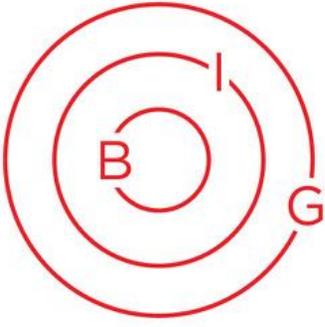




**BORDERS IN
GLOBALIZATION**





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The Puzzle of Nonviolence in Western Sahara

Matthew Porges and Christian Leuprecht
Royal Military College of Canada

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Matthew Porges and Christian Leuprecht

Department of Political Science, Royal Military College of Canada, Kingston

ABSTRACT

Western Sahara, a former Spanish colony that has been controlled by Morocco since 1975, has seen virtually no violent resistance by the indigenous Sahrawi people since the conclusion of a 1975–1991 war between Morocco and the pro-independence Polisario Front. That lack of political violence is puzzling in light of several factors, including broad support for independence, social and economic disparities between Moroccan and Sahrawi inhabitants and Morocco's repression of Sahrawi culture, resistance, and expressions of pro-independence sentiment. This article examines the absence of violence and draws lessons from Western Sahara: why some populations resort to violent resistance and others do not, and how best to frame and to study politically charged subjects such as insurgency, terrorism, and sovereignty. In addition to advancing theories of nonviolence, this article makes a methodological contribution to the study of resistance movements and improves our understanding of the conflict through fieldwork that included approximately 60 interviews with Sahrawi activists conducted in Morocco and Western Sahara. Western Sahara is difficult to study for a number of reasons, including its remoteness, relative international obscurity, and Moroccan suppression of dissenting research.

KEYWORDS

Nonviolence; Sahrawi;
Western Sahara; Polisario;
resistance

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Introduction

At first glance, Western Sahara appears ripe for an insurgency. The territory's low population density and the traditional emphasis by the indigenous Sahrawi people on moving and surviving in the desert would appear to confer a tactical advantage to a hit-and-run resistance movement. The territory's major cities are isolated and accessible mainly by air or a small number of main roads, all of which are largely unguarded and vulnerable to sabotage. Moroccan military presence in the territory, though numerically superior to any possible Sahrawi resistance movement, is concentrated in a few areas and lacks the ability to sustain power projection into the desert. The territory's major industries—fishing, phosphate mining, sporadic and tentative oil exploration—are all vulnerable to sabotage. Although major cities such as Laayoune, Dakhla, and Smara are, for the most part, saturated

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with Moroccan military, police, and intelligence, the rest of the territory is essentially ungoverned; the historical Arabic name for the territory, *Bilad as-Siba*, means “the land of no authority” or “the ungovernable country” (as opposed to *Bilad al-Makhzen*, or lands under direct control of the central government).¹ 40

The motivation for participation in a violent insurgency would also appear to be considerable. Although reliable data about Western Sahara is often difficult to obtain, virtually all the available evidence suggests that an overwhelming majority of Sahrawis living in the occupied territory favor independence from Morocco and integration into a primarily Sahrawi state under the governance of the Polisario Front, which currently functions as a government-in-exile based in Tindouf, Algeria. The inconclusive 1975–1991 war between Morocco and Polisario, which hints at how a future desert insurgency in Western Sahara might work, is celebrated by Sahrawis in both occupied Western Sahara and the refugee camps in Algeria. Polisario’s commitment to the post-1991 ceasefire agreement has been described as a continuation of “war by other means,”² and Polisario officials have made it clear in both words and actions that they are willing to return to war if necessary. Meanwhile, diplomatic efforts to further the cause of Sahrawi independence in the African Union and the United Nations have stalled obfuscated by a combination of Moroccan intransigence and realpolitik maneuvering on the part of the United States and France. Several scholars have noted that many Sahrawi youths in Western Sahara favor a return to war; given these preconditions, why has there been virtually no political violence on the part of Sahrawis since 1991? 45 50 55 60

