicle of the pacification of North Africa was published monthly from 1898 in *Afrique Française*, a newspaper of the *Comité de l’Afrique*. These stories came, of course, from military reports and direct witnesses.

The “adventures” of Wayaha of 1923 were also documented by his contemporaries. Ahambou Ba (1928, p. 572) described Wayaha as a mere swindler; a great-grandson of Chej Ma el Alain, who had been engaged in trade in the Adrar, and who, having undertaken several fraudulent businesses, had been forced into exile in the Saharan al-Hamra in the early 1920s. The swindler mysteriously traded himself into a feverish fanatic; in 1922, a series of successful incursions into the Azawad¹⁶ allegedly led him to conceive the dream of becoming a leader of jihad, which was to commit the whole of the qabilas of upper Mauritania to the project of expelling the French back to the basin of Senegal. Gillier (1926, 252), on the other hand, describes Wayaha as an ‘old merchant from Adrar who departed in dissidence after some difficult account settlements with his creditors.’

In the descriptions of Wayaha and his companions of “misdeeds” - of dissent - their selfish character and their fanatical relationship with Islam are emphasized as the basis of their actions. Such characterizations of the Saharan dissidents were commonplace in the French

¹⁶ The Azawad is an almost totally barren territory in the north of present-day Mali. It is considered as the cradle of the Tuaregs and in it are located its main areas of transhumance [NDLR].

chronicles of the colonization of Mauritania and North Africa. They were inscribed in the narrative used during the colonial conquest. Gillier, in 1903, justified the French conquest of Trarza ‘to put an end to the anarchy that reigned there’ (Diego Aguirre, 2004, 393). Colonial narratives represented dissidents, like Wayaha, not as resistant to colonial invasion, but as thieves, outlaws, bandits, and their actions fueled by greed and fanaticism. In her research on the Erguibat, Sophie Caratini (1989, p. 168) departs from Gillier in his assessments of Wayaha:

Let’s recall, regarding this quotation, that colonial literature generally presents the leaders of dissidence as dubious individuals. It is the systematic denial of all resistance behaviors, which can in no case be compared to the “civilizing” ideals of the colonial army.

Caratini goes on to use the terms used to describe them:

When they are not irresponsible fanaticized by some ambitious marabout, the resistant can only be murderers and thieves eager to escape justice, unless by a “congenital” atavism they are inveterate looters.

Caratini’s comments are taken up by Diego Aguirre (2004, 393) in a strong plea against the misrepresentation of the performances by the colonialist narrative, which contrasts with the judicious content of a letter from the Erguibat yeema sent to the commander of Adrar, February 24, 1917: ‘The numerous gazzyan that we carry out and the goods we take on a more or less legitimate basis, are motivated only by the fact that you prevent us from having what our ancestors have left us, that is to say, our trade and our cultivated land.’

In this letter, colonialism is seen as a system that takes away the resources of territories that are occupied by violence, preventing inhabitants with historical rights to that territory from developing their trade and accessing their crop lands; that is, to continue to carry out the practices associated with their way of life.

The rationality of the action of resistance and struggle in defense of its way of life can be better understood in the light of the details of the actions we have described, which allows us to unravel the logic of the actions of Wayaha and his fellow dissenters.

Caratini and Martínez Milán (2003, 251) note that, except for the attack on Port-Etienne, the operations carried out against the French detachments were generally carried out in the pastures reserved for grazing the camels of the Meharist platoons. To deprive the Meharists of their mounts was the easiest way to immobilize them.

Colonialism had exacerbated the difficulties of the development of nomadic life and trans-Saharan trade. It threatened the balance between men, cattle and the environment. These balances, unstable and precarious, did not entail any chaos, as Gillier suggested, but flexible forms of social organization and nomadic life practices, which included movement and friction

with others (López Bargados, 2003). Periodic catastrophes had been addressed through mobility strategies, which the establishment of borders now hindered or prevented. The management of famines resulting from climatic disasters, such as droughts and plagues, are part of the memory of the Bedouin. These calamities are collected in their computations of time (Caro Baroja, 2008, 497), as well as the names of places where they found abundance and where life became kind.

The poet Badi, in an interview conducted by Antonio Pomares in 2012, accompanied by Ahmed Fadel, summed up the Bedouin life in those years:

We have gone through different kinds of life. Sometimes we were fine, because the pastures were abundant, the rain, years of milk, camels with firm humps. We played, camel raced, shot the target, practiced the fight; everything was joy, we recited, we listened to music. Then come other times, hunger, scarcity, without clothes, we have a bad time ... Sometimes we eat desert grasses like *guerreima*, *danum*, *terzuz*, *elh* (gum) and we also eat locusts when the plagues arrive, they finish with the grass, there was no choice but to eat them; sometimes we also eat some fruits, *cegrín*, which the ants catch, we have to remove them from the anthill; and with that we fight the misery. We have gone through all this. There is a saying: everything that is not forbidden, can be done ... My father went through many stages, sacked, once drank *cirz* (liquid remains that remain in the stomach of the camel), other times we were plundered.

As anthropology and cultural ecology have documented, mobility is the most important defense of nomads in the face of the uncertainty of their habitat. But it is above all decisive in the face of catastrophe. In such a case, nomadic pastoralists migrate long distances. This practice of mobility necessarily entails a set of political alliances and the establishment of relations between tribal confederations. In short, droughts and their consequences (mortality and famine), as well as the inherited coping strategies, the ingenuity to survive and the flexibility associated with the mobility of the nomads, are part of the experiences of Bedouin men and women, of their ways of life.

These mechanisms of adaptation to the environment of the Saharan tribes were threatened with the establishment of frontiers, with pacification and colonial conquest, conditioning the strategies of the fractions themselves. In the colonial period, droughts became part of the great colonial game, as one of the main instruments of domination (Davis, M. 2006). Laroui (1987, 130) points out:

During the Adrar campaign in 1909, French soldiers occupied the oases at the time of the harvest of dates and waited for the men, forced by hunger, to come and surrender (it is true that not for long). In areas where there were seasonal migrations, they closed the winter pastures and hoped that hunger and cold would force the villagers to reach

an agreement... A consequence of the continuous hunger created by such policies, which were tougher for livestock than for the people, was that the colonial army found volunteers immediately after finishing the operations.

The management of hunger was the continuation of the French military conquest by other means. Sophie Caratini (198) correlates the difficulties encountered by the nomads in the renewal of hostilities in 1923 and the following years. These years were very dry, and the lack of pastures, especially in the north, forced the Erguibat to concentrate their herds in the Adrar, under French dominion. This argument is shared by Martínez Milán (2003, 251). For him, the resurgence of hostilities in Mauritania against the occupiers was limited in scope because the “allied” Erguibat could not participate in dissent since they were forced to leave their flocks in the edges of the Adrar Tmar¹⁷. In the early 1930s, Caratini points out, the situation was reversed both economically and politically; in those years all of them started again to dissent.

For Diego Aguirre (2004, 383), the change of resistance towards 1923 reveals the difference between the anti-colonialist struggle, initially applied to the obtaining of economic benefits, and the ideological and political struggle in favor of a nationalism or independence, which is an inseparable feeling of the Saharan tribes since the nineteenth century. There was a common basis, a shared ideology in the resistance from the beginning of the colonial invasion, based on the ‘rejection of the Christian presence (...), destruction of the Sultan, as delivered to the French; and recovery of their grazing lands and their commercial lines’. Islam served as a shared language of contestation and struggle.

The fighters fought against the interests of the French, not against those of the other Saharawis. They could not accept submission to the French, or their accomplices (like the Moroccan sultan, and the co-opted chiu). It was a war against the French who wanted to impose their customs on the region, its rules, its limits. The motto of jihad ‘the war against the infidels, liberate our land’ was a mobilizing source in itself¹⁸. Islam reminds the human being to be aware of his submission to God, and if an authority that prevents it is established, like the colonial one, an unsustainable situation is inevitably generated. Islam promotes internal and external (jihad) and movement (hijra)¹⁹ for human beings to submit to God and defend themselves against those who prevent it. As a shared belief, Islam served to overcome political opposition among Saharawis, to group and mobilize the population and recruit combatants for their cause.

¹⁷ The Adrar Tmar is a component of the great region of the Adrar; it constitutes, by the geologists, the southern part of the “dorsal of Erguibat”. Its main cities are Atar, Chingueti and Wadan [NDLR].

¹⁸ For Laroui (1987, 132) jihad is defensive: ‘Contrary to the common idea in the West, djihad, as it has been understood over the last few centuries, is defensive: that is, military service and taxes from it are only obligatory if the country is the victim of an aggression.’

¹⁹ The Hijra is the name used to evoke the parting of the companions of the Prophet from Mecca to Medina (in 622 of the Christian era)

In short, these were combats whose purpose was to defend their way of life; actions that came from a political program, which conformed to the immediate interests of the population, to their schemes of organization of life; and not actions of irrational banditry. They were strategies used in a correct reading of what constituted the invasion of the colonial metropolis, of the threats to their forms of life; they used what they had on hand to develop a project rooted in the historical social experiences that constituted their lives. There was a real political struggle against the invader, against the colonialist metropolis. And they are seen today by the Saharawis as components of their history.

Wayaha reconsidered. Towards a counter-history of the Sahara

The considerations derived from the work of Guha allow us to question the scope of colonial histories, constructed on the basis of archival documents. Guha (1983) has also questioned Hobsbawm's thesis on banditry, which 'deals with prepolitical people who have not yet, or have just found, a specific language in which to express their aspirations to the world' (Hobsbawm 1959, 11 and 12).

The pre-political dimension with which bandits are characterized is based on a non-rational basis of beliefs, not conscience. It is easy to draw parallels with the case of banditry on the Saharan border, where we find nomads who are represented as pre-political organized bands, based on religious beliefs. In the more modern versions, the concrete interests of the booty and the resources leave the beliefs aside to make a material motive arise, but which also distances the dissidents from a political stance in their resistance to the colonial invasion.

We can now return to the case of Wayaha to take into account the issues of political consciousness and their capacity to act as subjects immanent to the practices of the Saharan dissidents, taking into consideration the representation of their figure by the Saharawis themselves. This provides a framework for interpreting political action based on its own parameters, which we call the beginning of the article the "space of meaning". Let the Saharawis speak.

In the 1990s, Ahmedu Suelim, a dignitary Ulad Delim, introduced the historian Alejandro Garcia to the figure of Wayaha and his actions in these terms:

After Ma el Ainín had died and his sons had been defeated and his library of Smara destroyed by Lieutenant Morat, Ma el Ainín is replaced in the struggle by the children of his cousin; Wayaha and his brother Mohamed el Maimin. Wayaha feels legitimized for the fight due to the fatua of Ma el Ainín that calls to the holy fight. In his Ghazzis he never attacked the natives, except the collaborators of France. He maintained his struggle without truce until 1925. Wayaha was not a man of arms but the circumstances led him to it. He showed himself to be a bold, fearless, and honest man who never

picked up booty. Impregnated by a deep Islamic faith in fighting infidels, he never took anything away, practiced a clean war. He died in combat near Aguenit, although he had the possibility of retiring but that would have meant turning his back. There he is buried. Wayaha distinguished himself from other warriors, such as Ali Meyara and the others, because he came from a Chorfa family of Mauritanian origin and feel impregnated with the prophet's heritage.
(García, A., 2002, 77 and 78.)

In our work on the ground, in October 2011, the tomb of Wayaha, in Djen. We collected testimonies among Saharawi Bedouins, poets and military men in the liberated territories²⁰, about the history of Wayaha and other dissidents. Bahia Mahmud Awah, a Saharawi poet and member of the research team, summarized these testimonies:

[...] we find ourselves here, in one of the many caverns in Tiris, a cavern related to the great tyrant poet Mohamed Uld Tolba, and here we want to remember a history also related to all this geography, this magical land of the poets, of the erudites from Tiris, and a place that relates the past centuries with characters that are alive in the memory of Saharawi culture. Remembering one of them, a legendary warrior who resisted in the twentieth century, against French troops trying to penetrate the Saharawi geography ... The story of Wayaha. There are many versions related to his fall in combat against the French colonialists, and ... the closest to reality, according to the elders and the people of great oratory, who know the history of that geography, they say that Wayaha was in the region of Galb Buhalala, very near the area of Agueinit²¹, and of Tazualet. And they tell of the annoyance he made to the French with their incursions against the French sanga²². They gave a lot of money, they gave a very large reward to those who could kill Wayaha and give his head to the soldiers, to the French generals of the time.

But Wayaha was always on the alert, on his journeys, he hit when he could, in those places where the companies called sanga were concentrated, and he retired with ammunition, with weapons, with dromedaries. But finally they persecuted him with a sanga, and they located to him in the zone of Agueinit, in the mount of Buhalala. There started a combat between Wayaha, his group and the French troops, in which the number and the correlation of forces was totally abysmal. Finally, Wayaha fought from the back of his dromedary, but when he saw how the combat was developing and that

²⁰ The liberated territories are the territories controlled by the SADR - Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic - after the cease-fire with the Kingdom of Morocco on September 6, 1991. They represent about 25% of the territory of Western Sahara formerly occupied by Spain and claimed since 1973 by the Polisario Front.

²¹ Aguenit is located a few kilometers west of the border between Western Sahara and Mauritania.

²² Sanga: Auxiliary French troops consisting of a hundred soldiers, mostly native.

he was increasingly cornered, one of the French, of the French command, ordered the camel to be shot and knocked down. And then, when his camel was knocked down, Wayaha jumped near his camel, escaped to a trench and from there began the combat shot to shot, body to body, against the French, until they beat him badly together with another companion. And finally, when they approached him, they did not want to interrogate him, according to the account we have heard these days here in Tiris, they shot him right off the mark, beheaded him and took his head to the area of Agueinit. (...) according to that version. In Agueinit they said that there was a centenarian acacia that today no longer exists in the river of Agueinit, this was the place where it had hung his head. The purpose of doing this is to intimidate the rest of the resistance, because there were many legendary fighters scattered throughout that geography, from north to south, and that was to spread panic among the nomads who were here, and create, ... among the inhabitants (the idea) that France is a powerful enemy and that nobody can face it. The fact happened in 1924 to 25. There is not ... a date, let's say, that can be taken as an exact date. But it is said that in 1924-1925. (...) The inhabitants also tell that Wayaha, at the time when he was beheaded... entering now, let's say, religion, and because they committed a human crime, a crime unforgivable for the religion, God caused a whirlwind for more than four days in which nothing could be seen in that region. ... Some inhabitants of the area approached the French and told them that if they did not return his head to the body and bury it in the same place as dictated by the rules of his religion ... the gale will follow and possibly a tragedy would happen. Then the French, faced with this situation, and under the pressure of the people, had to take the head, return it and bury it again with the corpse. ... This is more or less the version that is collected among the nomads, among the wise people that know all this history, and we believe that it is necessary to do more investigation and look for more stories about Wayaha and about the circumstances in which everything happened.

It is not necessary to believe this history literally to accept that the reconstruction of the Saharawis on the struggle and death of Wayaha composes a moral narrative on the difference between the colonialists and the Saharawis, which contrasts with the perspective derived from the archives, to which we referred to earlier.

The practice of cutting heads was not exceptional in colonial repression. It was part of the representations of colonial violence: a pedagogy of terror that sent clear messages about the power of the colonizers and the negative consequences that resistance had. It was a practice carried out by the French and Spanish colonialists and by others (Wesseling, 1991,267).

The Saharawi poet Liman Boicha, in his book of stories *Ritos de jaima*, collects some Saharawi traditions, which bring us closer to the meaning they could give to the severed heads. It speaks of the mourning that a wife keeps for four months, ten days (and some say ten hours) to her husband after his death. 'It is believed that this space of time is the exact time it takes the deceased's head to separate from his neck. The neck symbolizes strength, vigor, personality.

Therefore, when a woman is married it is said of them *f'ragbtu*, “it is on your neck”, which means “it is under his protection.” We can imagine the horror that a practice like this could provoke on the Saharawis and the Muslims of the Maghreb.

There are several elements in the narrative about Wayaha that reverse the conventional image between civilized and barbaric. The Chorfa origin of Wayaha, its relation with the Prophet, that just ennoble him; the continuity of his struggle with the actions of the previous anticolonial resistances that compose the threads of an interrupted history; his deep Islamic faith, which gives meaning to actions and connects the present with the past and the future; his value in combat, even if it does not come from personal experience as a warrior, which reveals both personal value and the design of an accepted destination; his refusal to turn his back and flee, even risking his own life, in an act of warlike chivalry that insulted the invader; the practice of clean war in front of those who claim to be carriers of civilization, and the fact that it never took hold of anything alien, which contravenes the image of an interested thief. All these terms contrast with those used in the documentary sources of the time to refer to Wayaha as an interested and fanatical bandit. They provide a powerful counter-image, an inverted representation that places Wayaha as a protagonist in the interrupted history of independence, freedom, and generosity practiced to the extreme by the Saharan Bedouins, practices that today the Saharawi people claim as a legacy.

The practices of the settlers establish a powerful contrast with the image of European civilization, with the image that Europe wants of itself, and with what it appears on the outside. The new order that emerged in Europe after the Thirty Years' War, the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars involved the emergence of all European States, the mobilization of peoples on the European continent, the advent of modern nationalisms. Polanyi (1989) notes that after the “Peace of One Hundred Years,” as the allied powers of Napoleon I called the Treaty of Vienna signed in 1815, there was the feeling, deeply rooted in all European countries, of belonging to the same civilization and of sharing the same values. The Old World, in the nineteenth century would have forged a social system, institutions, a culture and some components that seemed unshakable. The torture had receded almost everywhere, until it disappeared; peace was recognized as a shared value; wars had a limited duration and scope. The system of alliances between the great powers was the reflection of this civilization. The same partition of Africa was a palpable demonstration of the achievements of knighthood diplomacy (Traverso, 2009).

European civilization was defined as the antithesis of the colonial world, a world of radical alterity that confirmed its image of superiority and domination; its historical “mission” as a vector of progress. The extra-European space was conceived as a space necessarily open to colonization, violence could be deployed without limits or rules. Justified as a means to an unquestionable end. The civilizing process by which Europe rescued African societies from their own obscurity was legitimized by a set of ideas, forms, images and imagery based on the moral, physical and technical superiority of Europeans. Morality was associated with the Bible, physical superiority with the demonstrated ability of Europeans to live anywhere in the

world, the technique with the access and control of energy, such as the steam, which allowed to navigate the African rivers and reach the center of the continent, and of arms. Moral superiority legitimized the colonizing action and excused its excesses, calling them errors, reprehensible but necessary. Burke III (2010) quotes one of the fathers of the revolution and democracy, Toqueville: 'Once we have committed ourselves to the great violence of the conquest, I think we should not stop exercising the small violence that is absolutely necessary to consolidate it.'

The vernacular narration of Wayaha's story helps reverse this narrative. It is an account of a moral victory, where the military defeat that leads to his death is delegitimized by the irrational violence of the victors. To separate the head of the body of a man, of an opponent in a fight, to hang it from an acacia to exhibit it like a trophy or to produce fear, are not acts that have to be accepted; they delegitimize those who perform them. The appearance of the wind that prevents the vision of the severed head cannot be seen but as a divine or supernatural sanction in favor of the cause of dissidence.

The confrontation between these two logics is evident. In the logic of colonialist thought the oppressed should accept the invasion because it is the natural extension of the evolution of humanity, which legitimizes European expansion; it is a necessary and inevitable process, and therefore, just, despite the "collateral damage;" and is also presented as beneficial. In the logic of the colonized the question is very different; pacification, the conquest suffered is not beneficial or fair, so it is not natural. The colonial invasion could be seen as a plague. Like the droughts and plagues that were part of the memory of the Bedouin years, the good years and the bad years, the colonial invasion was part of the accumulation of calamities that destiny holds, and also found its reflection in the count of the years. But if droughts and plagues were natural, colonization was not; so it could be resisted, avoided, never accepted as a design of God. Dissent was fully justified.

The dissidence of those years is part of a struggle that continues in the present. The histories of the death of Wayaha and Ali Meyara are part of the chronologies of some Saharawi tribes, although not all of them; they contribute to sew the colonial resistance in the passage of a long Bedouin time. To say Bedouin is to use a term that can only be understood in the plural. Today, these stories feed the common imaginary of the struggle for national liberation happening now. A counter-history of the Sahara will have to take into account the existence of a plurality of stories about the history of the Bidan world, the Bedouin societies, the Saharawi people.

History must be considered in relation to a plurality of events that form threads, traces on the territory. Something like rivers that collected the different significant events for each family, for each individual in their travelling through the years and through the movement moving through the territory. Resistance to invading aliens brought together these rivers, these lives; assemble them and disperse them again, gather them and disperse them again. In the contemporary story, Saguia el Hamra would be the river that would gather all these stories at once and lead them to the sea, where freedom would be conquered.

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**Phosphate Mining and Labour
in Western Sahara – Dynamics
of the Fosbucraa Rent (1969-1975) ☐**

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Abstract: Phosphate mining is a key issue in the modern history of both Western Sahara and Morocco. Until 1975 it also affected Spain, as Western Sahara's phosphates were exploited during the colonial period. In the early 1970s, phosphate mining generated super-profits. The Spanish state was the sole owner of the Bucraa deposit and used its ephemeral but significant super profits for two purposes: to subsidize the Spanish fertilizer industry and, for political reasons, to inflate spending in the Saharan budgets. However, Fosbucraa's profit maximization and the "development" of the Sahara quickly came into contradiction. The company employed relatively few workers and discriminated against them. Meanwhile, the multiplier effects of Fosbucraa's investment were rapidly changing the Saharawi way of life. A traditional nomadic society was becoming a peripheral society, dependent on jobs, subsidies and scholarships. The result of these two contradictions resulted in a social blockade: a model of accumulation incompatible with the expectations of young workers, technicians and students. The industrial conflict and anti-colonial action are part of this broader context.

Keywords: phosphate, Fosbucraa, differential rents, labour history

Resumen: La minería de fosfatos es un tema clave en la historia moderna tanto del Sáhara Occidental como de Marruecos. Hasta 1975 también afectó a España, ya que los fosfatos del Sáhara Occidental se explotaron durante el periodo colonial. A principios de la década de 1970, la minería de fosfatos generaba superbeneficios. El Estado español era el único propietario del yacimiento de Bucraa y utilizó sus efímeros aunque importantes superbeneficios con dos fines: subvencionar la industria española de fertilizantes y, por razones políticas, inflar el gasto en los presupuestos del Sáhara. Sin embargo, la maximización de la tasa de beneficios de Fosbucraa y el «desarrollo» del Sáhara entraron rápidamente en contradicción. La empresa empleaba a relativamente pocos trabajadores y los discriminaba frente a los demás. Mientras tanto, los efectos multiplicadores de la inversión de Fosbucraa estaban cambiando rápidamente el modo de vida saharauí. Una sociedad nómada tradicional se estaba convirtiendo en una sociedad periférica, dependiente de empleos, subsidios y becas. El resultado de estas dos contradicciones se tradujo en un bloqueo social: un modelo de acumulación incompatible con las expectativas de los jóvenes trabajadores, técnicos y estudiantes. El conflicto industrial y la acción anticolonial forman parte de este contexto más amplio.

Palavras chave: fosfato, Fosbucraa, rentas diferenciales, historia laboral

In commercial agriculture, phosphorus inputs come in the form of commodities produced by the chemical industry (phosphoric acid and phosphate fertilizers). Its raw material is the phosphate rock deposits which are beneficiated to produce marketable concentrates. In the 1960's, the trend in world demand for phosphate rock shifted towards high grade ore¹ (Milan, 2017:181).

The world demand for fertilizers has regularly increased. In the crop-year 2021 the world consumption of fertilizer products increased by 7% compared to 2020. High crop prices and increased crop areas tend to boom the production of phosphate rock, which in 2021 was estimated at 220,000 kt². This trade is dominated by four countries, which among themselves control almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of the world production: China, "Morocco", USA and Russia. As regards the phosphate reserves the degree of control seems bigger: "Morocco" alone is supposed to own 70% of it³.

In this statistic, the official label "Morocco" covers the territory of Western Sahara. It is obvious that the events related to this industry affected both W. Sahara and Moroccan modern history⁴. Up to 1975 they also affected Spain because the prospection and mining of the W. Sahara phosphates started during the colonial period.

As one of the key studies on this topic has put it, the research on mining history of this territory is far from over (Milan, 2017:177) and therefore every new contribution seems useful. However the main goal of the following points aims mainly a comparative issue. In the early 1970's, phosphate mining generated super-profits. Just like several other colonial mining activities, these rents would not have been possible without the colonial State. The study of capital accumulation in modern economies has much to gain by unveiling where the rents went to and above all, what political effects they produced.

The following points intend therefore: a) to start tracking the genesis, amount and recipients of the Spanish Sahara rents; b) to contribute to connect the phosphate rents to the labour and political history of Western Sahara. Needless to say that the hypotheses raised below are based on only a very small fraction of the archival documentation that is becoming available. On the other hand, none of these hypotheses can be validated without comparing them with the multiple oral sources which in W. Sahara and in Spain wait to be systematized.

¹ Medium and high quality moved into the 70-77% BPL range (Bone Phosphate of Lime).

² Kilotonne = 1,000 metric tons.

³ No cartel prices are expected: the USA statistical report used here adds that "the world resources of phosphate rock are more than 300 billion tons. There are no imminent shortages of phosphate rock" <https://pubs.usgs.gov/periodicals/mcs2022/mcs2022-phosphate.pdf> (consulted 22th September 2024).

⁴ Having been Morocco's main export for many years, the export of phosphates and derivatives is now the third largest (no less than \$ 11,3 billion). <https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2023/09/357395/moroccan-phosphate-exports-see-steep-decline-to-4-billion-in-2023> (consulted 22th September 2024).

1. Phosphate mining in Spanish Sahara – a State business

1.1. The early years (1947-1963)

Phosphate exploitation started in colonial Morocco in 1921 and it was likely that the ores, which are spread all over the southern Mediterranean shores, could extend further south along the African Atlantic coast. In a series of three missions between 1942 and 1947 the geologist M. Alia Medina confirmed its existence in the Spanish Sahara site of Izic, not far from the coast. The Government immediately urged the INI (*Instituto Nacional de Industria*) that, for his part, commissioned the state-owned *Empresa Nacional Adaro de Investigaciones Mineras S.A.*, also known as ADARO to the prospecting and sample testing. The ADARO stage of the Sahara phosphates lasted from 1948 to 1956. In that year the state corporation came to a final negative conclusion: low volume of open-pit mining possibilities, high cost of a difficult underground mining, the presence of sterilities and low absolute grade (Garcia, 1974: 13). Considering that both the cost of the plant necessary to upgrade the Izic phosphate (up to at least 65% BPL) and the investment on general logistics was too high, the Government and INI put ADARO mining on hold. Besides, the CIF price of the Spanish Sahara ton would always be higher than the ones produced in the two main Spain's suppliers, the USA and Morocco (Milan, 2017:184-185).

Meanwhile the growth of the Spanish commercial agriculture, still heavily protected, had been large enough to keep booming the sale of fertilizers: from 1946 to 1959 the production of phosphate P205 by the Spanish industry increased at an annual rate of 16.3%⁵. The 1959 Plan (*Plan de Estabilización Económica*) brought expectations of a forthcoming fall in customs duties on agricultural imports which fostered the capital intensification of Spanish agriculture⁶. The demand for fertilizers was expected to accelerate as well as the phosphate rock imports: compared to the period 1955-59, the index number for the yearly average Spanish imports (aggregate of the four main suppliers) in 1960-64 was 162⁷. Besides, the slow upward trend of phosphate rock prices, which in the USA would last until 1966, grew in the years 1957-1961 at an annual rate of 4,8⁸. The Spanish fertilizer industry would certainly appreciate

⁵ Physical output (tons). Growth rate from bottom to peak based on Teigeiro, 1992: 197.

⁶ Between 1960 and 1970 the labour force in agriculture dropped 15 percentage points. The trend during the following decades is almost exponential: in current prices, from 1963 to 1990 the ratio capital/ wages multiplied by a factor of 65. (Balboa, Delgado, Ciudad, 1994: 74;96).

⁷ Data based on the figures presented by Milan, 2017: 181, table 1. The main suppliers were Morocco, Algeria, USA and Tunisia. The increase in imports occurred in spite of an industrial reconversion (modernization of the sulphuric acid equipments) and may be explained by the switch to superphosphate production, which required more high-grade imports, such as those from Morocco and USA. (Milan, 2017: 179-181).

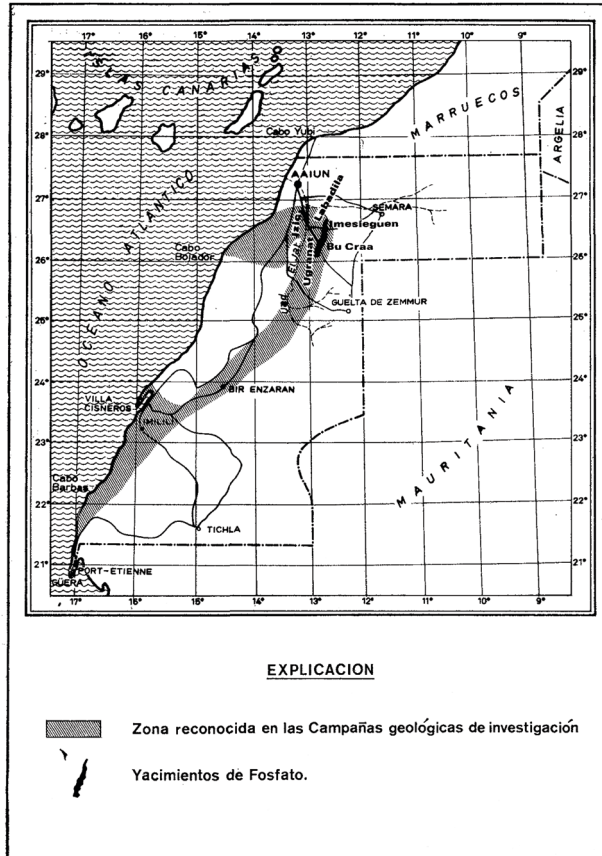
⁸ From data released by the USA Bureau of the Census, 1970: 583;598.

a steady and cheap home supply of raw material. The connections of INI with the capital of the sector dated back to 1940 (Teijeiro, 1992: 191) and in this context the government decided to reevaluate the ADARO report. Many INI leverage interventions in the sector would occur until 1975. In the decision to resume, two other favourable circumstances counted: the “success” of the *Ecouvillon/Ouragan* operations⁹ and the 1958 Oil Research Bill (*Ley de Investigación de Hidrocarburos*), which allowed Gulf Oil to resume the geological research in the Sahara territory. The outcome was that oil prospecting was not rewarding either but while it lasted it allowed for a better geological expertise and for the increase of governmental and private investment in the logistical infrastructure of the territory (Garcia, 1974: 13-14). On this new base, with I.N.I entrusted to resume the ADARO work under a new framework, a committee was appointed in 1960 to test the eventual performance of a pilot plan based on the Izic site. The management staff of a new State corporation should come out of it. The prospects about the Izic remaining poor, the INI did not establish immediately a new corporation – *su entusiasmo por el proyecto no era muy grande*. However, the committee, headed by another geologist (José M. Ríos García), had been working since February 1962 on a “Project B” to extend the phosphate prospecting over a wider area, using aerial photography and reevaluating the oil companies data. In July of that year INI finally decided to establish the *Empresa Nacional Minera del Sahara* (ENMINSA).

During the following two years methodical tests were carried out which led to the discovery of the Bucraa site in May 1963 (see Map 1). The combined tonnage of the Bucraa deposit was 1.7 billion tones: a belt of 49 km long by 6 km wide. In certain points the quality of the ore reached the equivalent to 80% BPL. It was *la mayor mina de fosfatos del mundo* (Garcia, 1974: 27-31) and, of course, the Izic Project was dropped. With the Bucraa site, ENMINSA could expect many years of differential rents: high-grade ore, good location (the mine was less than 100 km away from the sea), possibilities of economies of scale (a site exploited just in one mine, owned by a single corporation)¹⁰.

⁹ They were combined military operations of the French and Spanish colonial forces in the Spanish Sahara to counter the ALN (National Liberation Army), the armed wing of the nationalist Moroccan Istiqlal party. In 1958 ALN military staff was almost independent of the Istiqlal politicians. Colonial repression produced the first main exile movement of Saharawi populations, towards Mauritania and Southern Morocco. (Bontems, 1984:60-61).

¹⁰ As regards this importante comparative advantage of Bucraa, Ríos García wrote : “ya en Florida los yacimientos eran más extensos, su propiedad estaba dividida en, por lo menos, doce compañías distintas, y si los de Marruecos estaban en una sola mano, en cambio se repartía en diversas áreas distintas unas de otras, con diversidad también de características y calidades”. Further prospecting between 1963 and 1965 also showed that Bucraa was the only important phosphate site in Spanish Sahara (Garcia, 1974:31-33).



Map 1: the W. Sahara Phosphate belt (Garcia, 1974:10)

1.2. Still no rents but only public capital (1962-1973)

In 1962 ENMINSA was launched with a share capital of 50 million Pts (Milan, 2017:187). In 1975, the capital of the company that succeeded it, *Fosfatos de Bucraa*, was 5,000 million¹¹. In spite of the 100 times fold multiplication, the only capital subscriber of both companies remained the INI, that is, the Spanish State. Considering the rent-yielding prospects of

¹¹ AGA, 81/11550, *Prevision de Resultados Económicos de FosBucraa en 1.975*, 12-03-1975. It was the nominal capital of *Fosfatos de Bucraa* since its establishment in 1969.

Bucraa, this outcome could have been a permanent option but a recent study showed that in fact it was not.

In 1965, two main reasons were pushing ENMINSA to a capital increase open to companies in the sector: the mine's export vocation, whose production would largely exceed domestic demand, and its undercapitalization, which resulted in growing deficits, indebtedness and lack of liquidity. The government ordered INI to open tenders to select future partners but after the US group IMC¹² was selected, negotiations dragged on for two years. The downward trend of international prices of the late sixties did not favour the standing of Spanish government. Still in 1967, a proposal in which INI would keep 75% of the shares (with option to sell 20% to IMC) and IMC would pay \$ 26 million as compensation for the discovery of the site was still on the table. The American group pressed for an increased management control (a cartel of phosphate producers was emerging) but as INI did not believe that the downward trend in prices could last and, even if it did, that it would not affect Bucraa's high-grade ore, negotiations broke down in 1968 (Milan, 2017:192-197).

Still, as the installation of the basic equipment was far from complete¹³ and the fixed capital investments would continue without income for several more years¹⁴, it was urgent to recapitalize the company. In 1969, the INI established a new one, with a new management staff: *Fosfatos de Bucraa, S.A.* From 1969 to 1975, Fosbucraa's investment amounted to 24 billion pesetas, almost 5 times more than its share capital¹⁵.

Having made the political decision to rely solely on public capital, countering the fall in phosphate prices between 1967 and 1972 became INI's priority. The strategy, pursued through negotiations mainly with the world's two main producer groups (the American companies and the Moroccan OCP¹⁶), was to integrate the company into a cartel for prices and markets. The INI did not rule out new forms of foreign participation in the capital, which was tried

¹² International Minerals & Chemical Corp., based since 1940 in Chicago, became the US leading producer of phosphate rock and fertilizer. By the time of the negotiations with Fosfatos Bucraa, the company was making about \$130 million in annual sales and employed over 5,000 people around the USA. <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/2724.html> (cons. 25-09-2024).

¹³ It was only in 1968 that the conveyor belt facilities was awarded to Krupp Mashinen). For the delays in funding and the issuance of debt guaranteed by INI which delayed the full exploitation of the mine, see Milan, 2017: 198-199).

¹⁴ The experimental stage of production started in 1972. AGA, 81/11546, Fos Bucraa, *Resumen de las Relaciones del Mineral obtenido y facturado, valorado franco sobre bordo en El Aaiun (Fase Experimental, Octubre 1975*

¹⁵ AGA, 81-11579, *Sahara*, n/d, p. 15.

¹⁶ *Office Chérifien des Phosphates*. State-owned corporation established in 1920 for the mining of phosphate rock and, lately, production of fertilizers.

again with the IMC group in 1971. However, it excluded them from negotiations with the Moroccan group because of the possible political implications, namely the support it would grant for Moroccan claims on Spanish Sahara (Milan, 2019: 309-320). In 1975, the suspicion of Moroccan capital entering Fosbucraa was still present in the ceasefire negotiations between POLISARIO and the Provincial Government¹⁷.

The OCP was the weakest link in the chain of the main phosphate producers because it depended on its exclusive shareholder, an increasingly indebted Moroccan State. By the end of the 1960s, the blockage of land reform had led to negative per capita growth (annual population growth rates of 2.8% compared to less than 2% for output). The *Makhzen*, faced with successive strikes, urban riots and coup attempts, had begun a program of public investment: land irrigation, intensification of capital in the phosphate industry, tourist infrastructure, etc. (Vermeren, 2006:40-56). The fall in phosphate prices and the upward trend in oil prices came at the worst time.

In 1973 phosphate exports accounted for 21% of Morocco's national foreign exchange earnings (Geissler, 2023:7) and OCP badly needed a cartel needed in order to maximize sales. That is why during the years 1970-73, the OCP showed openness to experiment all cartel mixes (separately or combining the French Sephos¹⁸, the IMC group and INI). With the latter, the end result suited the INI's strategy: in the spring of 1972 OCP signed an agreement on prices and markets without stakes in Fosbucraa capital (Milan, 2019:322). It seemed that the Spanish firm could finally dispose of an increasing regular mineral output and of a commercial strategy. The following year the later would be completely changed.

1.3. The Fosbucraa rent and Spanish private capital (1974-1975)

The reversal of the downward price phase (1972-73) coincided with the start of industrial exploitation in Bucraa. For Fosbucraa the expected result was a flow of differential rents¹⁹.

¹⁷ According to Khalihenna Ould Errachid, then acting as a go-between for the colonial government, that was the conviction of Polisario: "Insisten de que en Fosfatos marruecos tiene una participación de un nueve por ciento, y que la Krup tambien."AGA, 81-11550, *Entrevista Ilmo Sr. Secretario General - Sr Halihenna*, 30-11-1974, p.2.

¹⁸ *Société d'Études et des Participations Phosphatières*. It was a holding of French chemical and banking capital for the production and sale of phosphate rock and fertilizers, established in 1968 (Milan, 2019:309)

¹⁹ In the Ricardian sense a differential rent is a permanent profit above the average rate which can be noted as as:

$$P = (Rp - Ic) \cdot Q.$$

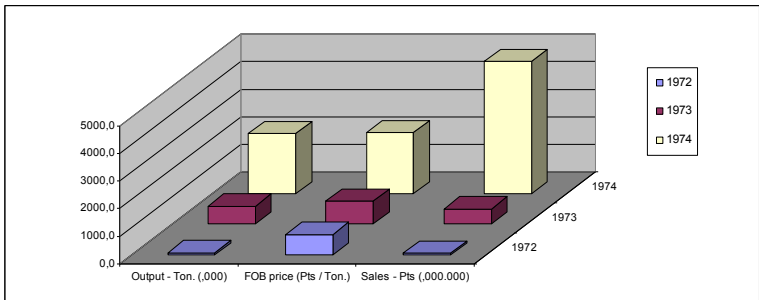
P being the mass of profit; **Rp** the regulatory market price (set by the marginal producer); **Ic** the individual cost of production (being $Ic < Rp$); **Q** the physical output produced.

Compared to the previous year the balance sheet for 1974 – the first year of the industrial stage of exploitation – shows a 3.3 increase in tonnage, a less than 3 increase in the average FOB price (2,6) and a 8.7 increase in gross operating revenue.

Table 1 and Figure 2 – Fos Bucraa – Output and Prices – 1972-74

Año	Output -Ton. (,000)	FOB price (Pts / Ton.)	Sales - Pts (,000.000)
1972	73.0	741.0	54.1
1973	654.9	836.0	547.5
1974	2168.4	2202.1	4774.8

Source: AGA, 81-11546, Fosbucraa, *Resumen de las relaciones del mineral obtido y facturado, valorado franco sobre bordo en El Aaiun (Fase Experimental)*; *Ventas de Fosfatos. Resumen del año 1974, 03-1975*



The fact that it was state and not private capital to have appropriated Bucraa’s rent favoured capital accumulation. If such a large mass of super-profits becomes a source of public revenue, capital as a class benefits from an extra-ordinary income which can be fiscally transferred to productive capital and *directly* increase the general rate of profit. If the rent is large enough, it can also be used to increase it *indirectly* by paying for part of the “unproductive” States’ expenditure.²⁰ Fosbucraa rent would do both. However, its relative distribution did not

²⁰ “The suppression of land rent, as defined by Ricardo, its transformation into state property - the rent instead of being paid to the landlord would be paid to the state - is the ideal, the burning desire that arises from the very nature of capital. Capital cannot suppress landed property. But through its transformation into rent (paid to the state) it appropriates it as a class to pay its state expenses through a detour of what it cannot take directly.” (Marx, 1974: III, 558). This means that a State owned rent prevents the risk of its unproductive use (such as sheer consumption) which would occur if private owners (such as landlords) would dispose of it. Although a large part of the State’s expenditure does not correspond to capital

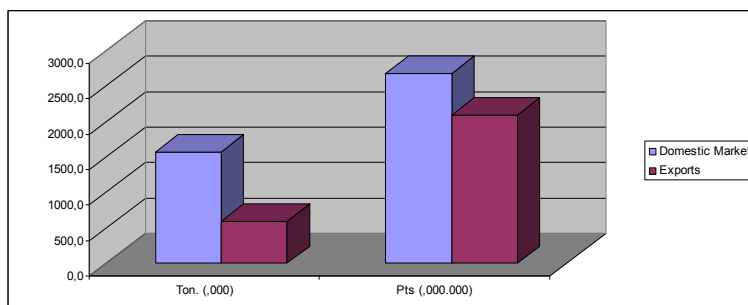
follow a governmental plan: it was determined by *other* sectors of capital and by external pressure.

The process decision was quick. In October 1973 the OCP backed by a double cartel protection (with the IMC and other minor producers and with the 1972 agreement with Fosbucraa) started to increase prices. The Spanish fertilizer industry immediately threatened to trigger the domestic prices of fertilizers which would worsen the Spanish inflationary environment²¹. The upward trend of phosphate rock was now unstoppable: in current prices, it went from \$ 14/ton in January 1974 to \$63 in November²². But the Spanish Government and INI would not allow it to hit the production costs of Spanish private capital. In November 1973, the market share which had been set at the 1972 agreement with OCP was redesigned in order to decrease the Moroccan phosphate exports to Spain and to replace it by Sahara ones (Milan, 2019:322). Accordingly, in 1974 the Fosbucraa sales were as follows:

Table 2 and Figure 3 – FosBucraa – Sales – 1974

	Ton. (.000)	Pts (.000.000)	\$ / Ton.
Domestic Market	1572.8	2681.8	30
Exports	595.5	2093.1	61
Total	2168.4	4774.8	39

Source: AGA, 81-11546, *Ventas de Fosfatos. Resumen del año 1974*, 03-1975



investments, this does not mean that such expenditure is not necessary to promote capital accumulation. The Sahara budget for 1975 would demonstrate it (see point 1.4).

²¹ In 1973, the yearly inflation rate in Spain was 11.3.

²² CIA 9326/74, Memorandum, 06-11-1974.

By selling 73% of its physical output at less than half the international price to the Spanish fertilizer industry, the amount of the Fosbucraa rent which was directly transferred to private capital was no less than 2.84 million Pts (6% superior to the company's sales in Spain)²³.

Putting it in another way, 37.3% of the potential gross sales revenue of the company was turned into a bonus for the Spanish pool of profits²⁴. No wonder that INI was against this decision coming directly from the government (Milan, 2017: 200): without it, Fosbucraa's gross sales revenue would be 60% higher.

The biggest beneficiaries of the bonus were the major groups of the Spanish fertilizer industry (see Annex 1). In 1974 the Fosbucraa phosphate was sold to 18 Spanish firms but *two* of them concentrated 60% of the sales: S.A. Cros²⁵ and UERT²⁶. Adding Foret S.A. and Fertiberia, four corporations bought 75% of the Sahara rock. The selling price also reflects government bias: 7 corporations, among which were UERT, S.A.Cros and Fertiberia, bought it below 30 \$ US (an average discount of 29% compared to the others).

The Spanish fertilizer sector was particularly unbalanced (there were three large groups, including INI itself and dozens of small firms) although not enough for international competition (Teigeiro, 1992: 190.191). The 1974 phosphate "political" sales were a further step towards a higher degree of concentration.

Keeping the Moroccan phosphate away from the home market implied changing the 1972 agreement on foreign markets. The reshaping of the market meant further losses of rent for Fosbucraa. As more than 80% of the OCP exports went to Europe (Milan, 2019: 320) where the unit price tended to higher, Morocco was to be compensated for lesser sales in Spain. Bucraa exports were therefore pushed towards markets where the regulator price was lower. In 1974, 63% of the export revenue made by the Spanish company resulted from sales at less than 60 \$US per tone. Japan became the major buyer of the Bucraa phosphates (51% of the export sales) but only at 58\$ US per tonne (in Germany the price was 72 \$ US – see Annex 2).

²³ Difference between the the potential gross income of Fosbucraa (if the company had sold all its physical output at the average international price of 3,514 Pts or 61\$ US, which would amount to a total of 7.62 million Pts) and its effective sales (4.77 million Pts).

²⁴ No industrial or banking corporation ever considered to subscribe capital of ENMINSA or Fosbucraa (Milan, 2017:192). In 1974, the sales policy of Fosbucraa confirmed they did not need it to access the phosphates rent.

²⁵ The *Sociedad Anónima Cros* (1904-1989) was the major Catalan corporation, with chemical plants all over Spain. For a short time it experienced a holding in the sector (*Proquiber*) with the UERT (Teijeiro, 1992: 195-196) . In 1972 it attempted to enter the mining sector by purchasing the Tharsis Mines.

²⁶ The *Unión Explosivos Río Tinto* (1970-1982) was the major Spanish industrial group controlling over 40 corporations. UERT (or ERT) resulted from the fusion the merger of *Unión Española de Explosivos* and the former British-owned mining *Compañía Española de Minas de Río Tinto*. In 1974 UERT bought *Fertiberia*.

1.4. The Fosbucraa rent and the Sahara Budget (1974-1975)

As the world's larger producer, the OCP kept increasing prices and influencing the other exporters to follow. The 1973 increase had been less than 20% but in the following year the world price was multiplied by 4, just like crude oil prices. In January 1975 Morocco announced an additional increase of 19% (up to 75 \$ US)²⁷. In fact, that increase marked the peak of the short boom because rightly after it became clear that the world recession and the increased output from all the phosphate producers would rapidly put an end to the rise²⁸.

Meanwhile, firms like Fosbucraa could still use a windfall profit. In its 1975 budget the firm expected to sell 3443 thousand tons (58% more than in 1974) at the FOB price of 3686 Pts/ton (67% higher than in 1974). Its expected gross sales revenue of 12643 million Pts (2,6 times the 1974 sales) should produce a net result after taxes of 5440 million Pts. This income, higher than the share capital of Fosbucraa, is likely to correspond to a real profit rate of 23%²⁹. It certainly would be even higher if the company did not continue to sell most of its physical output at reduced prices to the Spanish industry, as it did.³⁰

Anyway, the use of the Fosbucraa rent to subsidize capital of the chemical sector in Spain was not the single government-led use of the Fosbucraa rent:

Table 3 – Fosbucraa – Profit Distribution Account – 1975 (Expected)

	Pts (,000.000)	%
Reserve Fund	544	10
Increase in Legal Reserve	460	8.5
Dividend	300	5.5
Additional Dividend	300	5.5
Remainder of Results for the Sahara	3836	70.5
Total	5440	100

Source: AGA, 81-11550, *Prevision de Resultados Económicos Fosbucraa en 1975*, 12-03-1975

²⁷ CIA 9326/74, *Memorandum*, 06-11-1974.