This article’s puzzle is the lack of political violence by pro-independence Sahrawis in occupied Western Sahara. Resistance can involve a variety of tools, from peaceful activism to suicide bombing, and everything in between; a movement may simultaneously employ a variety of strategies across this spectrum, and it may include individuals with differing strategic goals and motivations, or different strategies for achieving specific goals. By studying the lack of violence in Western Sahara on the part of the pro-independence Sahrawi resistance movement, what is there to be learned about resistance and political violence? 65 70

This article draws on fieldwork carried out in Western Sahara and Morocco in the summer of 2014. Fieldwork was necessitated by the dearth of literature on the conflict; Western Sahara is, in practice, closed to journalists and scholars, and much of the literature is motivated by partisan and often unabashedly biased research. The worthwhile literature that does exist is often based on fieldwork conducted prior to 2010 (after which a protest camp and subsequent riot at Gdeim Izik made research more difficult) or investigates specific questions of only tangential relevance to this project; for instance, there is some excellent research on the role of women in the 75 80

Sahrawi resistance movement, as Sahrawi society is arguably the most gender-egalitarian in the Arab world.

The initial sections situate the article in the literature and lay out the research problem: Western Sahara has seen its fair share of political violence, and conditions would appear to remain ripe with potential for political violence. The Methods section will discuss the interview process in Morocco and Western Sahara, as well as the most common explanations for nonviolence among the Sahrawis. Subsequent sections analyze the results and propose two thought experiments as a means of controlling for conceivable violence and potential outcomes. The penultimate section will discuss implications, while the conclusion synthesizes lessons learned and directions for future research.

Literature

The Western Sahara conflict is notable for its relative dearth of research. To begin with, research is inherently difficult to carry out in the territory: Journalism and academic research are discouraged by Moroccan authorities. Western scholars in the territory face hostility from Moroccan security forces, including arrest, conspicuous monitoring, deportation, and varying levels of intimidation. Sahrawis who collaborate with researchers may also face increased scrutiny or repression. Compounding the security challenges are the remoteness of the territory, physical danger due to both the harsh climate and the prevalence of unexploded landmines, the language barrier (Hassaniyya Arabic is only partially mutually intelligible with Moroccan Arabic or Modern Standard Arabic, while Moroccan Arabic is itself considered one of the most difficult Arabic dialects to learn), and the perception of Western Sahara as an underpopulated and relatively lawless space. Popular activist attention to the conflict is limited in part due to the lack of academic research but also due to the low population density, as well as Morocco's attempts to frame the conflict as either a simple issue of decolonization or as a border dispute with Algeria. The "information blackout" imposed on the territory by Morocco has been quite successful.

While research in Western Sahara's Moroccan-occupied zone is difficult, research in the Polisario-controlled refugee camps in Algeria is much easier; Polisario has generally been willing to accommodate journalists and researchers and to facilitate academic work in their territory. Therefore, many scholars who are interested in doing work on the conflict end up going to Tindouf by default, rather than risking a trip to Western Sahara.

Nevertheless, some good resources do exist, the most comprehensive of which is Jacob Mundy and Steven Zunes' 2010 book *Western Sahara: War, Nationalism, and Conflict Irresolution*. The authors have done extensive fieldwork in both the occupied territories and the refugee camps, and their

work provides an exceptional survey of the entire conflict, with a focus on diplomatic challenges. The book also provides a sound history of the construction and evolution of Sahrawi national identity. 125

Both authors have written extensively about various aspects of the conflict elsewhere. Mundy in particular has examined the political and social context of Moroccan settlers in Western Sahara,³ the transition from violence to nonviolence in the conflict,⁴ and the unique case of the Gdeim Izik camp and subsequent riots.⁵ Zunes' work has focused on nonviolence, both in theory and practice.⁶ Both have also written extensively on the conflict's diplomatic history. 130

There are a number of other histories of the conflict, both from military and diplomatic perspectives. Among these, Erik Jensen's *Western Sahara: Anatomy of a Stalemate?*, Toby Shelley's *Endgame in the Western Sahara*, and Pablo San Martín's *Western Sahara: The Refugee Nation* offer particularly comprehensive insights. A significant strand of the literature examines the social and cultural conditions of the Tindouf refugee camps, especially with respect to the ways in which gender roles are uniquely constructed and expressed. A number of analyses and histories of the conflict were written during the 1975–1991 war. These works offer interesting snapshots of the conflict at particular times, but they are generally subsumed under more recent works. Juan Soroeta Licerias' *International Law and the Western Sahara Conflict* offers the most recent analysis of the international legal context. 135
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Much of the best ethnographic work on Western Sahara predates the occupation and its attendant research challenges. Spanish anthropologist Julio Caro Baroja's *Estudios Saharianos*, published in 1955 after extensive fieldwork among the nomads in 1952–53, is still probably the best and most detailed work of Sahrawi ethnography. John Mercer's *Spanish Sahara*, published in 1975, is similarly valuable for its insights on Sahrawi culture before the Moroccan invasion. 150

There is also a small body of literature specifically on nonviolence in Western Sahara, although much of it is descriptive rather than explanatory. Much of this relates to the case of the Gdeim Izik protest camp, which attracted considerable attention as an apparent deviation from the nonviolent strategy. 155

Within the field of security studies, there have been attempts to frame Western Sahara as a potential recruiting ground for Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). The Moroccan monarchy has capitalized on these concerns, playing up fears of widespread radicalization for political advantage. Few, if any, of these studies have any empirical basis. All available evidence suggests a wholesale rejection of radical political Islam by both Polisario and Sahrawis in the occupied zone. If Sahrawi activists have rejected violence at least partially because it compromises the public image of their struggle, why 160
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would they then build ties with Al-Qaeda? It is difficult to imagine what Polisario might get out of a relationship with Al-Qaeda, although the propaganda benefits of such a narrative to Morocco are quite clear.

There is also a large body of scholarship on nonviolent conflict in general. Much of it is of considerable interest to scholars of Western Sahara. Gene Sharp's typology of nonviolent resistance movements (for instance, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*) remains seminal in the field, as is Erika Chenoweth's *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*, which offers a broad study of many resistance movements over time. There are a great number of other exceptional works in this field; many were reviewed for this project, although this article in particular is concerned more with the strategic logic of violence, and its absence, than with the practice of nonviolence in Western Sahara, which is a complex and fascinating phenomenon in its own right.

The limited empirical and ethnographic research on post-1991 Western Sahara means that the research problem that drives this article cannot be answered by means of secondary sources alone; consequently, the puzzle of nonviolence aside, the article also seeks to make a novel empirical contribution to the limited literature on Western Sahara.

research Problem

Western Sahara is not historically nonviolent. Conflict pervades much of the territory's history, and conditions have at various times been ripe for internecine violence. The point of this section, then, is to make a case for the study of nonviolence in Western Sahara as a genuine research problem that merits investigation.

Politically, the territory now known as Western Sahara is divided by a militarized wall, or berm, running approximately 2,700 kilometers from Morocco to Mauritania and bisecting the territory. Approximately two-thirds of the territory of Western Sahara lies west of the wall and is occupied by Morocco; the remaining third to the east is claimed by the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), led by the pro-independence Polisario Front. Morocco considers the entirety of Western Sahara to be part of its historical domain within the larger irredentist narrative of Greater Morocco, and it does not recognize SADR or Polisario. Currently, Morocco describes Western Sahara as its "Southern Provinces" and administers the territory as a contiguous part of Morocco, albeit under heavy military occupation. The area east of the wall is sparsely populated, even by Sahrawi nomads; the majority of SADR and Polisario personnel live and work in a series of refugee camps near Tindouf, Algeria. No United Nations member state officially recognizes Morocco's claim to Western Sahara. SADR, but not Morocco, is

a member of the African Union, and Polisario's claim to Western Sahara is officially recognized by more than 80 countries.⁷