²⁸ CIA ER IR 75-15, May 1975, pp. 3-5.

²⁹ Assuming a permanent capital around 24,000 million Pts. See note 15. Adding the sales revenue which would be lost through discounts to the industry it is likely that the real profit rate should be over 30%.

³⁰ In 1975 this percentage rose to 83% (Milan, 2017:200).

Apart from confirming the state-owned feature of the distribution (which management of a private *rentier* firm could afford to distribute *just* 11% in dividends in a peak year?), table 3 shows that 70% of the 1975 net results should be transferred to the Sahara provincial budget. If the taxes already deducted that are added to the “Remainder”³¹, the Fosbucraa contribution to the income of the *Gobierno General del Sahara* would make 5478 million Pts.

Although this sum represented 2, 2 times the total Ordinary income of the Province in the fiscal year of 1974 (2472 million Pts), it was far from solving the urgent problems. For the Government of Sahara, mainly because the 1974 contribution of Fosbucraa to the territory was already below what should have been according to the new *Estatuto*: in other words, because the 2.8 million Pts discount to the Spanish industry should have reverted to the territory³². But for all the levels of the Spanish administration it was clear that the rapid evolution of events since late 1973 (POLISARIO military operations, Moroccan propaganda, the ongoing case at the International Court of Justice, the visit of the UN commission and the Madrid commitment to hold a referendum in the territory during 1975) was shaking the colonial authority. As a large scale colonial war was completely ruled out, considering the implications it could have on the survival of the Spanish regime, the most pragmatic policy would be the implementation of a fast welfare program in the Territory.

It seems that the colonial officials on the ground took less time than the Madrid authorities to feel the need for political shifts.³³ Yet both instances were aware that such program (*Programa Especial de Promocion del Sahara*) would practically start from scratch. As the *Direccion General del Sahara* stressed, the priorities were now public works (housing and urban infrastructures)³⁴, full employment³⁵ and welfare subsidies (unemployment and retirement³⁶, free

³¹ In 1975, the tax deductions were: a royalty of 7% on the FOB Sales: *Canon explotacion fijo* = 885 M. Pts + the taxation on profits = 605 M. Pts + *Impuestos IRTP + IGTE* = 152 M. Pts. AGA, 81-11550, *Prevision de Resultados Económicos Fosbucraa en 1975*, 12-03-1975.

³² AGA, 81-1150, *Gobierno General de Sahara – Secretario General*, 12-01-1975.

³³ As late as October 1974 an official opinion in the *Direccion General de Promocion del Sahara* was still against the integration of Nomadic Troops (Saharawi Police) into the Spanish regular army because of the increase in Retirement funds it would bring to future metropolitan budgets. AGA, 81-11546, *Nota sobre el anteproyecto de ley de creacion de Cuadros de oficiales y suboficiales saharauis de las tropas nómadas*, 09-10-1974. Less than three months later, a mixed commission from the Army and the Provincial Government was asking for wage increases of 42,2 million Pts just for the Police. AGA, 11-550, *Informe para el ex.mo senor director general*, 12-01-1975.

³⁴ The Public Works Plan amounted to 4769 million Pts. The document does not refer the time span of its implementation. Source: AGA, 81-11550, *Plan Progresivo de Obras Reales*, 12-03-1975.

³⁵ In the last four months of 1974 the Fosbucraa remittances had allowed to hire 4,000 unemployed workers. The corresponding item for 1975 in the most optimistic scenario would amount to 600 million Pts. AGA, 81-11550, *Gobierno General de Sahara – Secretario General*, 12-01-1975.

³⁶ The goal was to extend Social Security to the whole Saharawi population. AGA, 81-11550, *Gobernador General de Sahara*, February 1975.

delivery of basic foodstuffs, etc.)³⁷. They were also aware that either this Program (which was due to last four years with annual remittances of 5 billion Pts) was immediately implemented or it would be useless. For instance, in the summer of 1975 the rehiring of dismissed workers and the ability to supply the territory with foodstuffs at deflated prices were the focus of the negotiation with POLISARIO for an immediate cease fire. The two demands were immediately accepted by the Sahara Government³⁸.

Because of the urgency, the new policies required no-ordinary measures³⁹. According to the terms of the concession, Fosbucraa should transfer the amounts due to the *Direccion General de Promocion de Sahara* as phosphate exports were made. By late 1974 the average monthly transfer was estimated at 40 million Pts⁴⁰. This might have worked for the ordinary remittances but not for the implementation of the *Programa Especial*. In March 1975, the *Direccion General* wanted to force Fosbucraa to advance at once the taxes due for that very year of 1975, which legally the firm would have to do only in 1976⁴¹.

Most of the differences of opinion between the ministerial level and the territorial government were due to a mismatch of information. However the gap between the political authorities and Fosbucraa's management can be considered to be of a different nature. It reflects the contradiction between a general supervision of capital interests, provided by the Government as well as INI, and the individual interests of a fraction of capital, although legally owned by the state. The following points will focus on this contradiction. Still the major contradiction remained within Fosbucraa: the one which opposes every fraction of capital to labour, that is the conflict over the surplus-value rate⁴².

³⁷ Just the urgent extra-budget subsidies were estimated by the Sahara Government at 799,2 million Pts. Pts. AGA, 81-11550, *Gobierno General de Sahara – Secretario General*, 12-01-1975. All the measures contained in the information of the Direccion General had come from the officials at Aaiun. AGA, 81-11550, *Gobierno General de Sahara – Secretario General*, Febrero 1975.

³⁸ POLISARIO also wanted the liberation of recent detainees, which was also accepted. AGA, 81-11550, *Frente Polisario*, 05-08-1975; *Gobernador General de Sahara*, 11-08-1975.

³⁹ The D.G. *Promocion del Sahara* wanted “un remedio de choque (o por lo menos un paliativo)”. AGA, 81-11550, *Direccion General de Promocion de Sahara*, 29-03-1975.

⁴⁰ AGA, 81-11550, *Informe al ministro de la Presidencia del Director General de Promocion de Sahara*, 14-12-1974..

⁴¹ “La única dificultad es que la empresa no viene obligada a abonar ese dinero hasta la liquidacion del ejercicio que se hará a principios de 1976 y los gastos en el territorio hay que hacerlos ya desde ahora. Esta dificultad es la hay que resolver perentoriamente.” AGA, 81-11550, *Director General del Sahara, Informe para el Ministro de la Presidencia*, 29-03-1975.

⁴² Using the notations of the labour theory of value, the value added of every commodity in capitalist production is defined as $v + s$, being v the value corresponding to the labour time paid to the worker as wages and s to the non-paid labour time transferred to capital as surplus-value. The rate of surplus value is s/v .

2. Labour and conflicts at Fosbucraa

Phosphate mining impacted the Saharawi society only some years after the establishment of ENMINSA. In October 1962, by the time that Project B (mining prospection outwards of Izic) got validation from the INI (see 1.1), ENMINSA just employed a total of 98 effectives, including technical and administrative staff. (Garcia: 1974: 23-25). In 1967, still undercapitalized and at an early stage of installation, its whole labour force amounted to 405 workers⁴³. In 1973, during its experimental year of production, Fosbucraa employed a total workforce of 2000,⁴⁴ 1500 of whom were working at the industrial pole of Bucraa⁴⁵.

The numbers were supposed to rise. In early 1975, the company was planning to achieve outputs of 6 million tonnes during the year 1976 and 10 million in 1980, which means an yearly growth rate of more than 20%. Such rate would certainly not be matched by a proportional job creation. Bucraa operations were carried out in an open pit, which compared to underground mining allows for saving fixed capital (in engineering structures) and especially direct labor. This is probably the main explanation for the relatively low number of the 1972-73 workforce, even considered that it relates to an experimental stage of the production. Besides, being a late comer into the sector, the company must have started with a relatively high organic composition of capital⁴⁶.

Therefore the capital-labour conflict at Fosbucraa was focused over the *relative* surplus value⁴⁷. As there was no legal possibility of changing work times⁴⁸ the only way for Fosbucraa to increase its surplus value rate was to rise the degree of labor intensity and the corresponding productivity. The company's efforts to achieve this goal focused mainly on skilled and semi-skilled workers, those on whom productivity gains depended most. There are reasons to

⁴³ AGA, 81-11546, *ENMINSA, Condiciones de vida y trabajo del personal saharui en la Empresa Nacional Minera del Sahara, S.A.*, October 1967.

⁴⁴ About 600 of whom were Saharawi. https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fos_Bucraa (cons. 27-09-2024).

⁴⁵ AGA, 81-11546, *Fosfatos de Bu-Craa, S.A.*, 25-06-1973.

⁴⁶ The organic composition of capital relates the value of the means of production (equipments, other fixed assets, raw materials) to the amount of labour required to operate them. If c stands for the value of the means of production, the organic composition of capital is $c / (v + s)$. For s and v , see note 42.

⁴⁷ The surplus value rate (s / v) is determined by work time, work intensity and productivity. The *relative* surplus value increases when, while maintaining work time, work intensity and productivity cause s to increase proportionally more than v (wages). For s and v , see note 42.

⁴⁸ For political reasons, it is likely that ENMINSA and Fosbucraa were monitorised by the INI and the local Government as regards the 40 hours week. In 1967 ENMINSA boasted that as regards work times it had accomplish what “*en los países europeos más desarrollados económica y socialmente se viene luchando hace años por conseguir.*” AGA, 81-11546, *ENMINSA, Condiciones de vida y trabajo del personal Saharui en la Empresa Nacional Minera del Sahara, S.A.*, October 1967.

believe that this pattern of class-struggle also contributed to frame the relationship between Fosbucraa and the *Gobierno General* as regards labour issues.

2.1. The making of a Saharawi working class (1967-1975)

Considering that at Fosbucraa the surplus value rate depended more on specialized workers than on others, it is understandable that in its early years of activity, the company employed a relatively small number of Saharawi. It would take some years for a significant Saharawi skilled offer to be available. But it is also expected that if and when it did, the company preferred it to the more expensive Peninsular workers⁴⁹. Given the political context in which labor relations evolved in Spanish Sahara it is understandable that, in the first years, the disagreements between the government and the company concerned more often the *total* number of Saharawi employed and afterwards, as the skilled Saharawi offer increased, the discriminatory treatment given to them. Central government's directives to enforce preferential recruitment of Saharawi were in place since at least 1964⁵⁰. In 1967, ENMINSA's 405 wage-earners were distributed as follows, according to origin and qualifications⁵¹:

Table 4 and Figure 4 – ENMINSA workforce – 1967

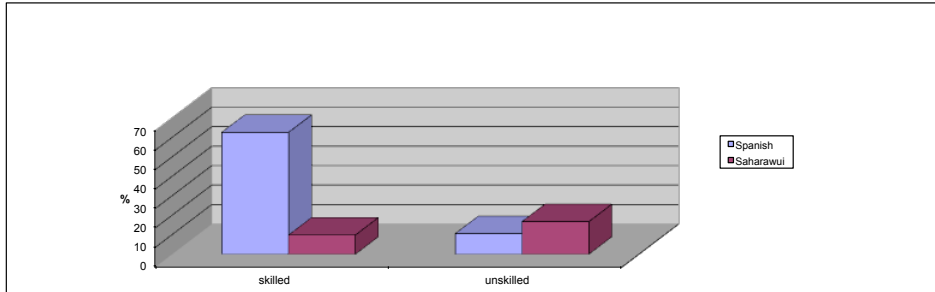
	Skilled	Unskilled	Total
Spanish	254	43	297
Saharawi	40	68	108

Source: AGA, 81-11546, *ENMINSA, Condiciones de vida y trabajo del personal saharui em la Empresa Nacional Minera del Sahara, S.A.*, October 1967

⁴⁹ As it had already been the case with the Gibraltar *unskilled* workers that INI had ordered Fosbucraa to recruit. The *D.G. Promocion del Sahara* accepted Fosbucraa's complaint and rejected the request, considering the higher costs involved in wages to Peninsular workers and in moving their families to the Territory. AGA, 81-11546, 27-01-1974.

⁵⁰ The articles 7 and 9 of the *Ordenanza* of 30-05-1964 established hiring preferences for "natives and other workers resident for at least one year".

⁵¹ The criterion used for the classification by skill was to consider, from the list of professions and positions given by Enmisa, as qualified: graduate and non-graduate technicians, drill runners and shot firers (1st to 3rd class of *barrenistas*), other qualified manual workers (1st and 2nd class of *oficios varios*) and administrative staff; as unqualified, all the others (*peones, pinche subalternos*).



By then the Spanish (Peninsular and Canaries) workers represented a little less than $\frac{3}{4}$ of the total work force (73%) but over $\frac{4}{5}$ of the *skilled and semi-skilled* workforce (86%). Justifying the low number of Saharawi of Table 4, ENMINSA reported that the *general selection criterion* was to *hire Saharawi personnel, as long as they had the indispensable knowledge required to perform a job* but that *the level of their knowledge is so low that their entry into the company has almost always been done as labourers*. Even when they had the formal qualification for skilled jobs, *experience has shown us that their level of knowledge was also very low, so they had to learn within the Company*⁵².

In the coming years these proportions were not likely to change much in spite of the *Programa de Promoción Obrera*, started in 1967. In 1973, the Spaniards still represented 70% of the Fosbucraa employees. The facts showed that as a rule the company would rather fire than hire Saharawi. In 1974, the *D.G. Promocion del Sahara* complained to Fosbucraa about this policy, reminding its political implications⁵³. The company was not too convincing in its reply: it admitted that the redundancies were limited to casual staff, whose 3 months contracts were over and added that reintegration could later occur, if justified. Still, the hiring map attached to the information showed that within less than three months 33 Saharawi had been laid off (of which 7 for not being considered suitable for the job) while 11 Europeans had been admitted⁵⁴.

⁵² On the other hand, the hiring of unskilled Spaniards (which required validation by the Government of the Territory) was justified by the tasks that the Saharawi male workers refused to perform, such as cleanings: “Entre los pinches y peones europeos los hay contratados para limpieza en las Residencias de Bu-Craa donde no hay mujeres, ya que el personal sahara no acepta normalmente esta labor.” AGA, 81-11546, ENMINSA, *Condiciones*, October, 1967.

⁵³ The Director wanted inner information about the rumours about frequent layoffs of Saharawi because “los saharauis en esto de la discriminacion estan supersensibilizados y cualquier diferencia sirve siempre de motivo de discusion y de descontento.” AGA, 81-11546, *Direcion General de Promocion del Sahara*, 12-03-1974.

⁵⁴ AGA, 81-11546, *Fosbucraa, Informe sobre contratacion de peones nativos eventuales por Fosbucraa*, April 1974.

Besides, Fosbucraa had an understanding too wide for Saharawi taste about the “native” label. A significant number of non-Spanish medium and high skilled staff were in fact Moroccan employees. In 1975 reversing this situation was also among the POLISARIO’s demands⁵⁵. In fact, the company never seems to have been concerned about the true origins of its “native” staff, even of the unqualified ones. Before the conveyor belt was operational, the *Chiu*⁵⁶ complained to the Government that the contract for loading the phosphate by truck was held by a Moroccan company and involved the recruitment of *tribus y fracciones* from the North, *consideradas por los nativos como marroquíes*. Addressing the company, which justified itself with the savings awarded by a single contract with a large company, the government recalled that in the circumstances of the Province political criteria should prevail over economic ones (*se estima que sobre criterios económicos, deben prevalecer los de carácter político*)⁵⁷. Fosbucraa’s internal documentation will certainly shed light on the extent to which the government was really able to enforce them during the period in which it controlled the company, particularly as regards the larger employment of real “natives”.

In addition to the greater or lesser number of Saharawi hired, Fosbucraa was aware of the Sahara’s peculiar labor framework, which had many legal shortcomings compared to that applied in other Spanish provinces (regardless of the empty formality of many of these procedures). For instance, in the Sahara there was no work juries (as it should be in plants with more than 50 workers), no legal Unions, etc.⁵⁸

These conditions favoured the discrimination against the Saharawi when in relation to Spaniards in similar jobs. In the late years of the Spanish administration, the differences between the political and the management criteria over this issue became more frequent. It seems that the first time the Government forced Fosbucraa to account for it was over Moroccan accusations in a press article⁵⁹. The journal accused ENIMINSA of forcing the

⁵⁵ When reporting to Sahara Government his negotiations with POLISARIO Khalienna asked about the true in the allegations that Moroccan staff was important at Fosbucraa. The Secretary of the Government confirmed it (*hay gente calificada, capataces, etc.*) but the fault was to blame on the ADARO heritage and... on the Saharawi who had documented them! AGA, 81-11550, *Gobernador General de Sahara, Entrevista Ilmo Sr. Secretario General – Sr Halihenna*, 30-11-1974.

⁵⁶ Traditional Saharawi chiefs.

⁵⁷ All the more, added the Government, considering that the amounts saved hardly weighed on the profitability of investments as large as those of Fosbucraa. AGA, 81-11546, *Dirección General de Promoción de Sahara*, 17-01-1970.

⁵⁸ The company admitted these formal omissions when it was legally obliged to draw up the Internal Regulations (*Reglamento de Régimen Interior*) of its Aaiun pole. AGA, 81-11546, *Fosfatos de Bu-Craa*, S.A, 25-06-1973.

⁵⁹ In the official translation: “El drama de los obreros del Sahara”, published in “Nuestro Sahara”. the newspaper of the pro-Moroccan *Frente de Liberación del Sahara*. The article mixed propaganda items

Saharawi to longer working hours at half of the European equivalent pay and with worst accommodation (precarious self-built housing or tents), etc. The firm rapidly produced a 18 pages leaflet denying it all⁶⁰ and boasting of going further than the labor and welfare legislation in Spain required as regarded other issues such as the number of days of paid leave, social security benefits for families, high-quality facilities, free medical assistance, education with monetary incentives, etc⁶¹.

Considering the absolute and relative importance of skilled and semi-skilled workers for the goal of increasing relative surplus value, it is plausible that Fosbucraa's direct and indirect wages tended to stand out from all other employers in the region⁶². In 1975, the Sahara Government felt obliged to complain about the company's wage policy which by offering "excessive" increases harmed other employers and the administration itself. Fosbucraa's high salaries were even pushing the local police officials to desert in search for company jobs⁶³.

But such wage policies were certainly not applied to the unskilled workers, that is the majority of Saharawi still employed by Fosbucraa. For jobs with no scope for increasing labour intensity and productivity the company had already admitted in 1967 that it paid low wages and did not make career progressions⁶⁴. As the workforce grew, the formation of a class consciousness among Fosbucraa workers became linked to the dual wage and career standards practiced by the company. In 1975, a report of an important official considered that the wage differences between Saharawi and Spanish staff had become *excessivas* and that they were fomenting unrest among the whole workforce⁶⁵. In 1975, the Secretary of the Government confirmed that Fosbucraa relegated the Saharawi to the lowest jobs, even those

with some reliable information, which shows that it had been made based on inner information. For instance, the absolute figures for Saharawi employmen were not far from those given by the company: the article mentioned 90 out of 400 workers, ENIMINSA 108 out of 405. AGA, 81-11546, Spanish Embassy in Rabat, 18-09-1967.

⁶⁰ Although indirectly admitting some wage differences: for instance, the company paid a basic wage but supplemented it with a 75% subsidy to compensate for the cost of living. This was certainly not paid to local workers. The productivity bonuses were another factor for a wider wage differentiation. AGA, 81-11546, ENMINSA, *Condiciones*, October, 1967.

⁶¹ The Saharawi benefited from three more days off than the Europeans because of Muslim holidays (Aid el Seguer, Aid el Quebir y Aid el Mulud). The leaflet included more than 20 photos of the facilities and daily life. AGA, 81-11546, ENMINSA, *Condiciones*, October, 1967.

⁶² See note 47.

⁶³ AGA, 81-11550, *Gobierno General de Sahara - Secretario General*, 12-01-1975.

⁶⁴ The company referred to jobs and workers *cuya única meta es subsistir con la menor fatiga posible. Esto ocasiona una serie de peones, que no saldrán nunca de esa categoría*. AGA, 81-11546, ENMINSA, *Condiciones*, October, 1967.

⁶⁵ AGA, 81-1550, *Delegado prefecto de la Juventud, Sahara Actual*, p. 13, 10-06-1975.

with formal qualifications. That is why, he added, that the Fosbucraa Saharawi employees had bad work performances⁶⁶. From work slowdowns to industrial action the steps were few. Since October 1974 strikes and workers demonstrations had occurred in Aaiun, although the details of its organization are not clear⁶⁷.

The conclusion drawn in 1975 by the Government about the political effect of Fosbucraa was clear: the company represented *un foco preocupante* for the Spanish interests. Moreover, the company was spreading all over *un espíritu anti-español*⁶⁸. Recent events had showed how far the “anti-spanish” mood had gone but at the same time the rapid progress of the Saharawi workforce.

2.2. Upgrade of the Saharawi workforce and social blockade (1975)

During the years 1974 and 1975, phosphate mining in the Sahara became increasingly affected by political action. Fosbucraa S.A. started selling its output in a instable market where a cartel configuration had not yet been set. It rapidly became a strategic target for the other main producers. The Moroccan OCP was the most active in attempting to control it, one way or the other (see 1.2).

For POLISARIO, capable of military action since 1973 and whose political support base included company’s workers, Fosbucraa was also, although for different reasons, an important political target. A successful attack to its facilities could bring the party more popularity and international recognition and thus POLISARIO struck the first blow.

On the 21st October 1974, possibly between 2 and 3 a.m., the stations 7 and 8 of the Fosbucraa conveyor belt were sabotaged and the transportation of phosphate was immediately interrupted. Although the circumstances of this POLISARIO operation are out of the scope of this paper, the operation in itself is also an indicator of the impact of Fosbucraa on the Saharawi society. The official enquiry showed that workers had actually been mobilized for the action: the staff due for night work at those two stations had asked for delaying the shift start until 6.00. Nobody was arrested lack of witnesses⁶⁹. It also showed that the technical operation, which had disabled 200 meter of the belt at about 8 km from the terminal, had been surgically executed. According to the company staff , *los que realizaran el hecho deben*

⁶⁶ AGA, 81-11550, *Gobierno General de Sahara - Secretario General*, 11-02-1975.

⁶⁷ AGA, 81-11550, Spanish Embassy in Tripoli, 10-06-1975.

⁶⁸ AGA, 81-11550, *Gobierno General de Sahara - Secretario General*, 11-02-1975.

⁶⁹ The envoy of the D.G. Sahara reported that the sabotage had been widely condemned among the population (*de condena total*) but the fact is that noone provided the single information about its authors. AGA, 81-11550, *Direccion General de Promocion de Sahara Informe para el Señor Director*, 30-10-1974.

ser alguien enterado(s) del sistema de funcionamiento. For instance, at station n. 7 only the electronic circuit board had been destroyed.⁷⁰ In fact, the coup had been so well organized that some Spanish authorities, used to downplay on the military capacity of Saharawi armed resistance⁷¹, were reluctant to credit it for the sabotage. In spite of all the pro-POLISARIO political graffiti on the walls of station 7, they wondered if it could not *pertenecer a otras ideologías extremistas*⁷².

In early 1975, Fosbucraa was again targeted by part of its staff, this time favouring the Moroccan interests. On February 3rd, photocopies of confidential information about the company and the phosphate deposit were found in the locker room of the Bucraa plant. The company suspected that the responsible for this attempt of industrial espionage was Abderrahaman Leiba, a senior mining technician working directly with the chief engineering of the site. Leiba came from a family of Tantan and his father had already been harassed during the 1957 Istiqlal campaign against Spain. In his attempt one of the factory foremen seems to have been also involved⁷³. These two actions against Fosbucraa indicate that among the Saharawi skilled staff there was not only capacity for complex technical tasks but also professional dissatisfaction which could be easily turned into political action.

The industrial conflict within Fosbucraa was not the single factor for the *ambiente cargado* of 1975. The company was also exporting the class struggle to its external environment. The multiplier effects of the INI mining investment since 1963 (public works, health and educational services, etc.) were followed by the rent flow which the company was transferring to the provincial budget since 1973-74. Both these money injections accelerated changes in the Saharawi society which in ten year went from nomadic clans to a peripheral class society⁷⁴. According to the 1974 Census, out of a population of 73.4 thousand people, no less than 41.2 thousand lived now just in the three urban areas of Aaiun, Villa Cisneros and Smara (56%). The Census also shows a fast proletarianization: 13 thousand wage-earners, who may

⁷⁰ AGA, 81-11546, *Gobernador General de Sahara*, telegrams, 20 and 21-10-1974.

⁷¹ Polisario had organized at least 11 military operations before the Fosbucraa sabotage. AGA, 81-11550, *Seccion de Informacio General, Cronologia del Frente Polisario (Documento de Trabajo B)*, 07-10-1975. Even so, after the sabotage, the Governor still described it as a guerrilla group of about 325 members, badly equipped (just 30% of automatic weapons) and badly prepared (*la preparacion es mediocre; su capacidad combativa no es mucha*). AGA, 81-11550, *Gobernador General de Sahara*, 12-01-1975.

⁷² AGA, 81-11550, *Direccion General de Promocion de Sahara*, 30-10-1974.

⁷³ AGA, 81-11546, *Direccion General de Promocion de Sahara, Nota Informativa*, 10-02-1975.

⁷⁴ As one official put it: *Practicamente en diez años de una sociedad nómada se ha pasado a outra de consumo basada en la industria del fosfato y en ejército*. AGA, 81-11550, *Delegado Ppfecto de la Juventud, Sahara Actual*, p. 13.

represent close to 46% of the active male population⁷⁵. The administration, Fosbucraa and *Cubiertas y Tejados*⁷⁶ were the main employers.

The demand for low-medium skilled jobs and the inflated governmental budgets boosted educational spending. Since at least 1967 Fosbucraa had organized its vocational training centers in Aaiun and Villa Cisneros (Dakhla). According to the company they were oriented towards the needs of qualified manpower⁷⁷ although the learning of Spanish was probably the most important of its basic courses⁷⁸. Meanwhile government expenditure on education had increased and in 1975 about 73% of the male population under 13 years attended the basic school (though only 11.3% of the girls). In that year, 111 Saharawi were registered in secondary schools and 56 had scholarships for studying in Spanish universities. Slowly the qualification of the workforce was increasing: in 1974, the aggregate of skilled workers and administrative staff already accounted for 31% of the Saharawi wage-earners⁷⁹.

It was progress, but nevertheless too much. The perverse effect of the Fosbucraa rent was that it accelerated the transition to a society of wage earners but did not produce enough jobs. Fosbucraa mechanised works needed a relatively low number of unskilled work, as did *Cubiertas y Tejados* and the few other private capitals operating in the Territory. It was up to the Government, the biggest employer, to fill the gap.

In 1975, the political effects of this blockade were plainly visible and several high officials identified the frustration caused by low paid or no jobs at all as the main cause for political action (*puede dar lugar a que sus reclamaciones se realicen con violencia*). They also saw a sharp generation gap between the traditional way of living still dominant in part of the older adult population and the dependence on jobs and imported food of the young ones (*jóvenes, estudiantes, administrativos, especialistas, etc.*)⁸⁰. For the Secretary of the Government even POLISARIO could be dismantled if, among other things, they were offered jobs⁸¹.

⁷⁵ AGA, 81-11570, *Sahara*, s/d, p. 8-9.

⁷⁶ *Cubiertas y Tejados S.A.* (1916-1978) was a civil engineering firm, which merged with the Railway company *Medina del Campo a Zamora y Orense a Vigo*. In 1966 the firm integrated the consortium to build the Fosbucraa conveyor belt (Milan, 2017: 189).

⁷⁷ AGA, 81-11579, *Sahara*, s/d, p. 40.

⁷⁸ In 1967, 45 “natives” were attending a course of language and culture. ENMINSA was paying a 5 to 10% increase in wages for those who passed the exams. AGA, 81-11546. ENMINSA *Condiciones*, October, 1967.

⁷⁹ Based on the figures of the Census. AGA, 81-11579, *Sahara*, s/d, p.8-9; 42-44.

⁸⁰ AGA, 81-1550, *Delegado prefecto de la Juventud, Delegado Prefecto de la Juventud, Sahara Actual*, p. 9-13, 10-06-1975.

⁸¹ About the students with scholarships *resentidos porque piensan que van a llegar tarde al reparto de cargos y prebendas*. About Polisario, AGA, 81-11550, *Gobierno General de Sahara - Secretario General*, 12-01-1975

Conclusion:

About a decade after the great phosphate discovery of 1963, there was reason for optimism at INI. No foreign capital had entered Fosbucraa during the establishment years to jeopardize its control. Exploration was to begin at the start of a phase of high prices (1972-1975) and there would be no profit sharing. Meanwhile an informal cartel agreement with Morocco had given Fosbucraa a favourable export niche. As the differential rents were appropriated by the state, the conditions were in place to increase capital accumulation in Spain. Part of the rent was used to subsidize the production costs of the Spanish fertilizer industry. Another part of the rent was transferred to the state's budgetary effort in Spanish Sahara. Thanks to Fosbucraa's yields, it would not be necessary to tax Spanish private profits to pay for the necessary "unproductive" expenses (public works, school and hospital network, etc.), which had been rising since the establishment of ENMINSA. A zero-sum game between these two "productive" uses of the rent did not represent a major contradiction insofar as they both boosted the general rate of profit.

Conversely, the maximization of the company's rate of profit and the simultaneous development of a class of wage earners in the Sahara quickly came into contradiction. Due to the high composition of Fosbucraa capital (in which jobs did not increase in proportion to investments and tended to be directed towards high or medium qualifications), the Saharawi workforce felt increasingly discriminated against. Another contradiction lay in the multiplier effects of Fosbucraa investment which in little more than a decade had changed the Saharawi society. The mining boom had grafted onto a traditional nomadic society a segment of new classes, dependent on jobs, subsidies and scholarships. The outcome of these two contradictions came as a social blockade: the accumulation model in Sahara was not compatible with the expectations of young workers, technicians and students. Industrial conflict and anti-colonial action were expected and colonial authorities were aware of that. It was consensual that with or without the effects of the international pressure, the political *statu-quo* of the Spanish Sahara had to go.

In early 1975, the Spanish State was just buying time, which meant boosting social spending *como si fuera permanente la presencia de España en el territorio*⁸². For that it badly needed increasing amounts of Fosbucraa rent (*el funcionamiento laboral de ésta empresa es fundamental para los proximos meses*)⁸³, all the more because part of that flow would have to keep buffering the effects of the recession that had hit industrial capital in Spain in the meantime. In the current state of knowledge, it is impossible to say what relative weight the reversal of the fall in phosphate prices and the evolution of political events (which with the imminence

⁸² AGA, 81-11550, *Direcion General de Promocion de Sahara*, 17-12-1974.

⁸³ AGA, 81-11550, *Delegado prefecto de la Juventud, Delegado Prefecto de la Juventud, Sahara Actual*, p. 14, 10-06-1975.

of war put the Spanish regime at risk) had on the Madrid Agreements of November 1975. However, the irreversible effects of the Bucraa rent on the cleavage of Saharawi society and its new political landscape seem undeniable.

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ANNEX 1

FOSBUCRAA – Phosphate Sales in Spain: Distribution by Company – 1974

Empresa	Shipments	Metric Tonnes	Unit Price Pts/ Tonne	Unit Price USD /Tonne	Total Revenue (Pts)
S.A. Cros	107	561506	1660	29,12	931972881
UERT	117	433175	1540	27,02	667233262
Fertiberia	31	128031	1545	27,10	197746734
Foret S.A.	17	80022	2739	48,05	219153384
Ind. y Abonos Navarra	25	74617	1572	27,59	117323271
Ind. Quimicas Canarias	40	68165	1633	28,65	111296570
Ind. Quimica Zaragoza	11	47722	1822	31,96	86943023
Fosforico Español S.A.	8	36134	1821	31,96	65815303
Proquiber S.A.	13	25278	2054	36,04	51920846
Quimica Ind. Capuchinos	9	21732	2075	36,41	45104052
S.A. Carrillo	13	19513	1696	29,76	33097004
Ind. Quimicas Tarragona	9	18433	1783	31,28	32858488
Mirat S.A.	7	17513	2067	36,27	36202479
Real C.A. De Minas	5	15150	2305	40,45	34924765
Nitratos de Castilla S.A.	4	13844	1520	26,66	21039196
Turegano S.A.	5	9940	2102	36,87	20891396
Cosmoquimica	3	1910	2944	51,66	5623413
Fragas	1	119	2950	51,76	351050
Totais	425	1572804	1704	29,89	2679497117

Source: AGA, 81-11546, *Distribucion por empresas del mercado interior de fosfatos durante 1974, 03-1975*

ANNEX 2

FOSFATOS – Phosphate Exports: Distribution by Country – 1974

	Metric Tonnes	USD / Tonne	Total Revenue USD	Pts
Japan	320989	58	18631432	1068667375
West Germany	130566	72	9407385	536565781
Mexico	40957	75	3067083	174823731
Uruguay	30057	50	1500814	86731153
United States	28322	50	1415250	82155472
Romania	11443	45	514935	29418745
India	11443	45	509327	29031639
Netherlands	10308	75	773100	44066700
Switzerland	5792	53	304080	17343457
Austria	5672	75	425500	24247800
Total	595549	61	36548906	2093051853

Source: AGA, 81-11546, *Distribucion por paises de las exportaciones de fosfatos durante el año de 1974, 02-1975*

**La memoria saharaui de la visita
de la misión de Naciones Unidas
al Sahara Español en mayo de 1975.
Una indagación en base a testimonios. ☐**

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Resumen: El artículo aborda la memoria de la visita del Comité de descolonización de Naciones Unidas al entonces Sahara Occidental español en mayo de 1975 y las manifestaciones por la independencia que se organizaron. La indagación utiliza material documental, hemerográfico y gráfico, pero sobre todo testimonios orales de actores saharauis implicados. Esto permite sostener que los saharauis han conformado una memoria particular y contrahegemónica de ese momento, que no se limita a los elementos que siempre han prevalecido en la reconstrucción histórica convencional del final del colonialismo español.

Palabras claves: Sahara Occidental, Naciones Unidas, Descolonización, Memoria.

Abstract: The article addresses the memory of the visit of the United Nations Decolonization Committee to the then Spanish Western Sahara in May 1975 and the demonstrations for independence that were organized. The research uses documentary, newspaper and graphic material, but above all oral testimonies of Sahrawi actors involved. This allows us to maintain that the Sahrawis have formed a particular and counterhegemonic memory of that moment, which is not limited to the elements that have always prevailed in the conventional historical reconstruction of the end of Spanish colonialism.

“Fue el momento más importante, sumamente importante. La euforia era tan grande que todo se mezcló. Fueron hechos determinantes en la historia del Sahara” (Ali Mojtar Bumajruta, entrevista 2020)

En diciembre de 1974, ante las presiones de Marruecos, la Asamblea General de las Naciones Unidas decidió paralizar la consulta de autodeterminación que había preparado el gobierno colonial español, pedir un dictamen sobre el estatuto jurídico del territorio a la Corte Internacional de Justicia (CIJ) y encomendar al Comité de Descolonización (el llamado C24) una visita sobre el terreno, para comprobar la opinión de los habitantes del territorio y elaborar un informe sobre su situación que sirviera como base al Consejo de Seguridad sobre el camino a seguir¹. La visita de Naciones Unidas al territorio del Sahara español tuvo lugar en mayo de 1975 y fue el escenario de manifestaciones y movilizaciones, inesperadas para las autoridades, que reivindicaban el fin de la colonia y la independencia. Lo que constataron los delegados del C24 se reflejó en un informe publicado en octubre de ese año. Pero para los saharauis las movilizaciones organizadas por el Frente POLISARIO supusieron un punto de inflexión trascendental en la construcción de su lucha por la emancipación y constituyen un hito en su memoria colectiva. Si bien la mayor parte de la historiografía sobre el final del colonialismo español en el Sahara Occidental menciona la visita de Naciones Unidas y las manifestaciones populares, generalmente se atribuye a estos episodios un menor relieve que al dictamen de la

¹ Res. 3292 (XXIX) de 13 de diciembre de 1974.

Corte o la Marcha Verde. Sin embargo, los hechos de mayo de 1975 tienen una centralidad particular en la memoria histórica colectiva de la nación saharauí, pues el protagonismo corrió a cargo de la población y de la organización política, conformando lo que podríamos denominar memoria propia y autónoma. Desde muy pronto el Frente POLISARIO hizo de estos acontecimientos un hito de la lucha nacional². Esas movilizaciones fueron un elemento fundacional o seminal del movimiento nacional saharauí.

Este artículo tiene por objeto recuperar parte de esa memoria a través de testimonios de los implicados, especialmente de los activistas saharauis. Participantes directos, testigos de esos acontecimientos, saharauis y españoles, activistas nacionalistas, población común, funcionarios y militares, todos subrayan la relevancia de esas protestas. Las manifestaciones de mayo de 1975 dejaron un recuerdo imborrable en quienes las vivieron o vieron a distancia. Para los militantes o simples partidarios de la independencia, el haber asistido a esas movilizaciones aparece como un ejemplo de compromiso temprano y de veteranía en la lucha nacional.

“Muy pronto participé en las manifestaciones pacíficas del Frente POLISARIO contra la presencia española. Teníamos la esperanza de que la independencia sería pronto alcanzada, sobre todo después de la visita de la misión de las Naciones Unidas en mayo de 1975. Centenares de saharauis habían blandido banderas del Sahara” (Sidi Mohamed Daddach, activista político y expreso político) (Decaster, 2017: 92)

La misión visitadora del Comité de descolonización de Naciones Unidas

En varios territorios coloniales, las visitas del Comité Especial de Descolonización de Naciones Unidas no sólo han sido un acontecimiento más en el proceso de independencia, sino que han supuesto una ventana de oportunidad, aprovechada por los actores políticos y las poblaciones. Fue el caso de la misión enviada al Sahara español en mayo de 1975. España entendió que la visita le podía ser ventajosa, así que dio su visto bueno, invitó formalmente a la misión del C24, y ofreció su plena colaboración³. En marzo, tras las consultas preceptivas del presidente Salim, se decidió la composición de la misión⁴. La delegación estaría integrada por Simeón Ake

² En uno de los primeros reportajes de la televisión española sobre el Frente POLISARIO (*Los Reporteros. El Frente Polisario*, de Miguel de la Quadra Salcedo) filmado en el verano de 1975, uno de los dirigentes del Frente y que posteriormente sería presidente de la RASD, Mohamed Abdelaziz, hace una mención explícita a las manifestaciones de mayo (min 24.00).

³ Villar (entrevista 2020) subraya que el delegado español en Naciones Unidas, Jaime de Piniés, convenció al ministro Mauri para que invitara a una misión de observación.

⁴ En 1974-1975 presidía el C24 el tanzano Salim Ahmed Salim. Entre los miembros integrantes del Comité ya se encontraba Cuba. Debe señalarse que España había recibido misiones del C24 en Guinea Ecuatorial en 1966 y 1968.

embajador de Costa de Marfil en la ONU, como presidente; Manouchehr Pishva, ministro consejero de Irán en la organización, y Marta Jiménez Martínez, directora de temas políticos del Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores de Cuba, especialista en temas de descolonización. A ellos se sumó un equipo de funcionarios de las Naciones Unidas, intérpretes y un fotógrafo. Si bien los tres delegados procedían de países no alineados, reflejando un cierto reparto geográfico, la misión tenía en cambio un sesgo ideológico no homogéneo: los dos primeros procedían de países claramente pro-occidentales o influenciados, cuando no pro-marroquíes, mientras que la latinoamericana y socialista estaba alineada con posiciones tercermundistas. En abril la misión fue invitada por Marruecos, Mauritania y Argelia a ampliar la visita a sus respectivos territorios⁵.

Aunque la resolución no precisaba el mandato de la misión, estaba claro que su objeto era determinar la situación de la colonia española, obtener información de primera mano sobre la situación, y constatar el sentimiento y las aspiraciones de la población autóctona; información que debería servir al Comité. Así se expuso en el Informe final de la misión. La visita de la Misión se extendió entre el 8 de mayo y 14 de junio. Primero hizo una escala en Madrid (8-12 mayo), luego visitó el territorio del Sahara (12-19 de mayo), retornó a Madrid (20-22), visitó el sur de Marruecos (22-28 de mayo), Argelia (28 de mayo – 1 de junio) y finalmente Mauritania (4-9 de junio). En cada una de las etapas mantuvo reuniones con los gobiernos y autoridades al más alto nivel, con actores locales muy diversos, con refugiados y con grupos políticos⁶. En lo que respecta a la parte de la visita en el territorio del Sahara español, la misión llegó el 12 de mayo en un avión facilitado por el gobierno español y su estancia duró 8 días. El Sahara era un territorio poco poblado, con unas pocas ciudades y con infraestructuras precarias. Su población total era de 73.497 habitantes; El Aaiún, la ciudad principal, contaba con 28.000 habitantes y Villa Cisneros con 5.370 habitantes. Con plena libertad, la misión recorrió el territorio y visitó varias ciudades, los principales poblados, las instalaciones mineras y algunos puestos fronterizos: El Aaiún, Daora, las instalaciones mineras Bu Craa, Tifariti, Guelta Zemmur, Mahbes, Smara, Villa Cisneros, Auserd, Tichla, Aargub y La Güera. En algunos casos la misión se dividió para poder acceder a localidades más remotas y del interior. En todos los lugares la delegación se reunió con las autoridades españolas, pero también con diversos grupos de saharauis: miembros de la *Yema'a*, notables, delegaciones del Frente POLISARIO

⁵ A/AC.109/484 (15-16 de abril de 1975), A/AC.109/486 (22 de abril 1975).

⁶ En Madrid la delegación se reunió con el ministro de Asuntos Exteriores Pedro Cortina Mauri, el ministro de Presidencia Antonio Carro y el presidente del gobierno Carlos Arias Navarro. En Marruecos la delegación se entrevistó con el rey Hassan II y visitó los campos de refugiados del sur, en Tan Tan y Zag. En Argelia fue recibida por el presidente Boumédiène; en el sur, visitó los campamentos de Tindouf, donde se reunió con El Uali Mustafá Sayed, secretario general del Frente desde el segundo congreso y se entrevistó con los prisioneros españoles en manos del POLISARIO. Finalmente, en Mauritania se reunió con el presidente Mokhtar Uld Dadah, visitó Nuadibú y otras localidades del norte (Atar, Zouerat, Bir Moghreïn). Los detalles y pormenores del periplo se recogen en el anejo del Informe final de la misión.

y del PUNS⁷, estudiantes, trabajadores, mujeres. La Misión fue inundada de peticiones de encuentros y frecuentemente se produjeron aglomeraciones de gentes que querían aportar sus testimonios o plantear peticiones.

Por parte española, acompañaron a la misión durante su visita al territorio tres diplomáticos muy implicados en la cuestión -Emilio Artacho, Pedro López Aguirrebengoa y Francisco Villar-, el antiguo funcionario español de la ONU Antonio Prada y el comandante Vicente Mateo Canalejo, del Servicio de Información y Seguridad de Sahara. También hubo al menos treinta periodistas, muchos de ellos españoles y algunos marroquíes⁸. El gobierno español se comprometió a facilitar los desplazamientos de la delegación, colaborar y no poner trabas a ninguna reunión ni manifestación popular; la población local podría expresarse y acceder a la delegación sin ningún riesgo⁹. También se garantizó el libre acceso a la prensa nacional e internacional para cubrir la visita¹⁰. El Informe final de la misión y todas las noticias muestran que, en el Sahara, la Misión pudo cumplir perfectamente su cometido y no encontró trabas ni dificultades mayores. Antes de la llegada de la misión las autoridades españolas habían dado instrucciones a la policía y al ejército para que se mantuvieran acuartelados y al margen. El plan era que su peón, el PUNS, se movilizara y se hiciera ver por la misión y los medios de comunicación internacionales¹¹.

La presencia internacional dio lugar a un momento excepcional de libertad de expresión y de manifestación, inhabitual hasta entonces. Y eso permitió una explosión de manifestaciones populares que acompañaron cada una de las etapas de la visita, sorprendentes por su amplitud, persistencia y la naturaleza de sus demandas. En sí mismo, este hecho no era excepcional del Sahara, a lo largo de su historia todas las misiones visitadoras del C24 han propiciado la acción colectiva de la población autóctona y de actores implicados en los procesos de descolonización.

⁷ El Partido de Unión Nacional Saharaui (PUNS) fue una organización política títere, creada por los servicios de inteligencia españoles en noviembre de 1974, para crear una base social adpta a España.

⁸ Según un periodista gráfico español: “Nos llamó la atención que los periodistas marroquíes venían con documentos acreditativos que tenían los números consecutivos; estaba claro que eran de los servicios de información” (José Luis de Pablos, entrevista 2022).

⁹ “La misión ha recibido de las autoridades españolas, al nivel más elevado, tanto en Madrid como en el territorio, seguridades de que nadie será inquietado por haber participado en manifestaciones ante la misión, o por haber expresado a la misma cualquier opinión política”. Comunicado de la misión de visita de las Naciones Unidas al término de su estancia en el Sahara Occidental difundido por la Oficina de Información Diplomática, Madrid, 20 de mayo de 1975.

¹⁰ “Quiero que no se oculte nada a los medios informativos de cuanto pueda ocurrir en el territorio” (gobernador del Sahara, general Gómez de Salazar). *ABC*, 7 de mayo de 1975.

¹¹ “Los medios oficiales, y la agencia oficial EFE, que fueron a cubrir la visita de la misión pretendieron magnificar la presencia del PUNS, estoy convencido de que desembarcaron con ese objetivo” (José Luis de Pablos, entrevista 2022).

En el caso del Sahara las manifestaciones tuvieron un doble objetivo; en primer lugar, visibilizar ante la comunidad internacional la demanda de independencia por parte de la mayoría de la población, y en segundo lugar las manifestaciones escenificaron la disputa entre el Frente POLISARIO y el PUNS por aparecer como el actor más representativo de la voluntad de la población. De ahí la importancia de la simbología, el uso masivo de la bandera independentista, de pancartas y de pintadas con mensajes explícitos a favor de la independencia y exigiendo la salida de España.

Aquí los hechos. El 12 de mayo la misión llegó a El Aaiún procedente de Madrid. Desde primera hora de la mañana, una muchedumbre de saharauis se apostó al borde de la carretera que lleva al aeropuerto. Sorpresivamente, al paso de la comitiva, los manifestantes desplegaron centenares de banderas y pancartas que llevaban ocultas bajo la ropa. Al principio aparecieron algunas banderas del PUNS, pero la multitud obligó a retirarlas; el Frente POLISARIO monopolizó la manifestación con sus enseñas y gritando proclamas contra España. Las mujeres lanzaban sus ululeos, y en el asfalto habían sido pintadas consignas independentistas. Las autoridades, atónitas y desbordadas, intentaron contener a las masas, pero no pudieron impedir lo que ocurría ante la misión y la prensa internacional.

«La sorpresa fue cuando los delegados de la ONU iniciaron su marcha y aquella multitud hizo surgir como por arte de prestidigitación un verdadero bosque de banderas del Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguia El Hamra y Río de Oro (...) como representantes de la posición de una independencia intransigente enemiga de cualquier país que pretendiera tener influencia en el territorio y que no tiene autorización de actividad política.» (*El eco de Canarias, 13 de mayo de 1975*)

Este es el recuerdo de un joven testigo español:

“Tenía quince años y vivía en Aaiún. Ese día llegó a la ciudad la Misión Visitadora de Naciones Unidas... En mi pequeño Diario reflejé esa fecha: “A las 11, y después del examen de griego, nos han dado fiesta. Rufino, Eladio, Vidal y yo subimos al aeropuerto. A la altura del polideportivo vemos una multitud de saharauis formada por unos trescientos. Al llegar a la puerta del aeropuerto nos esperamos allí unos 10 minutos y un policía nos dijo que nos marchásemos de allí. Al regresar, pude leer una de las tantas pancartas que ostentaban. Una de ellas decía: “ONU: El pueblo saharauí rechaza toda pretensión anexionista”. En realidad, los enviados de las Naciones Unidas llegaron a las tres y media. En el Instituto había una gran fortaleza de policías. A las 6, una cantidad grande de policías han rodeado Colominas y ahora me entero de que un destacamento de soldados se va a Casas de Piedra, donde hay una revolución. ¡Este asunto se está poniendo en toda su máxima emoción!” (...) Nunca antes había sido tan elocuente la voluntad de los saharauis, era tanta la gente, sus gritos, sus pancartas... Cuatro días después, sin darnos razón concreta, terminaba el curso en el Instituto. Una conmoción.

Comenzaba la operación “Golondrina”, el desalojo de la población civil del Sáhara.” (Felipe Briones, en <https://ceas-sahara.es/testimonio-de-felipe-briones/>)

Así lo narran algunos de los organizadores:

“Unos pocos días antes de la llegada de la misión de la ONU algunos miembros del Buró Político del Polisario tuvimos una reunión en Rabouni, Tinduf. Yo venía de El Aaiún, otro de Dajla... Cuando terminamos nuestra reunión volvimos cada uno a la ciudad de dónde veníamos y nos pusimos a trabajar en los preparativos de la visita de esa misión de las Naciones Unidas... Luego hicimos reuniones en El Aaiun con los responsables de las organizaciones clandestinas del Frente Polisario, jóvenes, trabajadores, mujeres y también con otros grupos de militantes que formaban parte de la Policía Territorial y con otros sectores de la clandestinidad. Con todos estos grupos nos reunimos y les trasladamos los eslóganes que se iban a llevar ante la misión de la ONU, a la vez trabajamos juntos las pancartas con sus mensajes que había que trasladar a la ONU” (Omar Buslan, entrevista 2023)

“El día de la llegada de la misión se organizó la participación. Disimulamos las banderas bajo la ropa. Había orden de “silencio absoluto” hasta recibir una señal con el altavoz que llevábamos en una camioneta. Se quería evitar una precipitación y revelar nuestros planes con antelación. Cuando recibimos la confirmación de que la delegación estaba en movimiento, dimos la señal y entonces la masa sacó las banderas” (Ahmed Mulay Ali Hamadi, entrevista 2020)

“Nosotros, temprano, nos acercamos a la vía por donde iba a pasar la comitiva. Íbamos con banderas y pancartas disimuladas bajo la ropa. Teníamos la orden de no sacar nada hasta que aparecieran los coches y se recibiera la consigna. Así ocurrió; al paso de los coches, dada la señal, hubo una explosión de banderas del Frente POLISARIO. El golpe de efecto fue enorme. Incluso los del PUNS se sorprendieron y algunos tiraron sus pancartas. España no pudo reaccionar” (Ali Mojtar Bumajruta, entrevista 2020)

La manifestación más numerosa tuvo lugar el día siguiente en El Aaiún; a los residentes de la ciudad se habían sumado saharauis de otras localidades¹². Aprovechando el espacio de libertad abierto por la presencia de la misión, varios vehículos recorrieron la ciudad con banderas del POLISARIO y lanzando consignas con altavoces. Allí donde se reunía la delegación con autoridades o instituciones, o en torno al Parador Nacional donde se alojaba,

¹² José Ramón Diego Aguirre (1991), entonces jefe de los Servicios de Información, hace una descripción muy detallada de la manifestación. Francisco Villar, que como diplomático español acompañó a la misión, reconoce que “a los diplomáticos no se nos puso en antecedentes sobre la real presencia del Frente POLISARIO” (entrevista 2020).

había concentraciones. Los días posteriores, las manifestaciones se repitieron en cada ciudad o poblado. El Informe final de la misión lo señala:

202. (...) En todos los lugares que visitó, la Misión fue recibida por manifestaciones políticas muy numerosas y tuvo muchas reuniones privadas con representantes de todos los sectores de la comunidad sahariana. En todos ellos resultó evidente para la Misión que entre los saharianos del territorio había un consenso abrumador en favor de la independencia y en contra de la integración con cualquiera de los países vecinos. Las diferencias de opinión que encontró la Misión guardaban relación no con el objetivo, sino con los medios por los cuales debía conseguirse ese objetivo y con el apoyo que se prestaba a los movimientos políticos rivales.

203. La Misión estima, a la luz de lo que observó en el territorio, especialmente las manifestaciones masivas en favor de un movimiento, el Frente POLISARIO, que se describe más adelante, que su visita sirvió de catalizador para hacer salir a la luz fuerzas y presiones políticas que anteriormente habían estado en gran medida sumergidas. Fue tanto más significativo para la Misión que ello haya resultado una sorpresa para las autoridades españolas, que hasta entonces sólo habían estado parcialmente conscientes del profundo despertar político que había tenido lugar en la población.

220. Como se explica en otra parte del presente informe, las manifestaciones públicas de masas en apoyo del Frente POLISARIO, que la Misión presencié en todo el territorio, especialmente en la región septentrional, incluido El Aaiún, constituyeron una sorpresa para las autoridades españolas y para muchos saharianos, y han alterado considerablemente la situación política en el territorio.

Según los organizadores

“Una vez aterrizada la Misión Visitadora de la ONU, lo primero que hicimos fue una manifestación que ocupó la pista por la que iban a pasar hacia su hotel. Esa pista viene desde el norte del aeropuerto y baja hacia el hotel El Parador... Pasó la misión por los manifestantes en la carretera, observaron nuestras pancartas, eslóganes y nuestros gritos por la independencia que exigíamos de España. El segundo día por la mañana hicimos otra manifestación cerca de la Plaza del Hospital que está al lado del edificio del ayuntamiento frente a la iglesia. Y allí logramos organizar una gran manifestación que ocupó y cerró la calle que conducía a la Secretaría del Gobierno General del Sahara”. (Omar Buslan, entrevista 2023)

“Hasta ese momento no hubo ningún contacto con la delegación de las Naciones Unidas... Cuando salió la delegación de la sede de la Secretaría del Gobierno y se dirigió hacia nosotros, la policía había realizado un cinturón de seguridad infranqueable, pero no

impidió que la delegación de la ONU viniera hacia donde estábamos manifestándonos. La única que hablaba español en la delegación era Marta Jiménez Martínez, la diplomática cubana. ...y recuerdo que nos dijo: “Tendremos una reunión con vosotros en el Parador y tenéis que acudir”. Le tuvimos que preguntar si las autoridades coloniales nos permitirían acceder o no. Y ella nos dijo que la delegación de la ONU solicitó a las autoridades españolas que facilitaran ese encuentro”.

“Esa misma tarde nos organizamos en grupos para reunirnos con la delegación de la ONU en el Parador. Un grupo, en el que yo estaba, se reunió con Marta Jiménez. El otro, integrado por Sidahmed Ahmed Mahmud¹³, Omar Mansur, Hamdi Bueha y otros que hablaban francés con los demás delegados”. (Omar Buslan, entrevista 2023)

Las organizaciones políticas que lograron que la población, adepta o no, se sumara a las movilizaciones, fueron esencialmente el Frente POLISARIO y, en menor medida, el PUNS; no hubo otros actores relevantes, y en particular no hubo promarroquíes. Sin embargo, todos los observadores coinciden que en las ciudades del norte el Frente POLISARIO dominó las protestas de manera abrumadora y el PUNS apenas fue visible. En cambio, en Villa Cisneros y las localidades del sur, estuvieron presentes ambas organizaciones disputándose el protagonismo. Allí el PUNS participó, pero se esperaba de él mayor presencia y protagonismo en la calle¹⁴.

“Yo recuerdo que cuando fuimos a la manifestación, en la plaza central, cerca de donde estaba la vivienda del procurador de Villa Cisneros, empezaron a llegar los del PUNS con sus banderas amarillas y azules... Y de repente empezó a llegar gente con las banderas polisarias. Bueno, no te lo puedes imaginar, fue una cosa impresionante: montañas de gente iban con el traje típico con el turbante que solo se les ven los ojos, por tanto, no eran fácilmente identificables. Empezaron a manifestarse ahí en la misma zona. Confluyeron de una manera totalmente pacífica. No recuerdo haber pasado miedo en ningún momento.” (María Antonia Álvarez de Lara, entrevista 2020)

Es difícil cuantificar la participación en las grandes manifestaciones y en las pequeñas concentraciones de esos días¹⁵. Emboirik Ahmed (2017), basándose en testigos, estima que sólo en la manifestación de El Aaiún del 13 de mayo hubo cerca de 13.000 personas; la misión elevó la cifra a 15.000. En Smara, unas 2.500¹⁶. En todo caso, dada la limitada población del territorio, la movilización de varios miles de personas supuso una de las principales manifestaciones públicas jamás ocurridas hasta entonces en la colonia.

¹³ De modo jocoso, a partir de entonces Sidahmed Ahmed Mahmud fue apodado con el nombre del delegado marfileño, Simeon Aké, por su parecido físico, corpulento y de piel negra.

¹⁴ Por ejemplo, Radio Sahara, medio público de las autoridades coloniales, reseñó la presencia mayoritaria del Frente POLISARIO y bastante menor del PUNS, salvo en el Sur (Dalmases 2010: 127).

¹⁵ Los observadores y la prensa avanzan estimaciones no muy dispares. Véase Dalmases (2010:124-126).

¹⁶ ABC, 17 de mayo de 1975, p.22.

234. Durante toda su visita al territorio, la Misión presencié manifestaciones políticas muy numerosas que, en muchos centros urbanos, ninguno de ellos grande, parecían abarcar a la mayoría de los residentes saharianos. Así, por ejemplo, en El Aaiún, con una población de sólo 28.499 personas, la Misión fue recibida a su llegada por una multitud calculada en varios miles de personas dispuestas a ambos lados del trayecto desde el aeropuerto, una distancia de varios kilómetros. Asimismo, en el norte, cuando visitó Smara, que cuenta con poco más de 7.000 habitantes, fue recibida por una manifestación que parecía comprender a la mayoría de los habitantes. Manifestaciones semejantes, aunque en menor escala, se presenciaron en Daora, Mahbes y Guelta Zemmur, en tanto que en la mina de fosfatos de la FOSBUCRAA parecía que toda la fuerza de trabajo sahariana, de unos 2.500 empleados, hubiera salido a saludar a la Misión. En todas esas manifestaciones en la parte septentrional del territorio, una mayoría abrumadora de los manifestantes portaba banderas y emblemas del Frente POLISARIO o había incorporado sus colores a su vestimenta. En todas partes, la Misión vio carteles en que se exigía la independencia total del territorio respecto de España y se rechazaba la integración con cualquiera de los países vecinos. Los lemas característicos de esos carteles, que se repitieron también verbalmente a la Misión, eran: “Exigimos la independencia absoluta”, “No al colonialismo español, no a Marruecos y no a Mauritania”, y “Sahara para los saharianos”. Muchos de los carteles del Frente POLISARIO exigían también la libertad de los presos políticos.

235. El 13 de mayo, en El Aaiún, la Misión asistió a la mayor de las manifestaciones organizada por el Frente POLISARIO, y en la cual, según la prensa, participaron 15.000 personas. Aunque ruidosa, la manifestación se realizó con orden y los miembros de la Misión pudieron caminar entre los manifestantes y escuchar sus opiniones.

236. Al llegar a Villa Cisneros, la Misión fue saludada de nuevo por miles; de manifestantes situados a lo largo de su ruta desde el aeropuerto y en toda la ciudad. Sin embargo, en esta ocasión hubo dos grupos grandes y completamente independientes de manifestantes, uno que portaba banderas y emblemas con los colores rojo, verde, blanco y negro del Frente POLISARIO, y otros que llevaba banderas y emblemas con los colores amarillo y azul del PUNS. Sin embargo, sus carteles y lemas eran análogos, pues en ambos casos se exigía la independencia completa del territorio y se expresaba oposición a la integración con los países vecinos.

237. Posteriormente, en sus visitas a los centros meridionales -Auserd, El Argub, Tichla y La Güera-, la Misión presencié manifestaciones análogas; en todas las ocasiones, los partidarios del Frente POLISARIO y del PUNS formaban grupos separados, cada uno con sus banderas y emblemas bien a la vista. Aunque ambos grupos contaban con un gran número de partidarios, era evidente el predominio del Frente POLISARIO. (Informe final de la misión, octubre de 1975)

El Informe final de la misión que se haría público cuatro meses más tarde, el 15 de octubre de 1975, señaló de manera contundente que la mayoría de la población quería la independencia, así como la espectacular eclosión del Frente POLISARIO y de su extraordinaria capacidad movilizadora y organizativa, muy superior a lo que esperaban las autoridades españolas. Pero más allá de lo descriptivo, hay elementos ligados a esas manifestaciones que merecen ser analizados: el fracaso del PUNS, el protagonismo del POLISARIO, la organización previa, la simbología y las consignas, y los participantes.

Las manifestaciones de mayo evidenciaron el fracaso rotundo de la estrategia española del partido títere PUNS que ni consiguió los apoyos esperados ni tenía una base social significativa¹⁷. Las autoridades contaban con que el PUNS organizara una manifestación pro española de recepción a la misión de Naciones Unidas, exhibiendo mensajes de adhesión. Sin embargo, apenas se hizo ver en el norte y su presencia fue modesta en el sur¹⁸. Además, en esos mismos días su principal dirigente, Jaliyhenna Uld Rachid, y dos colaboradores desertaron uniéndose a Marruecos. A pesar de ello, la misión se reunió con otros representantes del PUNS que, tal como refleja su informe, mostraban posiciones diversas, lo que ponía en evidencia la falta de solidez programática del partido. El PUNS vio con sorpresa el despliegue de banderas de sus rivales, se vio sobrepasado y cundió la frustración. En cambio, el Frente POLISARIO se impuso como protagonista de manera incontestable, desplazando y acallando a los seguidores del PUNS y desplegando una organización eficaz. Aunque las manifestaciones fueron mayoritariamente pacíficas no estuvieron exentas de algunos altercados entre punsistas y seguidores del POLISARIO, como en Villa Cisneros el de 19 mayo.

“[En El Aaiún] Del PUNS no quedó prácticamente nada sobre el terreno a la hora de la verdad. La cuatricromía de la bandera del F. POLISARIO –negro del colonialismo, blanco de la libertad, rojo de la sangre, verde de la riqueza–, con la media luna del Islam, cubría la masa como un verdadero océano, y las banderolas que exigían la independencia y la descolonización inmediata eran lo único que se veía sobre el torbellino de chilabas azules de los hombres o de los mantos negros de las mujeres. Si ha habido un vencedor popular en la calle es el F. POLISARIO y, además por K.O.” (El Eco de Canarias, 13 de mayo de 1975)¹⁹

¹⁷ “Los servicios de información del ejército no se enteraron de lo que se estaba preparando. De saberlo lo hubieran impedido” (José Luis de Pablos, entrevista 2022). “El PUNS era un montaje con poco futuro, a las autoridades españolas claramente le fallaron los servicios de inteligencia” (Ander Landaburu, entrevista 2022).

¹⁸ El PUNS había preparado pancartas y banderas del partido para ser enarboladas ante la misión, pero Jaliyhenna Uld Rachid tras bascular a las tesis marroquíes recomendó no usarlas. La versión de los dirigentes del PUNS es que, en los días previos a la llegada de la misión, se había acordado no esgrimir banderas, pero el POLISARIO no lo respetó. Lo que no concuerda con testimonios diversos que señalan que el PUNS se movilizó mal y fue sobrepasado.

¹⁹ “El Frente POLISARIO ganó la calle”, *El Eco de Canarias*, 13 de mayo de 1975, número 14.113. Artí-

“Mi padre era comerciante y para defender sus intereses tenía cercanía con el PUNS. Pero su mujer, hijos y sobrinos estábamos ligados al Frente. Mi hermana desde 1973, mis primos, yo también en el colegio. Mi madre era miembro de una célula de mujeres mayores; se juntaban, cosían banderas, ropa para los combatientes, ropa militar. Mi padre no sabía nada. El día de las manifestaciones, fui con un vecino que era compañero de colegio, hijo del alcalde de El Aaiún, con la banderita del PUNS y otra escondida, luego le dimos el cambiazio. Teníamos un poco de miedo. Mahamud (Juan Carlos) Labeid, policía saharauí y casado con una española, vigilaba a los activistas, pero su propia hija estaba con el Frente” (Buyema Bumajruta, entrevista 2020)

“[En El Aaiún] Al principio aparecieron algunas banderitas del Partido PUNS que se oponía al Frente, movilizado por España para contrarrestar al Frente y liderado por Jaliheña Uld Rachid (...) no consiguió ninguna victoria y se avergonzó y su partidito ese día no consiguió nada.” (Mohamed Lamin Uld Alal Uld Mbairik, entrevista 2020)

Al finalizar la misión, la delegada cubana Marta Jiménez en declaraciones a la prensa canaria expresó su sorpresa ante la implantación y capacidad movilizadora del Frente POLISARIO y por el papel jugado por las mujeres, destacando “la valentía y su afán por ser independientes y soberanos”; “todo el pueblo está preparado para la independencia”²⁰. En cambio, sobre el PUNS el informe de la Misión observó su menor implantación y capacidad de movilización. Los saharauis promarroquíes²¹ y promauritanos, sin estructura organizativa consistente y presumiblemente sin una base social significativa, no se hicieron ver²²

Un hecho relevante fue que las manifestaciones populares dieron pie a la utilización de un repertorio simbólico desafiante, utilizando banderas y pancartas, realizando pintadas y clamando consignas combativas. La bandera del POLISARIO, adoptada unos meses antes

culo firmado por Salvador López de la Torre.

²⁰ *La Provincia*, 20 mayo de 1975.

²¹ En esa época se hablaba de un *Movimiento 21 de Agosto*, creado por Rabat en julio 1973, con sede en Tarfaya y dirigido por Mohammed Abdu que defendía las tesis marroquíes para el Sahara, y que supuestamente tenía una cierta base entre los comerciantes con vínculos con el vecino del norte. *ABC*, 14 de mayo de 1975, p.96.

²² El archivo fotográfico de la Agencia EFE recoge imágenes de manifestaciones de partidarios de Marruecos y de Mauritania, pero otros periodistas que estuvieron presentes, nos las vieron ni oyeron de ellas y en todo caso consideran que fueron anecdóticas (entrevista a De Pablos y Landaburu, 2022). El informe de la misión señala que también hubo manifestaciones en las etapas en el sur de Marruecos, apoyando las tesis anexionistas, así como en algunas de las ciudades de Mauritania (Adrad, Fdérík, Zouerate, Bir Moghreïn y Nuadibú), donde había partidarios de la anexión junto a polisarios que apoyaban la independencia, y en las bases saharauis del área de Tindouf.

en su segundo congreso, se convirtió en protagonista simbólico de los independentistas²³. En todas las acciones se blandían decenas o centenares de banderas. Según los testimonios las banderas fueron esencialmente confeccionadas de manera manual por las células clandestinas, y repartidas entre los participantes que las llevaron disimuladamente bajo la ropa hasta que recibieron la consigna de enarbolárlas. Algunos testimonios indican que algunas banderas y pancartas se prepararon haciéndose pasar por partidarios del PUNS, pero en realidad fueron fabricadas para el POLISARIO. La consigna fue que los hombres se vistieran con su *derrahs*, la vestimenta tradicional, como muestra de afirmación identitaria. También se confeccionaron *derrahs* recortadas a modo de chalecos, sobre las que estaban escritas consignas, y que eran portadas por los activistas y agitadores. La bandera que ya se utilizaba de manera rudimentaria en panfletos y pintadas, se convirtió entonces en símbolo de la lucha nacional.

Los organizadores también dieron consignas para fabricar pancartas con mensajes en español e inglés que tuvieran repercusión exterior. Los eslóganes coreados no sólo iban dirigidos a la misión, sino a las autoridades españolas (Diego, 1991: 86). Unos eran de afirmación nacional (“Somos saharauis, ni marroquíes, ni mauritanos, ni argelinos”, “Frente Polisario nuestro único representante”); otros se dirigían contra el colonizador (“Fuera España”, “Fuera España, ni anexión ni partición, viva el Polisario”); otros denostaban al partido títere (“PUNS traidor colonialista”) y finalmente otros expresaban el deseo mayoritario de la población (“Independencia”, “Independencia total”, “El Sahara para los saharauis”, “No a Marruecos, no a Mauritania”, “El pueblo saharai rechaza todo intento anexionista”, “Hoy es el día en que hemos tomado el Sahara...”)²⁴. Según la prensa española, en Smara dominaron los gritos contra Marruecos²⁵. Las consignas no sólo se clamaron en las manifestaciones; aprovechando la momentánea libertad de expresión de esos días, algunos activistas se encaramaron en vehículos y utilizando megáfonos portátiles recorrieron la ciudad gritando eslóganes, lo que indudablemente contribuyó a elevar la tensión con los españoles. Finalmente, las paredes se llenaron de pintadas a favor de la independencia, del Frente y pidiendo la libertad de los presos. De hecho, en esos días se desató una “guerra de pintadas”. Los saharauis llenaron las paredes de consignas en árabe, español y francés, “No a España, no a Marruecos, no a Mauritania, no al partido PUNS, si al Polisario”, “Independencia total, no queremos engaños”, y los españoles, presumiblemente militares, las borraban y añadían en rojo consignas de “Viva España”, “Viva la legión”, “Arriba España esté donde esté”²⁶.

²³ Para la prensa española, la cuatricolor era inequívocamente la bandera de la independencia. *Blanco y Negro*, 17 de mayo 1975, p.30.

²⁴ Entre las consignas y pintadas se repetía “¿Dónde está Bassiri?”, el líder nacionalista desaparecido en 1970 a manos del ejército español (Dalmases 2010). Esta pregunta sobre la suerte de Bassiri también estuvo presente en las entrevistas de algunos grupos con la Misión. Esta reclamación sobre el mártir reforzaba simbólicamente la continuidad entre el movimiento de 1970 y las demandas independentistas de 1975.

²⁵ *ABC*, 18 de mayo de 1975, p.31.

²⁶ “Sahara...que se quema” *Cambio16*, 181, 26 mayo-1 de junio de 1975, pp. 8-14.

Los observadores presentes, así como los informes de las autoridades coloniales, subrayan que las manifestaciones estaban integradas por gente de todas las edades, con una significativa presencia de jóvenes, mujeres y niños²⁷. El Frente POLISARIO fue quien logró generar una amplia adhesión entre la población independientemente del grado de implicación o de integración orgánica en la organización clandestina. Lo logró porque había sabido conectar con el deseo mayoritario, y porque disponía de implantación y de organización, especialmente en los sectores más dinámicos de la población.

“A principios de 1975, durante la visita de la comisión de Naciones Unidas, mi madre me llevó a una manifestación. Nos insistían en que nos agarráramos bien a la *melfa* de nuestras madres para no perdersen” ... “Mi madre participó en la acción de las células del Frente Popular para sensibilizar a la gente en favor de la causa por la independencia. Las mujeres jugaron un gran papel político en ese movimiento, a diferencia con el movimiento iniciado por Bassiri que sólo integraba hombres” (Daha Ramouni, activista pro-derechos humanos y miembro de la ASVDH, nacido en 1968) (Decaster, 2017, p.180)

Los estudiantes de secundaria, algunos universitarios venidos de Canarias o de la península, y jóvenes trabajadores fueron especialmente activos en la preparación y en las movilizaciones. A ellos se sumaron incluso niños, estudiantes de primaria, que acompañaron a sus padres o hermanos mayores.

“En 1975, dibujaba banderas y escribía “Viva el Frente Polisario”, incluso en mis cuadernos. Me acuerdo de la visita de la delegación de Naciones Unidas en 1975; participé en la manifestación, me había puesto mi *deraah* y tenía mi bandera en la mano. Tenía 11 años. En esa época mi profesor español nos preguntó quién conocía la bandera saharauí, y fui el único de mi clase que levantó la mano. Me pidió ir a la pizarra, tomé las tizas de colores y dibujé una verdadera bandera. El maestro le dijo a un amigo que estaba presente: “todos los saharauis están con el Polisario”. Había numerosas manifestaciones en nuestro barrio con miles de participantes, las imágenes de esa época se retransmiten con frecuencia en la televisión de la RASD. No había represión policial. Las marchas partían del aeropuerto hasta alcanzar la sede del gobernador español, lo que suponía 3 o 4 kilómetros, la calle y las aceras estaban abarrotadas de gente”. (Hassana Douihi, activista, nacido en 1964) (Decaster, 2017, p.160)

“Tenía 14 años y estaba en 8º de EGB. En el colegio formaba parte de una célula de cinco personas, todos de la misma edad y del mismo entorno, con un jefe. Todo estaba compartimentado. Sólo conocíamos a los miembros de nuestra célula y no sabíamos lo que hacían los otros. Recibíamos información muy básica, todo en hasaniya. De vez en

²⁷ *La Vanguardia Española*, 13 de mayo de 1975, p.6.

cuando se oía una radio que emitía desde Libia y que empezaba: “Desde el corazón del Sahara Occidental, la voz del Polisario...” (Buyema Bumajruta, entrevista 2020)

“En el colegio los niños saharauis respiraban amistad con Argelia y presumían hablar francés” (José Álvarez de Lara, entrevista 2020)

“En mayo de 1975 tenía 18 años y estaba en último año de bachillerato en El Aaiún. Era miembro del Frente y dirigía una célula clandestina del ala estudiantil. Unos meses antes se había puesto en marcha la “organización interna”, la red clandestina en el territorio, dirigida por Mahfud Ali Beiba. La organización estaba compuesta por células de 5 ó 6 miembros, y por secciones o alas; eran de estudiantes, trabajadores y otros grupos específicos. La función de las células era concientizar; pretendían difundir la idea de la independencia, la denuncia del colonialismo, y educar contra lo retrogrado -el analfabetismo, el tribalismo, la relegación de la mujer-. Y claro está, llevar a cabo acciones como pintadas de eslóganes, reparto de panfletos, o colgar banderas en los cables eléctricos. Desde Zuerat en Mauritania, donde estaba la dirección del Frente, recibíamos la revista *20 de mayo*, órgano en árabe y español, que se usaba en las células para la formación política.” (Ali Mojtar Bumajruta, entrevista 2020)

Asimismo, muchas mujeres, que desde principios de los 70s habían vivido una importante concienciación y politización en la escuela y en la Sección Femenina, desempeñaron un papel clave en la preparación logística, y participaron en las acciones. El relato de las mujeres que llevaban las banderas caseras disimuladas bajo sus melfas y que las sacaron por centenares en las manifestaciones provocando la sorpresa de todos, se ha convertido en un hito de la memoria de la lucha nacional. La poetisa Ljadra Mint Mabruk Uld Daaf se emociona al recordarlo:

“Rompí mi *amshaghab*²⁸ para conseguir palos con los que sujetar las banderas del Polisario. Aparecí en la plaza con mi bandera y mi hija a la espalda y me dijo una mujer llamada Salka Mint Adlal: «esconde... esconde tu bandera...», así que la coloqué entre mi bebé y mi espalda. Pero, en cuanto aterrizó el avión, todos sacamos las banderas del Polisario, además de nuestras pancartas y nuestros tambores hasta que las banderas del PUNS se hicieron casi invisibles. Fue un buen día, te lo juro, fue un buen día de verdad. Todos estaban con nosotros, casi todo el ejército español, pero también todos los demás. Ese día a mi marido lo montaron en un taxi y lo metieron en la cárcel los españoles porque estaba prohibido que el ejército se metiera en política, pero a él le daba igual; les dijo «haced conmigo lo que queráis...», y es que no había nada que temer; en el Sahara han entrado españoles, han entrado mauritanos; hemos echado a los mauritanos y al final serán los saharauis quienes permanecerán en su Sahara. La gente está loca por recuperar el Sahara” (Ljadra Mint Mabruk Uld Daaf, en Gimeno et al. 2020: 162-163)

²⁸ Montura de mujer, palanquín o portaequipaje que se instala sobre los dromedarios.

Zenia Ahmed, ex secretaria de la UNMS, recuerda

“(...) todas las masas se lanzaron a la calle y se consolidó la fuerza del Frente POLISARIO como representante legítimo del pueblo saharauí; en su mayoría fueron mujeres. Esto lo puedes constatar en los archivos de las Naciones Unidas y ver en las imágenes el porcentaje de mujeres. La velocidad y la rapidez con que se correspondió al llamamiento del POLISARIO a las mujeres fue algo rápido y veloz. Nos transformamos políticamente casi siendo analfabetas, gracias al discurso del Polisario y nuestra correspondencia con él.”
(Zenia Ahmed, en Medina 2015: 265)

La consigna era manifestarse de manera pacífica, con un mensaje claro y contundente, sin dar pretextos para la represión. El gobierno se había comprometido con Naciones Unidas a que la misión visitadora pudiera constatar libremente la situación y la población expresarse sin restricciones. Esos días, ni el ejército ni la policía intervinieron contra los manifestantes. Pero a pesar de ello, entre los manifestantes había temor de que pudiera repetirse la violencia de Zemla de junio de 1970. De hecho, una vez concluida la visita, en las semanas posteriores, con la creciente polarización y el hostigamiento marroquí, volverían las medidas represivas y el cierre de barrios.

Estudiantes, obreros, mujeres y mucha organización

En los primeros momentos de articulación del Frente, entre el primer congreso (mayo 1973) y el segundo (agosto 1974), se crearon tres organizaciones de masas -mujeres, estudiantes, y obreros - que, en el terreno político, serían claves para la lucha de emancipación y que en mayo de 1975 constituyeron la estructura organizativa de las manifestaciones.

Con motivo de la misión visitadora, en todas las ciudades las mujeres estuvieron implicadas en la preparación de las manifestaciones, confeccionando enseñas, reclutando y recolectando fondos; destacaron numéricamente en las movilizaciones (algunos dicen que fueron mayoritarias), y organizaron grupos con peticiones a la misión donde expusieron su situación, sus demandas de mejores servicios y sus protestas por el mantenimiento del orden tradicional por las autoridades coloniales. Muchas de ellas lo hicieron a espaldas de sus padres y maridos que, a diferencia de ellas, eran habitualmente identificados y perseguidos. Varios testimonios apuntan la participación destacada de las “mujeres preparadas” de la Sección Femenina, que por ejemplo fueron las autoras de grafitis y pancartas en varias lenguas.

“Tenía 15 años y estudiaba bachillerato en el Instituto General Alonso de El Aaiún. Había células de estudiantes; eran mixtas, organizaban reuniones, su objetivo era concientizar, sensibilizar e involucrar a otros estudiantes. Yo era bastante joven, no estuve en la organización, sólo participé en las manifestaciones; fueron pacíficas, históricas. Fue

la primera vez que llegué a las once de la noche a mi casa. Nos recibió Marta Jiménez en el Parador, fui parte de una delegación de mujeres saharauis, era de las más jóvenes” (Zahra Ramdan Ahmed, entrevista 2020)

En las primeras organizaciones y manifestaciones independentistas saharauis de finales de los sesenta ya destacaron los jóvenes y los estudiantes politizados. También fueron estudiantes los activistas de las manifestaciones en el sur de Marruecos en 1972 y 1973, y la represión tanto española como marroquí contra ellos les radicalizó. Los fundadores del Frente fueron jóvenes saharauis, estudiantes y obreros o asalariados de las empresas y la administración colonial. Ese componente juvenil fue una constante especialmente en el medio urbano; numerosos jóvenes, estudiantes de secundaria y universitarios, se integraron a primera hora y se convirtieron en activistas y cuadros de la organización.

A partir de 1974 se produce una adhesión masiva de los estudiantes al POLISARIO, articulándose un frente estudiantil con presencia en centros de enseñanza secundaria, e incluso de primaria, donde crecía la conciencia nacionalista e independentista. Algunos maestros españoles desempeñaron un innegable papel en el despertar de la conciencia de esos jóvenes. Los estudiantes organizaron movilizaciones demandando mejoras de las condiciones de estudio (fueron los llamados “incidentes en centros escolares”), difundían pasquines, y creció el ausentismo como forma de protesta. El 29-30 de enero de 1975 hubo una huelga general en la mayoría de los centros escolares en solidaridad con los presos y enarbolando demandas educativas y de no discriminación. Las autoridades españolas eran conscientes de ello, y lo atribuían a la ruptura generacional y al atractivo de la retórica revolucionaria. No obstante, se intensificó el control sobre los estudiantes, castigando a los más revoltosos, condicionando las becas y los permisos de movilidad. Más significativo fue el peso de los universitarios con una conciencia política más articulada que ligaba las demandas de independencia, con una crítica al papel de los *chuijs*, demandas de empleo, no discriminación, derechos para las mujeres y un total rechazo al PUNS y a la estrategia española de cooptación. En 1974-75 se articuló la Unión de Estudiantes Saharauis (UES) entre estudiantes universitarios que estaban en Canarias, la península, Francia y Argelia. Los más destacados fueron perseguidos por la policía en Madrid y Canarias, mientras otros volvieron al Sahara abandonando sus estudios. Los universitarios y los estudiantes de secundaria destacaron en la agitación política de la población ante la llegada de la misión, antesala de su relevante papel posterior a la hora de integrar a jóvenes en el Frente y en la resistencia.

“Tenía 21 años y estudiaba Turismo en Madrid. Desde 1974 la mayor parte de los estudiantes residían en el Colegio Mayor Nuestra Señora de África, donde nos habían concentrado para controlarnos mejor, lo que por otra parte favoreció nuestra organización. Con pocas excepciones, casi todos éramos del Frente POLISARIO. Antes de la llegada de la misión, el Frente nos instruyó para que, quien pudiera, fuera al Sahara a participar en las movilizaciones. (Bachir Ahmed Aomar, entrevista 2020)

“Vivíamos en Villa Cisneros, tenía dieciséis años y tenía bastantes compañeros saharauis, la mayoría eran del POLISARIO. En el cole había un montón de chavales que eran del POLISARIO y aunque no todos decían de qué eran, ya sabes que a esas edades es difícil ocultar tus opiniones... Lo que sí recuerdo es la naturalidad con la que había chavales en las aulas que eran del POLISARIO... En las conversaciones ellos trataban de convencernos de lo importante que era que en un momento dado los españoles dejáramos aquello. Nos contaban que querían ser independientes. O sea que se hablaba abiertamente más o menos, al menos entre los amiguetes... Que una niña de 16 años hija de un funcionario español conociera a gente del POLISARIO y nadie hiciera nunca nada... No sé si es que no importaba, o que no se lo creían, o que Franco y su gente pensaban que lo tenían atado y bien atado... La verdad es que yo no sé cómo no se enteraba la Policía, pero en verdad es que ni se lo imaginaba eso de que tuvieran un foco de contestación social.” (María Antonia Álvarez de Lara, entrevista 2020)

La organización también se había extendido entre los trabajadores asalariados y de la administración española. El 14 de octubre de 1974, había tenido lugar una huelga general de trabajadores y estudiantes autóctonos, acompañada de manifestaciones populares, en rechazo de la política colonial española y que reivindicaba mejoras socioeconómicas y el reconocimiento del POLISARIO. Numerosos estudiantes fueron arrestados. Ahí donde había una concentración de obreros saharauis se crearon células.

“En mayo de 1975 tenía 35 años y era obrero en Cubiertas, la empresa de obras públicas. Me vinculé al Frente en el mes 5 de 1974 [mayo]. Apoyaba los principios y las consignas que decían. Queríamos la independencia y sabíamos que el PUNS pertenecía a España. Estaba en la célula. Ellos vinieron con principios y consignas muy aceptables. Además, quien te las trae es un pariente cercano en quien confías. Era tu pariente quien te introducía en la Organización. Era el pariente quien te traía el mensaje y te contaba lo que ocurría porque no podías sospechar de él. Si tú eres mi pariente solo me dirás la verdad. Te empieza a explicar los principios y las consignas hasta que te convences. (...) Cuando nos enteramos de que la Misión venía cada célula estuvo debatiendo para ver cómo podíamos afrontar la visita y cómo hacer para que nadie se quedara sin asistir. Las charlas siempre tenían lugar. Una noche, dos, tres cuatro... estudiamos los hechos. Todo el mundo estaba implicado con el Frente. Se abandonaron las riquezas personales, los hijos...todo. La Radio que escuchábamos era la que emitía desde Trípoli, que se escuchaba de madrugada y por la mañana temprano. Las consignas eran claras: fuera España, fuera Marruecos, viva el Frente Polisario. (...) Participé en las manifestaciones en Bucraa y en Guelta, en las dos. Quería participar en la de El Aaiún, pero llegué tarde. Cada organización puso a disposición de sus seguidores coches para asistir a la manifestación: el Frente ofreció coches y el Partido, pero el Frente este que ves lo apoyaba todo el mundo. Cuando llegamos a la manifestación estuvimos gritando todo el rato, con las banderas”. (Goum Uld Hnini, entrevista 2020)

“Trabajé en el ejército español entre 1973 y 1975, destinado en Cabeza de Playa, cerca de Mailia. Tenía 23 años. No estaba todavía vinculado al Frente, pero estuve en la manifestación de El Aaiún. Las manifestaciones siguieron varios días después en Aaiún y Dajla. (...) [la misión] se encontró con la manifestación delante, con el pueblo delante, con una organización, [los manifestantes] estuvieron en pie durante todo el día, desde la salida del sol hasta la puesta de sol. (...) A todas partes que iba la ONU se organizaban manifestaciones. (...) La consigna que todos repetíamos era “Fuera España, Fuera España”. Gritábamos por la independencia. (...) Había una organización interna muy grande y amplia, con muchas células y muchas reuniones. Pero en esas fechas me miraban con miedo y desconfianza porque yo aún estaba en el Ejército español. El Ejército español nos tenía prohibido meternos en asuntos políticos (...) Mi implicación empezó después de la manifestación de El Aaiún. A partir de ese día descubrimos que la política española era un engaño. Yo dejé el Ejército español y me uní definitivamente al Frente. Muchos hermanos se unieron y dejaron el Ejército español. (Mohamed Lamin uld Alal uld Mbairik, entrevista 2020)

“Tenía unos cuarenta años y vivíamos en Guelta. Los hombres eran *chgaguil*, [obreros, peones] trabajaban haciendo carreteras. Desde antes de la Misión ya éramos activistas. (...) los hombres ya trabajan en el activismo. (...) Las consignas venían en los papeles que los hombres traían en secreto. Antes no había grandes encuentros donde podíamos repetir las consignas. Pero por la noche traían una radio que decía de todo. Repetían las consignas (...) Ellos nos informaron. Nos pidieron que hiciéramos banderas. Las banderas se cosían y cada mujer tenía que llevar su bandera cuando fuera a recibir a la misión. (...) Nos trajeron la tela con todo para que cosiésemos. Cada grupo de mujeres estuvo reunido durante la noche cosiendo y por la mañana cada mujer se fue con su bandera. Después las volvieron a esconder. (...) Nos avisaron con poco tiempo para que no se contara. Ellos sí sabían de la manifestación, pero nosotros nos enteremos con poco tiempo. (...) No entendíamos muchas cosas. Fuimos por las ideas de fondo, no porque entiéramos qué era la misión. Nos dijeron que traería la independencia y algo así.” (Nana Mohamed Bachir, entrevista 2020)

El éxito de las movilizaciones se debió a que el Frente POLISARIO había desarrollado una base social significativa y disponía de capacidad organizativa. En apenas dos años de existencia había logrado desplegar su organización entre la población, de manera clandestina; incluso se había infiltrado en el PUNS, utilizándolo como cobertura. En 1975 disponía de un número limitado de militantes integrados en sus estructuras, pero tenía numerosos simpatizantes (en una población total pequeña). Además de las estructuras militares, que operaban esencialmente en el desierto y en las fronteras, se había desarrollado un entramado organizativo político, entre estudiantes, trabajadores en la administración y las empresas, y entre ciertos grupos de mujeres jóvenes. Fueron ellos los que protagonizaron huelgas, protestas y acciones colectivas en los meses anteriores. Una gran parte de su trabajo se centraba en la sensibilización, la formación

política, la recogida de fondos y el trabajo de propaganda mediante pintadas, octavillas y panfletos hechos a mano o con multcopista. Esta estructura se organizaba en pequeñas células compartimentadas y autónomas (Ahmed 2017). Cuando el Frente decidió organizar las manifestaciones, implicó a toda esa estructura civil y sus redes de apoyo en el exterior. El poeta Hasin Uld Brahim Uld Mohamed recuerda:

“(…) cuando me avisaron de la llegada de la Misión (…) mi célula me ordenó que fuera a la ciudad de Zuerat, donde recogí una maleta de banderas saharauis y viajé a El Aaiún. La comisión de la ONU llegó el 12 de mayo de 1975 y estallaron grandes manifestaciones en todas las ciudades saharauis, en las que se comprobó ante la Administración colonial y ante la comisión de la ONU la fuerza del Frente Polisario”. (Hasin Uld Brahim Uld Mohamed, en Gimeno et al. 2020: 345)

Ahmed Mulay Ali fue uno de los organizadores:

“Era militante del Frente y trabajaba como analista en el laboratorio de Fos Bucraa. Participé en la organización de varias células de estudiantes y de trabajadores. Dependía de los responsables políticos del interior. Esas células tenían la función de recaudar dinero, eran la vía para la orientación política, la explicación del proyecto revolucionario, la concienciación a favor de la independencia y la organización de algunas acciones. En 1975, con 21 años, era miembro de la comisión política por lo que fui uno de los organizadores de ese gran evento. Se recibieron instrucciones secretas para preparar las acciones con motivo de la visita de Naciones Unidas. Se compró una gran cantidad de tela con el dinero que se recaudaba en las células. Cada grupo de mujeres recibió telas, y cosieron banderas a mano o a máquina. También se compró tela blanca, con la que se confeccionaron chalecos con lemas escritos a mano en árabe y castellano. Teníamos varias casas, una de ellas la de mi padre que al ser juez tenía un cierto respeto de los españoles. Otro grupo se encargó del reparto entre militantes y cercanos”. (Ahmed Mulay Ali Hamadi, entrevista 2020)

El Frente POLISARIO fue consciente de la oportunidad que brindaba la visita y decidió no desaprovecharla para darse a conocer y para hacer llegar a la comunidad internacional su exigencia de salida de España y de independencia²⁹. Para ello activó sus estructuras clandestinas para preparar las movilizaciones. Su capacidad organizativa sería reconocida por las autoridades españolas.

²⁹ “En esos días, los activistas tuvieron muchas reuniones clandestinas con periodistas afines o receptivos; habían aparecido líderes del Frente en las ciudades para hablar con periodistas” (José Luis de Pablos, entrevista 2022).

“(…) se apreció igualmente un entrenamiento revolucionario no sólo en la redacción de las pancartas, alusivas algunas a la “opresión fascista” y con lemas hostiles a Marruecos y a nuestro país, en menor medida a Mauritania y en ningún caso a Argelia”³⁰.

La misión señala la disciplina de los organizadores:

231. Resultó evidente que la atmósfera emocional sumamente cargada favorecía a los grupos de manifestantes más activos, mejor organizados y capaces de movilizar el apoyo de las masas. El hecho de que no ocurrieran choques graves entre los partidarios del Frente POLISARIO y el PUNS se debió en gran medida a los esfuerzos de persuasión de las autoridades, y también a la disciplina ejercida por los organizadores de las manifestaciones. (Informe final de la misión, 1975)

Si bien en condiciones de clandestinidad la extensión de la organización fue producto de relaciones de confianza y afinidades familiares, otros medios influyeron de manera significativa en la generación de adhesión, lo que explica la movilización masiva de mayo de 1975. En esa época, la radio fue un importante instrumento de información, sensibilización y propaganda. Las autoridades coloniales disponían de Radio Sahara, creada en 1960 y con sede en El Aaiún. En los setenta se mejoraron sus medios técnicos y se intensificó su uso con fines políticos, ampliando su programación y con un mayor uso del árabe. Su objetivo era apoyar la estrategia española de autodeterminación y hacer contrapeso a la ofensiva propagandística de Marruecos (Dalmases 2010), aunque también contribuyó con distintos análisis a desarrollar una identidad saharauí. A su vez Rabat había montado una emisora en Tarfaya que denunciaba el colonialismo español y alentaba a la unión con Marruecos³¹, dando lugar a lo que la prensa española llamó la “batalla de las ondas” o “batalla dialéctica”³². Pero sin duda más importante para la población saharauí fue la radio del POLISARIO, que junto a la propaganda impresa (pasquines y panfletos muy precarios producidos en Mauritania e in situ) sirvió para dar a conocer su existencia y sus posiciones a favor de la independencia, la unidad del pueblo, y el fin del colonialismo. En esa época, en 1974, se empezó a emitir desde Libia y luego desde Argelia el programa *La Voz del Sahara Libre*³³. Sus

³⁰ Dirección General de Promoción de Sahara. Notas de la situación en el Sahara después de la visita de la Comisión de las Naciones Unidas. Madrid, 21 mayo 1975. Legajo 11.579, caja 81, AGA. citado en Maestre (2017).

³¹ En 1974 Marruecos creó la emisora de radio “La Voz de la Liberación y de la Unidad”. Emitía desde Tarfaya programas en árabe, hasaniya y español, pero tenía poca potencia y apenas penetraba en territorio saharauí y no llegaba a las grandes ciudades (Montes 2013:605).

³² Dalmases (entrevista 2020). *ABC*, 16 de julio 1975, p.11.

³³ *La Voz del Sahara Libre*, un espacio breve de media hora que se podía escuchar por las noches, se emitía a partir de 1974 desde Trípoli, y en 1975 desde Argel (ampliado a una hora), a través de Radio Argel, en frecuencia corta y larga. En diciembre de 1975 se crearía la Radio Nacional Saharaui (Ali Mojtár Buma-jruta, entrevista 2020)

breves emisiones se escuchaban con mucha precaución y eran un importante vehículo de información alternativa, y de politización.

Otro vehículo muy relevante de concienciación política fueron las versiones modernizadas de dos expresiones culturales de transmisión oral fundamentales en la sociedad saharauí, la música y la poesía. El Frente aprovechó y se benefició del desarrollo de una eclosión de cultura de la resistencia y su radio contribuyó a extender las canciones y los poemas nacionalistas.

A finales de los años sesenta y principios de los setenta se desarrolló un tipo de música protesta saharauí denominada *el-nidal* (la lucha), una música revolucionaria, moderna, híbrida al combinar formas tradicionales y mensajes políticos, en hasaniya, que estaría muy presente en todas las prácticas de resistencia de los saharauís. Entre 1973 y 1975 estos músicos habían pasado al Frente. Esa música y canciones se transmitían y circulaban en casetes, se oía en los coches y en las casas, así como en las fiestas, bodas y bautizos. La música fue un elemento clave en la difusión de mensajes revolucionarios y de unificación de la población en la lucha frente al colonialismo. Su uso se convirtió en demostraciones de apoyo al POLISARIO.

“En 1974 oíamos hablar de un movimiento revolucionario que se expresaba entre otras formas por canciones en las bodas y a través de cintas que circulaban. Yo estaba atraído por las canciones que hablaban de la Revolución. Mi madre y su marido también estaban implicados en ese movimiento revolucionario, al igual que mi abuela.” (Hassana Douihi, activista, nacido en 1964) (Decaster, 2017, p.160)

La poesía ha sido una manifestación tradicional saharauí, ligada a la cultura oral. En los últimos años del colonialismo español, con el arranque de la lucha por la independencia, se operó un cambio en la naturaleza y la función de la poesía, desempeñando a partir de entonces un papel clave en la formación de la conciencia nacional. La poesía se convirtió en un vehículo de difusión de mensajes, de concienciación, de identificación, y de reclutamiento. Esa poesía nacionalista relataba la épica de la lucha, ensalzaba a los mártires y combatientes, reivindicaba la independencia, llamaba a la unidad nacional supra tribal, en una suerte de pedagogía política nacionalista. Un elemento importante de la narrativa del nacionalismo saharauí emergente fue el énfasis en la unidad de todos los saharauís y la diferenciación respecto de Marruecos.

Lecturas y significaciones dispares

Los diferentes actores hicieron lecturas propias de lo ocurrido, lo que en gran medida explica sus posteriores actuaciones.