Although Western Sahara's traditional inhabitants are Sahrawis, an Arab-Berber ethnolinguistic group probably best characterized by their shared use of the Hassaniyya dialect of Arabic, there is no simple correspondence between the land and the people. The definition of Sahrawi ethnicity is historically complex and has co-evolved with the definition and political status of Western Sahara, but there are individuals who identify as Sahrawi (and who speak Hassaniyya Arabic) in Morocco, Algeria, and Mauritania as well as in Western Sahara.⁸ Traditionally nomadic, Sahrawis have historically existed at several levels of organization: as individuals, as families, as tribal lineages, and, finally, as a loose ethnicity that has coalesced partially in response to colonialism and rapid urbanization. As Zunes and Mundy have written:

The term *Sahrawi* ... is often used to mean "indigenous Western Saharan," although this equivalent is not accurate. Indeed, it is sufficient on most accounts that an "ethnic" Sahrawi only has to claim descent from one of the recognized major or minor social groupings—"tribes" or "confederations"—in or overlapping the former Spanish Sahara ... The most pragmatic definition of Sahrawis is that they are the Hassaniyyah-speaking peoples who claim membership among at least one of the social groupings found in and around the area now known as Western Sahara.⁹

Although reliable demographic figures are hard to come by (and are complicated by the dynamic definition of Sahrawi identity), the majority of Sahrawis live either in the Moroccan-occupied zone of Western Sahara or in refugee camps near Tindouf, Algeria. The exact Sahrawi population in both locations is a matter of dispute; a 2008 estimate pegs the population of the Tindouf camps around 125,000.¹⁰ There are probably fewer than a million Sahrawis worldwide.

Complicating the question of both an actual definition of Sahrawi identity and any measurement of demographic figures is that, beginning with the so-called Green March in 1975 and continuing to the present, Morocco introduced hundreds of thousands of settlers into Western Sahara in an effort to skew the results of an expected referendum on independence. Some of these settlers—how many is unclear—were Sahrawis living in southern Morocco, while others were Moroccan Arabs or Berbers from the Rif and Atlas regions.¹¹ During the process of registering voters, many of the non-Sahrawi settlers were trained in Sahrawi customs and in the Hassaniyya dialect; ongoing disputes over which Sahrawis are "real" and which are "constructed" are generally credited with derailing the referendum process.¹² The inclusion or exclusion of these settlers in the voting process would likely be the deciding factor in the referendum's result.

The existence of a political entity roughly contiguous with present-day Western Sahara formally began in 1884, with the establishment of a Spanish protectorate that was gradually expanded over the years along with Spanish possessions in present-day Morocco itself.¹³ Continued unrest and raids by Sahrawi tribes limited Spain's formal control over the territory, and by the 1970s, this passive insurgency had coalesced into early Sahrawi nationalism. The Polisario Front (from the Spanish acronym *Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguía el Hamra y Río de Oro*) was established in 1973 and quickly gained *de facto* control of a large amount of the territory from Spain.¹⁴ By 1975, in the midst of a global trend toward decolonization, Spain was negotiating with Polisario a possible handover and withdrawal. Both Morocco and Mauritania objected, claiming that the Spanish Sahara was a historical part of their own territory. The case was turned over to the International Court of Justice (ICJ), which after some deliberation ruled that no binding historical ties existed between the territory and either Morocco or Mauritania; in the court's opinion, the Sahrawi people had the right to self-determination for the colony.¹⁵

In an audacious diplomatic maneuver, Morocco's King Hassan II declared in a speech that the ICJ had ruled in his favor; less than a month later, in what became known as the Green March, hundreds of thousands of Moroccan civilians crossed the border into Western Sahara. Shortly after, Spain signed the Madrid Accords, dividing the territory between Morocco and Mauritania and guaranteeing Spanish withdrawal. Polisario established SADR as a government-in-exile and the corresponding Sahrawi People's Liberation Army (SPLA). Beginning in late 1975, Polisario fought a 16-year guerilla war against Morocco and Mauritania.¹⁶