“El mensaje llegó primero al pueblo saharauí (había que unirse al Frente), luego a España (su política había fracasado), a las Naciones Unidas (el pueblo quería la independencia) y

al resto de los países (el Frente era el Movimiento de Liberación Nacional y el actor más representativo)” (Ali Mojtar Bumajruta, entrevista 2020)

El informe final de la misión del C24 que se hizo público el 15 de octubre de 1975, recogió con claridad lo que los delegados pudieron constatar: la postura mayoritaria de la población a favor de la independencia y el protagonismo de un actor, el Frente POLISARIO con más apoyo social. La misión también subrayaba la necesidad de realizar una consulta con toda la población, recomendando la designación de una nueva misión que elaborase las modalidades de la consulta. El informe fue aprobado por el Comité Especial de Descolonización el 7 de noviembre de 1975. De esta forma Naciones Unidas subrayaba que la descolonización del Sáhara español debía tener en cuenta los deseos y las aspiraciones de toda la población sahariana del Territorio, incluidos aquellos que viviesen en el extranjero como exiliados políticos o refugiados, debiendo protegerse sus intereses presentes y futuros. Además, se instaba a la que era la Potencia Administradora del Sáhara Occidental, España, a posponer el referéndum de autodeterminación hasta que la Asamblea General decidiera cómo actuar, lo que suponía el aplazamiento de un proceso que pasaba a manos superiores de manera oficial. Desafortunadamente el informe quedó eclipsado por el dictamen de la CIJ publicado un día después, el 16 de octubre, y más grave, fue insuficientemente aprovechado por la Asamblea General de Naciones Unidas que le podía haber permitido un mayor papel³⁴. Sin embargo, las conclusiones del informe, el sentimiento expresado por la población y el dictamen de la CIJ contrario a las pretensiones de Marruecos, serían determinantes para que Rabat preparara, desde el verano, la Marcha Verde.

Las manifestaciones de mayo tuvieron un impacto enorme entre las autoridades españolas, tanto del territorio como de Madrid, y provocaron un verdadero punto de inflexión. Para el General Eduardo Blanco Rodríguez, que en 1975 era Director General de Promoción del Sahara “(...) el punto crítico fue la llegada de la misión y las manifestaciones”³⁵. El ministro de Presidencia, Antonio, declararía “La visita de la misión informativa de la ONU ha actuado como revelador fulminante de una realidad que permanecía oculta para los observadores e introduce en el proceso un factor de aceleración”³⁶. A la decepción por el fracaso del PUNS (¿dónde están sus supuestos 20.000 partidarios?), se sumó la conmoción e indignación por los eslóganes contra España, la sorpresa ante la capacidad organizativa del POLISARIO al que consideraban extremista y el miedo ante las consecuencias de una independencia rupturista.

³⁴ “El informe final de la misión tuvo menos repercusión mediática que el dictamen de la Corte Internacional de Justicia, pero en Naciones Unidas fue muy importante. E irritó en extremo a Marruecos” (entrevista Francisco Villar, 2020).

³⁵ Comisión de Asuntos Exteriores. Diario de sesiones, número 30 (1978) Sesión 5, 13 de marzo de 1978, p.40.

³⁶ Comisión de Asuntos Exteriores. Diario de sesiones, número 32 (1978) Sesión 7, 15 de marzo de 1978. p.57.

El paternalismo colonial se vio sacudido, la actitud de la población nativa conmocionó a las autoridades. Era el choque ante el saharauí “obediente” que se rebelaba³⁷. “Nos han decepcionado los saharauis”, “son desagradecidos, tras décadas de protección y desarrollo”, “justo cuando España está dispuesta a prepararlos para la independencia”. Como señala Dalmases (2012; 2010: 120-122) el asombro de los militares ante las protestas era un reflejo de la mentalidad imperante y la incapacidad de entender las demandas de los saharauis.

El POLISARIO exigía la salida de España y se oponía a la celebración de un referéndum organizado por la potencia colonial. Esa demanda explícita, coreada por la multitud era lo que desconcertaba y asustaba. Entre los militares españoles se generó una sensación de ofensa y agravio. Las pintadas nacionalistas saharauis fueron toscamente tachadas y se añadieron otras a favor de España, del ejército y de la legión³⁸. Algunos hicieron de la canción Viva España de Manolo Escobar, a todo volumen y repetida durante horas, una especie de himno de afirmación patriótica. La indignación por las consignas independentistas, y el miedo trascendieron también a la colonia española. El 15 de mayo hubo incluso una manifestación de 200 señoras españolas que reclaman seguridad para sus familias y pedían que se silenciara a los partidarios de los “terroristas que habían hecho pintadas sobre las paredes la iglesia”. Los meses siguientes la relación entre saharauis y españoles cambió, y se instaló una hostilidad latente; el mito de la convivencia idílica se desmoronó.

Lo ocurrido en el Sahara en mayo de 1975 tuvo también un impacto indudable en España. La prensa española contribuyó a ese estado de ánimo al visibilizar el fracaso de la estrategia unionista, la fuerza del POLISARIO y el imparable proceso de independencia³⁹. Tras el bloqueo informativo sobre el Sahara, la misión supuso una ventana informativa para los propios españoles: recuperaron una imagen del Sahara a través de las noticias de manifestaciones y acciones militares. El Frente POLISARIO se dio a conocer definitivamente en España y cristalizó una crítica a la política oficial española en el Sahara y una defensa del derecho a la independencia de los saharauis. El gobierno español se encontró con un hecho inesperado y decidió no reaccionar; a partir de entonces asumió que el Sahara estaba perdido. Años más tarde, Eduardo Blanco, quien fuera Director General de Promoción del Sahara, declararía

³⁷ Entrevista a Bachir Ahmed Aomar (2020).

³⁸ “Unos militares -los buzos-, a los que se sumó algún periodista del régimen, salieron por la noche a borrar las pintadas del Frente POLISARIO” (José Luis de Pablos, entrevista 2022).

³⁹ A modo de ejemplo, estos titulares de la prensa española: “Sahara: el PUNS se desmorona” (*Informaciones*, 20 mayo 1975), “El Frente POLISARIO ha ganado la calle” (*Arriba*, 13 de mayo de 1975), “Sahara, el nacimiento de una nación” (*Informaciones*, 13 de mayo 1975), “En el Sahara se asiste al nacimiento de una nación y a la crisis de una política de ganar tiempo sin hacer nada” (*Cambio 16*, 180, 19 mayo 1975, y 181, 26 mayo 1975). Los propios medios del régimen reportaban la presencia del Frente Polisario en todo el territorio y su implantación mayoritaria entre la población (*Arriba*, 15 y 20 de mayo 1975).

ante la Comisión de Asuntos Exteriores del Congreso de Diputados que [la reacción de la población saharauí fue] “lo que ratificó a España en su propósito de marcharse”⁴⁰.

En el lado marroquí la visita de la misión dio pie a una lectura particular. Rabat estaba empeñado desde hacía meses en desestabilizar a España en el Sahara, militarmente a través del grupo armado FLU que hostigaba en la frontera y llevaba a cabo algunos atentados en el territorio; desplegando una ofensiva diplomática que le había reportado algunos resultados; intentando cooptar algunos saharauís y haciendo presión sobre ciertos sectores españoles. Sin embargo, sus resultados entre la población saharauí del territorio eran muy limitados. En su etapa en territorio marroquí, la misión pudo entrevistar a personalidades y grupos de saharauís promarroquíes y visitar a los supuestos refugiados saharauís en Agadir, Tan Tan y Zag⁴¹. Para Hassan II, la irrupción de tanta bandera polisaria en El Aaiún era sospechosa y lo achacó a una estratagema de Madrid que daba alas al POLISARIO para torpedear las pretensiones de Rabat.

La aceleración de los acontecimientos y las consecuencias de mayo

Para entender la relevancia de las movilizaciones de mayo-junio hay que insertarlas en una cadena de sucesos, tanto previos como posteriores. Lo ocurrido con motivo de la visita precipitó los acontecimientos y afectó a todos los actores⁴². Después de la misión de NNUU los saharauís tenían la esperanza de que la independencia se lograría rápido. Las movilizaciones contra la presencia española se prolongaron las semanas siguientes, como la manifestación del 6 julio. También escaló la confrontación, con algunos incidentes violentos (incendio a empresas y comercios), que fueron seguidos de represión y detenciones. Por su parte el Frente cosechó una amplia ola de adhesiones y se le incorporaron militares desertores; también adquirió una proyección internacional que iría en aumento⁴³. España asumió que el Frente POLISARIO era “una realidad que hay que reconocer” (ministro Herrera, 23 de mayo), y con él se negoció la liberación de los militares españoles hechos prisioneros en mayo⁴⁴.

⁴⁰ Sesión 13 de marzo de 1978, Diario de Sesiones del Congreso de Diputados, 30, 1978, pp.40-41.

⁴¹ “Mil tiendas y 20.000 refugiados en el campamento de Amskroud” según la prensa marroquí. *Al-Bayane*, 27 mayo 1975.

⁴² El diplomático Francisco Villar (1982: 298) lo califica como el “verano caliente de 1975”.

⁴³ Tras las manifestaciones de mayo, el presidente argelino Houari Boumédiène recibió a El Uali y le brindó un apoyo que sería decisivo. Asimismo, a principios de junio en Argel, el POLISARIO mantuvo un encuentro directo con el Secretario General de la ONU, Kurt Waldheim. *ABC*, 10 de junio de 1975, p.18.

⁴⁴ En junio y julio el Frente POLISARIO se reunió en Argel con el diplomático Emilio Cassinello. En un primer momento como prueba de buena voluntad liberó a dos soldados heridos y pidió que España reconociera al Frente como representante del pueblo saharauí. Madrid se dijo dispuesto a un reconocimiento “no exclusivo”. El 9 de septiembre tuvo lugar un encuentro entre El Uali y el ministro

“En esa época la capacidad militar del Frente era limitada y modesta, fue sobre todo la implantación social, puesta en evidencia con las movilizaciones, la que hizo que España admitiera la fuerza del POLISARIO” (Bachir Ahmed Aomar, entrevista 2020)

La posición de España se complicó. El 23 mayo de 1975, al término del Consejo de Ministros el Gobierno español trasladó una nota al Secretario General de Naciones Unidas⁴⁵. En ella se reafirmaba la voluntad de acelerar su retirada del Sahara, transfiriendo “la soberanía del territorio en la forma que mejor convenga a sus habitantes” rotundamente favorables a la independencia, pero dando satisfacción a “cualquier legítima aspiración de países interesados en aquella zona”. Asimismo, llamaba a todas las partes implicadas a colaborar y anunciaba su salida si fracasaban las condiciones de colaboración. Esta formulación mostraba la indecisión del gobierno, obligado por una parte al cumplimiento sus obligaciones en materia de descolonización y cada vez más acosado por las presiones del lobby pro-marroquí y por las consideraciones geoestratégicas de la época. Mientras los diplomáticos seguían batallando ante la CIJ, la política española dio un giro a favor de quienes optaban por el abandono de la colonia y la cesión a Marruecos. Varios elementos influyeron en ello: el hostigamiento militar desde Marruecos, los atentados de mayo y julio, la captura de militares españoles, la inanidad del PUNS, y la actitud mayoritaria de la población saharauí en las manifestaciones de mayo.

A partir de junio el PUNS perdió fuelle. Si bien la desconfianza de Rodríguez de Viguri en Jalihenna Uld Rachid databa de varios meses antes, cuando empezó a dudar de la supuesta base social y solidez del partido, la defección de los dirigentes en mayo y la pobre actuación del partido abocaron a abandonar la carta unionista. En agosto el PUNS celebró su segundo congreso en El Aaiún bajo vigilancia policial y acosado por manifestantes con banderas del POLISARIO. El PUNS languideció unos meses más y se disolvió el 14 de noviembre de 1975. Su último secretario general terminó autorizando a sus miembros a unirse al Frente en su lucha contra Marruecos. El “experimento Jalihenna”, la baza pro española, había fracasado⁴⁶. En junio, al terminar el curso escolar, empezó la salida de familias españolas. Los saharauis asistían al fin de la presencia española. A partir de septiembre, la postura abandonista del gobierno Arias cada vez más evidente se convirtió en objeto de debate público, a lo que

de Asuntos Exteriores, Cortina Mauri, en Argel y se liberó a los 13 prisioneros de guerra. A su vez el 17 de septiembre las autoridades españolas liberaron a 23 combatientes polisarios detenidos en El Aaiún y Smara. (Villar 1982: 297; entrevista Cassinello 2020)

⁴⁵ Nota distribuida como documento A/10095 (23 mayo 1975).

⁴⁶ La mayor parte de los españoles que vivieron de cerca esos meses hacen un balance bastante negativo del proyecto del partido pro-español, considerándolo artificial, cuando no utilizaron calificativos más duros: “fantoche” (Diego de Aguirre 1991), “invento artificial” (Dalmases 2010: 111), “PUNS no fue más allá de ser una ficción” (Pinies 1990:60), “un montaje de última hora” (entrevista con F. Villar, 2020).

contribuyó la prensa⁴⁷. Cuando vio la luz el informe final de la misión, el 15 octubre, cuatro meses después de la visita, mucho había cambiado sobre el terreno.

La visita de Naciones Unidas y las movilizaciones tuvieron consecuencias determinantes en lo que ocurriría posteriormente. Marruecos, consciente del deseo mayoritario de independencia entre la población saharauí, con escasos partidarios en el interior, y ante el predecible abandono de España, decidió actuar para evitar la celebración de un referéndum o la transferencia de soberanía sobre el territorio al POLISARIO, tal como había hecho Portugal en Mozambique. España dio un giro en su política y acabaría abandonando el Sahara a manos de Marruecos y Mauritania en noviembre de 1975. La movilización saharauí y la constatación de la amplia base social del POLISARIO, y la renuncia de la carta unionista del PUNS, determinaron las posteriores decisiones del gobierno respecto a la salida del territorio en beneficio de las tesis de Rabat⁴⁸. Los entonces responsables políticos percibieron un futuro Sahara occidental independiente, construido sobre el programa del Frente (considerado responsable de las proclamas antiespañolas de mayo), como una peor opción para los intereses de España. Por su parte, Argelia terminó de decantarse plenamente en favor del movimiento de liberación nacional saharauí; lo que reportaron los periodistas e informadores argelinos que cubrieron la visita de la misión hizo bascular definitivamente a Argel, cuyo presidente Boumediène adoptó una actitud totalmente favorable al POLISARIO.

En cuanto al POLISARIO, las movilizaciones de mayo y los meses siguientes mostraron que no sólo era una organización armada, sino también un movimiento representativo, con implantación entre la población, que disponía de organización y tenía capacidad de movilización. La participación en el movimiento social de mayo politizó a la gente y la vinculó con el movimiento independentista. La visita de la misión permitió al Frente destaparse como la fuerza política hegemónica del Sahara (Villar 1982: 286) y contribuyó a un importante cambio de alineaciones entre actores de la sociedad saharauí, culminando con la adhesión de una parte de las élites tradicionales

“Ante lo ocurrido, algunos que eran del PUNS se pasaron al Frente, que amplió enormemente su base social, un 30 o 50% de la población que no se había sumado se adhirió al movimiento” (Ali Mojtar Bumajruta, entrevista 2020)

⁴⁷ En octubre y noviembre de 1975 el semanario *Cambio16* publicó una serie de artículos sobre el Sahara. En uno de ellos (*Cambio16*, 205) se incluyó un texto que llevaba por título “Sahara no es una finca”. No firmado, pero redactado por una decena de diplomáticos españoles que habían estado cerca del proceso. En él se defendía la entrega del Sahara a los saharauis y la no claudicación ante Marruecos. Advertían que la entrega era contraria al derecho internacional e iba a acarrear consecuencias graves para el pueblo saharauí y entrañaba un grave perjuicio para los intereses de España, pero también a su prestigio y credibilidad internacional (Villar 1982: 370).

⁴⁸ “No me atrevo a decir que las movilizaciones de mayo fueron un elemento decisivo, pero sí influyeron”, entrevista con Francisco Villar (2020).

El Frente POLISARIO fue capaz de articular una movilización que, como toda acción colectiva, tenía por objetivo el control de la conducta social. Para ello, combinó un elemento identitario fuerte (lo indígena, lo saharauí, pero redefinido como unitario), articuló un mensaje de oposición (al colonizador, al PUNS, a los Estados vecinos) y lo insertó en un proyecto total (la independencia, un nuevo proyecto nacional). En la protesta, en tanto que espacio de contestación, se utilizaron cuerpos, símbolos, discursos e identidades, combinando persuasión y confrontación, acción no violenta y coacción limitada. Además, hizo uso de un repertorio variado de formas de expresión: las concentraciones, las consignas, las pintadas, los encuentros con la misión, o la contención al PUNS. Fue un tipo de protesta, diferente a la protesta rutinaria o a la protesta violenta, y que, mediante formas innovadoras, rompe la rutina, sorprende a los observadores y desorienta a las élites durante un tiempo. El POLISARIO demostró en mayo un calculado aprovechamiento de dos oportunidades políticas. La primera fue de orden interno, había un cambio en la estructura, el declive del orden colonial y la cristalización de un sentimiento identitario. Se aprovechó un momento álgido, en el que la población, sin estar plenamente organizada, era movilizable y por eso se adscribió y se sumó al calor de una cierta euforia. La segunda oportunidad fue externa: la visita de la misión de Naciones Unidas, que modificó el orden habitual (libertad de expresión y de manifestación, un marco relativamente seguro), e introdujo un elemento nuevo (la posibilidad de tener eco internacional, al llevar el mensaje a Naciones Unidas). La presencia de la misión fue un catalizador.

“El Frente decidió aprovechar la ocasión. No sabíamos hasta qué punto podríamos lograr nuestro objetivo, y si lo lograríamos con la organización que teníamos. Había que demostrar la fuerza del Frente, porque el gobierno había preparado al PUNS. El mensaje era para la comunidad internacional en primer lugar” (Ali Mojtar Bumajruta, entrevista 2020)

Las manifestaciones populares de mayo en el Sahara español pueden ser interpretadas como una disputa entre el POLISARIO y el PUNS para ocupar el espacio público, demostrar protagonismo y darse a conocer; es la interpretación de la “guerra de banderas” (Hernández 2006: 105). Sin embargo, la poca fuerza del PUNS y su endeblez organizativa y programática impiden que pueda ser considerado un contendiente relevante. Sin negar que el PUNS fue un elemento a tener en cuenta, lo que es mucho más relevante es la capacidad de organización, agregación y movilización que logró el independentismo rupturista. Esas protestas fueron el primer gran éxito del Frente y la demostración de su capacidad y de su base social. Sólo fue posible porque no se improvisó, sino porque era el producto de un trabajo organizativo previo. Con ello pudo cosechar unos resultados que sorprendieron a todos, españoles y saharauis. El objetivo era simple: movilizar en torno a la demanda de independencia real, un mensaje con fuerte potencial aglutinador. La actitud de la población en las manifestaciones y otras acciones de protestas desestabilizó a las autoridades españolas y contribuyó a acelerar los acontecimientos.

Mayo fue un momento clave en la lucha anticolonial y quedó en la memoria colectiva como una victoria del pueblo colonizado, como un hito. Un momento de euforia y fervor revolucionario que la gente llamó *nidal* (lucha, combate). Desde entonces, la bandera y la ocupación pacífica del espacio público se convirtieron en una forma de acción colectiva y de afirmación identitaria. También se confirmará la ciudad como espacio de protesta, lo que se prolongará hasta el día de hoy en los territorios ocupados. Asimismo, la activa participación de las mujeres en las manifestaciones de mayo sería una de las primeras etapas en la construcción de una representación de las mujeres como “bandera de la lucha saharauí por la libertad” que estaría en el posterior discurso nacionalista: la imagen de las *munadila*, mujeres militantes, comprometidas y autónomas que personifican la identidad saharauí.

“La misión fue sin duda un hito para todos” (J.I. Dalmases, entrevista 2020)

“Por fin salimos a la calle. Las movilizaciones fueron un gran golpe. Los mismos saharauíes resultamos sorprendidos de la amplitud de la protesta” (Bachir Ahmed Aomar, entrevista 2020)

“Fue una acción contundente, una respuesta de la sociedad, una fiesta pacífica. Indudablemente las manifestaciones dieron empuje a los acontecimientos” (Ahmed Mulay Ali Hamadi, entrevista 2020)

“Fue el momento más importante, sumamente importante. La euforia era tan grande que todo se mezcló. Fueron hechos determinantes en la historia del Sahara” (Ali Mojtar Bumajruta, entrevista 2020)

La singular presencia de Cuba en la misión visitadora

La participación y actuación en la misión de la delegada cubana, Marta Jiménez, se menciona de manera recurrente. Muchos saharauíes la recuerdan con aprecio y ha sido convertida en una de las primeras muestras de vínculo entre el Sahara y Cuba. Cabe preguntarse si la inclusión de Cuba en la misión del C24 respondía ya a algún interés por la cuestión saharauí. En todo caso es innegable que contribuiría a implicar a Cuba en la cuestión saharauí. Marta Jiménez Martínez era una funcionaria cubana totalmente identificada con la revolución. Había sido activista durante la dictadura de Batista y era viuda del líder estudiantil revolucionario Fructuoso Rodríguez. Fue diplomática hasta 1989, ocupando diversas responsabilidades. Formó parte regularmente de la delegación cubana a las sesiones de la Asamblea General de Naciones Unidas en Nueva York y atendió el escaño de Cuba ante el Comité Especial de Descolonización de la ONU por espacio de varios años, bajo la dirección de Ricardo Alarcón. En 1975 formó parte de la misión visitadora al Sahara y destacó por su actuación. Desde muy pronto la prensa española prestó atención a la delegada cubana:

“La señorita Jiménez (..) considera que la misión que les lleva a España y al Sahara Occidental es “importante y delicada”. Y añadió: “Cuba está a favor de la resolución 1514, de 1960 (..) y propugna su aplicación a todos los pueblos”⁴⁹.

En la misión tenía varias ventajas: hablaba español; procedía de Cuba, un país socialista partidario de las descolonizaciones, y era mujer. Muchos testigos, especialmente las mujeres, preferían acceder a ella al ser percibida como la más receptiva de la delegación. Obviamente, los saharauis aprovecharon la cercanía ideológica de Jiménez

“Inmediatamente se percibió a la delegada cubana como la más accesible y confiable, una garantía para nosotros. Por ejemplo, a Marta se le dieron pruebas documentales de que había prácticas esclavistas consentidas por la colonia. En esa época no se sabía gran cosa de Cuba. Quizás hubiera contactos personales con cubanos en Argel”. (Ahmed Mulay Ali Hamadi, entrevista 2020)

“En esa época, los jóvenes militantes se identificaban con la revolución cubana” (Bachir Ahmed Aomar, entrevista 2020).

“En el Sáhara estaba claro que Marta Jiménez era la más partidaria de la independencia, por hispana y cubana. Los españoles también confiaban en ella” (J.I de Dalmases, entrevista 2020)

Los activistas recuerdan la inmediata sintonía que se estableció:

“Un grupo nos reunimos con Marta Jiménez; recuerdo a tres chicas militantes (Zahra Nas, Mariam una chica morena amiga de ésta, y una tercera). Recuerdo que Mariam habló sobre los problemas de racismo y la marginación que sufrían los negros por la administración colonial. En ese encuentro pudimos trasladarle a Marta nuestras aspiraciones como pueblo que reivindicaba la descolonización y ella tomaba nota en su agenda, y todo se reflejó en el informe final... La reunión que tuvimos con ella fue muy interesante. Desde entonces fue muy solidaria y cercana a nosotros.” (Omar Buslan, entrevista 2023)

A las autoridades españolas, eso no les pasó desapercibido, y rápidamente fue etiquetada de pro-polisaria

“La persona de mayor valor de esta misión, la cubana Marta Jiménez, hablando conmigo más de una vez, felicitaba a la Administración española por lo que veía en sus descubiertas. Incluso llegaba, en su celo proselitista, podríamos decir, y de amistad con el Polisario, a hacer de intérprete, puesto que los francófonos y anglófonos de la

⁴⁹ ABC, 8 de mayo de 1975, p.33.

comisión se podían hacer entender a través de una chica árabe que procedía de Egipto y que no dominaba el hasaniya, siendo el vehículo de comunicación el español. Esta señora, Marta Jiménez, sirvió así muchas veces de intérprete en estos contactos de la misión con la población civil”⁵⁰

Según el Servicio de Inteligencia Bis del Ejército (SIBE) en Villa Cisneros, ciudad donde el PUNS tuvo mayor protagonismo en las manifestaciones, la delegada cubana fue quien forzó al jefe de misión S. Ake a atender al POLISARIO y hacerles participar en las audiencias. (...) “Jiménez estaba más interesada por el diálogo con los jóvenes vinculados al Frente POLISARIO que con las autoridades” (Rodríguez Jiménez 2015: 350, 351). Cuando la misión de Naciones Unidas visitó Argelia y se desplazó hasta Tindouf, el líder saharauí El-Uali se entrevistó con sus miembros, sintonizando especialmente con la delegada cubana (Briones et al, 1997: 179-180).

Al concluir la visita sus declaraciones públicas fueron claras y contundentes: “Estoy totalmente convencida de que el Sahara reúne las condiciones óptimas para ser un país independiente”. Preguntada por un periodista si no resultaría peligroso que el pueblo saharauí no estuviera preparado para la independencia, la delegada cubana replicó: “Eso es lo que dicen los imperialistas”. (La Vanguardia Española, 21 mayo 1975, p.5). En testimonios posteriores narró su empeño en que la comisión no basculara a favor de Marruecos, y relató las burdas presiones de Marruecos durante su visita⁵¹. Finalmente, en la elaboración del informe final Jiménez desempeñó un papel crucial para que se reflejara cabalmente lo observado, desactivando las inclinaciones de Ake y Pishvah, y fue clave a la hora de formular las conclusiones. Incluso fue la única en hacer constar una observación particular final en el informe

“La delegada de Cuba, estando de acuerdo con lo fundamental del informe, desea dejar constancia de la siguiente observación: Es un derecho legítimo de los pueblos ser dueños de su propio destino de conformidad con la resolución 1514 (XV) de la Asamblea General, de 11 de diciembre de 1960, que señala: «Todos los pueblos tienen el derecho de libre determinación en virtud de este derecho determinan libremente su condición política y persiguen libremente su desarrollo económico, social y cultural», El ejercicio de este derecho no puede ser limitado, menos aún supeditado a los intereses de otras naciones. La acción de las Naciones Unidas debe encaminarse a garantizar que el pueblo saharauí determine libremente su propio destino a lo cual deben contribuir

⁵⁰ Intervención del General Eduardo Blanco Rodríguez, que en 1975 era Director General de Promoción del Sahara, en la Comisión de Asuntos Exteriores. Diario de sesiones, número 30 (1978) Sesión 5, lunes 13 de marzo de 1978, p.40

⁵¹ Marta Jiménez interviene en el documental *El Maestro Saharaui. Océanos de exilio* (documental, dirigido por Nicolás Muñoz, 2012, minutos 13:50 y 65:00) y menciona brevemente su participación en la misión.

la Potencia administradora y los países vecinos, en un ambiente de paz y seguridades recíprocas”⁵²

Para muchos saharauis, si el informe de la misión reflejó la realidad que se vivía en el Sahara, fue gracias a la delegada cubana.

“Jiménez, la de Cuba, contó la verdad. Los otros dos anduvieron con cautela” (Goum Uld Hnini, entrevista 2020)

Es probable que no hubiera concertación previa, pero la postura de la delegada cubana defendiendo el derecho del pueblo colonizado a la autodeterminación, su especial interés en recabar los testimonios auténticos de la gente y su capacidad para no dejarse influir por otros actores, produjo inmediatamente una complicidad con la población. Después de la misión, quedó como una gran amiga y defensora de la causa saharauí en Cuba hasta su fallecimiento en 2016 a los 82 años⁵³. El presidente Mohamed Abdelaziz puso el nombre de Marta a la mayor de sus hijas en su recuerdo y como homenaje. Hoy en día, todavía muchos saharauis recuerdan el nombre de Marta Jiménez y su papel en la misión visitadora de Naciones Unidas.

“Nunca había olvidado a Marta Jiménez, así que la invitamos a la presentación del libro [sobre Luali]. En su intervención se sienta junto al hermano de Luali, Bachir Mustafa Sayed, ministro de Exteriores del POLISARIO. Marta recuerda su encuentro con Luali, su arrolladora personalidad, su franqueza y su nacionalismo. Y evocando su viaje al Sáhara, de pronto se aproxima a la esquina de la sala, y siendo ayudada a trasladar hasta el centro de la tarima una enorme caja de cartón, nos revela: “En nuestra visita a Aaiún tuve la precaución de retrasarme y solicitar a las gentes que me entregaran algunas pancartas. Las he conservado durante más de veinte años en mi casa con todo el cariño que he sido capaz. Pero ha llegado el momento de entregarlas, y así lo hago a Bachir, para que sean conservadas en el Museo de su país, que algún día será libre”. Marta es ayudada a desplegarlas. Luego se funde en un largo abrazo con Bachir.” (Felipe Briones)⁵⁴

⁵² Observación de la señora Marta Jiménez Martínez (Cuba). Apéndice I del Informe de la Misión.

⁵³ Marta Jiménez visitó los campamentos de refugiados en Tindouf en 1977. Años más tarde, en 1997, participó en el acto de homenaje a Luali organizado en Alicante, en la que hizo entrega de algunas pancartas que recogió durante la misión de 1975. Ver testimonio de Felipe Briones <https://ceas-sahara.es/testimonio-de-felipe-briones/>

⁵⁴ <https://ceas-sahara.es/testimonio-de-felipe-briones/>

Epílogo

Las manifestaciones saharauis de mayo de 1975 en demanda de la independencia conforman un momento relevante de la memoria nacional saharauí. Un momento de protagonismo, de afirmación identitaria, de fractura del orden colonial. Sus consecuencias fueron trascendentales: Naciones Unidas se llevó una imagen precisa y fidedigna de la situación, España decidió abandonar el territorio e incumpliendo con sus obligaciones, y Marruecos, consciente de su falta de base social, optó por los hechos consumados. Para los saharauis, esta memoria tiene una centralidad y una relevancia que no siempre coinciden con el relato dominante construido desde afuera. Además, liga el protagonismo popular con una dimensión transnacional, a través del Comité de descolonización de Naciones Unidas y la conexión con Cuba, que perdurarán hasta hoy. Por ello podemos denominarla memoria colectiva popular y contra hegemónica.

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Ahmed Mulay Ali Hamadi, diplomático saharauí. En 1975 estuvo implicado en la organización clandestina de las manifestaciones y en la logística (entrevista en México, 6 de mayo de 2020)

Bachir Ahmed Aomar, escritor y periodista. En 1975 era estudiante y participó en las movilizaciones. (entrevista en Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, 13 de mayo de 2020)

Buyema Bumajruta. En 1975 era estudiante y participó en las movilizaciones en El Aaiún (entrevista en Tenerife, 11 de julio de 2020)

Zahra Ramdan, activista del movimiento de mujeres saharauis. En 1975 era estudiante en El Aaiún; participó en las movilizaciones y en un encuentro de la misión con un grupo de mujeres (entrevista en Jerez de la Frontera, 20 de julio)

Ali Mojtár Bumajruta, diplomático saharauí. En 1975 era estudiante y participó en las movilizaciones. (entrevista en Valencia, 17 de julio de 2020)

Nana Mohamed Bachir. Colaboradora del Frente Polisario desde 1974. En la entrevista también participan sus hijas Maluma Hamma y Gabbal Hamma (entrevista en los campamentos de Tindouf, 10 de septiembre de 2020)

Goum Uld Hnini, ex obrero, combatiente y luego monitor acompañante de estudiantes (Guelta Zemmour, 1941). En 1975 era obrero en la empresa Cubiertas y miembro de una célula del

Frente; participó en las manifestaciones de Bucraa y Guelta. (entrevista en los campamentos de Tindouf, 10 septiembre de 2020)

Mohamed Lamin Uld Alal Uld Mbairik (n.1955), excombatiente saharauí. En 1975 era militar en el ejército español, destacado en Cabeza de Playa cerca de Mailia; participó en las manifestaciones de El Aaiún (entrevista en los campamentos de Tindouf, 30 de julio de 2020). Francisco Villar, diplomático español retirado. En 1975 se ocupaba de cuestiones de descolonización en el equipo de Piniés en Naciones Unidas; acompañó la misión visitadora en su recorrido por el territorio (entrevista en Madrid, 1 de mayo de 2020).

Emilio Cassinello, diplomático español retirado. En 1975 estaba encargado de cuestiones de descolonización en el MAE y de las negociaciones para la liberación de los militares españoles en manos del Frente. (entrevista en Madrid, 30 de abril de 2020)

Pablo Ignacio Dalmases, periodista. En 1975 era el director de Radio Sahara en El Aaiún y cubrió la visita de la misión en varias localidades (entrevista en Barcelona, 18 de mayo de 2020)

Familia Álvarez de Lara (María Antonia, Cristina, Mónica, José y Pedro). En 1975 la familia residía en Villa Cisneros donde el padre estaba destinado como funcionario de Correos; los hermanos, que en esa época eran niños, adolescentes y jóvenes adultos, fueron observadores directos de las movilizaciones del PUNS y del Frente POLISARIO (entrevista en Madrid, 2020; transcripción de Marta Trejo)

Ander Landaburu, periodista. Desde 1974 cubrió los acontecimientos del Sahara Occidental para el semanario Cambio 16; presenció la visita de la misión. (entrevista, marzo de 2022).

José Luis de Pablos, reportero gráfico. Desde 1974 cubrió los acontecimientos del Sahara Occidental para el semanario Cambio 16; presenció la visita de la misión y documentó gráficamente las manifestaciones (entrevista, Canarias, marzo de 2022).

Felipe Briones, jurista. Junto con su familia vivió desde 1960 a 1975 en El Aaiún. Miembro de la Asociación Internacional de Juristas por el Sáhara Occidental (IAJUWS) (testimonio tomado de <https://ceas-sahara.es/testimonio-de-felipe-briones/>).

Omar Bulsan, diplomático saharauí. En 1975 era miembro del Buró político del Frente Polisario; posteriormente ha tenido distintos cargos en el gobierno de la República Saharaui (entrevista en La Habana 9 de febrero de 2023).

**Intervention militaire française au
Sahara Occidental** *opération Lamantin 1977* ☐

☐ <https://doi.org/10.21747/3078-431X/tifa4>

Abstract: The little-known Lamantin military operation was a French intervention carried out between December 1977 and July 1978 by a squadron of Jaguars taking off from the OUKAM 160 air base near Dakar, Senegal.

These strikes targeted the Sahrawi liberation army in Western Sahara and northern Mauritania. Despite the support of Moroccan forces, Mauritania was targeted by the Polisario in 1977, particularly on the 650km railway linking the Zouerate iron ore mine to the port of Nouadhibou, which is essential to the Mauritanian economy.

President Mokhtar Ould Daddah, faced with the threat to his regime, requested French military intervention. With the Mauritanian army unable to counter the Polisario, Paris intervened. The operation was shrouded in secrecy to avoid repercussions, especially given France's colonial past in Africa. Testimonies from Sahrawi and French officers shed light on this intervention.

Keywords: Operation Lamantin; Western Sahara war; Polisario Front, Mauritania.

Resumen: La poco conocida operación militar Lamantin fue una intervención francesa llevada a cabo entre diciembre de 1977 y julio de 1978 por un escuadrón de Jaguars que despegó de la base aérea OUKAM 160, cerca de Dakar (Senegal).

Estos ataques iban dirigidos contra el ejército de liberación saharaui en el Sáhara Occidental y el norte de Mauritania. A pesar del apoyo de las fuerzas marroquíes, Mauritania fue objetivo del Polisario en 1977, especialmente en los 650 km de ferrocarril que unen la mina de hierro de Zouerate con el puerto de Nouadhibou, esencial para la economía mauritana.

El presidente Mokhtar Ould Daddah, ante la amenaza que se cernía sobre su régimen, solicitó la intervención militar francesa. Ante la incapacidad del ejército mauritano para contrarrestar al Polisario, París intervino. La operación se mantuvo en secreto para evitar repercusiones, sobre todo teniendo en cuenta el pasado colonial de Francia en África. Los testimonios de oficiales saharaui y franceses arrojan luz sobre esta intervención.

Palabras clave: Opération Lamantin ; Sahara occidental ; Frente Polisario ; Mauritania.

I – Introduction

La France a décidé, pour la première fois, depuis sa campagne aérienne lors de l'opération «Ecouvillon» conjointe avec l'armée espagnole et marocaine contre la résistance sahraouie en 1958, et après la guerre d'Algérie, que ses avions de combat modernes effectuaient des frappes aériennes en Afrique du nord. Mais cette fois-ci, au côté de l'armée Mauritanienne qui occupait le tiers sud du Sahara occidental. L'opération militaire était baptisée *Lamantin* du

nom d'un mammifère marin qui vit à Languera, ville du Sahara occidental sur la côte atlantique et frontalière de la Mauritanie.

L'opération Lamantin est méconnue de beaucoup en raison de la rareté des informations à son sujet. Cette intervention militaire française, de décembre 1977 à juillet 1978, fut principalement menée par un escadron de Jaguars. Les avions français décollaient de la base aérienne française *OUKAM 160* près de la capitale sénégalaise (Dakar), pour mener des frappes contre le Polisario (Mouvement de Libération pour de *Saguiya El Hamra et Rio de Oro*) au Sahara occidental.

La Mauritanie a été soutenue par 8000 soldats marocains, dans le cadre l'accord de coopération militaire et de défense conjoint avec le Maroc, qui occupait les 2/3 du Sahara Occidental. Ce même Maroc qui a revendiqué une souveraineté sur la Mauritanie auparavant sur tous les forums, devant toutes les instances et qui a armé des groupes pour la déstabiliser. Les forces marocaines stationnées dans les villes et zones sensibles de la Mauritanie ont mené des batailles conjointes avec son armée contre celle du Polisario.

En 1977 le Polisario a concentré ses attaques sur les 650 kilomètres de ligne de chemin de fer la plus longue du monde avec 200 wagons- entre la mine de fer de Zouerate et le port d'exportation de Nouadhibou. L'économie du pays dépendait essentiellement de cette ligne exploitée par la société française MIFERMA jusqu'en 1974 et entretenue à l'époque par des techniciens français dont le pays était son principal client. Les exportations de fer représentaient les trois quarts des apports en devises de la Mauritanie.

Le président mauritanien de l'époque, Mokhtar Ould Daddah, sentit le danger de la guerre sur l'existence de son régime, du fait de la paralysie de la principale source économique du pays. La Mauritanie recevait une certaine aide financière de l'Arabie Saoudite, du Koweït et de la Côte d'Ivoire, mais en 1977, les coûts de la guerre ont consommé environ 60% du budget national. Les attaques du Front Polisario ont touché la majorité du sol mauritanien, notamment la capitale Nouakchott, à deux reprises. Ould Daddah voyait que la seule issue pour éviter l'effondrement de son pays était de faire appel à la France pour intervenir militairement.

Pour intervenir militairement, Paris a pris prétexte de préserver la sécurité de ses ressortissants français, mais surtout pour sauver le régime du président allié Ould Daddah et en conséquence de protéger ses intérêts stratégiques dans cette partie du continent africain.

L'armée française est intervenue directement dans la guerre du fait de l'incapacité de l'armée mauritanienne face au Polisario. Les combattants du Polisario s'appuyaient sur leur bonne connaissance du théâtre d'opérations et des tactiques de guérilla à travers des unités rapides capables de surprendre leurs cibles et de retourner d'où elles venaient rapidement.

Le gouvernement français, sous la présidence de Valérie Giscard d'Estaing a entouré l'opération militaire d'un secret absolu, pour éviter l'escalade et les répercussions qui pouvaient en résulter;

surtout avec son lourd passé colonial en Afrique, dont les dernières pages furent écrites en Algérie et au Cameroun. La France décide d'intervenir militairement avec l'envoi d'une force interarmes d'environ 350 hommes principalement des forces aériennes équipées d'appareils ultra sophistiqués pour l'époque.

Comme *l'opération Lamantin* est relativement récente, c'est dernièrement que la France a levé le voile sur les informations et les détails de cette intervention agressive contre le peuple sahraoui. L'étude est un éclairage sur cette intervention militaire française à travers les écrits, les témoignages et les mémoires recueillis auprès des officiers sahraouis et français, qui ont participé à ces opérations, comme le capitaine Jean-Claude Gravin et le lieutenant-colonel Efevi, commandant de la compagnie de l'armée de terre française, qui était stationnée à la Base du Levier au nord de la ville de Nouadhibou.

L'autre source importante d'informations sur l'opération est le général de brigade Michel Forget, le commandant de *l'opération Lamantin*, commandant de l'armée de l'air tactique française pendant la période (1976-1983). Michel Forget est l'un des généraux supérieurs de l'armée de l'air française, pour laquelle il a servi pendant 35 ans. Il a participé à plusieurs guerres, comme celle de l'Algérie, en tant que pilote d'avion de guerre, puis comme officier d'état-major au Bureau d'études et de communication chargé de la guerre psychologique et de la situation quotidienne en Algérie, dirigé par le général Maurice Challe. Michel Forget est aussi l'auteur de plusieurs ouvrages, dont «Armée de l'air et stratégies» et «La guerre froide et la guerre d'Algérie».

II – Préparation de *l'opération Lamantin*

La préparation proprement dite de l'opération a commencé en septembre 1977. Des avions de reconnaissance français stationnés à Dakar, effectuaient des sorties secrètes pour surveiller le théâtre d'opérations autour de la zone ferroviaire. L'état-major des armées françaises a mis à disposition les moyens nécessaires à cette opération militaire qui a joué un rôle fondateur dans l'élaboration de la doctrine des interventions extérieures de l'armée de l'air française.

Dans le cadre la préparation de l'opération, il a fallu consulter les archives détenues au Service historique de l'Armée française, pour l'élaboration d'une note de synthèse se rapportant à la situation aux opérations franco-espagnoles dont le Sahara occidental a été le théâtre en 1956-58 et surtout *l'opération Ecouvillon*. Le document a été mis à la disposition du commandement de *l'opération Lamantin*.

Sans doute que de profonds changements étaient intervenus en vingt ans. Le contexte politique avait changé, les matériels militaires avaient évolué (radar, armes anti-aériennes), les unités de combat n'étaient plus les mêmes mais les enseignements qui ont pu être tirés sur le même terrain dans une même région contre un ennemi identique pouvaient toujours être utiles.

L'État-major français voyait une grande similitude entre les axes d'attaque, de retrait et les zones de relais logistiques utilisées par le Polisario contre l'armée mauritanienne - au nord-ouest de Zouerate et dans la région d'Aouerd- et ceux utilisés autrefois par les moudjahidines sahraouis pour attaquer les bataillons français stationnés au nord de la Mauritanie.

La note fait ressortir certains aspects efficaces des opérations en zone Saharienne qui sont encore d'actualité. Les enseignements portaient sur le comportement des hommes, la définition de la tactique à adopter, l'emploi des moyens et l'organisation de la logistique.

On peut citer parmi ces enseignements de la note les points suivants :

– « *Les guerriers sahraouis semblent s'être adaptés à la fois au matériel et aux manœuvres d'unités motorisées. Ce sont des tireurs économes et précis, infatigables marcheurs. C'est un ennemi fluide, adapté à tous les types de sol désertique et qui sait parfaitement se camoufler des vues aériennes.*

– *Les moyens modernes d'écoute radio doivent être également utilisés. Des cartes des axes de pénétration du Polisario doivent être constituées et mises à jour.*

– *La reprise en mains des populations est indispensable pour l'acquisition du renseignement: celle-ci peut être obtenue, non pas seulement par des contacts humains mais aussi par des distributions de céréales et l'organisation du ravitaillement en eau. Sachant que la majorité de la population a été évacuée par le Polisario sur les camps de Tindouf, l'intérieur du Sahara Occidental et presque vide. Il ne reste que les populations sédentarisées sur la côte.*

– *Il est essentiel de ne pas laisser le Polisario maître de la nuit. C'est un ennemi agissant par surprise pour éclater rapidement après l'action, il convient d'être renseigné pour parer à ses attaques et d'être mobile pour pouvoir le poursuivre, l'intercepter et le détruire. »*

La note souligne dans sa conclusion, que c'est par une action résolument offensive basée sur la recherche systématique du renseignement et la rapidité d'intervention, s'appuyant sur une logistique adaptée, que le succès peut être obtenu.

Après avoir élaboré et étudié le plan de l'opération avec l'État-major général des forces armées, le commandant de l'opération, le général Michel Forget, accompagné de ses deux adjoints des forces terrestres et navales, s'est rendu le 2 novembre à Dakar, au Sénégal, avec un petit détachement composé d'un mini État-major interarmes, d'une partie de l'avant-garde des unités aériennes et des groupes de parachutistes des forces terrestres qui formeront des points de guidage avancés. A Dakar chacun a trouvé protection dans le plus grand secret, à l'abri des regards de la presse internationale.

Les forces aériennes sont parties de la base aérienne de Toulon (sud de la France), elles ont suivi un itinéraire le long de la côte orientale de l'Espagne, en passant par le détroit de Gibraltar puis



Itinéraire des forces françaises de l'opération *Lamantin*

le long des côtes du Maroc et des Iles Canaries, en parallèle avec la côte atlantique du Sahara occidental et de la Mauritanie jusqu'au Sénégal.

Dès son arrivée à Dakar, le commandant de l'opération a pris contact avec les autorités sénégalaises et mauritaniennes compétentes, pour lui simplifier la tâche. Il a également établi la structure de commandement de l'opération comme suit : Un poste de commandement avancé et secret à Nouakchott, comprenant quelques officiers spécialistes en télécommunications, un poste de commandement opérationnel et logistique arrière à la base *Oukam* de Dakar, à 450 km du premier, afin de gérer les moyens aériens. L'accent a été mis sur les moyens de communication pour assurer une liaison permanente et directe entre le poste de commandement avancé, le poste de commandement arrière et la centrale des opérations supervisée par l'État-major général des armées françaises.

II-1- Forces aériennes

II-1-1-formation et tâches - organisation, effectifs et armement-déploiement

Lamantin est une opération interarmes (conjointe), mais elle s'est concentrée principalement sur l'Armée de l'Air qui se composait des avions suivants :

- 1 – Avion d'attaque : le chasseur moderne Jaguar franco-britannique (1973-2005) qui a participé dans plusieurs interventions militaires (guerre du Sahara occidental, du Tchad, du Liban, guerre du Golfe, Bosnie etc...)

- 2 – Avion de surveillance aérienne (reconnaissance) : Breguet Atlantic
- 3 – Avion de transport militaire aérien et le PC aérien pour le commandant de l'opération : C160Transall
- 4 – Avion de Ravitaillement en vol (air refueling) : C 135 F
- 5 – Avion d'opérations de guidage et de sauvetage : l'hélicoptère PUMA
- 6 – Avion de soutien logistique : avion Nord 2501.

Type avions	Nombre d'avions	Equipages	Armement	Effectif
Jaguar A	10	01	- 2×30mm - Missile A/S - Roquettes	10
"Breguet Atlantic	02	10		20
C135- ravitailleur	02	04		08
Transall C160	02	05		08
Hélicoptère Puma SA 330	02	03	- 7.62mm - Roquettes A/C	06
" Nord501"	04	06		24
Total Effectif	22			78

II-1-2-Un groupe de la Division des Parachutiste Aéroportée du 11 DP stationné à Toulouse: groupe d'élite spécialisé dans le combat aéroporté et l'assaut par air. La Mission de ce groupe était de former les « PGA » (4 points avancés de reconnaissance et de guidage) répartis en quelques points, à proximité de la voie ferrée et de procéder à l'alerte avancée, diriger les raids aériens des avions de chasse « Jaguar » au sol et effectuer des opérations de sauvetage.

II-1-3- Un groupement du Régiment de Faucons Parachutistes « 13e RDP »

Stationné à Dieuze de la Brigade des Forces Spéciales sous le commandement du Chef d'Etat-major et du Commandement des Opérations Spéciales, la mission du groupe est de sécuriser les communications radio à Nouakchott (capitale de la Mauritanie) et d'assurer la protection au sol du centre de commandement (PC Volant) du chef de l'opération.

II-1-4- Un détachement de parachutistes commando du 8^{ème} RPIMa : stationné sur la base aérienne de Castres.Sa mission est de protéger le poste de commandement arrière de l'opération, les avions et les équipements de la base aérienne de Dakar.



Base Aérienne Française 160 OUKAM
Poste de commandement arrière
(Dakar -Sénégal)



PC avancé Secret dans une villa
(Nouakchott-Mauritanie)



Michel Forget, Commandant de l'opération
lors d'une escale du Un Transall C160 PC
Volant Nouakchott



Nord 25 : Transport des Forces Spéciales
Françaises de Dakar à Nouakchott



PUMA SA 330 pour opération de sauvetage



Jaguar en atterrissage

II-2- Forces terrestres : formation et tâches – organisation, effectifs et armement – déploiement

II-2-1- La 1ère Compagnie du 2^{ème} Régiment de Marines (CIE/2e BIMA)

Les forces terrestres françaises ont participé à l'opération à travers la 1ère Compagnie du 2ème Régiment de la Marine, faisant partie de la 9ème Brigade Légère Blindée du Commandement des Forces Terrestres. Stationné dans le village de Champagne, à 12 km à l'est du Mans, ville du grand Ouest français. C'est une compagnie d'un régiment des forces d'élite françaises, la plus ancienne et la plus expérimentée des forces navales au combat, notamment en Afrique. Cette compagnie est distinguée par sa grande capacité de préparation et de maîtrise des techniques amphibies, ce qui l'a qualifiée pour intervenir dans les combats interarmes et opérations spéciales qui se sont déroulées sur la plupart des continents au siècle passé (Algérie-Vietnam-Tchad-Liban-Irak, République Centrafricaine-Nouvelle-Calédonie-Rwanda-Kosovo -Bosnie-Herzégovine-Afghanistan etc.

Mais le problème qui se posait à l'époque pour l'État-major français était que ses unités n'étaient pas dotées de matériel adapté à la guerre du désert et à la lutte contre le Polisario, qui utilisait sur des voitures « Land Rover » ! Légères et rapides.

L'État-major prend rapidement la décision de doter l'unité des équipements appropriés pour devenir une « compagnie légère portée » pour le combat dans le désert, s'appuyant sur le véhicule léger de reconnaissance et d'appui « Volera ». Il a été décidé aussi d'envoyer un détachement de soutien opérationnel (DAO) pour entraîner les unités mauritaniennes impuissantes face aux attaques du Polisario.

En raison de son emplacement stratégique, une ancienne base de l'OTAN construite par les Américains dans les années 60 a été choisie comme lieu d'installation du camp de cette force.

Cette base appelée « Base du levier » est située au nord de la ville de Nouadhibou, à 8 km de l'aéroport, à 12 km du port et à 24 km du port ferroviaire de Nouadhibou « Cansado » qui abritait les ouvriers de la SNIM (Société sidérurgique mauritanienne), dont environ 2000 salariés français.

Depuis début octobre 1977, un détachement de soutien d'avant-garde a été déployé, il est composé d'un peloton d'artillerie lourde et d'une compagnie mixte appartenant au 6^{ème} régiment du génie. Sa mission principale était de restaurer les infrastructures de la base, d'organiser sa défense et de la préparer à accueillir la force terrestre française. Début novembre, il a été décidé de transférer les unités par une opération amphibie, partant du port de Toulon, sur la côte méditerranéenne au sud de la France, vers le port de Nouadhibou, sur la côte atlantique, à l'ouest de la Mauritanie.

Après un long voyage à bord de plusieurs trains en provenance de la ville du Mans, les forces sont arrivées dans la ville de Toulon, d'où a commencé la traversée maritime en direction de Nouadhibou. Cependant, au cours de la première nuit de la traversée, au niveau la Baie du Lion, le navire a été exposé à une violente tempête durant laquelle de laquelle les vagues ont atteint des dizaines de mètres de hauteur, causant des dommages aux équipements tels que des conteneurs de munitions et des véhicules qui étaient sur le point de tomber du pont du navire. Le personnel et les équipages n'ont pas non plus été épargnés et se sont retrouvés dans une situation difficile à cause du mal de mer, leurs espaces de vie ayant été transformés en fosses septiques... il a donc fallu tout nettoyer et désinfecter ! Le lendemain le navire a rebroussé chemin pour rentrer à Toulon.

Après deux jours de préparation au combat, le navire est reparti pour la Mauritanie, le voyage a duré 11 jours. Durant cette période des exercices tactiques et de tir, ainsi que de nombreuses réunions et conférences ont été organisés pour élever le niveau de préparation au combat.

Dès l'arrivée des forces terrestres au port de Nouadhibou, le contact a été pris avec le détachement d'avant-garde et le débarquement et la prise de position à la base du levier ont commencé. Cela a pris plus de deux jours.

Après que la compagnie eut pris position, son premier objectif fut de transformer la base en un point d'appui et de support. Il était nécessaire de revoir et d'améliorer le système qui a été développé par le détachement d'avant-garde, tels que les plans de tir temporaires, qui doivent évoluer constamment parallèlement avec le plan de défense élaboré par le génie militaire.

La tâche principale de la compagnie était la suivante :

- Protéger le chemin de fer mauritanien selon son axe : Zouérate - Atouajil - Choum - Boulnoir
- Inal – Nouadhibou.
- Evacuation des techniciens français travaillant à Zouerate, Nouadhibou et le long de l'axe ferroviaire en cas de danger.
- Soutenir le Détachement d'Appui Opérationnel (DAO) dans sa mission de formation des unités mauritaniennes.

Organisation, effectifs et armement de la compagnie:

Unités	Moyens roulants	Armement	Effectif
Section de Combat	(04) ×3 VLRA	MAT 49 AAT-52 12,7 Milan	3×42
Section Cdt. A. I	(07) VLRA (02) JEEP	Mortier 81 mm 7.62mm	64
Section Genie	JEEP ?VLRA	MAT 49	10≥
1 CIE / 2e BIMa	(02) JEEP (19) VLRA	MAT 49 AAT-52 12,7 Milan Mortier 81 mm	200
Détachement parachutists (11DP)	JEEP ? VLRA	MAT 49 AAT-52 12,7	60
Detachment 13e RDP"	JEEP ?VLRA	MAT 49 AAT-52	≥10
Detachment "8eRPIMa	JEEP ?VLRA	MAT 49 AAT-52	≥08
Total effectif			278



Base Aérienne Française Embarquent des forces terrestres de Toulon (France) sur la dive pour un transit maritime à travers la méditerranée et l'océan atlantique vers Nouadhibou (Mauritanie)



Réaménagement de la base du Levier (Prés de Nouadhibou) pour accueillir les forces terrestres françaises



Chargement du fer de Zouerate

Train en route

Déchargement du fer au port de Nouadhibou

III-1-Déroulement des opérations aériennes

Jusqu'à présent des avions de reconnaissance aérienne effectuaient des sorties régulières pour surveiller le théâtre d'opérations le long de la voie ferrée, afin de déterminer les contre-mesures à prendre pour contrer les attaques du Polisario. Cependant, depuis le 27 Octobre 1977, la situation s'est encore détériorée. Le 4 novembre, quarante-huit heures après l'arrivée de l'avant-garde des forces de l'opération à Dakar, le Polisario a mené une attaque contre les forces mauritaniennes. Ces dernières occupaient la petite ville de Bir Gendouz, à l'intérieur du Sahara occidental, mais située à quelques kilomètres de la voie ferrée, au nord de Nouadhibou. Le 7 Novembre un poste mauritanien au nord de la ville d'Atar, à 326 km au sud-ouest de la ville de Zouerate est attaqué par une colonne du Polisario.

Les combattants du Polisario se sont retirés en direction du nord-est à travers le *Grand Erg* s'étendant de la ville d'Atar à la région de *Lemghiti*.

Le 22 novembre, un train a été attaqué au centre d'Etouajil, situé à 90 km au sud de la ville de Zouerate. C'est l'occasion qu'attendait Paris pour donner l'ordre effectif du lancement de l'opération *Lamantin*. A cette date, le commandant de l'opération le général Michel Forget, prend le titre de « Commandant en chef des forces françaises en Mauritanie il rejoint immédiatement son

poste de commandement avancé à Nouakchott, tandis que le soir même, 4 avions Jaguars qui rentraient à la base de Dakar d'une mission au Togo, étaient mis en alerte. Le lendemain, 4 autres avions similaires en provenance de France les rejoignent, tandis que les avions Transal, les forces de soutien, les équipages et les techniciens sont arrivés au même moment à la base d'*Oukam*.

Il semblait que l'intervention était imminente, mais il a fallu attendre plusieurs jours avant que le « feu vert » soit donné. Ce délai inattendu a été l'occasion de poursuivre les préparatifs et d'améliorer l'état de préparation des forces.

En raison de l'immensité du théâtre d'opérations et de l'absence de routes et de passages obligés, il était difficile de détecter les patrouilles du Polisario avant qu'elles atteignent leurs cibles. La seule information confirmée était le moment où ces patrouilles attaquaient les forces mauritaniennes. Seulement la décision de l'attaque aérienne française peut être prise et mise en œuvre. A ce moment, la tâche de l'avion Breguet Atlantic devient la surveillance rapprochée des unités du Polisario à travers l'axe de leur repli vers ses bases arrière.

Les avions Jaguar ont effectué leurs missions en fonction de trois facteurs :

* Les cibles du Polisario étaient principalement situées dans le triangle: Nouadhibou – Zouerate – Atar.

* L'axe de retrait des forces l'armée sahraouie était vers le nord-est

Les interventions se font à une distance de 1000 à 1500 km de Dakar et la durée de ces missions sera de 4 à 5 heures, avec une moyenne de trois ravitaillements en vol.

Plus la décision d'attaquer est retardée, plus ces distances augmentent dans ces circonstances, de sorte que le temps entre l'ordre de décollage et l'atteinte de la cible sera de l'ordre d'une à deux heures.

La première intervention de l'aviation française est survenue après l'attaque du centre Boulenoir, à 80 km à l'est de Nouadhibou, le 2 décembre 1977. Les combattants du Polisario l'ont occupé pendant 3 heures, ont capturé des soldats mauritaniens, puis se sont repliés vers le nord. Un des avions Breguet Atlantic les survolaient et les surveillaient, suivis par l'avion du commandant de l'opération et une escadrille de Jaguars venant de Dakar.

Pendant plus de deux heures, les Jaguars ont volé à basse altitude au-dessus des convois des forces du Polisario, mais ils n'ont pas reçu le feu vert d'attaquer.

Ils se sont contentés d'obtenir des photos aériennes qui ont ensuite aidé les pilotes à connaître leurs cibles (leur composition, leur système de mouvement et même la nature de leur armement). Selon le commandant de l'opération, ce qui a attiré son attention était le sang-froid

des combattants sahraouis qui n'ont dévié à aucun moment leur trajectoire et ne semblaient pas s'inquiéter du ballet aérien au-dessus de leurs têtes, les menaçant pendant deux heures. Ils ont continué leur retrait comme si rien n'était. Ils n'ont répondu par aucun feu ; il est certain que la situation aurait été complètement différente si l'avion avait lancé l'attaque.

La deuxième intervention a eu lieu le 12 décembre 1977, suite à une attaque de l'armée Populaire de libération Sahraoui (ALPS) qui a visé le train à 9 heures du Matin à Twajil à 90 km au sud de la ville de Zouerate.

Lors de cette attaque les forces mauritaniennes ont subi de lourdes pertes. Le train a été incendié, 13 soldats ont été capturés et les combattants sahraouis ont occupé le site pendant une heure, avant de se replier à midi à travers l'axe Twajil- *Kasbat Elhesyan - Elkhata*.

Comme d'habitude, ils ont été suivis et surveillés par l'avion de reconnaissance et l'avion du commandant de l'opération, dans l'attente de l'arrivée des Jaguars.

Vers une heure de l'après-midi, une escadrille de Jaguar est arrivée. Les colonnes de l'unité de L'ALPS, composée de 50 voitures, étaient réparties sur 5 km de terrain plat et aride. La zone la plus proche qui pouvait fournir une certaine protection se trouvait à 25 kilomètres.

Deux options s'offraient aux Sahraouis:

- soit réduire la vitesse et rassembler les forces pour obtenir la densité de tir maximale possible et affronter les avions avec toutes les armes (kalachnikov, missiles «Sam 7» et mitrailleuses bitubes 14.5 mm....)
- soit se disperser et se diriger le plus rapidement possible vers l'est pour atteindre la zone la plus proche qui offre le camouflage.

Le choix s'est porté sur la deuxième solution. Lorsque l'escadrille passe pour effectuer son premier raid, les voitures s'éloignent les unes des autres et foncent à toute vitesse vers l'Est. Les cibles ont été dispersées et la mission des Jaguars est devenue plus difficile. Ils ont été contraints d'attaquer chaque véhicule séparément, ce qui nécessite plus de précision et de temps ; c'est-à-dire le temps de suivre la cible, de viser et le temps de coordination entre les avions. Les avions tiraient à des vitesses très élevées, plus de 850 km/h, et s'esquivaient à basse altitude et à une distance suffisante pour éviter les tirs des combattants sahraouis. Les armes des deux camps n'étaient pas égales, la patrouille a répliqué aux raids des avions, mais elle a subi des pertes, causées surtout par l'embrasement rapide des quantités de carburant transporté pour sécuriser les longues distances de désert à parcourir. Les avions français sont retournés à leurs bases, à l'exception de l'avion de reconnaissance, qui a continué à surveiller l'unité sahraouie sur son chemin de retrait tout au long de cette nuit et le lendemain. Le commandant de l'opération a reçu le feu vert pour l'attaquer à 15h. Vers cinq heures du soir, l'escadrille d'avions



Avion de reconnaissance
Breguet Atlantic en compagnie
d'escadron Jaguar



Raids aériens français contre le
Polisario



Land Rover détruite par les
Jaguars

Jaguar a surpris la patrouille du désert avec des frappes aériennes alors qu'elle était stationnée pour regrouper les voitures et se reposer dans une zone accidentée à une distance de 300 km du lieu du premier raid.

Les sahraouis ont répliqué par des tirs de canon ZU-2 et de missile portatif SA7 Grail, mais les avions volaient à haute altitude. Vingt minutes plus tard, la deuxième escadrille de Jaguar effectue une frappe aérienne similaire au raid précédent, mais les pertes furent moindres, le convoi ayant changé de place et s'étant retiré après le premier raid.

Le 18 décembre 1977, le Polisario attaque le poste mauritanien de Tméimichatt les Jaguars français interviennent et détruisent plusieurs Land Rover de la colonne, un Jaguar de l'armée française a été touché par un tire de ZPU-2. L'avion de combat français a été obligé d'atterrir à Nouadhibou, sans pouvoir rentrer à la base de Dakar.

Le 28 février 1978, une colonne du Polisario attaque à nouveau la garnison de Touagil, elle abat un Northrop F-5A Freedom Fighter Marocain, envoyé en renfort des forces mauritanienne. La colonne du Polisario se replit sans perte.

Le 2 mai 1978 une colonne de combattants du Polisario a attaqué et encerclé la garnison de Choum. Les Jaguars interviennent pour dégager les troupes mauritaniennes, mais les pilotes français eurent des difficultés pour différencier les unités des deux camps car les troupes du Polisario étaient très rapprochées des positions mauritaniennes. Les attaquants se sont repliés pendant la nuit mais l'avion de reconnaissance les a surveillés toute nuit, jusqu'à l'aube du 3 mai, où ils ont subi des frappes aériennes dont les pertes ont été limitées grâce à la dispersion de leur colonne tout en affrontant les Jaguars avec leurs armes anti-aériennes. Ce fut les derniers raids de l'aviation française contre le Polisario, dans le cadre de l'*opération Lamantin*

III-2-Déroulement des opérations terrestres

Après 15 jours d'occupation de la base du levier près de Nouadhibou et l'adaptation à l'environnement, la Compagnie des Forces Terrestres reçoit l'ordre de sa première mission qui consiste à l'observation et la reconnaissance des voies ferrées le long de l'axe du train pendant une semaine.

L'objectif était d'alerter le Polisario de la présence des forces françaises, ainsi que de tester sur le terrain les armes et les équipements.

Les premiers résultats sont rapidement apparus : après moins de 50 km de marche du convoi, plusieurs véhicules sont tombés en panne à cause des roues crevées par les morceaux d'acier éparpillés, semblables à des lames de rasoir tranchantes.

Ces morceaux d'acier, résultant de la fonte des voies ferrées due au passage successif des wagons, pénétraient les pneus comme des rayons laser.

Les tests de tir des missiles antichar Milan a été désastreux : soit ils tombaient horizontalement au sol ou s'élevaient verticalement. La raison en est que le système de guidage des missiles a été gravement affecté du fait de la température très élevée pendant la journée (environ 50°). Les patrouilles s'accéléraient et avec elles, la fatigue physique et psychologique des soldats français. Les sections de combat de la compagnie effectuaient des patrouilles mobiles à proximité de la voie ferrée afin de protéger le train, certains éléments se trouvaient à l'intérieur des wagons aux côtés des forces mauritaniennes pour assurer une double protection du train.

Quant aux forces du Polisario, elles ne les ont vu que deux fois, sans les heurter, malgré leur présence en contact quasi direct avec eux, du fait de leur présence de part et d'autre de frontières adjacentes surtout dans des ponts du chemin de fer.



Les françaises sécurisant le train Mauritanien (1977)



Soldats français en Garde Rapprochée du train

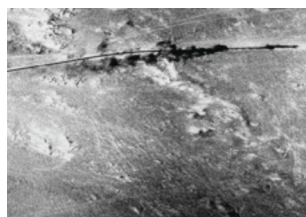


Photo aérienne : train attaqué et incendié par le Polisario

Anecdote : à deux reprises les forces françaises qui gardaient l'arrière du train se sont heurtées aux forces alliées mauritaniennes qui sécurisaient l'avant de ce dernier. Cela s'est produit à l'Est de la ville de Choum.

-Les Français ont ouvert le feu, s'imaginant exposés aux tirs de l'ennemi avec des balles révélatrices venant du front. De leur côté, les Mauritaniens ont riposté. Les alliés ont découvert plus tard que des morceaux d'acier en fusion incandescents s'envolaient du train la nuit étaient responsables de cette erreur qui a causé des pertes humaines des deux côtés!

Selon les informations que nous avons pu obtenir, il n'y a pas eu d'affrontement ni de combat direct entre les forces terrestres françaises et les forces du Polisario.

La raison en est peut-être que la France, dirigée par Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, dissimulait l'opération militaire au Sahara occidental et s'appuyait sur son armée de l'air stationnée à la Dakar, dont elle connaissait la supériorité. Cela a lui a évité l'entrée de ses forces dans des opérations terrestres qui auraient pu conduire à une escalade aux répercussions internes et externes dont elle n'avait pas besoin, comme nous l'avons mentionné précédemment.

IV – Conclusions:

-La préparation et l'exécution de *l'opération Lamantin* se sont déroulées dans le plus grand secret, à l'abri des regards de la presse internationale.

-Les archives des opérations militaires françaises contre la résistance sahraouie, en particulier *l'opération Ecouvillon(1958)*, ont été exploitées pour la préparation de l'opération.

-Une opération délicate avec relativement peu de forces, mais des armes ultrasophistiquées à l'époque.

-Le contrôle de l'autorité politique de l'ordre du feu vert pour les frappes aériennes, a été appliqué à fin d'éviter le risque d'escalade du conflit.

-L'armée sahraouie a subi des pertes, contrairement à l'aviation française, dont les pertes ont été mineures du fait que les Sahraouis ne disposaient pas de moyens de défense aérienne adéquats, ce que le Polisario a pris en compte dans les phases ultérieures de sa lutte armée.

-Les forces terrestres françaises qui protégeaient le train de fer mauritanien ont évité la collision avec les combattants sahraouis, par crainte d'une escalade d'une guerre terrestre de longue durée.

-A travers sa participation dans le conflit militaire au Sahara occidental, la France s'est trouvée dans une position inconfortable, car cette intervention était désapprouvée par l'opposition française, comme elle n'avait pas non plus l'unanimité à l'extérieur.

-L'opération a été l'occasion pour l'Armée de l'Air française de tester des avions modernes et d'acquérir des expériences lors *de l'opération Lamantin*, pour des interventions étrangères et des guerres ultérieures (la guerre du Tchad en 1978 et la guerre du Liban 1981/1982, Guerre du Golfe 1991 et d'autres).

-Cette opération n'a pas empêché les attaques et les sabotages des installations ferroviaires mauritaniennes, le Polisario a changé de tactique par le recours à des attaques nocturnes en utilisant des colonnes de véhicules plus petites et plus difficiles à repérer.

-Le 10 juillet 1978, le coup d'État militaire contre Mokhtar Ould Daddah évincé du pouvoir a offert à la France une occasion élégante de se dégager du conflit sahraoui, son intervention militaire lui posant problème.

-Le 5 août 1979, un accord de paix était signé entre la Mauritanie et le Front Polisario, selon lequel la Mauritanie se retire de la partie qu'elle occupait et s'engage à n'avoir aucune revendication territoriale au Sahara occidental. Le mois suivant les forces marocaines ont quitté le territoire mauritanien.

-Le retrait de la Mauritanie de la guerre a porté un coup dur au Maroc, son allié dans le conflit armé. Les opérations du Front Polisario se sont étendues aux villes du sud marocain. Le roi Hassan II fit appel à aux experts israéliens, français et américains pour construire, en 1980 des ceintures défensives (mur de séparation militaire d'une longueur de 2700 km au Sahara occidental) financées par l'Arabie saoudite et les pays du Golfe.

-Les forces françaises participant à *l'opération Lamantin*, y compris les forces terrestres stationnées au nord de la ville de Nouadhibou, sont restées sur le sol mauritanien jusqu'au printemps de 1980.

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**Western Sahara War Archives,
between archives and GIS:
how to map a war remotely ☐**

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Abstract: This paper presents a comprehensive study on the II Western Sahara War, leveraging GIS and historical cartography to monitor and analyse the conflict remotely. Data collected from military communiqués are standardized, and analysed. Between November 2020 and November 2023, 4,306 attacks were recorded, with a noted decline in frequency, attributed to the efficacy of Morocco's defensive strategies. This work underscores the critical role of physical geography, particularly the challenging desert environment, in shaping military strategies and outcomes. The study also delves into guerrilla tactics employed by the POLISARIO Front, emphasizing the importance of rapid, flexible operations and the use of local knowledge and support. The findings provide a detailed overview of the conflict dynamics in Western Sahara and illustrate the potential of GIS and historical cartography in conflict monitoring and analysis.

Keywords: Historical Cartography, Western Sahara, GIS, Western Sahara War Archives

Resumen: Este artículo presenta un estudio exhaustivo sobre la Guerra del Sáhara Occidental, en el que se aprovechan los SIG y la cartografía histórica para seguir y analizar el conflicto a distancia. Se normalizan y analizan los datos recogidos de los comunicados militares. Entre noviembre de 2020 y noviembre de 2023, se registraron 4.306 ataques, con una notable disminución de la frecuencia, atribuida a la eficacia de las estrategias defensivas de Marruecos. Este trabajo subraya el papel fundamental de la geografía física, en particular el difícil entorno desértico, en la configuración de las estrategias y los resultados militares. El estudio también profundiza en las tácticas de guerrilla empleadas por el Frente POLISARIO, destacando la importancia de las operaciones rápidas y flexibles y el uso de conocimientos y apoyo locales. Las conclusiones ofrecen una visión detallada de la dinámica del conflicto en el Sáhara Occidental e ilustran el potencial de los SIG y la cartografía histórica en el seguimiento y análisis de conflictos.

Palabras clave: Cartografía histórica, Sáhara Occidental, SIG, Archivos de la Guerra del Sáhara Occidental

Introduction

*Ejército de Liberación Popular Saharawi*¹ is the armed branch of *Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguia el Hamra y Río de Oro*² and, by extension, the Armed Forces of *Sahrawi Arabe*

¹ ELPS

² Frente POLISARIO (in english POLISARIO Front)

*Democratic Republic*³. They are, however, a liberation movement of popular origin (Hodges, 1983; Omar, 2017). And like all popular liberation forces, they use guerilla combat methods and tactics (Jensen, 2013).

It is not our intention to explore in detail the history of the actions of POLISARIO Front and ELPS. We will only summarise them in order to demonstrate the efficiency of guerrilla tactics when applied in the context of desert warfare, in this case in the Sahara Desert.

By the end of WWII, the western empires started to crumble and fall apart (Droz, 2006). The Spanish were no different. Spite the decline as a world power, Spain stood as one the European empires that reached the 20th century (Ortega, 2001). However, the stress of the Riff War, would overextend the thin Spanish army stationed in Africa. Franco dictatorship would be a factor of instability (Esteban & Timón, 2015; Hassan, 2019; Iglesias Amorín, 2015; Martín, 1973; Ortega, 2001).

In the wake of the independence of Morocco from France in 1956, the Moroccan royal house immediately started to overtake Spain as the primary powerhouse in the region (Esteban & Timón, 2015; Hassan, 2019; Martín, 1973; Ortega, 2001). Shielded in a nationalist rhetoric put forth by *Istiqlal* party⁴, first *Mohammed V* and then *Hassan II*, the Moroccan royal house, tried to annex Mauritania, parts of Algeria, *Ifni* and the other Spanish territories in the North and, Western Sahara (Hodges, 1983).

Mohamed V created pressure on Spain by using the *Jaich at-Tahrir*⁵ allowing him, to annex *Ifni* (Esteban & Timón, 2015; Hassan, 2019; Iglesias Amorín, 2015; Martín, 1973; Ortega, 2001). Later, Hassan II embarked on a political campaign, in order to spread Morocco's influence in north-west Africa. He wanted to establish his hegemonic power over the region, (re)creating, in his mind what constituted the former Pre-colonial Morocco. This political stance would be defended on the United Nations General Assembly⁶. Mauritania would join the claim, thus resulting in a massive discussion during the 2318th plenary meeting held on December 13th 1974. So, in order to clarify if either of those claims were valid under the General Assembly 1514 (XV), the UNGA would request an advisory opinion to the International Court of Justice⁷ in 1975. This request had two questions. Number one, was Western Sahara *terra nullius*⁸ at

³ SADR

⁴ Independence Party

⁵ Liberation Army

⁶ UNGA

⁷ ICJ

⁸ Latin expression meaning “nobody's land”. It has been in use since the 19th century as legal term in International Law as principle invoked by States as a justification to the claim of occupation of a strip of land.

the time of the Spanish colonization. If the response was negative, the follow up question was if there any type of ties whatsoever with either Morocco or Mauritania (ICJ, 1979). The ICJ would issue its opinion in October 1975 after analysing all sort of documentation (ICJ, 1980). The first question was refuted, but, in spite some tribes of Western Sahara had some ties to both Morocco and Mauritania, the Court found no sovereignty ties. (ICJ, 1975). Issuing an opinion against the claims of Morocco and Mauritania. *Hassan II* would claim the contrary, that the court had agreed with Morocco (Hodges, 1983).

However, in October 1975 Morocco had already sent soldiers to Western Sahara, in preparation of the “Green March”. *Hassan II* not waiting for the ICJ, sent in military forces disguised as civilians into Western Sahara, and stationed troops on the border. In November Morocco and Mauritania would officially invade (Besenyó, 2009; Hodges, 1983; Omar, 2017). While this was happening, and Mauritania, would reach an agreement with Spain to divide Western Sahara between the two African states, and in return, Spain would get a stake in Bou Craa, the Madrid Accords (Pinies, 1976). Mauritania being, in theory, the weaker army compared to Morocco, and after several attempts to fight both at the same time, POLISARIO Front decided to focus first on the Mauritanian forces.

This led to a change in combat strategy. It changed from a war which the main objective was to destroy the army to a war of attrition. This made the political and social pressure on the government in Nouakchott so unbearable that it had no choice but to withdraw and seek a peace agreement (Hodges, 1983).

The economic pressure of the war with POLISARIO Front became so intolerable that it reached 60 % of the Mauritanian national budget. But despite the involvement of France⁹, financial support from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the Ivory Coast, the internal situation combined with the financial situation dictated the signing of a peace agreement after a *coup-d'état*.

Morocco lost an important ally to the South and its moves to occupy the territories from where Mauritania retreated meant that the war effort doubled. The number of soldiers rose from 60,000 men to 120,000 men and the economic effort rose to 40 % of the state budget. It should be noted that between 1979-1989, the United States financed the Moroccan state and helped militarily by sending equipment, training and military advice, directly or via proxy. Saudi Arabia lent money to Morocco during this period. And Israel, alongside Saudi Arabia have also sold weapons to Morocco (Hodges, 1983; Jensen, 2013; Lourenço & Teixeira, 2023; Teixeira, 2022, 2023; Zunes & Mundy, 2022)

Taking advantage of the concentration of POLISARIO Front's attention on Mauritania, Morocco took the opportunity to advance deeper into Western Sahara. Later, after the withdrawal

⁹ Which sent war material and provided military support from Senegal.

of Mauritania, it took the opportunity to occupy the southern part of Western Sahara, while bombing with napalm and white phosphorous (MARTIN BERISTAIN et al., 2015).

In terms of materials and Moroccan soldiers sent to the territory of Western Sahara, they were not prepared for the climatic conditions. And despite installing Westinghouse radar systems¹⁰ during the 1980s, and being able to use Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicles¹¹, better known as Attack/Surveillance Drones¹², some imported from the USA, and combat aircraft¹³ (Jensen, 2013). The guerrilla tactics of POLISARIO Front, managed to cause considerable damage. Mobility and surprise attacks led to the destruction of a lot of military equipment, including bases. The seizure of military equipment and the capture of Moroccan soldiers (Hodges, 1983; Jensen, 2013).

They managed to force Morocco to retreat and change its strategy. Moving from a form of defensive-reactive warfare, in which it tried to react quickly against the guerrilla attacks, to a form of static defensive warfare, by building the military separation wall (Hodges, 1983; Jensen, 2013).

In other words, with the construction of the wall, Morocco set up a defensive system based on electronic detection systems (radars), with military bases in the first line, control bases in the rear lines and air bases on one side and mines on the other.

Exposed and under pressure, Morocco's static defensive war would eventually lead to a stalemate. This impasse dictated the *status quo* until the ceasefire of 1991. Despite the fact that POLISARIO Front was able to break through the wall to make incursions since the wall was built in several stages. The separation barrier it created between the POLISARIO Front and the rest of the Sahrawi population posed a serious obstacle to the effectiveness of the guerrilla tactics. It was one of the factors that contributed most to the progress of the mediation and negotiation efforts that resulted in the ceasefire.

On November 13th 2020, the long-standing cease-fire agreement between POLISARIO Front and Morocco was denounced by POLISARIO. A group of peaceful Sahrawi protesters, protesting against a new breach in the Berm¹⁴, in *Guergarat* was attacked by Moroccan forces (Ahmed & Jechtimi, 2020; Gali, 2020; Lourenço, 2020).

¹⁰ Imported from the United States and France.

¹¹ UCAV

¹² For example, the Bayraktar TB2 and the General Atomics MQ-9 Reaper (Predator B)], tanks [For example, the T-54, M1A1 Situational Awareness, M1A2M and M1A1 U.S. Marine Corps version

¹³ For example, the F-1 Mirage and F-16 Fighting Falcon fighters, and the AH-64 Apache attack helicopter

¹⁴ Name by which the Moroccan military defense wall built in Western Sahara, is more commonly known.

By doing so, Morocco violated point 3, section 3.1, section 3.2 and subsection 3.2.1. of the cease-fire agreement (*Military Agreement N°1*, 1997). This action forced the Sahrawi Arabic Democratic Republic¹⁵ to promptly denounce the cease-fire agreement and to resume the war (CEAUP, 2021; Gali, 2020; Lourenço, 2020; Teixeira, 2022). Hence bringing an end to the twenty-three years cease-fire agreement, signed by both parties in 1997.

1. Historical Cartography

Statistics are a powerful, and yet neglected tool, that help historians to achieve a greater understanding of events, “*Maps, graphs, and statistics are tools to describe patterns in data. Explaining the patterns is an additional step requiring the traditional skills of an historian.*” (Gregory, 2008, p. 124). Statistics can provide useful insights, allowing the researcher to visualise the patterns in his dataset, that otherwise he wouldn't see. When it's mixed with spatial statistics¹⁶, creates a multi-variable approach, allowing the overlay of multiple aspects. Thus, creating links between phenomena¹⁷.

Spatial statistics are an amalgamation of three key components: spatial realm, time realm and thematic realm. This requires one realm to be represented, a simplification of a realm and to fix a third realm (Gregory, 2008). Thematic maps utilize to its fullest the spatial realm of the datasets, the fix realm. However, this typology of maps cannot properly handle time. In this order, the time realm will always be a single set point or a comparison between two set points, the simplified realm. Upon these two realms are superimposed a theme, the represented realm. These simplifications of data generate problems. It relies on an oversimplification of reality, by omitting some aspects over others. It needs the creation of polygons to represent, usually, man-made artificial zones, which limits the data. And only displays one or two aspects (Gregory, 2008). In a way, acting like quantitative data. Needing further qualitative explanation of the patterns. Because it only shows the physical connections, not the reasons behind the interactions between different locations and social actors.

In spite of its limitations, space is important to the understanding of the phenomena. It allows the researcher to break large spaces into smaller, more feasible ones to study the larger aspect. Allowing for a more personal behaviour/interactions between components and the space

¹⁵ SADR

¹⁶ It's the branch of statistics that studies geographical related datasets of social nature not related to pure economics.

¹⁷ For example: Is growth in population in an area linked to an increase in crime in the same area? Statistically speaking, they are two deferent datasets, that alone can only imply correlation. When superimposed onto a map, can lead to confirmation, or not, of the correlation. We can see, or not, the physical link, but we will still need more qualitative data to actually confirm our hypothesis.

(Gregory, 2008). Whenever a historian applies those tools to his research, a new field opens up: Historical GIS (Bodenhamer, 2008; Gregory, 2008)

Historical GIS tries to understand/demonstrate the patterns regarding the spatial nature within a historical phenomenon through the means of applying quantitative and qualitative data onto maps (Bodenhamer, 2008). The idea is to represent the physical aspects of the historical phenomena, by reducing complex interconnected web of social actors, different events and different locations¹⁸ (Bodenhamer, 2008). Meaning, it helps to visualize the datasets of a historical event in an applied way, reducing the complexity to an easier to read, near schematic structure. Such as migrations patterns, troop movements, population growth, temperature and heat distribution, empires borders, trade routes. These representations can shed some light over phenomena. Allowing a glimpse of the reasons behind migrations movements, city construction/growths patterns, resources explorations, battlefield selections, routes selections ... *“Historical GIS is concerned with taking data in this form and turning into knowledge and new scholarship about the geographies of the past”* (Gregory, 2008, p. 124).

The integration of GIS technology contributes for a more complex analysis. We can see, at the same time, the different scales of the event, either in time or space. For example, the evolution of resource exploration and its impacts on migrations, city building and housing patterns. We can also track troops movements along a battlefield. The clash of armies and the building of fortifications. When the first example is alongside with the second, we might see reasons for a war, better comprehend the strategies used, and the post war evolution or the pre-war escalations of tensions (Bodenhamer, 2008)

“This integrative ability means that historian can construct multiple perspectives [...] We can shift scales quickly, zoom in and out, and view level of detail. Spatial relationships can prompt questions we might otherwise ignore; we can build intuit connections for further exploration.”
(Bodenhamer, 2008, p. 223).

Consequently, in order to understand the situation in Western Sahara, we need first to characterize the environment.

2. Theatre of Operations: Desert

Physical geography plays an important role in any scenario of human evolution/action. The temperature, the presence or absence of drinking water, the existence of extreme landforms. All of this determines how the social actor acts in relation to the environment around him and how he is affected by it. This is even more evident in war scenarios, especially those that take place in terrain considered to be extreme.

¹⁸ Both in time and space.

Western Sahara it is the westernmost part of the Sahara Desert. It has an area of 266,000 km², of which 78.5 % is arid¹⁹. In climatological terms, it falls into the Subtropical Climate classification, in the Hot Desert Climate (BWh) subcategory on the Köppen-Geiger scale. It has a temperature range that varies between 23°C (in February) and 50°C (August) during the day. With a relative humidity of between 60% and 65% and 0.4 - 1.4²⁰ rainy days per year.

There is a prevalence of *Harmattan* wind, a dry, dust-laden wind with a north-east-east direction. During the winter-spring period, *Sirocco* winds occur, a warm and humid wind with a south-east-south-west direction, loaded with particles of sand and dust.

With the rekindling of the sparks of war, in order to understand the context in which the data is collected, it is necessary to understand the effects that a theatre of operations in a desert environment has at the following levels:

- Equipment/Armour;
- Units/Soldiers;
- Strategy.

3. Equipment/Armour

One of the main characteristics of an army, in any period of history, is the equipment it uses in combat. It's not much different today. The big difference is the large-scale use of firearms in all branches of the Armed Forces. They can be small calibre and for individual use, such as pistols and assault weapons or heavy calibre and used in medium-long range artillery weapons, as a form of support for infantry units or mechanised cavalry units.

Another, and this time major, difference is the widespread use of aviation as units capable of affecting the theatre of operations. With the introduction of the ability to fly into the art of war, a new chapter has been opened in the art of combat. With the help of helicopters, it is possible to pick up a unit at one point and take it to another point in the theatre of operations, in a faster, more effective and efficient way. Combat aviation enables far more effective operations, from support actions to the prior neutralisation of potential threats, such as attacks on fixed artillery positions, battalions of mechanised units and fortified positions. In very simplistic terms, a firearm consists of a short/medium/long-range weapon, with single fire, semi-automatic, automatic, or mixed fire, which fires a type of ammunition of a certain calibre²¹.

¹⁹ Natural water sources are rare, and most are saltwater sources.

²⁰ The precipitation rate that varies between 0.03 mm/day in July and 0.27 mm/day in October.

²¹ Calibre is the metric that measures the width of the rifle barrel or the width of the cartridge, e.g. 5.56 NATO, 7.62 × 51 mm NATO, .50 BMG.

The firing is a mechanical action that generates heat, which all components must withstand. Weapons capable of continuous fire have to withstand these high temperatures for a longer period of time.

For this reason, when the theatre of operations is a desert, where the temperature ranges are irregular, the risk of damage to the firing tubes is greater. Both by the action of heat²² during the day, and by the cold²³ at night (Gilewitch et al., 2014). The same applies to the fluids, rubbers, tyres²⁴, engine components²⁵, cooling systems, fuel intake control, afterburner systems²⁶. Sighting system²⁷ can be compromised and lead to potentially catastrophic breakdowns and failures. The vehicle or weapons system may become partially or completely inoperable or lead to serious failures during use (Army & Corps, 2021).

Stronger sunlight contributes to faster degradation of plastics, pressurised gases, lubricants and some chemicals, while it can also tamper with infra-red and thermal systems²⁸. Light Refraction, better known as *Mirages*, can cause problems with target acquisition, making the potential target appear closer than it really is. If this factor is not taken into account, it can lead to a loss of the element of surprise and position reporting or to an overshoot or undershoot, leading to unnecessary expenditure of ammunition and unnecessary stress on the system and components.

The electronic equipment is also highly sensitive to extreme temperature variations. When exposed to high temperatures, electronic components can go into meltdown or simply shut down the entire system completely. Communications over long distances are difficult and can be the reason why aeroplanes and helicopters cannot fly. Radio spectrum decreases during the day and at night static can cause communications difficulties (Army & Corps, 2021). Static electricity discharges can lead to fires. Batteries need to be monitored, as they lose their charge more quickly in hot weather.

²² Internal and external.

²³ Rapid heating and rapid cooling can cause unwanted cracks and/or bends in the barrel.

²⁴ Exposure to heat is greater, since the tires will be in contact not only with atmospheric heat, but also with the temperature of the ground they will be in contact with.

²⁵ Fluid transport hoses, such as petrol, can melt.

²⁶ A system used in jet or reaction engines, essentially used by aircraft and some tanks, such as the M1A2 Abrams tank, use systems of this kind to reuse elements that have not been burnt in the first pass through the engine. An afterburner system reuses these particles in order to generate an additional power boost.

²⁷ Optical, Digital or Laser Sights

²⁸ Heat Seeking Targeting Systems or Night Vision Goggles.

Wind, but especially the particles of sand that winds carry, affect the operational capacity of aircraft. They can cause atmospheric pressures that make flight impossible, accumulation of sand in engines, rotors, air intakes and outlets. The Sahara Desert is prone to sandstorms that can last for days (Army & Corps, 2021; Gilewitch et al., 2014).

4. Units/Soldiers

Like equipment, units and soldiers are adversely affected by extreme conditions. The main concern is dehydration, and by extension sodium loss²⁹, due to high temperatures. Soldiers at rest, can lose a quarter of their body water per hour. Low temperatures of the desert, however, can lead to hypothermia, which can cause frostbite and death (Army & Corps, 2021).

With high temperatures and low humidity, the body's temperature regulation function³⁰ occurs more frequently. However, this process is almost invisible, as the sweat is instantly dried, leaving no visible traces on the skin. A loss of 1.8 litres represents a loss of around 2.5% of body weight and a 25% decrease in efficiency. The loss of 15 % of body weight, if not treated immediately, leads to severe health problems, and ultimately, death (Army & Corps, 2021).

Sunlight is another risk factor. Repeated exposure can also cause sunburns, the appearance of blisters³¹, melanoma³², eye fatigue, vision impairments and facilitate the deregulation of body temperature, through extreme heat.

The high speed of the wind reduces visibility, destroys territorial marks and reduces communication capacity, which in turn can lead to soldiers getting lost from their platoon. Furthermore, wind can cause bodily harm, through either cut or/and wind burn. It may irritate soft tissue, like the lips, leading to difficulty in eating or causing eye infections (Army & Corps, 2021).

5. Tactics

A desert is a scenario of extreme conditions as we have seen, where any poorly planned action can result in scenarios far worse than simple combat. The physical and mental strain is at

²⁹ Via salt loss

³⁰ Sweating

³¹ Which, if left untreated, can lead to infections.

³² Skin Cancer

least 2x that of a so-called “normal” combat scenario³³ (Army & Corps, 2021). The ability to utilise vast areas of the desert in order to move combat forces quickly over long distances is imperative, since the terrain provides favourable conditions for long-distance shooting as well (Army & Corps, 2021; Gilewitch et al., 2014).

The geomorphology of the terrain is another “unknown”. It is quite easy to hide land mines under sand. Places where it seems safe to drive heavy machinery, can turn into quicksand due to the existent landforms³⁴, or they can be nothing more than sand dunes³⁵ (U.S. Army & U.S. Marine Corps, 2021). A sand desert can also turn into a mountainous desert overnight.

Venomous animals³⁶ and parasites are another set of dangers that exist in a desert environment. Nonetheless, all deserts are unique and complex scenarios and the Sahara is no exception (Gilewitch et al., 2014). It is a desert with little room for manoeuvre, in which large columns of tanks are easily constrained. The use of heavy mechanised cavalry is therefore inadvisable. The use of the air force is conditioned by atmospheric conditions. This makes the use of lighter, more mobile units essential.

Smaller units of infantry and light mechanised cavalry are the key to effective combat in this theatre of operations. POLISARIO Front fully adapted and knowledgeable of these conditions successfully employs guerrilla tactics (Jensen, 2013).

6. Guerilla Tactics

According to Mao Zedong the guerrilla units can be recruited from the social masses. The aim is to form paramilitary units³⁷, smaller than a normal battalion³⁸. Mao argues that two types of units should be formed: defensive and offensive. While the offensive units carry out the operation, the defensive units cover the retreat. Serving as a distraction, drawing attention to another area. As cover units, opening fire or as escape units.

³³ Extreme conditions of the climate and terrain make it easier to wear down the morale, physique, equipment and soldiers.

³⁴ Such as old riverbeds or mountain escarpments.

³⁵ They can be more than 30 metres high and stretch for kilometres, requiring them to be bypassed in order to cross safely.

³⁶ Palestine Yellow Scorpion, Varano, Noth African Desert Viper.

³⁷ Which may or may not work together with the regular armed forces

³⁸ The aim is to form cells capable of working independently, but centralized, either by neighborhood, city or region.

Combat units should be organised into:

- Platoons, the smallest units, composed of 3-6 units
- Battalions, made up of 2-4 Platoons
- Regiment, made up of 2-4 Battalions
- Brigades, made up of 2-4 Regiments

The aim is to wage unconventional warfare for an indefinite period of time. As its main strength is the masses of the population the troop movements, for example, even within occupied territory, become much easier. In theory, the population of that territory is an ally (Guevara, 1964). Facilitating the integration into the social fabric of guerrillas who may come from outside. They can help make guerrillas “disappear” after a successful or unsuccessful attack. Serving as a logistics facilitator, allowing guerrillas in the heart of occupied territory to be resupplied with food, weapons and ammunition (Guevara, 1964).

For Che Guevara(1964) “[...] *guerrilla fighting is not passive self-defence; it is defence with attack [...]*”. The intention is to wear down enemy forces³⁹ and/or disperse their forces. Taking away their ability to respond quickly to events. Attacking lines of communication, supply lines, strategic defence points, using multiple attacks in multiple zones at the same time or using blitzkrieg methods. It consists of rapid attacks, using operational means capable of utilising the element of surprise to attack a target and withdraw within a limited and short period of time, so that the enemy is unable to respond. Or when the reaction forces arrive, the units that attacked are no longer there.

Attacks should be carried out where they are least expected, or where they are expected, but on the side that is most unexpected (Griffith, 1989). In order to make the best use of this means, they must use light weaponry⁴⁰ appropriate to the type of operation, fast vehicles and mobile means of communication⁴¹. The equipment must be easy to use and in line with their mission, or use material that can be obtained on site “[...] *The standard of equipment is based upon the nature of duties assigned [...] The equipment of guerrillas cannot be based on what the guerrillas want, or even what they need, but must be based on what is available for their use. [...]*” (Griffith, 1989). This requires an excellent knowledge of the terrain, local customs, fauna and flora. Mao identifies the need to study the theatre of operations, divide the terrain into smaller scenarios and establish various bases and support networks.

Precise, efficient and effective coordination is a necessity and is based on this knowledge. Thus, one of the first needs, after establishing the guerrilla groups, is to set up support bases, communication and supply lines (Griffith, 1989). It is from these bases that the operations will

³⁹ Physically and mentally.

⁴⁰ Tactical weaponry such as assault weapons.

⁴¹ Preferably disposable and which do not compromise the communications network.

be carried out. The targets chosen are crossing points, choke sections, places where the forces are more dispersed. The aim is to be quick and brutal, by exploiting the element of surprise. Lines of communication and supplies are also favoured targets (Griffith, 1989).

Another favourite target is symbols of morale. Attack where the enemy forces feel superior, through rapid incursions from and/or within occupied territory. Or through acts of sabotage, such as destroying bridges, preventing crucial access to a base or the arrival of support units. The destruction of surveillance and monitoring stations. Capturing soldiers is also a way of demoralising forces (Griffith, 1989; Guevara, 1964).

In short, the leadership of the guerrillas must be aware of the need to be on constant alert, the need to move quickly and tactical flexibility to operate in complex theatres of operations. The use of guerrilla warfare is not something that can be left to chance, its action is only possible with serious and comprehensive planning. The fact that each platoon functions as an independent cell must also be subordinate to an overall strategy. A balance must be struck between independence and centralised command. This strategy must include the use of regular forces in order to complement guerrilla activities or exploit the latter's actions (Griffith, 1989).

7. The Project and the Analysis

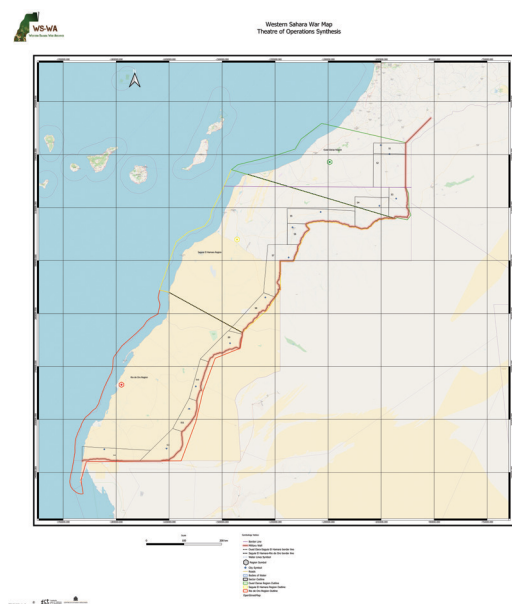
Faced with the events of November 13th, a media blackout and a history of denial and concealment of information by Morocco, CEAUP created a project to monitor the war. The platform we decided to use to provide information about the war was a digital platform (CEAUP, 2021). All the information collected from political, military and media documentation, is available in open access format and without restrictions.

In order to be able to analyse the phenomenon of the II Western Sahara War, a macro and a micro level of division of the theatre of operations was created. A symbolic language was established in order to facilitate the coding of data. A military region is coded as MRx. Sectors are coded as Sx. In graphic terms, each MR has been assigned a colour, and each sector a degradation of the colour of the corresponding military region.

The macro level is the largest geographical level of military activity and is made up of three military regions. Designated as MR1) *Oued Daraa* (Green); MR2) *Saguia El Hamara* (Yellow); MR3) *Rio e Oro* (Red) (Teixeira, 2022a). And at the micro level, where military operations take place, it is made up of thirteen sectors. These are designated as S1; S2; S3; S4; S5; S6; S7; S8; S9; S10; S11; S12; S13.

The data corresponding to the attacks is published by the SADR, in the form of military communiqués, on the website of the Sahara Press Service the official Sahrawi news agency (SPS, 1999). The military communiqués are published in Arabic, Spanish, French and

Western Sahara War Map _ Theatre of Operations Synthesis



Map 1 – Theatre of Operations of the war- The three MR and the thirteen sectores

English. In the collection protocol we established to collect press releases in Spanish. This choice is due to the fact that they contain the most information and are published most regularly. In terms of periodicity, the data is collected daily. The data collected are the dates of the attacks, the locations within the sectors that were attacked, the number of attacks carried out and additional information (such as battalion bases, radars, various infrastructures, where applicable, number of dead). The fact that *Hassaniya* is an oral dialect rather than a written one, created the problem of spelling out the names of locations. In order to overcome this difficulty, a partnership was set up with the Sahrawi Diaspora in France to create a list of standardised names.

Once collated, the data is entered into an Excel table. The names are compared with the database of already clarified names. The attacks are counted and transformed into statistical data, shown in graphs and maps.

As we can see in Table 1 between November 13th 2020 and November 13th 2023, ELPS made 4306 attacks, with an average 1435.33 attacks per year. Year 1 was the one with most

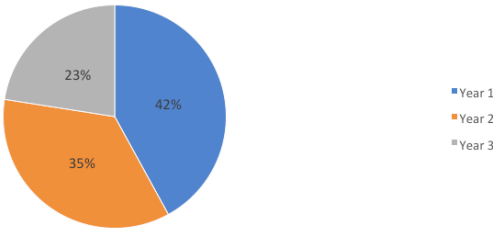
attacks counted, 1809 attacks. The least attacked year was year number 3, with a total of 920 attacks. The most attacked MR was MR1 comprising 53 % of the total of attacks, follow by MR2 with 30 %.

Theatre of Operations: Western Sahara

	Total of Attacks Per Year	Total of Attacks (2020-2023)	Average	Mode	Median	Standard Deviation
Year 1	1809	4306	1435.33	#N/A	1527	426.95
Year 2	1527					
Year 3	970					

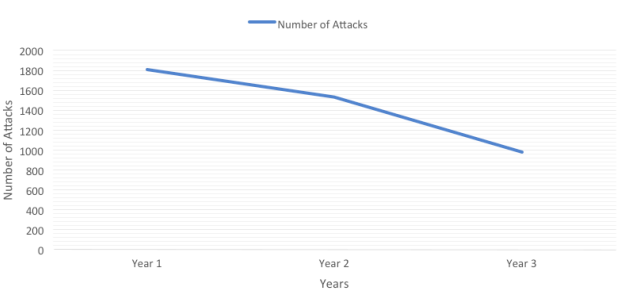
Table 1 – Theater of Operations: Western Sahara

Total of Attacks per year



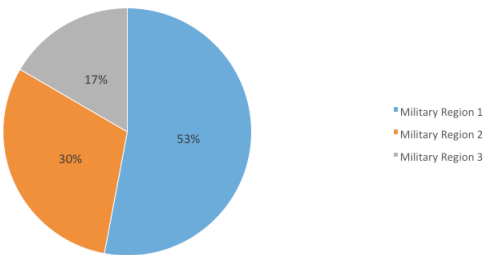
Graphic 1 – Total of Attacks per year in Western Sahara

Evolution of the number of attacks made by ELPS during the II Western Sahara War (2020-2023)



Graphic 2 – Evolution of the number of attacks made by ELPS during the II Western Sahara War (2020-2023)

Total of Attacks per MR



Graphic 3 – Total of Attacks per Military Region

Overall, the data indicates a downward trend. The total number of attacks has been decreasing yearly. Going down from a total of 1809 attacks in year 1 to 970 attacks in year 3. This stems from the efficacy of the wall as a defence system preventing the advance of the guerrilla fighters of ELPS. Only allowing the Moroccan army long range attacks, while relying on Drones strikes to counter-attack (SMACO, 2024).

Military Region	Year	Total of Attacks Per Year	Total of Attacks (2020-2023)	Average	Mode	Median	Standard Deviation
MR1	1	918	2281	760.33	#N/A	812	188.88
	2	812					
	3	551					
MR2	1	506	1310	436.67	#N/A	468	89.23
	2	468					
	3	336					
MR3	1	385	715	238.33	#N/A	247	151.19
	2	247					
	3	83					

Table 2 – Number of attacks per Military Region (2020-2023)

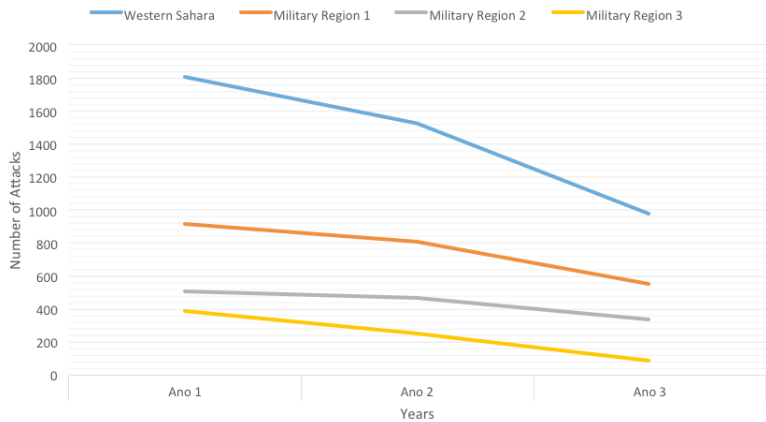
However, this is a double edge sword. Morocco over relays on its military technology. The *Forces Armées Royales* in 1956⁴², by recurring to Western consultants and trainers alongside the integration of soldiers from the former colonial army, the FAR became the main defence

⁴² FAR

weapon of the *Alawite* monarchy. After the alignment with the United States of America⁴³, the forces entered an innovation phase (Teixeira, 2023), that integrated a massive amount of technology, buying new weaponry and supplies parts on regular bases from the US and Israel (Agency, 2018, 2019; SIPRI, 2024).

As we have seen, the harsh environment of a desert has the potential of causing tremendous problems. The Sahara Desert is no different. The devastating sandstorms can alter the battlefield in an instant, by blocking the skies, not allowing the aerial vehicles to fly, jamming all technological equipment, rendering it useless. The soldiers are in a constant stationary situation. In front of them is a military defence wall covered in barbed wire and minefields. The military defence wall is separating the territory of Western Sahara. Approximately 2/3 of it is under Moroccan occupation. So, it's a military wall that was built in the middle of the desert with military bases. In addition to all the risks we have mentioned that desert conditions can cause, we have to add the psychological fact of isolation feelings of the Moroccan soldiers. The important psychological effects on Moroccan soldier's health and moral are one of the issues of this kind of warfare. The carrying out of constant bombing raids by POLISARIO Front, makes it a war of low impact and attrition.

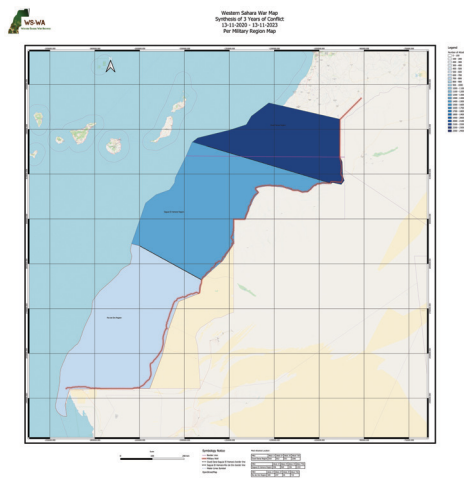
II Western Sahara War: Evolution of the attacks (2020-2023)



Graphic 4 – II Western Sahara War:Evolution of the attacks (2020-2023)

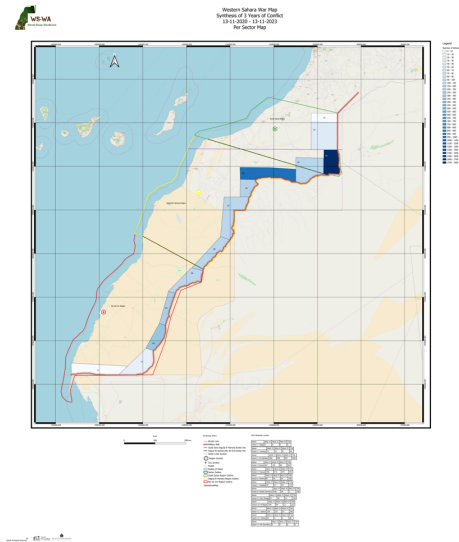
⁴³ USA

II Western Sahara War: Evolution of the attacks (2020-2023)



Map 2 – Western Sahara War Map: Synthesis of 3 Years of Conflict (13-11-2020 to 13-11-2023) Per Military Region Map

II Western Sahara War: Evolution of the attacks (2020-2023)



Map 3 – Western Sahara War Map: Synthesis of 3 Years of Conflict (13-11-2020 to 13-11-2023) Per Sector Map

8. Conclusion

War is a human activity that carries many risks. A war in which the theatre of operations is a desert adds to the difficulties. In addition to the health problems caused by exposure to thermal fluctuations, winds and dangerous animals, there are the implications that the same elements can have on weapons. Winds and sandstorms can render air assets inoperable. Thermal fluctuations can render combat equipment, weapons and tanks useless due to the ease with which extreme heat and extreme cold can cause equipment to buckle, tyres to burst and pipes to explode.

The psychological impact of the environment is also a factor. Inclement weather, the presence of venomous animals and the possibility of illnesses that can prevent the body from functioning properly are all factors that severely affect morale and psychological state.

The geography of a desert also causes problems. Dunes, old riverbeds that quickly become unstable. The sudden appearance of cliffs and rocky areas make it difficult for a conventional army to manoeuvre. It does, however, facilitate guerrilla manoeuvres.

Guerrilla warfare is an asymmetrical and unconventional form of combat. It requires the support of the local population and extreme knowledge of the geography of the place where it is being fought. In a desert environment, both factors are extremely important.

This was well demonstrated by the way in which the POLISARIO Front fought against the Spanish, Mauritians and Moroccans. The need by Morocco to build the wall is testimony to this superiority.

The military defence wall is an unavoidable element for the POLISARIO Front. In the 1990s it led to a state of stagnation and was one of the elements that led to the establishment of the Ceasefire Agreement, signed in 1991.

With the resumption of the war on November 13th 2020, problems arose again. Adapting to this new reality, POLISARIO Fronts guerrilla attacks still continue. So far, these attacks are mainly bombing raids against the wall.

It is within this context that CEAUP has developed the Western Sahara War Archives project. A digital platform that provides open access to all available documentation on the resumption of the conflict. Accompanying the documentation, the project team, using new GIS technologies, spatial statistics and historical research, provides statistical data on what is happening on the ground. Between 2020 and 2023, 4306 attacks were recorded. However, given the presence of the wall, the war is still in a state of low impact and friction.

Given this situation, the team's analyses show that the number of attacks is falling. This indicates that the war is not overcoming the stalemate it has been in since the 80s. Morocco continues to deny that the war is happening. But it has continued to employ the use of UCAVs. Maintaining its tendency to rely on the use of technological elements. This dependence, within a theatre of operations, could prove dangerous. With its soldiers trapped behind the Berm, buffeted by attacks from the POLISARIO Front, the psychological impact could be profound. Combined with a catastrophic failure of its technological resources, the course of the war could turn in favour of the POLISARIO Front.

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Sáhara Occidental
– *una historia de nuestro tiempo*
en los debates internacionales

Environmental Reflections of Plundering Natural resources of Western Sahara. ☐

☐ <https://doi.org/10.21747/3078-431X/tifa6>

Abstract: The continuous and extensive exploitation of natural resources in Western Sahara has undeniably negative consequences for the environment. However, there is a notable lack of significant studies investigating its environmental repercussions. The marine resources in Western Sahara, exploited by foreign fleets for decades and further depleted under Moroccan occupation, have reached alarming levels. The extraction, transportation, and processing of phosphate rocks from the Boukraa mine, one of the world's largest phosphate mines, have resulted in severe pollution, which pose substantial health risks and contaminate water sources, air quality, soil, and the marine ecosystem. The absence of an effective environmental policy enforced by the Moroccan occupation is directly responsible for this damaging environmental state.

Keywords: SADR, environment, pollution, phosphate,

Resumen: La explotación continua y extensiva de los recursos naturales del Sáhara Occidental tiene innegables consecuencias negativas para el medio ambiente. Sin embargo, existe una notable falta de estudios significativos que investiguen sus repercusiones medioambientales. Los recursos marinos del Sáhara Occidental, explotados por flotas extranjeras durante décadas y esquilados aún más bajo la ocupación marroquí, han alcanzado niveles alarmantes. La extracción, el transporte y el procesamiento de las rocas fosfáticas de la mina de Boukraa, una de las mayores minas de fosfato del mundo, han provocado una grave contaminación, que supone importantes riesgos para la salud y contamina las fuentes de agua, la calidad del aire, el suelo y el ecosistema marino. La ausencia de una política medioambiental eficaz aplicada por la ocupación marroquí es directamente responsable de este perjudicial estado medioambiental.

Palabras clave: RASD, medio ambiente, contaminación, fosfato,

Environmental studies on the effects of intensive overexploitation of Natural Resources in Western Sahara have not yet been conducted. However, there are frequent discussions regarding multiple data showing catastrophic imbalances in water, fishing, and mining sectors, particularly in the occupied territories of Western Sahara. The study conducted for the German Environment Agency on the Bu Craa mine in April 2018 sheds some light on the current and future environmental situation of the region, highlighting the exception that proves the rule.

Due to the lack of specialized environmental studies on the effects of widespread exploitation of Sahara's natural resources on the environment and its impact on both humans and nature, several principal reasons, among others, may be noted as environmental abuses in Western Sahara:

- ✓ The absence of a clear legal framework and national strategy in Morocco for environmental protection, as revealed by the United Nations' environmental performance review in 2014¹.
- ✓ The prevalence of corruption and clientelism, which shield actors in the fishing and mining sectors in occupied Saharawi territories from punishment, while the Moroccan king's family and senior security and military officials wield unchecked power over the law.
- ✓ The absence of clear strategies for sustainable development in fishing and the widespread exploitation of phosphate and sand mines without generating added value or fostering a renewable economic cycle.
- ✓ The lack of plans or strategies related to environmental obligations, safety conditions, and the implementation of safe exploitation, with no differentiation between exploited sites in occupied Saharawi territories and Moroccan regions.

While awaiting specialized studies, we will briefly review aspects of the environmental reflections of the exploitation of natural resources in the Saharawi context as examples, but not exclusively:

I – Ground water

Western Sahara is located in a dry, water-scarce region, where there are no rivers and rainfall is characterized by scarcity and fluctuation. Therefore, groundwater remains the main source of water in Western Sahara. Groundwater deep size of reserves has not yet been accurately identified. It is important to emphasize here the modest results of projects implemented to desalinate seawater, which remains expensive due to its large energy needs. Groundwater in occupied Saharawi territories is subjected to devastating depletion processes supervised and benefited by the Moroccan Water Bureau as a Moroccan government institution that controls the extraction, treatment and distribution of water and obtains the proceeds of its extensive exploitation which constitutes a depletion of one of the most important environmental threatening of natural resources of Western Sahara.

¹ United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (2014): Environmental Performance Reviews: Morocco. In cooperation with United Nations Economic Commission for Africa.

Professor Moises Ponce de Leon believes that the extensive Moroccan exploitation of the groundwater of occupied Western Sahara should be seen as a plunder of natural resources of Western Sahara similar to the plunder of phosphate or fishery wealth².

The large scale of groundwater depletion is due to:

1. The urban expansion resulting from the Moroccan occupation brought hundreds of thousands of Moroccan settlers and their settlement in the cities of Western Sahara, whose population increased as a result of Moroccan settlement from 74 thousand people in 1974 to more than 600 thousand people in 2022. This urban expansion has led to a significant increase in water consumption rates, both water intended for human consumption needs and those related to construction and housing projects, which have spread significantly in the framework of enabling and stabilizing Moroccan settlement policies in Western Sahara.
2. Projects of various industrial structures mainly in the vicinity of the cities of El Aaiun, Dakhla and Boujdour, such as cement factories, construction materials, fish canning and freezing plants, fish oil and flour industries etc.
3. There is no doubt that the current level of exploitation of groundwater and the existence of plans to expand agricultural projects near Dakhla, constitute sources of threat and serious depletion of the limited water supply area, will result in an increase in salinity of fresh water and then the scarcity of this water, which will make this dry area with rare rainfall will inevitably face a serious shortage of drinking water in the future.
4. Mineral activity: the processing of phosphate rocks before exporting them from the port of El Aaiun requires enrichment and impurity treatment processes, and large amounts of water are used in these annually, processes.

According to the report of the German Environment Agency, in 2015, the Moroccan phosphate Bureau established a seawater desalination plant, which produces up to 1.5 million cubic meters³ to meet the demand for fresh water after decades of depletion of Saharawi groundwater in its illegal operations aimed at processing and exporting looted Saharawi phosphate to dozens of countries around the world.

It is known that seawater desalination plants have negative effects on the environment, as they consume large amounts of energy and leave harmful waste, such as concentrated saline solutions, which negatively affect the marine environment.

². قباس ردصم، ءتيبر غلا ءارحصلال يف ايجولورديلا و ءايملا لوح قرضاحم، نويل يد س نوب سيس يوم روسيفورب

³ The German Environment Agency, OekoRess II: Country Case Study VI Morocco/Western Sahara: Phosphate (Bou Craa), (2018), P.31.

The Moroccan occupation's efforts to start exploiting the mineral ores in Tuwainat El - ghareg, Glebat Lefhouda and Zemelet Aghrasha, among other projects that require large amounts of water, pose additional sources of threat to the already scarce fresh water, which is exploited without conducting accurate assessment studies of its underground reserves, which opens the future of the region's water security to great risks.

In general, the groundwater reserves in Western Sahara have not been estimated in depth and accurately, and it can be said, within the limits of available information, that they are limited and non-renewable due to the scarcity of rains, which necessitates rational exploitation of the existing ones, which are currently subject to depletion due to urban expansion and increasing industrial, agricultural and mineral activities. It is important to turn to the Seawater desalination as an alternative to the widespread exploitation of groundwater.

II – Fishery

Sahrawi marine wealth has been subjected to extensive depletion operations by foreign fleets, especially European and Asian for decades during the colonial era, and this looting doubled after the Moroccan occupation, which practiced looting the Sahrawi marine wealth by expanding the activity of its naval fleets, issuing licenses for fishing in the Sahrawi territorial waters to foreign fleets belonging to dozens of countries, and this depletion has affected fish, molluscs, crustaceans, sea cucumbers and others.

In addition to the excessive exploitation of biomass in the Saharawi territorial waters, the activities of a number of European vessels on the Saharawi coasts after being banned in their countries due to their age and risks to the environment have been observed. The widespread use of towing vessels, unattended nets, the non-observance of biological rest times, dumping of thousands of tons of fish after being caught at sea, even the use of explosives, illegal, unattended and unauthorized fishing activities are all considered frequent and routine practices on the Saharawi coasts that are not governed by clear legal procedures⁴. All these factors combined with mismanagement, weak management and the expansion of corruption in the marine fishing sector; threaten the sustainability of Sahrawi marine resources and the extinction or scarcity of many marine species.

⁴ In a statement issued by the members of the Professional Association of Fishing Boat Owners on the High Seas in Morocco following their meeting in the city of Agadir on May 10, 2022, they expressed "their fears that the efforts made to ensure the sustainability of fisheries will be harmed, in light of the severe threat to which these fisheries are exposed, due to illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing activities, as is the case today on the southern coast - according to their expression - with their indication of the presence of more than 1,000 illegal boats active in octopus fishing under different names".

The levels of significant industrial expansion associated with the canning, freezing, fishmeal and fish oil industries, the number of units in the occupied Saharawi cities amounted to about 150 factories, as well as supplying the cities of the fish industries in Morocco with their needs of Saharawi fish. Additionally, the volume of exports, estimated through the activity of 206 export companies in the cities of El Aaiun, Dakhla and Boujdour, and the scale of multinational foreign looting of Saharawi fish resources, are all considered direct indicators of the scale of looting and the catastrophic depletion of Saharawi marine wealth.

Unwanted fish are also discarded or replaced with species of greater commercial value on a large scale, sometimes up to half of the catch, and the amount of organic matter thrown away and disposed of in the case of the Saharawi aquarium is estimated at about 114,000 tons per year, which may have affected food relations⁵.

The looting and depletion of molluscs due to their high market value and the entry of “big whales” into their exploitation activities, this is a topic that needs some stopping at its size and its obvious risks to the sustainability of these Saharawi marine riches and the dire threats to the balance of the Saharawi marine ecosystem, which has been disrupted more than once, a situation that has been repeatedly alerted by specialized authorities at the local, regional and international levels.

The last two decades of the last century and the following have witnessed a huge increase in the volume of Moroccan and foreign depletion of molluscs in the Saharawi coasts, especially in the vicinity of the city of Dakhla, and in light of the struggle of influential Moroccan lobbies supported by foreign capital in order to acquire larger shares of the spoils of Saharawi molluscs due to the high demand for them in the European and Asian markets and their high market value, which opened the door to the struggle of financial forces and influence in Morocco, in which political and financial parties located at the top of the political and financial pyramid in Morocco, starting from the Royal Institution, and since King Mohammed VI is the first shareholder of Omnium)) or Al-zabdi group as well as Generals Abdelaziz Bennani, Abdelhak Kadiri and Hosni Ben Slimane as well as some men of influential families due to their origin and political position during the decolonization of Western Sahara⁶.

A class of Moroccan businessmen has also emerged, whose great activity is to invest in marine fishing, and they control a large percentage of the activities of the marine fishing sector in the occupied Saharawi territories, especially in the Dakhla region, and they are protected and sponsored by the occupying Moroccan Authority, the most prominent of these is Mohammed

⁵ Balguerías, E. 1996. Discards in fisheries from the Eastern Central Atlantic (CECAF Region). FAO Fisheries Report, no. 547, Supplement: 183–214.

⁶ Victoria Veguilla. Conflits et actions collectives autour de l'exploitation du poulpe au Maroc. Politique africaine 2009/4 (N° 116), pp. 43 à 62.

Al-Zabdi, known locally as the king of the pelagic, who is the owner of the Zabdi group, which owns a number of companies, including the company “Golden Fish”, which is one of the largest sardine canning and exporting companies in the world, the beloved known for happy beard, the prominent face in the hunt Octopus trading, the owner of a number of refrigeration units and the owner of a number of companies working in marine fishing in the Dakhla region, such as “golden golf”, “Koza Beach”, Abdul Rahim Al-hibza and his brothers, who are considered one of the largest ship owners and traders of marine fishing products in Dakhla, in addition to Ibrahim Al-batah, Al-qabaj, Alalaj, Al-hamdawi and others.

This conflict involved conglomerates of Moroccan companies that received government support and foreign funding, primarily Chinese and Emirati, in order to invest in Saharawi octopus fishing, among the most prominent of these conglomerates:

- The Professional Association of high seas boat masters in Morocco, known in short as APAPHAM, which was founded in 1978 and includes a mixed Moroccan and Chinese capital, and the total tonnage of each of its vessels is 797 tons on average, all its huge vessels are active in the Saharawi waters between Boujdour and Leguera and includes a modern fleet equipped with the latest fishing and navigation technologies. the Professional Association of high seas boat masters in Morocco represents the interests of a number of companies, such as OMP Ominium Marocain de Pêche group (54 vessels), Marona which affiliated with ONA Group⁷ (40 vessels), the South Atlas fisheries company (20 vessels) and others. These companies with great political and economic influence oriented to octopus fishing, and they have benefited from government subsidies⁸. The number of its vessels active in fishing for Saharawi octopus reached 324 vessels.

- The Arab Maghreb-United Arab Emirates fishing company, known as UMEP (Union Maghreb Émirats Arabs Unis de Pêche), includes a number of environment and small companies dedicated to octopus fishing. It was established in 1989 with joint financing between Morocco and the United Arab Emirates, and the number of its vessels operating in the territorial waters of the Sahara reached 67 vessels. Later the two groups united and formed the Moroccan cephalopod Hunters Association known as ACM.

⁷ ONA group is the largest Moroccan company ever and one of the largest companies in the Arab world, It controls large sectors of the Moroccan economy, such as the milk and dairy products sector, the sugar industry, fishing, real estate, agriculture, communications, oils, mines, and retail, in addition to having an important stake in the largest private bank in Morocco, Attijariwafa Bank. The King Mohammed VI and his royal family own a large share of the company's shares, and the company enjoys preferential treatment in many economic sectors.

⁸ Ismail Azaguagh et Ahmed Driouchi,)2019(: Gestion des ressources halieutiques au Maroc et modes d'accès : Le modèle des «AntiCommons» et la pêche poulpière, Revue Marocaines de Sciences. Agronomiques et Vétérinaires, volume 7 n 1, p 5.

In addition, the activity of foreign vessels directed to the fishing of molluscs, where 150 vessels belonging to the EU countries practiced octopus fishing off the Sahrawi coasts during the nineties after obtaining a license under the maritime fishing agreements between Morocco and the EU.

Due to extensive overfishing and overexploitation of molluscs by Moroccan and European fishermen, “the cephalopod catch increased from only 1,100 tons in 1991 to 88,000 tons in 1999, which led to an alarming decrease in cephalopod stocks, which went from 100,000 tons in 2000 to 8,000 tons in June 2004”⁹.

The scale of this widespread looting is shown by the rocket increase in the number of octopus freezing units in the city of Dakhla, whose number increased from 4 units in 1994 to 94 units in 2004, as well as the increase in the number of fishing vessels on the Moroccan high seas, all of which are active in Saharawi territorial waters, and octopus fishing accounts for 73% of its activity, from 4 vessels in 1973 to 228 in 1984 to 353 in 2020.

This acceleration in the pace of insane looting of molluscs, which peaked in 2000 with the capture of 45,233 tons of octopus, as was announced, soon reflected on the vital stock of molluscs in Western Sahara, so the volume of catch in 2004 fell to the level of only 12,417 tons, this catastrophic situation prompted the Moroccan Institute for research in Marine Fisheries in October 2003 to sound the alarm by announcing a dramatic decrease in the size of molluscs, where announced a sharp decline in the stock of octopus 80% in 2003, which he confirmed again in his report published in 2004¹⁰.

The Moroccan and foreign depletion of molluscs fisheries in Western Sahara led the food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in 2010 to urgently recommend reducing the overexploitation of molluscs, especially by tugboats in the Dakhla region, which, as mentioned, may lead to the interruption of the life cycle of these precious marine creatures and their extinction.

Similar warnings were issued years after the 2003-2004 disaster by the food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)¹¹ and the organization for Economic Cooperation

⁹ Sandrine, DAVANTURE, «Les limites de l'application du droit sur les ressources naturelles: le cas des territoires palestiniens et du Sahara occidental», mémoire de maîtrise, Université du Québec à Montréal (Dir. René Côté), 2005, p. 69.

¹⁰ INRH (2004). Note relative à l'état du stock du poulpe, Campagne d'évaluation par chalutage du Navire de Recherche Charif Al Idrissi, 2004. Département des Ressources Halieutiques.

¹¹ FAO, (2014). The state of world fisheries and aquaculture, Opportunities and challenges, FAO, Rome 2014.

and Development (OECD)¹², which confirmed in 2014 that most of the Saharawi octopus stocks are under threat due to overexploitation, overfishing and mismanagement.

The Moroccan Institute for research in Marine Fisheries reiterated in its 2016 report that the effects of the 2003 disaster have not recovered the stock of the Saharawi octopus, noting: “the stock of octopus in southern Morocco is characterized by fragility and instability and cannot be rebuilt after a long period of overexploitation, especially the very advanced state of collapse that occurred in 2003¹³.”

The deterioration of the vital stock of molluscs is what prompted the introduction of the so-called “reconfiguration of molluscs traps” scheme. It is clear that this scheme has yielded little results due to the chaos and nepotism that governs this sector, with the spread of false data on fishing quantities, smuggling, as well as the practice of octopus fishing at biological rest times, as witnessed by hundreds of trucks transporting octopus from the occupied Saharawi cities to Morocco, as well as the use of rubber tires, unlicensed boats and other methods of circumvention and circumvention of the already fragile procedures.

Large-scale fishing, indiscriminate fishing and overexploitation of molluscs stocks in the Saharawi marine basin have known the rise again; the octopus catch has increased from 10,000 tons in 2004 to 55,000 tons in 2018¹⁴, threatening the biomass with an inevitable environmental catastrophe.

In June 28, 2022 the report published by the Moroccan Institute for research in Marine Fisheries alerted to the new environmental disaster that has hit the stock of the Saharawi octopus based on the results of the monitoring campaign conducted by his teams between March 24 and April 3. In 2022, the alarm was raised again about the catastrophic situation of the octopus’s sharp decline reached in the area between Boujdour and Leguera, which decreased by 60% compared to the same period in 2021¹⁵, and the report shows that “the severity of the recorded collapse can only be explained by excessive and systematic exploitation that destroys the capabilities of replenishing the fish stock itself, as the study associated with the scientific indicators of the status of Excessive as a result of non-compliance with the measures and procedures adopted by the rotation trap, foremost of which are periods of biological rest, reproduction”.

¹² OCDE (2014). Utilisation des ressources halieutiques, dans Panorama de l’environnement 2013: Les indicateurs de l’OCDE, Éditions OCDE.

¹³ Ismail Azaguagh and Ahmed Driouchi, 2019. Previously mentioned source, p. 7.

¹⁴ This is how the “Halieutis” plan increased the production and exports of marine fishing, Al-Akhbar Press, September 16, 2019.

¹⁵ The report of the Moroccan Institute for Research in Marine Fisheries in December 2022 raises this percentage to 82%.

In light of this catastrophic situation, the Moroccan Institute for research in Marine Fisheries confirms in its report that “the lack of respect for breeding and biological rest periods, the continuation of overfishing activity and depletion has led to an unprecedented critical situation, the catastrophe that had befallen the southern fisheries years ago will be reborn, if the custodian administration does not take urgent and immediate measures, such as, managing octopus fishing on the principle of fishing within the limits of biological productivity levels and stock replenishment levels, reducing the mortality rate (fishing volume) through the management of fishing effort (number of fishing fleet, fishing mechanisms, fishing duration...etc.) and also the determination of quotas granted to octopus fishing sectors (cotta).

It should be emphasized that the fact that octopus is not the only marine wealth at risk due to overexploitation, chaotic and uncontrolled fishing, but there are many marine species threatened with extinction from the territorial waters of the Sahara, the Supreme Council of accounts, a Moroccan regulatory body, in its report on the marine fishing sector, through its evaluation of what is known as the “Halieutis Plan” for the period 2009-2020, indicating the need to “adopt a voluntary program to rebuild stocks for species that are in a state of overexploitation, such as pink shrimp, white hake, sea bream, bream, Corbin, sea bass, and gray sea bream in the Atlantic Ocean”.¹⁶

In addition to the depletion of Fish and molluscs, some fishing methods practiced on the Saharawi coasts with traditional equipment contribute to environmental pollution and the destruction of the marine environment “each traditional fishing boat uses more than 800 plastic bottles in the sea on each fishing trip, monitoring the rate of loss of these bottles by 36% to 58%, which leads to an approximate figure of up to 1.5 million bottles lost at sea every year, turning the bottles into ghost traps that increase the exposure of female octopuses to death more namely, plastic bottles are worrying sources of pollution,” says the report of the Moroccan Institute for research in Marine Fisheries (June 2022), moreover, the «Targeting small sizes using illegal nets, with narrow eyes increases the percentage of octopus fry thrown into the sea, and from other fish species, and this also has a reflection on the marine environment, and on the decline in the percentage of oxygen in the water,» says the same report, and all this contributes to the degradation of biomass.

The devastating environmental effects of large-scale industrial activity associated with the exploitation of marine wealth in the occupied Saharawi territories is another manifestation of the dangers of the frightening exploitation of Saharawi marine resources, for example, the production of one ton of fishmeal requires about 5 tons of fresh fish.

The impact of such a large-scale exploitation of the Sahrawi marine wealth-only through overfishing by Moroccan fishermen who practiced a large and continuous crawl on the Sahrawi

¹⁶ <https://lakome2.com/decryptage/134269/>

coasts after the depletion of the wealth of the Moroccan coasts or through intensive foreign fishing – Including the catch directed for industrial purposes such as canning, freezing, flour, fish oil industries and others in the occupied Saharawi territories (149 industrial units in the cities of El Aaiun, Dakhla and Boujdour) or directed to the numerous factories in Moroccan cities, especially Safi and Agadir, as well as its direct effects on the regeneration of the biomass of the Saharawi Marine Area, which the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations has warned more than one location, for example, fishmeal odors cause respiratory diseases Such as asthma, respiratory infections, allergic rhinitis, eyes, skin eczema infections, diseases of the stomach, intestines, pharynx and others.

In addition to the extensive exploitation of water and energy sources in these industries, their risks to the environment and human health represent deep concerns, especially in light of poor compliance with safety conditions, low environmental culture, lack of interest in waste treatment with modern technical methods, the absence of control, the spread of corruption and nepotism and weak management in this sector.

III – Phosphates

The high environmental risks of extracting phosphate from the Bu Craa mine-despite the lack of accurate data on the environmental effects of this mineral activity - can be confirmed by comparison with similar cases that have been documented as ecological disasters in phosphate mining areas, as in the case of Rusaifa in Jordan and the Tunisian mining basin area, especially in Redif and Gafsa in western Tunisia, in addition to Jorf Lasfar, Youssoufia and Safi in Morocco, which are areas where extensive contamination with phosphate substances has been documented through specialized studies.

Despite the lack of a comprehensive assessment of the environmental impacts on mining activities at the Bu Craa mine in detail, with the exception of a study conducted by the German Environment Agency in 2018, it is certain that the extensive mining activities known in the Bu Craa area and its surroundings for decades, and in the absence of a real environmental safety rules in the activity of the company exploiting the mine, leave contaminated in phosphate rocks, in addition to phosphates, these rocks contain cadmium, fluorine, lead, uranium, thorium, chlorine, vanadium, chromium, phosphate gypsum and others.

These harmful effects, the risks of which extend to humans, animals, plants, marine life, soil, microbiology and others, can be summarized in the following points:

1. Destruction and disruption of the ecosystem:

The Bu Craa mine is exploited by Surface Mining, which covers a large area that has doubled over time This extensive exploitation of the Earth's surface containing phosphate ores led to

a change in the natural environment, damage to landscapes and ecosystems through drilling, extraction and transportation of phosphates, uprooting the soil, removing the already limited vegetation cover, and the creation of mineral Hills on the Earth's surface, which negatively reflected on the local ecosystem, whose components were subjected to destruction and change in its geographical and morphological structure, as well as in its chemical composition through the formation of abnormally high concentrations of some minerals associated with the extraction of phosphates, which destructively affect various components of the fragile local ecosystem, existing in difficult Saharawi conditions.

These facts are supported by the report of the German Environment Agency when it says: "phosphate mining in general and in Bu Craa in particular leads to a change in land use and affects the aesthetic landscape. The landscape is disturbed by" the removal of vegetation, the removal of topsoil, the digging of overloads and ore, the construction of dense dumps, moreover, the processing plants in the eyes occupy space along the coast"¹⁷ which, in addition to all this, represents visual pollution.

"Mining activities have expanded since 1984 to cover an area of 23,100 hectares (231 square kilometers) and global phosphate demand is not expected to decrease, so it can be assumed that the Bu Craa mine will continue to expand in the future"¹⁸ the report adds.

2. Air pollution

Significant amounts of dust and dust are released as a result of drilling and transportation operations associated with phosphate extraction activities in the Bu Craa area. These dusts, which spread around the mine site and along the phosphate conveyor belt from Bu Craa to the port and at the shipping and processing site on the Atlantic coast, contain some heavy elements and some metal components that pollute the air significantly, such as cadmium, fluorine, uranium and phosphate gypsum.

Since the Bu Craa mine, which is open on a large area, is located in an area known for its permanent sandstorms that transport dust over large distances, these pollutants resulting from the extraction of phosphates are able to move to large areas, forming a source of serious air pollution not only in the vicinity of the mine and the town of Bu Craa, but throughout the Western Sahara region, especially that the Bu Craa mine is in the middle of three of its main population centers, as it is located only 97 kilometers from the city of El Aaiun, 125 kilometers from Samara and 163 kilometers from Boujdour, and the effects of this pollution can extend to the regional neighborhood for the western Saharawi, as the numerous aerial photographs that

¹⁷ The German Environment Agency, *OekoRess II: Country Case Study VI Morocco/Western Sahara: Phosphate (Bou Craa)*, (2018), P.27.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p27.

have monitored the arrival of the sandstorm load show Saharawi to the Canary Islands, Europe and even South America and the Caribbean region.¹⁹

The report of the German Environmental Authority lists the causes of air pollution resulting from the exploitation activities of the Bu Craa mine, both at the mine site in the town of Bu Craa and in the port of El Aaiun, such as weight Removal Operations, extraction of phosphate rocks themselves, the movement of mining machinery on unpaved roads, dry sorting at the mine site, transportation through the conveyor belt, enrichment, drying and loading on ships, in addition, satellite images show the scattering of phosphate and accompanying minerals along the conveyor belt, which is about 100 kilometers long, which doubles the area of pollution, and increases the likelihood of transported by wind erosion and spreading in the surrounding environment .

3. Water pollution

Although the Bu Craa mine is located in a dry area with little rainfall, the rains in this area occur in the form of devastating floods in some years²⁰, which raises the risks of water pollution carried by the valleys of the area, which are part of the hydrological network of the Saguia El-Hamra basin, as these valleys drain into the Saguia El-Hamra valley, which represents the most important watercourses that feed the delta of the valley) Fom Elouad(, which is an important source of fresh water, and also threatens the deposition of heavy metals and dangerous radioactive metals in surface water stored at the level of the El Aaiun dam and in groundwater, which is the main source of drinking water, irrigation and livestock watering in the area, which may lead to the emergence of High toxicity in drinking water and in food.

These heavy metals and radioactive elements associated with phosphates can also pollute the seawater in which the flow of the waters of the Saguia El-Hamra valley ends, which will inevitably affect the ecological balance in the marine environment, as will be seen in the following paragraphs.

4. Soil and plant pollution

The extensive and unsafe extractive activity of Bu Craa phosphate in its various stages leads to an increase in the concentration of dangerous mineral elements in the soil, which leads to

¹⁹ The amount of phosphorus reaching the Amazon soil from the Sahara is estimated at 22 thousand tons annually, according to the article below: Cook, T. (2015), Amazon rainforests fueled by African dust, EOS, 96, doi:10.1029/2015EO031649. Posted on June 22, 2015.

²⁰ An example of this is what happened in November 1947, which is known locally as the year of “death of the Lebsser family,” when the flood of Bou craa valley led to the death of eleven members of the same family.

a disruption of its chemical composition, which negatively affects its fertility and the vital balance of the microorganisms that inhabit it, and the accumulation of harmful mineral elements and their deposition in the soil, whether by wind or by water, causes pollution risks leading to the loss of natural pastures or pollution of their plants in a way that reflects on animal and human health in a region where pastoral activity is still one of its most prominent features.

5. Pollution of the marine environment

The transportation and accumulation of phosphate rocks in the open in large quantities in the AL-Mersi area (phosphate export port), in addition to the dust and dust resulting from transportation and shipping, as well as dry processing of rocks through crushing, sorting, screening or treatment by immersion and rinsing by water in the absence of a scientific method of treating waste disposed of by emptying into the Sea directly are considered serious pollution factors that threaten the neighboring marine environment.

The deposition of various mineral elements associated with phosphates changes the marine chemical environment and pollutes it with some dangerous elements such as cadmium²¹, lead, uranium, fluorine and others that are deposited in the bodies of marine fauna and concentrate toxic substances in fish, molluscs, shellfish and other marine resources of economic value.

The melting of phosphates in marine waters also changes the pH of the water, turning it into alkali, which affects marine life, as well as increasing the growth of harmful algae because phosphorus compounds are considered plant nutrients and lead to significant algae growth, leading to environmental hazards, such as high rates of substances that poison marine life and lack of oxygen in the water.

These multiple risks, as well as health risks, are factors that threaten the marine diversity and biological richness of the Marine Area of Western Sahara, which is known as one of the richest areas in the world with its marine wealth.

A study conducted in 2006 by the Moroccan Institute for research in Marine Fisheries confirmed the presence of significant cadmium contamination in oysters around the discharge points of the residues of the Bu Craa phosphate processing carried out by the company affiliated to the Moroccan phosphate Bureau²².

²¹ The percentage of cadmium in Bu Craa phosphate rocks is 35 mg per kilogram.

²² The German Environment Agency, OekoRess II: Country Case Study P.29.

Studies conducted in the Safi and Jorf Lasfar areas in Morocco have also shown that industrial effluents discharged into the sea are contaminated with uranium (0.27 to 0.45 mg / L) and this uranium comes from phosphate gypsum²³.

6. Radioactive contamination

Phosphate contains radioactive metals such as uranium and thorium, and the percentage of uranium in Bu Craa phosphate reaches about 200 grams per ton²⁴ exposure to these substances leads to the risks of radioactive contamination, which has a devastating effect on human, animal and marine health, as it causes the destruction of living cells and causing distortions in their structure, as well as leads to cancer, heart and kidney disease, infertility, fetal death and malformation, and others.

It is noted that «it is very likely that the risks of radioactive substances in the eyes will increase as Fosbucraa expands its production. The reason for this is the presence of phosphate gypsum, a by-product of radioactive waste generated during the production of fertilizers; phosphate gypsum contains noticeable amounts of uranium and its products that are concentrated during the production of fertilizers»²⁵.

The accumulation of phosphate rock mounds, the discharge of waste from their processing, transportation and spread into the ocean are sources of radioactive pollution dangerous to the health of direct workers, local residents, the environment and the ocean with its various components.

7. Risks related to human health:

Pollutants resulting from the exploitation of phosphates pose many risks to human health, as exposure to harmful elements emitted by phosphate mining processes leads to a number of diseases, both those resulting from air pollution and(or) water pollution, such as respiratory diseases, allergies, poisoning, cancer, cardiac diseases, infertility, kidney failure, tooth decay and darkening due to the concentration of fluorine in their structure, osteoporosis and fragility, diseases of joints and muscles, premature skin aging, atherosclerosis and an increased likelihood of heart attack or stroke ...etc.

In the absence of field studies on the serious impact of the exploitation of Bu Craa phosphate on workers in light of low occupational safety measures and on the local population and residents of other areas affected by the impact of harmful minerals associated with phosphate,

²³ https://voir-et-agir.ch/content/uploads/2019/02/summary_morocco.pdf, p.6.

²⁴ DIERCKE 1981, Weltwirtschaftsatlas I, München, p.55.

²⁵ The German Environment Agency, OekoRess II: Country Case Study, p 30.

the results of studies conducted on phosphate in Moroccan mines that share with the Bu Craa mine in their chronological age and chemical characteristics, because they all belong to the phosphate basins of northwest Africa, where “Greenpeace and the World Nuclear Association found that Moroccan phosphate contains a high content of cadmium and significant amounts of uranium, which are heavy metals associated with cancer, kidney failure and bone diseases”²⁶.

A research report by a scientific team from Switzerland that conducted a field study on the sites of activities of companies affiliated to the Moroccan Bureau of phosphates in the city of Safi and in the area of Jorf Lasfar in February and March 2019 revealed high pollution rates in the air, water and agricultural soil and the significant impact of phosphate extraction activities and fertilizer production on the health of workers and the local population, which represents a violation of human rights, as the research team says that “the production of phosphate fertilizers in Morocco violates the right of workers and neighboring communities to health and has a negative impact on the environment, as many workers suffer from respiratory diseases and cancers due to exposure to pollutants and fine dust, experts emphasized That many cases of worker deaths have been announced as a result of these diseases, in addition, “the local population also suffers from pollution”²⁷

The report of the German Environment Agency notes that “the health risks caused by dust (in the processing area of the port of El Aaiun) are similar to those in the mines and will grow stronger in the future as Fosbucraa plans to expand its activities to include the production of phosphoric acid and Fertilizers. The production of sulfuric acid, phosphoric acid and ammonia gases can affect the health of workers during the chemical preparation of phosphates, or through the production of fertilizers via the release of dust, phosphate, fluorine, cadmium, uranium and phosphate gypsum, all of which can cause health problems”²⁸.

In addition, there are health risks to human health resulting from the consumption of plant and animal food, including marine products, contaminated with phosphate compounds or harmful mineral substances resulting from the exploitation of phosphate rocks.

IV – The sand

Sand is depleted in the Saharawi territories occupied since the Spanish colonial period. Sand is the second oldest wealth being depleted in Western Sahara after fish wealth. Sand began to be shipped from Western Sahara to Spain in 1955. The frequency of this depletion increased

²⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/dec/16/toxic-shadow-phosphate-miners-morocco-fear-they-pay-high-price>.

²⁷ https://voir-et-agir.ch/content/uploads/2019/02/summary_morocco.pdf

²⁸ The German Environment Agency, OekoRess II: Country Case Study, P.38.

under the Moroccan occupation. Sand is widely shipped from the port of El Aaiun to Spain and the Cape Verde Islands. The process of sand extraction is concentrated in the coastal area near the port of El Aaiun in order to reduce the cost of Transportation.

The process of uprooting and exporting sand in large quantities has devastating effects on the environment as the removal of part of the local ecosystem, which is home to some living species of plants, animals and microorganisms, and this leads to an imbalance in the ecosystem as a whole, and the depletion of beach sand and coastal dunes threatens the neighboring marine ecosystem, which affects and is affected by the coastal environment.

The removal of sand also leads to the fragility of the soil surface, its dryness and low fertility with the subsequent degradation of the environmental environment and the threat of its vital components, in addition, the removal of sand results in known risks to groundwater, because sand stores large amounts of water and leaks into the ground, which allows the supply of groundwater reservoirs continuously, and reduces the percentage of loss by maintaining moisture and reducing evaporation.

The continuous removal of sand at high rates from the marina area and the mouth of the Valley coastal area is a threat to the aquifer of the mouth of the valley, as it leads to the advance of the sea towards the land, which will cause an increase in the salinity of groundwater in this important aquifer.

In general, the current widespread exploitation of Saharawi sands will lead to a change in the fragile Saharawi ecosystem, threaten water resources and components of the marine environment, and many living creatures will lose their natural habitats, leading to an ecological imbalance, which will have profound negative repercussions on man and his natural surroundings.

V – The Moroccan military wall and environmental pollution

The Moroccan defensive wall, which stretches from the southeast of Morocco across the territory of the Western Sahara from North to South at a distance of 2,720 kilometers, represents the largest modern military facility on Earth, and is considered the longest military wall in history after the Great Wall of China, and was constructed with the help of experts from Israel, the apartheid regime in South Africa, France, Portugal and South Korea.

This wall is related to the looting of the Sahrawi natural resources, as it was erected in its first phase (August 1980-June 1982) around the area that the Moroccan occupation then called the “beneficial triangle”, which includes the cities of El Aaiun, Samara and Boujdour, including the Bu Craa mine, which was the target of a number of operations of the Sahrawi

people's Liberation Army, and its most recent expansion was carried out in EL Guerguarat area (November 2020) in order to ensure the flow of looted Moroccan and Sahrawi goods towards West African countries through Mauritania through the illegal loophole the Moroccan occupation occurred near the Sahrawi – Mauritanian border.

Due to the fortifications erected on both sides of the Moroccan military wall protecting the activities of looting and exploitation of the natural resources of the Sahara, Western Sahara is one of the most polluted areas of the world with anti-personnel mines and mechanisms, with more than seven million mines “distributed among 72 types of Mines manufactured in 14 countries, more than three types of cluster bombs and about 100 types of various unexploded ordnance”, says Aziz Haidar, president of the Sahrawi Mine Action Association²⁹, whose association counted more than 500 victims of these extremely dangerous pollutants.

The Moroccan occupation forces have also cut down and removed large of the Western Sahara's trees, especially Talah(*Acacia tortilis*), Ettamat(*Acacia ehrenbergiana*), Ejdari(*Rhustripartita*), Ignin(*Capparis decidua*) and Tarfa(*Tamarixarabica*), wherever they are found along the Moroccan wall, so as not to be used as barriers by Sahrawi fighters, in these cases the trees are removed in such a way that it is impossible for them to grow again while maintaining the lower part close to the ground to be an obstacle to the movement of Sahrawi vehicles, which the soldiers fear the moors attacked her.

The final removal and felling of these slow-growing perennial trees over large areas is certainly a terrible destruction of the natural habitat of many species of living creatures and irreparable destruction of the fragile Saharawi ecosystem.

²⁹ <https://www.spsrasd.info/news/ar/articles/2023/04/04/44924.html>

**«Unwavering Resolve:
The Sahrawi Diaspora and the Fight
for Self-Determination»**

 <https://doi.org/10.21747/3078-431X/tifa7>

Abstract: The Western Sahara conflict, stemming from Spain's never finished decolonization process and Morocco's invasion in 1975, led to the displacement of thousands of Sahrawi. The Sahrawi diaspora has become a significant force advocating for self-determination, freedom, sovereignty, and human rights. This paper highlights the diasporas' diversity, noting unique contributions and challenges faced globally. Through its political, cultural and humanitarian activism, the diaspora has kept the Western Sahara issue visible. The article concludes emphasizing the need for sustained international support and solidarity to resolve this conflict.

Keywords: Western Sahara, Resistance, Exile, Diaspora

Resumen: El conflicto del Sáhara Occidental, derivado del proceso de descolonización de España, nunca finalizado, y de la invasión de Marruecos en 1975, provocó el desplazamiento de miles de saharauis. La diáspora saharauí se ha convertido en una importante fuerza que aboga por la autodeterminación, la libertad, la soberanía y los derechos humanos. Este documento destaca la diversidad de las diásporas, señalando las contribuciones únicas y los retos a los que se enfrentan a nivel mundial. A través de su activismo político, cultural y humanitario, la diáspora ha mantenido visible la cuestión del Sáhara Occidental. El artículo concluye haciendo hincapié en la necesidad de un apoyo y solidaridad internacionales sostenidos para resolver este conflicto.

Palabras clave: Sáhara Occidental, Resistencia, Exilio, Diáspora

Historical Background of the Western Sahara Conflict

The Western Sahara conflict, one of the longest-running territorial disputes in contemporary history, began in the mid-20th century. A Spanish colony, Western Sahara's fate became uncertain following Spain's lack of decolonization efforts in the 1970s. This period marked the beginning of a struggle for self-determination, freedom and sovereignty by the indigenous Sahrawi people, represented by the POLISARIO Front, against Spanish and Moroccan territorial claims and occupation.

In 1884, Spain formally established a protectorate over Western Sahara, a region rich in phosphates and with potential offshore oil reserves. The indigenous Sahrawi tribes had little influence over the administrative affairs of their land during the colonial period (Martín, 2010).

In 1975, the International Court of Justice issued an advisory opinion acknowledging the right of the Sahrawi people to self-determination (ICJ, 1975, 1979, 1980). However, this ruling was overshadowed by the Green March on November 6th 1975, a strategic mass demonstration organized by Morocco to assert its claim over Western Sahara. Concurrently,

Mauritania also laid claim to part of the territory, leading to the signing of the Madrid Accords. This tripartite agreement facilitated Spain's withdrawal, handing administrative control of Western Sahara to Morocco and Mauritania without consulting the Sahrawi people (Zunes & Mundy, 2010).

Previous, on October 31st 1975, Moroccan military forces invaded Western Sahara, attacking civilians and initiating a conflict with the POLISARIO Front. POLISARIO, had been formed in 1973 to fight for Sahrawi freedom against colonial Spain. This military act was followed by the Green March which comprised over 350 000 Moroccan settlers which occupied large part of Western Sahara. The Moroccan invasion, including bombings and mass killings, led to intense fighting and a humanitarian crisis, with thousands of Sahrawi fleeing to Tindouf, Algeria where they erected refugee camps (Shelley, 2004). The POLISARIO Front declared the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic¹ in 1976 and launched a guerilla war against both Moroccan and Mauritanian forces. By 1979, Mauritania withdrew its claim, leaving Morocco to control approximately two-thirds of the territory, while POLISARIO maintained control over the remaining areas, primarily the desert hinterlands (Jensen, 2005).

Despite numerous efforts by the United Nations to broker a peace agreement, including a ceasefire in 1991 and the establishment of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara², a lasting solution has remained elusive. The ceasefire agreement included provisions for a referendum on self-determination, which has yet to be realized due to the refusal of Morocco (Lourenço & Teixeira, 2023; Shelley, 2004).

The role of external actors has further complicated the conflict. Morocco has garnered support from key international players, including France and the United States. Algeria has backed the POLISARIO Front, the decisions of the International Court of Justice and the United Nations resolution as well as the constitutive act of the African Union. The Sahrawi diaspora and international activists continue to advocate for the Sahrawi people's right to self-determination. The human rights abuses in the region and the plight of Sahrawi political prisoners, drawing international attention to the human rights dimensions of the conflict are broadly documented (Lourenço, 2014; Lourenço & Teixeira, 2023).

In recent years, tensions have flared periodically, with skirmishes breaking out despite the ceasefire. The failure to hold the promised referendum due to the Moroccans categorical refusal, has perpetuated the stalemate, leaving Western Sahara in a state of limbo.

In November 2020, the long-standing ceasefire between Morocco and the POLISARIO Front collapsed, reigniting armed conflict in Western Sahara. This escalation followed

¹ SADR

² MINURSO

Morocco's military operation in the Guergarat buffer zone, an area near the Mauritanian border, against peaceful civilian Sahrawi protesters. POLISARIO Front responded by declaring the end of ceasefire and resuming the war, marking the end of nearly three decades of the United Nations-brokered agreement (Gali, 2020). The renewed hostilities have intensified the humanitarian crisis, displacing more Sahrawi and straining the already dire conditions in the Tindouf refugee camps in Algeria. International efforts to mediate have been complicated by entrenched positions and geopolitical interests, with Morocco seeking recognition of its sovereignty over Western Sahara and the POLISARIO Front demanding the holding of the referendum on self-determination as stipulated by the UN resolutions. (Lourenço & Teixeira, 2023)

The continued resilience of the Sahrawi people and their diaspora underscores the enduring significance of their struggle for self-determination, sovereignty and freedom.

Significance of the Diaspora in the Context of Western Sahara's Decolonization

At the heart of the struggle between the Sahrawi people, represented by the POLISARIO Front, and the Moroccan occupation, is the role of the Sahrawi diaspora, which has become increasingly significant in advocating for the decolonization of Western Sahara. This diaspora, dispersed across several countries, particularly in Europe, plays a crucial role in maintaining cultural identity, lobbying for political support, and providing humanitarian assistance and keeping the issue of Western Sahara on the international agenda. Due to the oppressive conditions and apartheid within the disputed territory and the lack of opportunities in the refugee camps in Algeria, many Sahrawi have sought refuge and better opportunities abroad (Lourenço, 2018, 2020a). This diaspora, though geographically dispersed, remains united in its quest for self-determination and freedom for Western Sahara. By leveraging the freedoms and resources available in host countries, the Sahrawi diaspora has been able to mobilize support, raise awareness, and put pressure on international organizations and governments to address their cause (Zunes & Mundy, 2010).

One of the key contributions of the Sahrawi diaspora is its role in cultural preservation and education. In exile, the diaspora has established various cultural organizations and initiatives to preserve Sahrawi heritage and educate younger generations about their identity and the ongoing struggle for independence. These efforts ensure that the Sahrawi national identity remains vibrant and resilient, despite the challenges posed by displacement and assimilation pressures in host countries. Cultural preservation is critical for maintaining a unified front and fostering a sense of belonging and purpose among Sahrawi worldwide (Martín, 2010).

"Sahrawis in the diaspora living far from the country face a great challenge in adapting to a new environment, preserving their identity and culture and transmitting it to their children. Parents urge their children to maintain the Hassanya dialect, learn their religion, revive

moral and patriotic values in them and consolidate the link with the Sahrawi cause. They also strive to encourage them to learn the language and culture of the host country, open up to the outside world and maintain relations with all components of civil society.” (Munadil, 2020).

Furthermore, the diaspora plays a pivotal role in lobbying and advocacy. Through non-governmental organizations, community groups, and individual activism, the Sahrawi diaspora has been successful in engaging with international bodies such as the United Nations, the African Union, and the European Union. By organizing protests, participating in international conferences, and engaging with the media, the diaspora highlights the human rights abuses and the need for a fair and transparent decolonization process. Notably, Sahrawi activists in Europe have been effective in influencing policy discussions and decisions, urging governments to take a firmer stance against Morocco's occupation and advocating for the implementation of UN resolutions that call for a referendum on self-determination (Tavakoli, 2023).

Humanitarian assistance provided by the diaspora is another critical aspect of their contribution. Many Sahrawi in the diaspora send remittances back to the refugee camps in Tindouf, Algeria, where tens of thousands of Sahrawi live under challenging conditions. These financial contributions help to improve living standards, support education, and provide essential services that are often lacking due to the protracted nature of the conflict and limited international aid. Additionally, the diaspora organizes fundraising events and collaborates with international organizations to supply food, medical supplies, and other necessities to the camps (Shelley, 2004).

In the occupied territories of Western Sahara, the Sahrawi population is victim of a social and economic apartheid. To survive without having a fixed income or job opportunities which are reserved for Moroccan settlers makes them largely dependent on the economic aid of the family in the diaspora (Lourenço, 2018).

Therefore, the Sahrawi diaspora plays an indispensable role in the decolonization process of Western Sahara. Through cultural preservation, political advocacy, economic and humanitarian aid, the diaspora not only keeps the spirit of Sahrawi nationalism alive but also exerts significant influence on the international stage to push for a just resolution to the conflict. Their efforts demonstrate the power of a united diaspora in championing the rights and aspirations of their people, ensuring that the quest for self-determination and freedom remains a vibrant and pressing issue in global affairs (Mundy, 2007).

Early Sahrawi Migration Patterns to Spain and the Canary Islands

The Sahrawi people, originally from the Western Sahara region, have a rich history that intertwines with the broader narratives of North African nomadic cultures. Their migration patterns to Spain and the Canary Islands began to take shape significantly in the 20th century, influenced by colonial history, political upheaval, and socio-economic factors (Omar, 2017).

The Spanish colonial period in Western Sahara, beginning in the late 19th century, laid the groundwork for Sahrawi migration to Spain and the Canary Islands. Spanish colonial administration, trade, and the movement of people established early connections between the Sahrawi people and the Spanish territories. These early interactions were mostly limited to trade and occasional movements for labor, but they created a foundation for future migration flows (Pazzanita & Hodges, 1994).

As Spain withdrew from Western Sahara in 1975, the region was plunged into conflict between Morocco, Mauritania, and the Sahrawi nationalist movement, the POLISARIO Front. The ensuing Western Sahara War and the harsh conditions in refugee camps led many Sahrawi to seek asylum and better living conditions abroad. Spain, as the former colonial power, became a primary destination due to established historical ties and linguistic connections (Shelley, 2004), but also to the fact that many Sahrawi had Spanish nationality since they were born under Spanish colonialism. Many Sahrawi sought refuge in Spain, leveraging their linguistic and cultural connections to assimilate and find employment (Pazzanita & Hodges, 1994).

Over the years, the Canary Islands have seen a steady flow of Sahrawi refugees who have sought asylum and temporary protection. The Spanish government has periodically provided humanitarian aid and recognized the unique situation of Sahrawi asylum seekers (Cabrera, 2023).

In Spain and the Canary Islands, the Sahrawi diaspora has gradually formed vibrant communities. These communities maintain their cultural heritage while integrating into Spanish society. Sahrawi migrants have established associations that advocate for their rights and provide support networks. They have also played a crucial role in raising awareness about the ongoing conflict in Western Sahara and lobbying for international support for their cause (Tavakoli, 2023; Zunes & Mundy, 2010).

1960's and 1970's migrations to other European Countries and Morocco

During the 1960s and 1970s, a notable diaspora of Sahrawi people started to grow in various regions besides Spain. France, Belgium, and neighboring countries saw the arrival of Sahrawi. This period was marked by the migration of individuals seeking better living conditions, educational opportunities, and political asylum, as well as by the emergence of influential political movements (Hodges, 1983).

France and Belgium attracted Sahrawi migrants due to its broader economic opportunities and established North African diaspora communities, which provided social support networks for newcomers (Zunes & Mundy, 2010). In Morocco, Sahrawi students played a pivotal role in the political and educational realms during the 1960s and 1970s. Many Sahrawi youths pursued higher education in Moroccan institutions, where they engaged in vigorous political discourse

and activism. The educational experience in Morocco often exposed Sahrawi students to new political ideologies and organizational skills, which they later applied to their nationalist activities (Shelley, 2004). These students were instrumental in raising awareness about the Sahrawi cause and advocating for the independence of Western Sahara. They organized protests, disseminated information, and built alliances with Moroccan political groups sympathetic to their cause (Martín, 2010; Omar, 2017).

The role of the Diaspora against Spanish and Moroccan Occupation

The POLISARIO Front, founded in 1973, emerged as a key political and military organization advocating for Sahrawi freedom, self-determination, sovereignty and end of the Spanish and later Moroccan occupation (Omar, 2017). The formation of the POLISARIO Front was significantly influenced by the political activism of Sahrawi students and intellectuals in Morocco and abroad. The movement aimed to establish an sovereign Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic³ and garnered widespread support from the Sahrawi diaspora (Hodges, 1983). The POLISARIO Front's impact was profound, as it led to armed conflict with Moroccan and Mauritanian forces, and eventually secured recognition from various countries and international organizations (Shelley, 2004).

The POLISARIO Front's ability to mobilize the Sahrawi population, including those in the diaspora, was crucial to its success. The organization utilized the educational and political skills of its members to effectively communicate its goals and gain international support. The diaspora played a significant role in lobbying for the Sahrawi cause at international forums and providing financial and logistical support to the POLISARIO Front (Zunes & Mundy, 2010).

These developments not only shaped the trajectory of the Western Sahara conflict but also highlighted the resilience and determination of the Sahrawi people in their pursuit of self-determination.

Influence of the 1975 Moroccan Occupation on Diaspora Patterns

The 1975 Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara significantly influenced the patterns of Sahrawi diaspora. Following the occupation, a large segment of the Sahrawi population fled the region to escape the ensuing conflict and persecution. The Moroccan invasion prompted a mass exodus, leading to the establishment of refugee camps primarily in neighboring Algeria. These camps, particularly around the city of Tindouf, became the central hubs

³ SADR

for Sahrawi refugees, fostering a sense of community and resistance against the Moroccan occupation (Tavakoli, 2023).

The 1980s were a transformative period for the Sahrawi diaspora, shaped by the Moroccan occupation and characterized by a persistent quest for education and economic stability. The influence of educational opportunities in countries like Cuba, Libya, Syria, and Algeria was profound, equipping the Sahrawi youth with the knowledge and skills needed for their nation's future. Meanwhile, the refugee camps in Algeria became centres of resilience and small economic activity, supported by international aid and the unwavering spirit of the Sahrawi people. These experiences have collectively contributed to the enduring strength and cohesion of the Sahrawi diaspora.

From the outbreak of the Moroccan-Sahrawi conflict, many countries supported POLISARIO independence efforts, which opened the floor for the program of educational mobility of youths. The program started in the late 70s, on the basis of bilateral agreements between the Sahrawi government and cooperating countries such as Algeria, Cuba, Mexico, Chile, Venezuela, Syria and Libya. This political project was a result of the post-Cold War division and an interesting example of South- South development and humanitarian aid. (Kluszczynska, 2022, p. 140)

Cuba, in particular, played a significant role by offering scholarships to Sahrawi students, who were able to study in Cuban universities. This education was not limited to academic pursuits but also included technical and vocational training, which was essential for the development of a self-sufficient Sahrawi society (Calle, 2016). Similarly, Libya and Syria provided educational opportunities that enabled Sahrawi youth to receive higher education and return with valuable skills and knowledge. Many of young Sahrawi that had the opportunity to study in these programs are now the driving force of the POLISARIO Front, not only in the refugee camps in fields of education, health, communication and administrative tasks but also in the international organizations.

Algeria, also supported educational programs within the refugee camps. These programs aimed to provide basic education to children and specialized training for adults, helping to foster a sense of normalcy and hope despite the challenging living conditions.

Refugee Camps and the Quest for Economic Stability

The refugee camps in Algeria became the epicenters of the Sahrawi struggle for economic stability and self-reliance. Life in these camps was marked by harsh conditions, with limited access to resources and opportunities. Despite these challenges, the Sahrawi people demonstrated remarkable resilience and ingenuity in their quest for economic stability.

The POLISARIO Front played a crucial role in organizing the economic activities within the camps. Various initiatives were launched to promote self-sufficiency, including agricultural projects, small-scale manufacturing, and artisanal crafts. These activities not only provided essential goods and services within the camps but also created avenues for economic engagement and skill development (Tavakoli, 2023).

International aid and solidarity also contributed significantly to the economic stability of the Sahrawi refugees. Humanitarian organizations and sympathetic nations provided food, medical supplies, and financial support, which were critical in sustaining the refugee population. Additionally, the diaspora communities abroad sent remittances back to the camps, offering a vital lifeline for many families (Chatty, 2010).

Political Activism in the Diaspora

The diaspora community plays a crucial role in advocating⁴ for Western Sahara on the international stage. Dispersed across Europe, North America, and other regions, Sahrawi refugees, asylum seekers, migrants, students and their supporters actively engage in political activism to bring global attention to their cause.

The Sahrawi diaspora utilizes various platforms and strategies to garner international support. They lobby policy-makers, engage with human rights organizations, and participate in global forums such as the United Nations.

One of the significant challenges faced by the Sahrawi diaspora is counteracting the Moroccan government's narrative and overcoming the media blackout imposed on the region. Morocco has invested heavily in public relations campaigns to portray the Western Sahara conflict in its favor, often depicting the POLISARIO Front as a terrorist organization and emphasizing false benefits of Moroccan rule. The Sahrawi diaspora combats these narratives by highlighting human rights abuses and the repression of Sahrawi people under Moroccan occupation. They leverage social media, independent news outlets, and human rights reports to disseminate information. To enhance their advocacy efforts, the Sahrawi diaspora has formed numerous media groups and associations. These organizations play a vital role in raising awareness and mobilizing international support for the Sahrawi cause.

The Sahrawi Association in the USA^{5,6} is one of the many examples of diaspora-led initiatives

⁴ For further reading on the activities of the Sahrawi diaspora: <https://porunsaharalibre.org/tag/diaspora-saharai/>

⁵ SAUSA

⁶ SAUSA. (2016). *Sahrawi Association in the United States of America*. <https://sahrawiusa.com/>

that work tirelessly to promote the Sahrawi struggle for self-determination. RASD TV, the official channel of SADR, through satellite broadcasts and online streaming, reaches a global audience, including the diaspora, helping to unify and inform Sahrawi communities worldwide (San Martín, 2010). RASD TV covers also all major events related in the diaspora and relies as well as other outlets on the collaboration of young Sahrawi in the various countries.

Sahrawi media groups such as Equipe Media, Al Gargarat, Smara News and others founded by Sahrawi journalists in the occupied territories, provide first-hand accounts of the situation on the ground documenting human rights violations and produce content that reaches an international audience. Since the resumption of war the detention of journalists has increased as well as the necessity to exit the occupied territories by all means available.⁷ Sahrawi journalists that fled are now in French Guyana, Spain, France and other European countries adding to the ranks of the diaspora.

The Western Sahara Diaspora Post-Ceasefire Era (1991 Onwards)

The Western Sahara ceasefire in 1991 did not lead to a permanent resolution of the conflict, prompting many Sahrawi to seek better living conditions abroad. As a result, the diaspora expanded notably across Europe and other parts of the world. Countries such as Italy, Norway, Sweden, and the UK have gradually become new destinations for Sahrawi refugees. This dispersal has been driven by the pursuit of safety, political asylum, and improved socio-economic opportunities and security that are unattainable in their homeland or economic and development opportunities in the refugee camps in Algeria where many Sahrawi have been living for decades.

The Sahrawi diaspora in Mauritania represents a significant community, with estimates suggesting that around 20,000 to 30,000 Sahrawi live in the country. This diaspora primarily consists of individuals who have fled the ongoing conflict in Western Sahara, which has seen its people displaced over decades. The Sahrawi in Mauritania maintain a strong cultural identity, influenced by their historical ties and the socio-political dynamics of the region. They have integrated into Mauritanian society while also preserving their distinct linguistic and cultural heritage, largely characterized by the Hassaniya Arabic dialect, which remains a unifying element among Sahrawi across the Maghreb region (Almenara-Niebla, 2022).

Despite their displacement, the Sahrawi diaspora in Mauritania continues to play a crucial role in advocating for the freedom and self-determination of Western Sahara. This community is

⁷ Lakemfa, O. (2024, 10/05/2024). The journalist as a guerrilla: Saharawi as jungle experts. *VANGUARD*. https://www.vanguardngr.com/2024/05/the-journalist-as-a-guerrilla-saharawi-as-jungle-experts-by-owei-lakemfa/#google_vignette

actively engaged in transnational political activism, leveraging digital platforms to connect with Sahrawi worldwide and to keep their cause visible on the international stage. The diaspora's efforts are part of a broader movement that seeks to highlight the struggles of the Sahrawi people and to secure a resolution to the conflict that respects their right to self-determination (Almenara-Niebla, 2022).

In Germany although the presence of Sahrawi is almost non-existent with fewer than 100 Sahrawi, the work of the younger generation of Sahrawi has been highlighted in a recent article by Judit Tavakoli (Tavakoli, 2023). These efforts help to inform the global community and counter Moroccan propaganda.

In her paper «What will you do When Western Sahara Becomes Free?» Judit Tavakoli (2023) explores the cyber activism of Sahrawi diasporic youth in Germany. It focuses among others on a virtual campaign called #WhenWesternSaharaBecomesFree, initiated by Sahrawi Civil Society Europe. This campaign illustrates how young Sahrawi engage with the Western Sahara conflict through online activism. The study examines the experiences of a small group of young Sahrawi born or raised in Europe, particularly in Germany, and their political engagement both online and offline.

Key drivers for their mobilization include a strong political consciousness, the influence of transnational initiatives, and the desire to contribute to the Western Sahara cause. Despite the lack of a large Sahrawi peer group in Germany, these youths maintain a strong connection to their heritage and a commitment to activism, often integrating their political goals with their career aspirations.

Challenges in Obtaining Asylum and the Issue of Statelessness

The Sahrawi diaspora faces significant challenges in obtaining asylum due to their political status and the complexity of the Western Sahara issue. Many Western countries have stringent asylum policies, and Sahrawi often struggle to provide adequate documentation or proof of persecution required for asylum claims. The status of non-self-governing territory of Western Sahara⁸, complicates their asylum applications. Host countries sometimes do not fully understand or acknowledge the specific plight of Sahrawi refugees, leading to inconsistent and often unfavorable asylum decisions. Furthermore, the Sahrawi in the occupied territories are forced to have Moroccan nationality which complicates the matter even more.

A significant issue faced by the Sahrawi diaspora is statelessness. Statelessness refers to the condition of an individual who is not considered a national by any state under the operation

⁸ <https://www.un.org/dppa/decolonization/en/nsqt>

of its law (UNHCR, 2020). Sahrawi from the SADR do not have recognized citizenship from many countries. On the other hand Sahrawi in Morocco occupied Western Sahara are forced to have Moroccan citizenship which great part of the Sahrawi refuse (Munadil, 2021; Venkov, 2022). The SADR passport owned by many in the refugee camps and diaspora is not recognized in any western country and thus further exacerbates their stateless condition, limiting their ability to travel, work legally, and access social services.

During the first decade of 2000 a group of Sahrawi has obtained the status of stateless in Spain. To be able to solve this issue the Spanish courts have been forced to check again a wavering question, since the abandon of Western Sahara by Spain in 1975 and the situation of international vulnerability in which the native population remained. In fact, Spain continues to be the *de jure* administrative power hence Sahrawi should continue to have Spanish citizenship. The Spanish courts have tried to solve legally a problem of political nature, using the concession from the stateless status to the Sahrawi to modify the official or majority version of what happened with the Western Sahara. (López Baroni, 2014)

Statelessness has profound implications for the daily lives and long-term prospects of Sahrawi refugees. Without citizenship, they cannot participate fully in the political and civic life of their host countries, and they often lack basic rights and protections afforded to nationals or recognized refugees. This precarious legal status also affects their children, perpetuating a cycle of marginalization and exclusion (ISI, 2020).

Mahmoud Zouida Rais and Ali Bachir Mustafa, both Sahrawi refugees, have faced significant challenges in obtaining stateless status in France. Their experiences highlight the complexities and emotional toll of navigating the bureaucratic processes while maintaining a firm sense of identity as Sahrawi. In an article published in March 2023 by Guit News⁹ these two Sahrawi men explained their path to statelessness in France.

Mahmoud, originally from Western Sahara, arrived in France in 1989 to pursue his studies. As a Sahrawi, he lacked a recognized nationality, making his journey towards obtaining a legal status fraught with difficulties. Upon arriving in France, Mahmoud's status was uncertain. He applied for stateless status, a legal recognition that would allow him to reside in France without being considered a national of any country. The process was complicated and lengthy, involving substantial paperwork and legal procedures. Stateless status in France requires proof of not being recognized as a citizen by any state, a challenging task for those from occupied territories.

⁹ Witter, L., & Michel, A. D. (2023, 15/03/2023). Ni d'ici, ni d'ailleurs : Mahmoud & Ali, réfugiés Sahraouis, racontent l'apatridie #4. *GUITT NEWS*. <https://guitnews.fr/cest-leur-histoire/ni-dici-ni-dailleurs-mahmoud-ali-refugies-sahraouis-racontent-lapatridie/>

After several years of persistence, Mahmoud was granted stateless status in 2003. This recognition was a significant milestone, providing him with legal protection and rights in France. In 2005, Mahmoud took another significant step by acquiring French nationality, further solidifying his status and enabling him to fully integrate into French society.

Ali Bachir Mustafa was born in a Sahrawi refugee camp, in Tindouf region a place marked by limited resources and international aid dependency. He decided to move to France in 2019, seeking better opportunities and stability. His journey was driven by a desire for a life where he could freely express his identity and aspirations. Applying for stateless status involved proving his lack of nationality, a process hindered by bureaucratic red tape and the intricacies of international law. The two-year wait was marked by uncertainty and emotional stress, highlighting the often-overlooked human aspect of legal processes.

In 2021, Ali was officially recognized as stateless by the French authorities. This status granted him certain protection and the right to reside in France.

Both Mahmoud and Ali's stories underscore the resilience and determination of individuals navigating the complexities of statelessness. Their journeys are not just legal battles but also deeply personal struggles to maintain their cultural identity and sense of belonging. Despite the challenges, both men have managed to carve out lives in France while staying true to their Sahrawi heritage.

Recent Migration Patterns and Routes – French Guiana

In recent years, Sahrawi migrants from Western Sahara have increasingly turned to a new route to seek asylum in France by traveling to French Guiana, an overseas department of France located in South America. This shift is driven by the dangerous and often deadly Mediterranean crossings and the complex geopolitical landscape in Western Sahara, occupied largely by Morocco.

French Guiana is a part of the EU, and it is the only territory in the mainland Americas to be fully integrated into a European country. It can take four months for a preliminary interview to request asylum, and at least five further months to appeal if turned down. By law, the process is supposed to take nine months maximum, but it can drag on twice as long (Thebia, 2021).

The journey typically begins in Morocco, with migrants traveling to Turkey or Qatar before flying to Brazil, which does not require visas for Sahrawi with Moroccan passport. From Brazil, they make their way to the northern city of Macapá and then illegally cross the Oyapock River

to reach French Guiana. This route, though lengthy and expensive¹⁰ and dangerous, is seen as a safer alternative to the Mediterranean crossings (Chambost, 2023).

Upon arrival in French Guiana, Sahrawi migrants face significant challenges. French Guiana is already under strain from high numbers of asylum seekers, with limited resources and infrastructure to support them. Many migrants live in precarious conditions, often in makeshift shelters or overcrowded accommodations. The local administration provides a small allowance, but this is insufficient to cover the high cost of living, leading many to work illegally in harsh conditions (Thebia, 2021).

The French government has been overwhelmed by the number of asylum applications in French Guiana, leading to a backlog and lengthy processing times. In 2021, only a small fraction of Sahrawi applicants was granted asylum, highlighting the difficulties they face in securing legal status. Despite these hurdles, migrants persist, driven by the hope of safety and better opportunities away from the repression and conflict in their homeland (Chambost, 2023).

For many Sahrawi, reaching French Guiana is part of a broader strategy to eventually move to mainland France, where they believe they might have better chances for integration and support. However, the journey remains fraught with uncertainty and challenges, both in transit and upon arrival.

The Sahrawi woman in the diaspora, a few examples

Sahrawi women in the diaspora play a crucial and evolving role in the struggle for Western Sahara's self-determination, freedom and sovereignty. Unlike the past, when women were involved in armed struggle and establishing spaces in refugee camps, today's focus has shifted towards non-violent activism. These women are active in various sectors such as education, health and administration, reflecting their continuous involvement in the cause.

Women in the diaspora engage in non-violent protests and organize and participate in demonstrations, debates, conferences, and exhibitions. These activities aim to raise awareness about the conflict in Western Sahara and highlight the necessity of achieving self-determination and peace, aligning with United Nations resolutions and international law. They actively work to get media coverage of their cause, striving to break the silence and keep the struggle's flame alive. Sahrawi women in the diaspora have a unique responsibility to make their voices heard internationally, a task that is more challenging for those in refugee camps and occupied territories.

¹⁰ Costing around 2000€

Tesh Sidi's life history and political position has been on several news outlets in Spain. Three¹¹ of her main interviews shed a light on her life journey. Born in 1994 in the Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria, she endured the harsh and nomadic life. She first lived in the camps, travelling afterwards to Mauritania. Her early life was often marked by absence of the most basic nutrition and water. Sahrawi children are expected to mature quickly due to the challenging conditions. This accelerated maturity shaped Sidi's resilience and determination. At nine, she moved to Spain as part of a foster program, seeking better opportunities. Integrating into her foster family and adapting to a new culture posed significant emotional and cultural challenges. Despite the initial difficulties, she excelled academically becoming a computer engineer and working in the world of big data in banking.

In 2023, Sidi was elected to the Spanish Congress as a member of the Sumar party. Her political career is marked by her advocacy for the rights of Sahrawi people and other marginalized groups, using all of her knowledge and skills¹². She rejects the romanticizing of poverty, emphasizing that poverty should not be seen as noble or character-building, but as a critical issue needing pragmatic solutions (Salcedo, 2022). She often highlights geopolitical issues involving Western Sahara and Spain's relationship with Morocco, stating that *«Spain is kidnapped by Morocco»* (Salcedo, 2022) pointing to the political influences affecting her homeland. In the Spanish Congress, Sidi continues to push for policies that support the Sahrawi cause and address broader issues of poverty and inequality.

Her unique perspective as a former refugee and her steadfast commitment to her identity make her a powerful advocate for change. Her journey from a refugee camp to a significant political role in Spain exemplifies her determination and ability to overcome adversity while remaining true to her roots.

Khadja Bedati, is a university student, now twenty-seven years old, and is Deputy Chairwoman of Jusos¹³ Leipzig, member of the Association of Ethical Shareholders Germany and also active

¹¹ Cánovas, I. (2023, 22 / 06 / 23). La saharauí de Sumar, de nómada al Congreso: "España está secuestrada por Marruecos". *El Independiente*. <https://www.elindependiente.com/espana/2023/06/22/la-saharauí-de-sumar-de-nomada-al-congreso-espana-esta-secuestrada-por-marruecos/>; Salcedo, J. S. (2022). Tesh Sidi, informática y activista. *Mundo Negro*. <https://mundonegro.es/tesh-sidi-la-pobreza-no-se-puede-romantizar/>; Rojas, M. (2024, 11/07/2024). Entrevista a Tesh Sidi. *Cadena SER*. <https://cadenaser.com/nacional/2024/07/11/tesh-sidi-diputada-la-primera-vez-que-pude-votar-en-espana-me-vote-a-mi-misma-cadena-ser/>

¹² An example is the online platform Saharawis Today: saharawistoday [@saharawistoday]. (2022). ¡NO HEMOS LLEGADO HASTA AQUÍ PARA DETERNOS! Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CipoeN-NohT/?locale=pt_P&img_index=1

¹³ Leipzig, J. (2020). *Jusos Leipzig-Vorstand*. Retrieved 7/15 from <https://jusos-leipzig.de/vorstand/>, *ibid.*, *ibid.*

in the academic world. In an interview to the German Magazin *Disorient*¹⁴ Bedati explained how she spent her early childhood, until the age of six, in the Sahrawi refugee camps. In the camps she formed her earliest memories, relationships and experienced the sense of community and resilience among the Sahrawi which left a lasting impression on her. When she moved to Germany with her family, the stark contrast between her new life and the one she had known fueled her desire to advocate for her people.

Over the years, Bedati has become a dedicated human rights activist, passionately advocating for the rights of the people of Western Sahara. When asked why this cause is so important to her, Bedati's response is rooted in profound empathy and a deep sense of justice¹⁵.

In Europe, particularly in Germany, there is scant coverage of the human rights abuses and the ongoing conflict in Western Sahara. Unlike the extensive media attention given to other countries in the West Asia and North Africa¹⁶ region during the so-called «Arab Spring» the situation in Western Sahara remains largely ignored. Bedati's activism is driven by both past and ongoing injustices suffered by her people. She vividly recalls the tragic incident of 14-year-old Najem Algarhi, who was shot while delivering food to his family in the protest camp of El Aaiun in 2010 during the peaceful Gdeim Izik uprising. This personal connection to the violence and suffering of her people has been a powerful motivator in her activism. The sense of loss and injustice she felt at such a young age has never left her, driving her to speak out and seek justice for others (Jagemast, 2021).

Bedati expresses her frustration with Germany's stance on the Western Sahara conflict. Despite the persistent human rights violations, Germany remains largely unresponsive¹⁷. She acknowledges the efforts of former UN Special Envoy Horst Köhler, who made significant attempts to address the issue, including visiting refugee camps and showing empathy towards Sahrawi children and youth. However, his mission ultimately failed due to a lack of support from powerful countries and continuous blockade from Morocco as faced by his predecessors.

The involvement of European and international companies in the occupied territories of Western Sahara, particularly in the exploitation of natural resources, is another major concern for Bedati. She has actively called out companies like Siemens AG for their operations in the region¹⁸. When addressing these companies, Bedati often encounters justifications that fail

¹⁴ Jagemast, H. (2021). Als würden wir nicht am Leben sein. *dis:orient*. <https://www.disorient.de/magazin/als-wuerden-wir-nicht-am-leben-sein>

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ WANA

¹⁷ Jagemast, H. (2021). Als würden wir nicht am Leben sein. *dis:orient*. <https://www.disorient.de/magazin/als-wuerden-wir-nicht-am-leben-sein>

¹⁸ Ibid.

to acknowledge the reality of the Sahrawi situation. Siemens, for example, argues that their wind projects benefit the Sahrawi by providing renewable energy. However, Bedati questions whether Siemens decision-makers have ever witnessed the oppressive conditions under which the Sahrawi live, which prevent them from benefiting from their own resources¹⁹.

Dr. Raabub Mohamed Lamin, is a doctor and Sahrawi, in an interview made in 2020²⁰ she spoke about her reality as a woman, mother, doctor and Sahrawi and the struggle for the freedom, self-determination and sovereignty of her country putting an end to Moroccan occupation.

She was born in Western Sahara, grew up in the Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria, studied in Cuba and lived and worked in Portugal and Spain and since 2023 in Switzerland. In the diaspora she is part of a Sahrawi doctors' association that actively works in the refugee camps, dedicating almost their entire vacation time to this work.

Educating children in the diaspora poses significant challenges, particularly in preserving cultural identity and language. Dr. Raabub underscores the importance of parents being role models and actively teaching their children about their heritage. This includes participating in demonstrations and instilling pride in their Sahrawi identity. She highlights that children learn not only from what they are told but also from observing their parents' actions and commitments.

Language preservation is a critical aspect, with Dr. Raabub emphasis that the time spent by her children in the refugee camps immerses themselves in their cultural and linguistic heritage. This exposure helps them learn Hassaniya and understand Sahrawi traditions and the realities of refugee life.

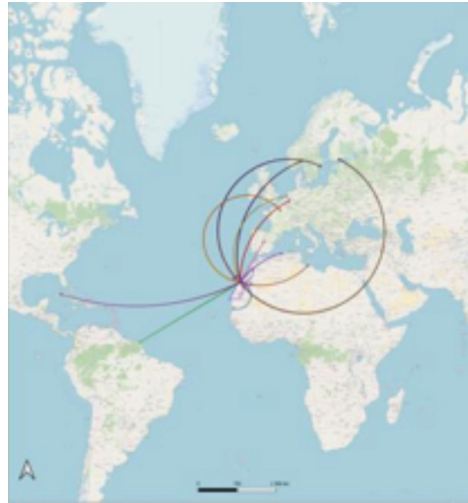
Dr. Raabub's insights provide a comprehensive view of the multifaceted role of Sahrawi women in the diaspora. Their contributions to the struggle for independence are significant and evolving, marked by a commitment to non-violent activism, cultural preservation, and community support. Their experiences and actions underscore a deep-seated desire for independence and a resilient connection to their Sahrawi identity.

Diaspora as a Waiting Phase

Despite the challenges faced, the Sahrawi diaspora has utilized the waiting phase to return to a free and sovereign homeland to advocate for their cause. In 2022, when hostilities resumed in

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Lourenço, I. (2020b). Difficulties of a Saharawi doctor in exile. *Jornal Tornado Online*. <https://www.jornaltornado.pt/difficulties-of-a-saharawi-doctor-in-exile/>



Map 1 – Saharwi Migrations Patterns

Western Sahara, this period of waiting was transformed for many young Sahrawi. Frustrated by the lack of progress and driven by a renewed sense of urgency, many young Sahrawi returned to the refugee camps in Tindouf to enlist in the military and join the POLISARIO Front in their renewed struggle against Moroccan control²¹. This mobilization underscores the deep-rooted desire among the Sahrawi youth to actively contribute to the fight for their homeland, rather than remaining passive victims of a protracted conflict.

The experience of the Sahrawi diaspora is marked by a continuous state of waiting – for legal recognition, for a resolution to the conflict, and for the possibility of returning home. The protracted asylum processes in host countries exacerbate this waiting phase. Many Sahrawi spend years in legal limbo, navigating complex immigration systems that do not always recognize their unique plight. This uncertainty is compounded by the lack of a universally recognized status for Western Sahara, which complicates their asylum claims (Bhabha & Robinson, 2011).

²¹ <https://www.elmoudjahid.dz/fr/monde/le-ministre-sahraoui-de-la-defense-les-jeunes-sahraouis-favorable-a-une-reprise-des-armes-1726> Le ministre sahraoui de la Défense : «les jeunes sahraouis favorable à une reprise des armes». (2020, 17/11/2020). *EL Moudjahid Monde*. <https://www.elmoudjahid.dz/fr/monde/le-ministre-sahraoui-de-la-defense-les-jeunes-sahraouis-favorable-a-une-reprise-des-armes-1726>

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Beyond hypercriticism and exclusionary rhetoric: Sahrawi sovereignty and 'ethic of life and future' against realpolitik ☐

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Abstract: Almost five decades after the illegal occupation of Western Sahara, the *realpolitik* approach continues to be utilized by conservative scholarship and the media to claim absence of pragmatism in the Sahrawi demand for self-determination in the wider power context. This pragmatist and rationalist reasoning is applied as a disqualifier of Sahrawi approaches to liberation and decolonisation, deeming them insufficient and unfeasible. Conversely the approach of the Sahrawi diplomat and thinker Boukhari Ahmed emphasized that *realpolitik* as framing of expert position on Western Sahara operates as an exclusionary rhetoric towards the dismissal of the capacities and the determination of the Sahrawi people. Sahrawi resistance and survival in conditions of occupation and severe deprivations offers more than a model for anti-colonial action. The article examines the hypercritical – and intrinsically ideological– nature of the scholarly scrutiny of the Sahrawi governance and statehood.

Key words: Western Sahara, decolonisation, *realpolitik*, coloniality of power.

Resumen: Casi cinco décadas después de la ocupación ilegal del Sáhara Occidental, el enfoque de la *realpolitik* sigue siendo utilizado por los académicos conservadores y los medios de comunicación para afirmar la ausencia de pragmatismo en la demanda saharauí de autodeterminación en el contexto de poder más amplio. Este razonamiento pragmático y racionalista se aplica como descalificador de los planteamientos saharauís de liberación y descolonización, considerándolos insuficientes e inviables. Por el contrario, el enfoque del diplomático y pensador saharauí Boukhari Ahmed subrayaba que la *realpolitik* como marco de la posición de los expertos sobre el Sáhara Occidental opera como una retórica excluyente, es decir un medio para desestimar las capacidades y la determinación del pueblo saharauí. La resistencia y la supervivencia saharauís en condiciones de ocupación y graves privaciones ofrecen algo más que un modelo para la acción anticolonial. El artículo examina la naturaleza hipercrítica -e intrínsecamente ideológica- del escrutinio académico de la gobernanza y la estatalidad saharauís.

Palabras clave: Sáhara Occidental, descolonización, *realpolitik*, colonialidad del poder.

Introduction

Since 1975, the prolonged Sahrawi people's struggle for decolonization, statehood and sovereignty attracted varying levels of interest from media and academic researchers. Most visibly, it attracted hypercritical scrutiny: Sahrawi people and their governance structures are studied by political scientists, legal scholars, ethnographers and anthropologists regarding their position on self-determination and matters of sovereignty, political organization, state

formation, refugee camp management¹; also, and prominently, gender roles and position of women in the Sahrawi society and governance². Disavowal and hypercriticism are abundant and remarkably superfluous considering the relative absence of the Western Sahara conflict from the mainstream media and a modest scope of published research and coverage by international scholarship. Additionally, it is unfounded in the context of unlimited support provided by the Sahrawi communities and Polisario to all initiatives involving research and visits to the Sahrawi refugee camps. The criticism comes in many forms, not just regarding the staunch attitude towards the issue of self-determination or matters of governance. Sahrawi people, their institutions and recognized representative authorities are accused of forging false appearances and manipulating their public image in the world, while some scholars even speculate on the covert nature of Sahrawi religiousness (Fiddian-Qasmieh 2014). As Zunes and Mundy (2010) demonstrate, even the Sahrawi identity is questioned, problematized as inauthentic or incomplete.

At the same time, the struggle of the Sahrawi people is marked – and marred – by the public reproduction of the ‘forgottenness’ discourse, closely related to the politics of forgetting, a political-discursive process in which certain groups are rendered invisible within the dominant political culture (Fernandes 2004). As a darker counterpart of politics of memory, politics of forgetting operates through ‘inaction, hesitation, and silence’ as means to suppression and erasure (Shin and Jin 2012, 4). ‘Forgottenness’ as a discourse involves perpetual – past, present, ongoing – process of production of representational material situating a group or groups into a position outside of the horizon of expectation of relevance and, to a varying extent, viability (Vicentic and Abdeslam, forthcoming). As explained by a media professional in 2007, “Sahara does not exist. It does not appear in the media and therefore, it does not exist.”³

Over decades of occupation and postponement of the referendum for self-determination, a stability of placement of Western Sahara into ‘forgottenness’ has been achieved, ensuring what Zunes and Mundy had termed “low visibility ‘silent march’ for North Africa’s untapped natural resources” (2010, 86). Keeping the unresolved issue of Western Sahara self-determination off the mainstream media radar, maintains the disconnectedness from understanding causal chains of exploitation and securitization in the region. Sahrawi ways of being, knowing and surviving in the world are erased from mainstream public domain in Europe, relegated to ‘forgottenness’, while specialized fora continue to produce single-faceted depictions of the Sahrawi cause and identity, undifferentiated and anachronistic.

¹ see Ammour 2014; Boukhars and Roussellier 2014; Boukhars 2013; Jensen 2013; Lohmann 2011; Mohsen-Finan 2009; Wehrey & Boukhars 2013

² Fiddian-Qasmieh 2010, 2014; Hinden 2018

³ “El Sahara no existe. No aparece en los medios de comunicación y por lo tanto no existe.”, Vicente Romero, RTVE journalist, 2007 (transcribed in Lillo et al. 2009).

Drawing from David Scott, anthropologist Mark Drury (2023) employs the notion of ‘the trace of futures past’ to add clarity to the developments following the transition from the era of anticolonial emancipatory ethos to the age of development and humanitarianism. This displacement had reconfigured temporal relationships, blurring lines between the past, present and future and allowing merely for an immobile and anguished aftermath of the dissipation of a horizon of expectation of revolutionary change. Drury identifies the Sahrawi struggle as such a trace, a phenomenon belonging to a political outlook of an era forgone. The protracted conflict and the absence of resolution for the Sahrawi people create accordingly the effect of being stranded in ‘in-betweenness,’ between decolonization and national sovereignty, between the right to self-determination and its enactment, between international law and occupation, between conflict and resolution, between war and peace” (Drury 2020, 93). Pronouncing this condition as ‘being stranded in and by the process of decolonization’, Drury interprets Sahrawi agency as captured in decolonization as a horizon of expectation, “compelled to undertake continuous, ongoing action with the aim of achieving a political future that is both apparently imminent and chronically unattainable” (2023, 93).

By undertaking a decolonial reading⁴ of the subject matter and engaging critical to be replaced with Indigenous (with capital I) scholarship pertaining matters of sovereignty and self-determination, this article explores the aspects of critical engagement with Western Sahara and the Sahrawi struggle that apply the rhetoric and the logic of *realpolitik*, more or less directly incurring erasures of the Sahrawi knowledges, ethics and culture. The elisions and exclusions incurred by the violence of this logic reveal the workings of the coloniality of power in the international order.

Between sovereignty and *realpolitik*

The term *realpolitik* came to commonly denote an approach to politics and policy that purportedly rests on the premises of pragmatism and interest. The concept, tied to a loanword originating from German language and XIX century practice of statesmanship, subsequently transferred into the Anglo-American political discourse, also refers to theory, the realist approach in international relations, often encompassing both positive and negative usages. Although still marked by some lingering negative connotations such as cynicism, power politics and self-interest stripped from any moral frills, the notion of *realpolitik* has expanded to refer to a position, aspiration, theory, policy, and practice, and as such it been embedded into the public discourse over time⁵ as a neutral, objective fact of the state of the world and relations in

⁴ Decolonial reading means reading how modernity/coloniality is at work generating images of the world (reality) that prevent us from seeing what is in front of us... exposing the ontological fiction of Western modernity's vocabulary.” (Casimir 2020: xiv)

⁵ As demonstrated in Bew's history of *realpolitik*, the popularity and the connotation of the concept appear to be changing over time. As illustrated by Zunes and Mundy (2010) in case of Western Sahara the

it, a requirement even, “a necessary antidote to the perceived excess of idealism” (Bew 2016, 3). With the recuperation of the ‘great power’ competition narratives, a subtle and pervasive turn has occurred, reclaiming the exclusive dichotomy of the ‘real’ against the ‘utopian’, relating the *realpolitik* as “cool, circumspect approach to statecraft, deliberately contrasted to what is presented as the naïve idealism of others” (Bew 2016, 4).

Moroccan invasion on the territory of Western Sahara occurred on October 31, 1975, violating UN resolutions and the ruling of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) from October 16, 1975, and two fundamental principles of the existing international order – peoples’ right to self-determination and the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by force. The Security Council, the body responsible for the maintenance of international peace and security under the UN Charter, did not act in appropriate response, maintaining an attitude of ambivalence, inaction and indifference since. Sahrawi scholar Sidi M. Omar attributes this failure to causes related mainly to *realpolitik*:

This is obviously not the place to engage critically with *realpolitik* and its ‘dogmatic acceptance’ of power as the fundamental determinant of international politics, among other things. There is no denying the fact, however, that its doctrinaire power-centred approach in policymaking has caused (and continues to cause) so much instability and insecurity in many parts of the world. (Omar 2020)

From the perspective of ‘political realism’, the Western Sahara conflict is “essentially a territorial dispute pitting Western Saharan nationalism against Moroccan irredentism” (Zunes and Mundy 2010, xxiv). However, Zunes and Mundy discount it as reductionist, lacking argument to explain the persistence of the Sahrawi resistance. Omar identifies a tension between approaches rooted in doctrine of *realpolitik* and the ones founded upon the right of colonised peoples to self-determination. Following the calls issued by the Security Council, he recognizes the self-contradictory and confusing nature of international organization’s approach, losing focus of its own foundational principles under the weight of the supposed ‘realist’ argument.⁶ He terms this attitude “destructive ambiguity”, as it creates more confusion and thwarts any member initiatives toward action, while providing Morocco with opportunities for obstruction and evasion of responsibility (Omar 2020).

attitude of *realpolitik* never relaxed, regardless of the tag, “contrasting Kissinger’s *realpolitik*, the Carter administration’s ‘idealism’, and the subsequent Reagan and George H. W. Bush (1989–92) administrations’ hawkish approach, the differences were minute. The only perceptible changes have been in terms of the quality and quantity of support the U.S. government has afforded Morocco. Support for the Moroccan regime and thus for its expansionist campaign in Western Sahara was never questioned.”

⁶ UN Security Council on the one hand calling for “a realistic, practicable and enduring political solution based on compromise”, and to enter into “negotiations without preconditions in good faith with a view to achieving a just, lasting, and mutually acceptable political solution, which will provide for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara” (Omar 2020)

In this sense, *realpolitik* acts as another protective shield that enables members of the international community to shrug at the pretence of irrefutability of power politics, despotism, violence and insecurity.

The *realpolitik* approach continues to be a method utilized to claim absence of pragmatism in the Sahrawi demand for self-determination in the wider power context, thus deeming it unfeasible. It acts as a disciplining technique intended to ultimately trickle-down critical realist argument to Polisario as a political structure representing Sahrawi people, operating on multiple levels. It is also consistently applied in the attempts to reduce the significance of factors of solidarity in foreign policy and continuing moral obligation to assist in suppression of colonialism (Elaggoune and Aty 2018).

Sahrawi diplomat and political thinker Boukhari Ahmed (Boukhari Ahmed Barikala)⁷ affirmed in his work his understanding that *realpolitik* as framing of ‘expert’ position on Western Sahara operated as an exclusionary rhetoric. The exclusive space opened for inherently Eurocentric and power-oriented privilege-affirming ‘expertise’ functioned as a venue to apply purportedly realist narrative as means to dismiss the capacities and the determination of the Sahrawi people (Awah 2019, 21).

Realpolitik can operate as a tool of policy and public discourse management in the national contexts of settler colonial states, being applied as an ‘antidote’ to the Indigenous methodologies and philosophies of custodianship and governance. In this context, Indigenous theoretical approaches to colonial occupation and extraction emphasize the significance of the irreconcilable nature of land as pedagogy – as a life practice and resistance in one – with authority of the settler colonial state. The fact of Indigenous life and sovereignty practiced through land as pedagogy triggers colonial state’s surveillance and violence, as “it places Indigenous bodies between settlers and their money” (Coulthard 2012).

In the case of the Sahrawi people, settler colonialism is a fact of daily life within the Morocco occupied territories of Western Sahara. Elaborating on Drury’s argument (2023), it is thus possible to say that Sahrawi people are not ‘stranded in the process of decolonisation’, which presents suspended decolonisation itself as the root cause of Sahrawi detriment and the unrelenting demand for self-determination the cause of blockage in the international system; they are stranded in the expansive web of colonial complicity by the international community. The prolonged state of irresolution is more complex than an outcome of being “a geopolitical hot potato in the corridors of Washington and the United Nations” (Isidoros 2018, 5).

Pulling at the threads of the unresolved Western Sahara conflict reveals the seams of the interrupted process of decolonisation enmeshed with the lingering effects of the colonial

⁷ In Spanish transcription, Bujari Uld Ahmed Uld Barical-la.

world order and mindset or coloniality of power, as defined by Colombian scholar into Aníbal Quijano (2000).⁸

The colonial matrix of power⁹ operates in interrelated domains: control of economy, including land appropriation and extractivism; power, including all institutionalized authority; control of gender (as another hierarchic sorting mechanism and system of exploitation¹⁰); and control of knowledge (epistemology, education and formation of subjectivity/identity).

Resilience of the Sahrawi struggle presents a universal challenge to colonial complicity and lingering mechanisms of coordinated colonial plunder and subjugation. It is a challenge to all institutions and structures maintaining systems of oppression: Western-imposed model of a surveillance state, sorting mechanisms of racial capitalism, including disciplining through imposition of Eurocentric feminisms. It resists embeddedness in the colonial trope of disappearance and extinction, as well as fixedness and datedness of ideas of community, resistance, liberation, and decolonisation.

The territorial negotiations between some of the Latin American governments and the Indigenous peoples can be addressed as a matter of difference in signification: for the state, some phenomena have meaning only in the context of extraction of value, such as natural resources, while to the Indigenous communities with an ancestral connection to the place, a resource, a locality or a natural object can engage a number of meanings, roles and practices. In the process of negotiation on the matters of access and ownership, Di Giminiani recognizes that the same concepts employed by both groups refer to “radically different worlds” (Di Giminiani 2013, 535). The neoliberal culture of expertise imposes its interpretations of the issue within the neoliberal model of governability, not allowing the space for Indigenous views (Di Giminiani 2013, 540). When studied, Indigenous land activism is often presented within the constructivist framework as expressions of identity politics, with land standing solely for a symbol of collective identity. Di Giminiani explains the significance of recognition of ontological difference:

⁸ Quijano saw the contemporary globally hegemonic model of power as presupposing the element of coloniality, inherent to capitalism and its idea of race and classifications of the peoples and control and division of labour. (Quijano 2000)

⁹ “Implanting the colonial matrix of power (either in sixteenth century Anahuak (Valley of Mexico) or in today’s Iraq) implies to dismantle, simultaneously, existing forms of social organization and ways of life”. (Mignolo 2007).

¹⁰ For more information about Spanish colonial gender interventions, see *Mujeres, colonialismo y nacionalismo saharaui: hilvanando historia(s)* by Enrique Bengochea Tirado, Juan Carlos Gimeno Martín and Rocío Medina Martín.

Recognition of ontological pluralism is central in the debate on the political self-determination of indigenous groups. Conflicts over the recognition of cultural difference have been generally regarded as ‘negotiations over meaning involving different, culturally conditioned interpretations of social reality’. However, claims point to the possibility that divergences refer not only to discordant representations of society, but also to differences in ontological terms. (Di Giminiani 2013, 540).

Failure to address the matter of ontology and plurality of meanings, as much as the oversimplified and essentialist notions of symbolism and identity, interfere with proper understanding of the significance of the territory, leading to failure of negotiations. According to Di Giminiani, this recognition is a political act in itself, nonetheless, an unavoidable one, as “the political self-determination of indigenous people is indeed incomplete unless we take into account questions concerning the conceptual and ontological self-determination” (Di Giminiani 2013, 541). Similarly, Zunes and Mundy see the Western Sahara conflict as ‘imaginary at its most fundamental level’, being based on ideas. They do not dispute the materiality of war, displacement, plunder, nor the territorial dispute: “Yet abstractly, at the level of the ‘metaconflict’, the dispute stems from mutually exclusive differences in the self-perceptions that ground Moroccan and Western Saharan nationalism.” (Zunes and Mundy 2010, xxiii).

Regardless of the measure of *realpolitik* in the status of affairs regarding Western Sahara in an international context, the Polisario and the Sahrawi people cannot be engaged in legitimizing or justifying the approach or lenience to it (Omar 2020). In Boukhari Ahmed’s word, what is fundamental is the principles that should be engaged to seek the solutions: “The solution exist, it is and will be here, and Polisario cannot renounce, not today, not in a hundred years, this right to independence” (Awah 2019, 15). The political, economic or strategic motivations and incentives behind the illegal occupation of Western Sahara constitute “a denial of the existence of the Sahrawi people and their right to self-determination and independence” (Omar 2020). What Omar terms ‘the practical expression of denial’ other than denial of territory includes bombardment of Sahrawi civilians, scorched-earth policy, violence practiced against civilians in the occupied territories and appropriation and destruction of Sahrawi cultural heritage.

Following this logic resulting from the lived experience, the Sahrawi people’s struggle goes beyond defending national identity as existing in the European imaginary, as it involves their right to exist altogether, and in particular “as a free and sovereign people in their homeland” (Omar 2020). In other words – and paraphrasing decolonial scholar Walter D. Mignolo – for an greater understanding of the Western Sahara issue, the epistemic decolonial shift is required that would look at the ‘empires’ from the perspective of the Sahrawi people rather than looking at the Sahrawi people from the perspective of the ‘empires’ (Mignolo 2007).

Indigeneity: interrogated identity and denial of authenticity¹¹

The term Sahrawi (or Sahrawi) is broader than ethnic or political-geographic category. Complex historical and geographical circumstances are further complicated by the political situation of settler colonialism in the occupied territories of Western Sahara and displacement of the refugee population. The question of Sahrawi identity as a point of relevance for the prospective referendum had additionally been manipulated by the Moroccan government as a source of continued contestation of Sahrawi claim (Zunes and Mundy 2010, xxi). Since 1976 almost half of the Sahrawi population lives in the refugee camps in Tindouf area of Algeria, and many continue to move for purposes of activism, education and work. In addition to the already present influence of the language of the former colonizer, strategic relationship with Latin America and particularly Cuba contributed to what Pablo San Martín termed ‘Hispanisation’ of the Sahrawi (Castellino and Dominguez-Redondo 2013).

Omar provides an overview of the process of development of the collective sense of ‘people’ among the indigenous population of Western Sahara (2008). Prior to Spanish colonisation there was a sense of distinct territorial belonging and a common understanding of a sociopolitical community, shared language (Hassaniya dialect of Arabic), distinct systems of governance, and legal custom and practice. Clarifying that all identity formation occurs through performative acts, Omar explains that Sahrawi identity came to exist through combining pre-existing collective identity and series of such acts, as socially constructed as any other, “socially produced, reproduced and normalized through various institutional and discursive practices” (Omar 2008, 44):

Historical studies on the region indicate that the present-day Sahrawis represent a fusion of the indigenous Sanhaja Berbers, Africans and Arabs who came from Arabia during the 13th century. Successive invasions of the territory by the Arabs led to the gradual Islamization and Arabization of the indigenous people. This process gave rise to an ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural symbiosis that gradually led to the formation of the constitution of the Sahrawi people represented by the tribes and tribal confederations that inhabited the area now known as Western Sahara. (Omar 2008, 44)

Contemporary understanding of indigeneity resists stereotypes, colonial tropes and essentialisms of land, tradition and genealogy, recognizing “eclecticism, and dynamism as the

¹¹ Authors do not intend to evaluate or validate evidence of the indigeneity of the Sahrawi people, nor provide elements for compliance with its legal definitions. We share an understanding of the historical account of Western Sahara as complex, characterized by unrestricted migratory movement in the region, organized along specific routes, tribal autonomy and legal custom. Attempt to read ethnic or any other form of homogeneity into Sahrawi population would disregard “complexities of identity, further legitimise the colonial boundaries, and force identities to conform to them” (Castellino and Dominguez-Redondo 2013).

essence of indigeneity as opposed to a falling off or ‘corruption’ of some original state of purity... recognizing [indigeneity] as a relational field of governance” (de la Cadena and Starn 2007, 3). Reconceptualization of Indigenous identity requires a recognition of larger social fields of difference and sameness:

It acquires its “positive” meaning not from some essential properties of its own, but through its relation to what it is not, to what it exceeds or lacks. This is not to say that the indigenous condition is somehow derivative or without powerful visions and directions of its own. What it does mean is that indigenous cultural practices, institutions, and politics become such in articulation with what is not considered indigenous within the particular social formation where they exist. (de la Cadena and Starn 2007, 4)

Indigenous struggle for liberation in Western Sahara challenges notions of Moroccan nationalism, contributing to the construction of the Sahrawi national identity inseparable from claim to their territory. Zunes and Mundy clarify that this relationship implicitly asserts incompatibility with being/becoming Moroccan or being subjected to foreign power:

Claiming centuries, if not millennia, of continuous habitation, Western Saharan nationalists have constructed themselves as the natives, whereas Moroccans are the settlers, a reflection of the same volatile identity dynamic found in other colonial situations. In such colonist–settler situations, the outcome has historically tended to follow one of three trajectories: total independence for the native population (e.g., Algeria’s liberation from France); total subjugation, if not near annihilation, of the indigenes (e.g., the Native Americans in the United States); or an independent, hybridized polity (e.g., postapartheid South Africa). (Zunes and Mundy 2010, xxiv)

At the same time, Sahrawi relationship with territoriality is problematised. Castellino and Dominguez-Redondo ask whether current circumstances of the international order permit an identity that is not based on a territorial assumption, and still be entitled to statehood.¹² Additionally, the centuries of continual habitation and movement are not regarded as a sufficient source of identity by some, as Western Sahara “functioned largely as a frontierless entity whose peoples had close relations with the entities that neighboured it” (Castellino and Dominguez-Redondo 2013).

¹² “Inside me, I know Western Sahara is my home. I have never seen it, but I know it does exist, maybe it does not exist in other people’s minds or library books and school maps, but it does exist inside me, inside all the Sahrawi and inside all those who believe in justice.... I do not really agree that we should have borders; I wish that all people would be able to live together. But first I want to experience that feeling. The feeling of belonging. The feeling that people get when they see me wearing my traditional Melhfa and say to me that I am from Western Sahara, not India. I want to witness my family and all Sahrawi return to our country.” Sahrawi activist Asria Mohamed Taleb (Taleb 2013).

Expectations around indigeneity remain “fickle, sometimes contradictory”, including the demand for cultural purity and authenticity (de la Cadena and Starn 2007, 9). Previously mentioned research on land disputes between Latin American governments and Indigenous groups, establishes that sites in question have multiple meanings as sources of identity and/or, but not exhaustively, other form of power and agency. According to Di Giminiani, making such territories an object of Indigenous land activism is often deemed inauthentic, as land claims derive from the supposition that political usefulness and sacredness are mutually exclusive (Di Giminiani 2013, 537). In a similar fashion, disputing Sahrawi connection to the land on the grounds of the nomadic nature of their culture, “perpetuates the sedentarist view that living spaces should be static, constant and without much movement, that transience suggests insecurity and instability and that a place must have perceptible borders” (Isidoros 2018, 91). Engaging the notion of ‘relational view of home’, as proposed by Isidoros, is useful, indicating the complexity, dynamism and the cyclic nature of pastoral movement.

The tendency towards dismissal of Sahrawi abilities constitutes one of the continuities of misrepresentation since the early days of the war in 1975. Zunes and Mundy list several examples of such dismissal in the context of early evaluation of Sahrawi military capability, all excluding the possibility of knowledge: “As is often the case with indigenous insurgencies, observers also failed to understand the advantage of generations of place-based knowledge (Zunes and Mundy 2010, 6).”

Isidoros (2018) proposes that the Sahrawi identity takes place as a negotiation between various pressures: geopolitical, religious, neo-patriarchal, and those imposed by the development and humanitarian actors. In his early work, Boukhari Ahmed discussed the departure from the apparent ‘traditional’ towards the ‘contemporary’ in the Sahrawi identity and the significance of this negotiation, reflecting on the move from an embeddedness in the dogma towards following ‘an ethic of life and future’, grounded in the Sahrawi philosophy and wisdom offered by African anti-colonial leaders, alert to the divisive ambitions of the colonizer (Boukhari Ahmed in Awah 2019, 21).

Criticisms that Polisario’s appearance is fixed and obsolete, place it as visually belonging to an era long gone, not moving with time and appealing to the tastes of the new generations of news content consumers. Some scholars however recognized change as the continuum of the Sahrawi struggle: change of tactics was necessitated by changes in the terrain of conflict. Polisario and Sahrawi communities have developed unique coping mechanisms to deal with war and its aftermath, prolonged armed struggle, leading to ceasefire and then a campaign for a referendum. The discursive shifts had also been noted, self-determination to negotiated settlement and then to human rights discourse, while it is Morocco’s approach that is marked by rigid consistency: “Occupy, settle and exploit the territory, forestall any agreement under the rubric of UN-based decolonization, maintain French and American support within the Security Council, use Western Sahara as leverage in diplomatic negotiations with other nations and ruthlessly repress domestic dissent” (Drury 2020).

Negotiating recognition, surviving misrepresentation

Perhaps the Sahrawi people of this generation will not live to see the independence, but the next one will. Our determination is in any case unflinching. Children born in the occupied zone sing the notes of the Sahrawi national anthem. This generation managed to successfully transfer the seeds of this independence onto the next generation. In this sense, we can die in peace. (Boukhari Ahmed in Lillo et al 2011, 69)

Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, a prolific scholar on matters concerning representation of Western Sahara, and Sahrawi women within the development paradigm, raises issues of myths of ‘uniqueness’ of Sahrawi refugees and the ‘ideal’ refugee model based on the Sahrawi, and the purported role of gender equality in promotion of that public image (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2010, 2011, 2014). These works unreflectively perpetuate and reproduce colonial-style sorting, by scrutinizing imagined representations of the ‘ideal’ and ‘non-ideal’ categories of refugees, women in particular. Focusing on the ‘mythological’ aspect of the constructed image of the Sahrawi refugees, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh introduces claims that Polisario Front mobilizes gendered images and concepts strategically in order to secure humanitarian and political support from the West (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014, 3). This undertaking is performed with the asserted aim to “reveal a manipulation of gender and imagined gender relations” and marked by an inquisitorial style mixing scrutiny and assumption (2014, 3). The analysis is challenged by an inconsistency in author’s contestation of the Sahrawi identity and agency, as she argues that the perception of the Sahrawi is an almost exclusive construction of writings and observations of the Western academics, NGOs and international organizations (Sahrawi being an invention of the West), simultaneously pursuing her investigation with a presumption of self-interested false pretence (“They have in turn projected a specific image of the camps to ensure these actors continued support”, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014) attributed to the Polisario.

In addition to the critical scrutiny of Sahrawi agency and public image (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2010; 2014), a Eurocentric and development-centered examination of Sahrawi feminism and the Polisario’s imagined construction of an idealized image of Sahrawi woman (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2018), some of the recent scholarship explores intergenerational relationships within the Sahrawi communities, projecting an image of conflicting views, beliefs and objectives between the ‘young’ and the ‘old’ (Finden 2018; Finden and Olson 2016). In this instance, the misrepresentation of the intergenerational ‘disaccord’ and the supposed dichotomous opposition of views and positions on the continuing struggle of the Sahrawi people is intended to construct evidence of uncertainty and instability in the general context of the world, and within the community. The article in question (Finden 2018) reflects upon the relationship to the ancestral lands present in the older generations and absent from the younger ones, as they have no connection to the landscape of Western Sahara. Through application of repetitive reductionism and on the basis of two misconstrued interviews presented as research material, it misinterprets the meaning and the effects of stated frustration of the refugees and the desire to return to the armed conflict. The hypercritical misrepresentation is rounded with an

account of (Eurocentric) gender-binary views of the Sahrawi circumstance, reproducing and affirming externally imposed gender framings. Article outlines a set of essentialized feminine or ‘matriarchal’ gender features as a norm, simultaneously pronouncing them to be a witting ruse by the Sahrawi people to ameliorate their case for the European audiences, as carriers of universal meanings of peacefulness, non-violence, absence of potential for harm. The misrepresentation¹³ appears to intentionally disregard the multiplicity of views, opinions and positions present and proliferating within the Sahrawi political community, as well as the particular cultural aspects of intergenerational interactions and gender as manifested in the Sahrawi communities (see Isidoros 2018 for anthropological insights and complexity of gender). It also reinforces the positioning of the authors into a hierarchic setting where European scholars allow themselves unhampered practice of the white gaze scrutiny and corrective critique, while they situate Western Sahara conflict and the predicament of the refugees in a place of availability for the European eyes, naturalizing the condition in which the Sahrawi – or all refugees for that matter – need to appeal to the good will of the international institutions and appease the anxieties of the Global North.

The hypercritical discourse on the topic of Sahrawi women and theoretical non-permissiveness of Sahrawi women’s agency raises the issue of multiple violences Sahrawi women are subjected to: in the occupied territories of Western Sahara, Sahrawi women, as leading figures of the resistance to occupation, activists and community members, experience, institutional discrimination and violent suppression and constant abuse¹⁴ by Moroccan security forces (Vasquez 2014). The systemic violence experienced in the occupied territories is complemented by symbolic violence, particularly affecting women, “the subjectifying form of violence that renders the crushing materiality of systemic violence invisible, appear natural, acceptable” (Coulthard 2014, 177). The scepticism and distrust exhibited by some of the scholarly scrutiny of the Sahrawi women extends this form of systemic violence.

Indigenous scholar Glen Coulthard writes about the central themes connected to the struggle for recognition experienced by multitudes of Indigenous peoples. These scenarios differ and engage a range of complex ethical, political, and legal questions, with varying aspirations towards “affirmative recognition and institutional accommodation of societal cultural differences on the one hand, and the freedom and autonomy of marginalized individuals and groups living

¹³ Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson explains that the systemic racism erases Indigeneity and replaces it with stereotypes, leading to continual misrepresentation of Indigenous movements and actions. It is through solidarity within one’s community and other communities of radical resistance that self-image is recuperated. (Simpson 2018, 235)

¹⁴ See El-Ejla Chejh Alla (Ayla Chejh), *Women at the forefront of politics: the organizing work of the Sahrawi women*, 24.03.2023, and Capire in conversation with Sultana Khaya, *Despite persecution, Sahrawi women have not stopped demanding freedom and independence*. 18.02.2022 Capire at <https://capiremov.org/en/interview/sultana-khaya-despite-persecution-sahrawi-women-have-not-stopped-demanding-freedom-and-independence/>

in ethnically diverse states on the other” (Coulthard 2014, 3). The Sahrawi predicament plays out in two fields: the one of settler-colonial occupation and the one within the international legal system, engaging international community in a variety of ways. The recognition is not sought on a state level, but within an international domain, too often influenced by residues of the colonial self-interest framed as pragmatism and *realpolitik*. Coulthard argues that the recognition approach appealing to the power in a one-directional manner is counterproductive, as “the politics of recognition in its contemporary liberal form promises to reproduce the very configurations of colonialist, racist, patriarchal state power that Indigenous peoples’ demands for recognition have historically sought to transcend” (2014, 3). Instead, he proposes the ideal of reciprocity, which presupposes mutual contributions to conviviality.

Mutual contributions and reciprocity, as values present in many Indigenous cultures, remove the threat of placement of the state/international actor in the unearned position of moral authority. According to Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, appeals to compassion of the colonizing state or ‘benevolent’ forces results in false pity and inaction:

The politics of grief can also so easily become the politics of distraction—a process, which moves us away from the renewal of place-based practices by distracting us with politics that are designed to reinforce the status quo rather than deconstruct it. Both the politics of distraction and the politics of grief are just enactments of the politics of recognition. (Simpson 2018, 240).

Simpson poses the question what the outcome of acting in concert would be, “engaging in large-scale resurgent organizing on our own terms” (Simpson 2018, 240). Sahrawi struggle and the culture of resistance to oppression provides a possibility for better understanding of peaceful resistance and mutuality in the exchange with the international community.

Boukhari Ahmed uses the principle of self-determination as the point of international consensus, as the one of foundational importance for the acceptance of the construction of the international legal order. As the “basic and irrevocable principle” it is embedded in the international system in the form accepted by the states of today (Boukhari in Lillo et al. 2011, 68). Due to the validity of the foundational and consensual nature of the arrangement, Western Sahara, in his words, cannot be exception to the general rule, as it is one of the building blocks international legal order rests upon (Lillo et al. 2011, 69). Self-determination as a concept however goes beyond the legal: it is a value in itself, expressed through a perpetual aspiration towards growing and evolving process of decolonisation of the peoples. It operates as a multidirectional agency, recognized by Awah as a morality gleaned from the thoughts and actions of the African anti-colonial forefathers (2019). As a sense of duty of action, it is an ongoing call to continue one’s own path of self-determination and support others in their struggle, with a constant reminder that the goals have not been reached as long as the traces of colonialism are observable (Awah 2019, 20). In this sense, it encompasses several mutually contingent, expansive and cumulative demands, as it is a process that cannot take place in isolation:

“Nothing can impose a solution in Western Sahara that is in opposition to the international legality, in opposition to the will of the Sahrawi people and the vision of Africa and the countries in the region that have something to say about today and tomorrow of Western Sahara.” (Boukhari Ahmed in Lillo et al. 2011, 69).

This attitude echoes another aspect poignantly elaborated upon by Drury (2018) on Western Sahara and advisory opinion on Western Sahara (The International Court of Justice Advisory Opinion on Western Sahara, 1975), in particular, contributing significantly to the corpus of the international law regulating the right of the peoples to self-determination. He identifies irony in the fact that this contribution and the legal commentary proceeding from it had given more impetus to the norm of self-determination, than in actuality improving the case of the Sahrawi people. As Drury points out, the advisory opinion on Western Sahara is premised on the Eurocentric and undoubtedly colonial legal concepts such as *terra nullius*, while simultaneously opening a less restrictive, multicultural legal space:

From one perspective, the decision has contributed to the emergence of a more inclusive, multicultural international law characterized by a Rawlsian ‘overlapping consensus’ between European and non-European concepts, thanks to its narrowing of *terra nullius*. Conversely, others have contended that, given its very reliance upon *terra nullius*, a concept used to justify colonial occupation throughout the 19th century, *Western Sahara* (1975) participates in reproducing international law’s irrevocable Eurocentrism. Still others see an “ambivalent compromise” in the case’s reinforcement of self-determination and, by association, normative concepts of territorial sovereignty, even as it engaged with non-Western political formations. (Drury 2018)

Conclusion

Sahrawi people possess detailed and embodied knowledge of the geopolitical intricacies of the Western Sahara predicament, including the passivity of the UN bodies, the role of the major EU member states in perpetuation of it, continual colonial relationships of patronage and exploitation, as well as the extractive presence of the corporate actors, and the greenwashing of the occupation performed by the Kingdom of Morocco. Occupation of Western Sahara remains a violation of a fundamental norm of international law, and the displacement of Sahrawi people a matter of urgency.

The conflict of Western Sahara remains the point of contention where *realpolitik* and international law clash. More importantly, it continues to be the place of Sahrawi past, present and future, and the locus of Sahrawi agency. The Polisario Front and the Sahrawi people have conscientiously been fulfilling their responsibilities towards the international community and contributing to its legal order premised on the principles ensuring people’s inalienable right

to self-determination. In the spirit of good will built into the foundations of the consensual international legal order, and consistent with the principles of Sahrawi socio-political thought, ethics and legal custom, it is the responsibility of the international community to respond with reciprocity to their continued efforts.

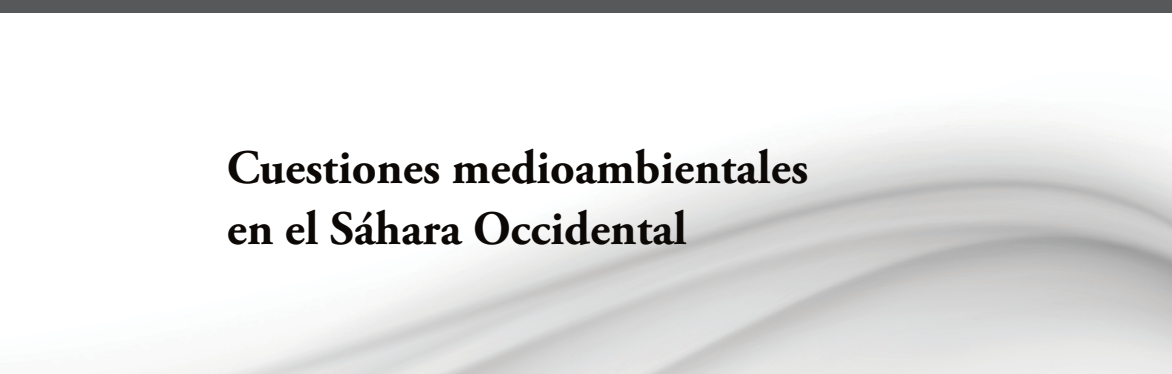
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A decorative graphic consisting of several overlapping, wavy, horizontal lines in shades of gray, creating a sense of movement and depth. These lines are positioned behind the title text.

Cuestiones medioambientales en el Sáhara Occidental

ESTUDIO ETNOBOTÁNICO DE LAS PLANTAS DE TIFARITI ☐

☐ <https://doi.org/10.21747/3078-431X/tifa9>

1. Introdução

El autor participó en la misión del Centro de Estudios Africanos (CEAUP) de la Universidad de Oporto, que durante la primera semana de febrero de 2020 permaneció en Tifariti, en la zona liberada del Sahara Occidental, y que tenía como objetivo hacer el reconocimiento arqueológico y ambiental de la región desde Tindouf a Tifariti (Figura 1). Se estudiaron las características del medio ambiente, el sistema pastoril y la vegetación. Se ha privilegiado el contacto con la población local recogiendo la mayor cantidad de datos posible sobre el uso de los recursos vegetales con el fin de incrementar el conocimiento etnobotánico de esta región. Se constató que a pesar de la escasez de agua y de todas las dificultades que conlleva la vida en el desierto, se pueden mejorar las condiciones de utilización de los recursos para hacer sostenible el sistema pastoril del Sáhara Occidental. Es posible aumentar la cobertura vegetal del desierto plantando árboles en zonas donde haya algo de agua disponible (Ozenda, 2004). Durante nuestra investigación de campo identificamos varias especies de plantas que en otras partes ya se cultivan para mejorar la nutrición del ganado y las personas y luchar contra la desertificación. En esta primera parte del trabajo sólo nos ocuparemos de las especies arbóreas encontradas.

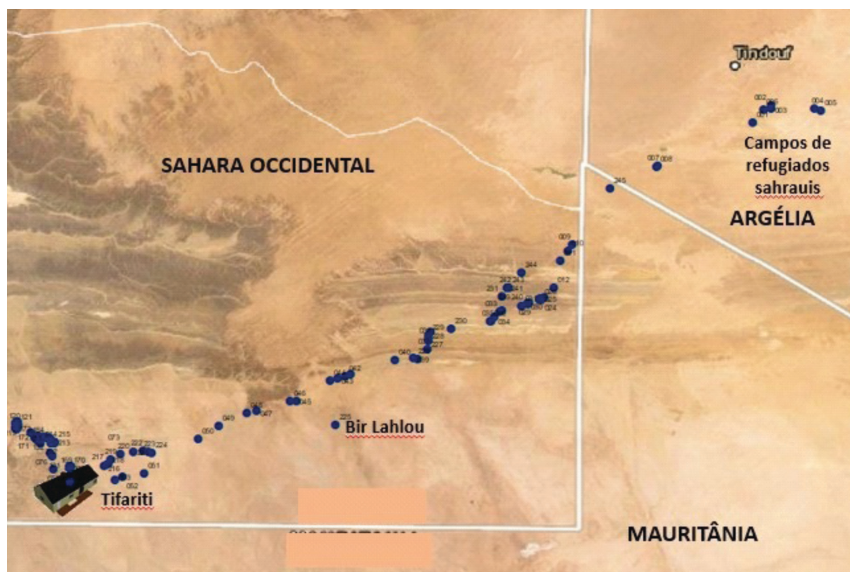


Figura 1. Ruta realizada entre Tindouf y Tifariti

2. El medio ambiente en Tifariti

Tifariti se encuentra en la región de Zemmur occidental, caracterizada por llanuras de arena y grava (*reg*) cortadas por valles o ueds y donde emergen algunas colinas y mesetas. Se desarrolla una vegetación adaptada a la aridez, el ecosistema de la sabana del desierto, dominado por *Acacia tortilis* (*talha*) que permite el pastoreo tradicional nómada de camellos, ovejas y cabras, principal actividad económica y recurso alimentario de la población. El clima en Tifariti se considera de tipo desértico suboceánico. La proximidad del mar provoca lluvias más frecuentes que en el interior del Sahara y el aire húmedo penetra por los valles hasta varios cientos de kilómetros tierra adentro, como en el valle del Seguiet el Hamra (Médail y Quézel, 2018). Este aire húmedo reduciendo la aridez promueve el desarrollo de las plantas y lo que Monod (1989) llama un desierto atenuado. El escudo de Reguibat aflora en los alrededores de Tifariti, dando origen a un reg granítico. Las masas de granito suben a la superficie e impiden que se acumule el agua de lluvia. Por eso esta zona es pobre en agua subterránea. Estas llanuras están atravesadas por pequeños ueds y aquí es donde se acumula el agua de lluvia, donde se cavan pozos (*bir*) y se desarrolla la vegetación y la ganadería.



Figura 2. La tierra muy árida del reg, cerca de la frontera con Mauritania, forma un paisaje mineral (Long. - 8,773075; Lat. 26,949868; Altitud 420 m).



Figura 3. Una talha (*Acacia tortilis*) de la sabana desértica en el Uad Sluguiat (Long. -8,847996; Lat. 26,811046; Altitud 424 m).



Figura 4. Las gara (plural: gour) o mesetas cerca de Uteit Aannania. Un paisaje típico saharai hecho por el viento (Long. - 10.67952; Lat. 26.307239; Altitud 429 m).



Figura 5. Uteit Aannania es un *inselberg* granítico. Estos cerros de granito emergen del escudo Regueibat. Los *inselberg* son comunes en el paisaje saharaui y representan rocas que han resistido la erosión durante millones de años.



Figura 5. Fuertes lluvias sobre Tifariti el 17 de septiembre de 2008. Foto cortesía de la FAO.



Figura 6. Las fuertes lluvias sobre Tifariti el 17 de septiembre de 2008 llenaron de agua los ueds.
Foto cortesía de la FAO.



Foto 7. Inundaciones en el campamento saharaui de Smara tras las fuertes lluvias de la última semana de septiembre de 2024. Foto de Senia Hamdi.



Figura 8. Para abreviar a sus camellos, los habitantes de Tifariti utilizan agua de pozos excavados en los valles de los ued. Aquí se acumula el agua de las fuertes lluvias



Figura 9. Un paisaje de desierto atenuado. Abundante vegetación de una fedra en la base del monte Rkheiz, donde se acumula el agua de lluvia que baja por las laderas (Long. -10,749841; Lat. 26,358691; Altitud 396 m).



Figura 10. El reg y el ued. El agua fluye desde el reg cuando llueve y la vegetación encuentra suficiente humedad para desarrollarse en el ued.



Figura 11. Camellos junto a un pozo en Tifariti. Para mejorar su alimentación, el propietario añade harina de trigo al agua.



Figura 12. Rebaños de ovejas y cabras pastan en el desierto en las afueras de Bir Lahlou (Long. -10,255104; Lat. 26,251825; Altitud 480 m).

3. La vegetación en Tifariti

La mayoría de las plantas saharianas pertenecen al reino floral Holártico, al que también pertenecen plantas de las zonas templadas de Europa, Asia y América del Norte. Durante la separación de los continentes, iniciada a principios de la era Mesozoica, estas masas continentales permanecieron unidas hasta el período Terciario, y las plantas que sobre ellas existían desarrollaron características comunes (Julivert, 2003). En la zona tropical del África subsahariana se desarrolló el reino floral Paleotropical, con características tropicales proporcionadas por altos valores de temperatura y humedad durante todo el año. Las plantas que existieron en el Sahara hace 3 millones de años se habrían extinguido en su mayor parte debido a la instalación de condiciones áridas a finales del período Terciario (Plioceno). Este largo período hasta hoy habría permitido el desarrollo de muchas plantas endémicas y este es uno de los hechos que sustentan la tesis de la gran antigüedad del desierto. Las nuevas especies que se asentaron allí a partir de ese momento procedían de las zonas más septentrionales del Mediterráneo y dieron lugar a un dominio propio dentro del reino floral holártico, el de las plantas sahara-árabes, que se encuentran desde el Sahara atlántico hasta la península arábiga, y que actualmente constituye el principal grupo

de plantas saharianas. Limitan al sur con las plantas del dominio Sudano-Angoleño del reino Paleotropical y al norte con el dominio mediterráneo del reino Holártico. Además de este grupo dominante sahara-arábe el Sahara también cuenta con especies específicamente mediterráneas, principalmente en las zonas más septentrionales y en lugares de refugio donde las plantas mediterráneas quedaron aisladas por la creciente aridez. Un buen ejemplo de estas especies son los cipreses (*Cupressus dupreziana* y olivos (*Olea europaea* subesp. *laperrini*) del Tassili, en las menos áridas montañas de Hoggar, en Argelia. En el sur, en la frontera con las plantas paleoafricanas sudano-angolesas, la transición climática permitió que algunas de estas especies típicamente tropicales se desarrollaran en el sur del Sahara y en su frontera con el Sahel. En muchos lugares del Sahara también podemos encontrar plantas cosmopolitas, originarias de otras zonas del mundo y que encuentran condiciones de supervivencia en lugares más húmedos (Ozenda, 2004; Rognon, 1994; Julivert, 2003)

La vegetación en Tifariti se desarrolla principalmente en los ueds y sus principales componentes son el árbol *Acacia tortilis* acompañado de la hierba *Panicum turgidum* (*mrobka*) los dos de origen tropical. Este conjunto, acompañado de muchos arbustos, es muy importante para la ganadería del pueblo saharauí, aportando la acacia las proteínas de sus hojas y frutos y al *Panicum* la energía de sus hojas y semillas. Cerca del hospital de Tifariti encontramos grandes árboles de *Faidherbia albida* (*Acacia albida*, afarfar) en el ued. Este árbol es uno de los árboles más importantes de África para la ganadería. Sus poderosas raíces encuentran aquí agua subterránea y se desarrolla un bosque de *F. albida*. Cerca del monte Rkeiz se encontró una población de árboles de la especie *Maerua crassifolia* (*atil*), cuyas hojas fueron pastadas intensamente.

En los ued de Tifariti predominan las acacias y los *Tamarix*. spp.. Las acacias son leguminosas, como las habas o los garbanzos, fijan el nitrógeno atmosférico y son muy importantes para mejorar los suelos de Tifariti. Los *Tamarix* son árboles muy resistentes a la sal en el suelo. Es necesario proteger sus poblaciones y, si es posible, aumentarlas, lo que se puede hacer alrededor de los pozos.

Las especies de árboles que se encuentran en la región de Tifariti son las que se mencionan a continuación.

***Acacia tortilis* (Forsskal) Hayne susp.*raddiana* (Savi) Brenan**

Sinónimo: *Vaichellia tortilis*

Familia: Fabaceae

Nombre Hassaniya: talha

Ubicación: cerca de la frontera con Mauritania, estas acacias son de pequeño tamaño y se pueden encontrar en grupos dispersos o en hileras siguiendo los dei (pequeños valles por donde fluye el agua) o incluso aisladas. La gran aridez del clima de esta región no les permite crecer más.

El paisaje del valle del ued Slugiati está marcado por tallas muy dispersas y mostrando mayor desarrollo en el lecho arenoso de los ued. Se acompaña de matas de la gámina mrobka (*Panicum turgidum*). Esta asociación, la llamada sabana del desierto, es muy común en el desierto saharauí y proporciona abundante alimento a los animales en esta zona tan seca. En el noreste saharauí, en estas sabanas se encuentran regularmente rebaños de camelos, ovejas y cabras. Algunas tallas se presentan aquí con la corteza arrancada por los burros. A medida que nos acercamos a Tifariti, las acacias se desarrollan y aumenta su densidad, indicador de la mayor disponibilidad de agua que se encuentra en esta región.

Propiedades: La talla es considerada el árbol de la vida del desierto del Sahara. Todas sus partes son útiles para los humanos. Los animales comen las hojas y las vainas, sus raíces realizan la fijación simbiótica de nitrógeno y mejoran el suelo. La madera es un combustible importante para los saharauis. La goma (elk) secretada por los troncos tiene usos alimentarios y medicinales. Mezclado con agua, se utiliza como antitusivo (foto). La mezcla es sabrosa y forma una espuma densa y estable. Es la receta saharauí para todo tipo de resfriado y un remedio seguro. La goma de acacia es producida por estos árboles al final del verano y por efecto de las altas temperaturas. Se recoge para el consumo y se compra en comercios locales.

Información general: Las acacias tienen una gran importancia ecológica en el Sahara. Bajo una sola acacia se encontraron más de cien especies diferentes de animales, entre aves, reptiles, insectos y arañas (Bernard citado por Rognon, 1994).



Figura 13. Población de talla (*Acacia tortilis*) en el ued cerca de Tifariti (Long, -10,549676; Lat. 26,201197; Altitud 465 m).



Figura 14. Talha en una roca del monte Erkeiez.
(Long. -10,743948; Lat. 26,365993; Altitud 405 m)



Figura 15. Goma de *Acacia tortilis*. Esta goma se recolecta durante las épocas más calurosas del año, cuando los árboles la secretan a través de sus troncos.
La goma de Talha tiene varios usos alimentarios y medicinales.



Figura 16. Solución de goma de Acacia tortilis en agua para reducir la tos..



Figura 17. Frutos e sementes de Acacia tortilis. Son un concentrado proteico para el ganado.
El nombre tortilis deriva de la forma espiral de la vaina de esta leguminosa.



Figura 18. Detalle de una rama de *Acacia tortilis*, sus espinas y sus hojas compuestas.
Las hojas son un alimento valioso para los animales.

***Faiderbia albida* (Delile) A. Chevalier**

Sinónimo: *Acacia albida*

Familia: Fabaceae

Nombre Hassaniya: afarfar

Ubicación: En Tifariti hay al menos dos núcleos de *Acacia albida*. Están situados en el valle junto al hospital y en el hortus. Aquí hay una gran *acacia albida* que alcanza grandes proporciones, quizás por estar ubicada en una zona protegida de los animales y su depredación, además de beneficiarse del agua que se utiliza para regar los cultivos en el hortus (Figura 19).

Propiedades: uno de los árboles forrajeros más importantes de África. El ganado come sus nutritivas hojas y vainas. Como árbol leguminosa proporciona mucha proteína a los animales y aumenta el contenido de nitrógeno y materia orgánica del suelo. Beneficia así a todo el ecosistema.

Información general: Aunque se encuentra principalmente en zonas de clima estepario (Sahel, sur de Angola, etc...), algunos árboles pueden desarrollarse en zonas concretas del Sahara donde el agua subterránea se acumula como los lechos de los ríos. También en huertas donde

haya agua para riego. Aquí pueden alcanzar una gran altura. Algunas *F. albida* también se desarrollan en zonas montañosas del Sahara (Hoggar, Tibesti, et...), donde aumenta la cantidad de lluvia (Médail y Quézel, 2018). Como otras acacias saharianas (*Acacia tortilis*, *A. seyal*, *A. ehrenbergiana*, *A. laeta*, *A. nilotica*) es de origen tropical y todas ellas son un testimonio del avance de la flora tropical en el Sahara (Médail y Quézel, 2018).



Figura 19. Un gran ejemplo de afarfar en el hortus de Tifariti.



Figura 20. Una buena población de afarfar (*Faiderbia albida*) en las afueras de Tifariti.

Estas acacias también se distinguen de las tortilis por su gran tamaño y porque son relativamente raras en el Sahara (Long.-10,561421; Lat. 26,159091; Altitud 479 m).



Figura 21. Detalle de las ramas de afarfar (*Faiderbia albida*). Al igual que la *Acacia tortilis*, permiten alimentar a los animales durante largos períodos de sequía. Es una planta del Sahel que en el Sahara sólo sobrevive en los ued con mucha agua subterránea o en las montañas.

***Maerua crassifolia* Forssk.**

Nombre hassaniya: atil

Familia: Capparaceae

Ubicación: Se encuentra en Tifariti en los ued y está asociado con la *Acacia tortilis*.

Propiedades: Es un árbol forrajero de gran valor nutricional y sumamente rico en minerales y proteínas. Los camellos se comen las hojas. Tradicionalmente se elaboran palitos de atil para limpiar los dientes (Figura 26). Todos los ejemplares observados en Tifariti presentan signos de sobrepastoreo, lo que podría poner en riesgo la supervivencia de esta especie en esta zona del Sahara Occidental.

Información general: *M. crassifolia* es un árbol de hoja perenne. La copa es muy ramificada y puede alcanzar los 10 m de altura. Es muy ramificado y el tronco principal es retorcido y poco desarrollado. Se encuentra en el norte de África, Oriente Medio, Irán y Pakistán. Es una especie típicamente desértica, pero considerada tropical. La especie es muy común en las zonas áridas del Sahel, pero en el desierto ocupa el terreno arenoso de los lechos de los ued (Le Houérou, 1995) donde encuentra aguas profundas. Muy resistente a la aridez.



Figura 22. Población de afarfar cerca del hospital de Tifaiti. Cerca de estas acacias albidas se encuentran arbustos que producen frutos rojos comestibles y muy apreciados localmente, los lghardag (*Lycium intricatum* Boiss.).



Figura 23. Atil (*Maerua crassifolia*) cerca de Fedrat El Erkeiez



Figura 25. Detalle de los troncos dela til.



Figura 24. Un atil en la Fedra el Rkeiz (Long.-10,748859; Lat. 26,340738; Altitud 467m)



Figura 26. Palillos para limpiar los dientes hecho de ramitas de atil.

***Tamarix aphylla* (L.) H. Karst.**

Nombre hassaniya: lezl

Familia: Tamaricaceae

Ubicación: es una planta propia de los ríos der arena en Tifariti, donde el agua está disponible a poca profundidad. Aparece aquí asociada con *Acacia tortilis* y *Maerua crassifolia*.

También en ued Aannania (Long. -10,667108; Lat. 26,313142; Altitud 409 m), una zona de suelo arenoso profundo y donde los coches quedaban enterrados fácilmente. En este oued crecen muchos *Tamarix*.

Propiedades: son importantes para la alimentación de las manadas de dromedários.

Información general: Es un árbol muy tolerante a la sal y los suelos salinos del desierto. Sus pequeñas hojas tienen la propiedad de excretar sal.



Figura 27. Un lezl en medio de un ued (Long.-10,743366; Lat. 26,353996; Altitud 404 m)

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