Polisario's initial performance in the war was impressive; long-distance raids deep into Moroccan and Mauritanian territory established the movement's military credibility, while traditional Sahrawi knowledge of the deep desert made it very difficult for Morocco to implement an effective counter-insurgency campaign. Polisario's early military strategy focused on Mauritania, and by 1979 Mauritania withdrew from the war entirely, leaving Polisario free to focus on Moroccan targets. With the assistance of many countries, including the United States, Morocco began a novel counterinsurgency strategy, building a sequence of concentric defensive barriers, including the widespread use of landmines, that allowed the Moroccan military to consolidate its gains around major urban centers such as Laayoune. This strategy reduced Polisario to hit-and-run attacks on the expanding wall itself.¹⁷ By the late 1980s, the war was essentially a stalemate. In 1991, the two sides signed a UN-brokered ceasefire on the understanding that a referendum would follow; Morocco built up its defenses around the wall's final position. The current Western Sahara berm, often called the Wall of Shame by Sahrawis, is the longest security barrier in the world.¹⁸

Since 1991, repeated efforts by the United Nations and various diplomats have failed to organize a referendum that is acceptable to both sides. Immediately following the Green March, Morocco began training thousands of Moroccan citizens in Sahrawi customs and in the Hassaniyya dialect in an attempt to pass them off as ethnic Sahrawis who would then vote to integrate into Morocco. Polisario has consistently argued that only those Sahrawis who can demonstrate historical ties to the territory should be allowed to vote. Morocco has also blocked proposed referenda that included full independence as an option, stating repeatedly that Morocco's "territorial integrity" will never be put to a vote.¹⁹ As a result, diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict have largely stalled. 295

Since 1991, both sides have respected the ceasefire. Inside the territory, resistance by pro-independence Sahrawis has been almost exclusively non-violent, manifesting mainly as protests, demonstrations, and symbolic expressions of solidarity with Polisario and commitment to independence. Organizations such as *Asociación Saharai de Víctimas de Violaciones Graves de los Derechos Humanos Cometidas por el Estado Marroquí* (ASVDH), *Colectivo Saharai de Defensores de los Derechos Humanos* (CODESA), and *Comité de Defensa del Derecho de Autodeterminación del Pueblo del Sahara Occidental* (CODAPSO) promote human rights and self-determination within the territory but have a limited role in facilitating nonviolent protest.²⁰ The lone substantiated exception to the nonviolent strategy occurred at Gdeim Izik, near Laayoune, in the fall of 2010. A protest camp quickly evolved into a complex tent city consisting of several thousand Sahrawis—some estimates suggest as many as 24,000²¹—organized with a horizontal structure that included a hospital and, according to some accounts, even a prison.²² On November 8, Moroccan security forces moved in and leveled the camp, triggering violent clashes that left at least 11 Moroccan security forces dead. This departure from the nonviolent strategy appears to have been fairly disorganized and spontaneous, although the brutal imagery that accompanied the riot, including footage of a Sahrawi protester apparently urinating on the corpse of a Moroccan soldier, and another video allegedly depicting a protestor beheading a wounded soldier,²³ damaged international perception of the Sahrawi cause: 305

In the aftermath of Gdeim Izik, young Sahrawi men did engage in violent acts in response to the incitement and brutality of the Moroccan security forces. The range of intensity included physical attacks against security forces, intentionally hitting a security officer with a car, throwing rocks, and setting fire to buildings. While the response from the Moroccan security forces was equal or greater in its brutality and violence, the acts of violence undertaken by Sahrawis were harmful to the message and the success of the largely peaceful movement by playing into the continuing cycle of violence . . . While the original demonstration was meant to be 310

fully nonviolent, the violence perpetrated against the demonstrators did produce a violent response.²⁴

One problem encountered in describing a nonviolent resistance movement lies in the definition of nonviolence itself: What, exactly, would constitute a departure from nonviolence? There are many recorded instances of Sahrawi protesters throwing rocks or Molotov cocktails. In these cases, a violence/nonviolence binary may not be particularly useful. These instances, however, are the exception to the rule. Gdeim Izik is the only reliably attested case of lethal force applied by Sahrawi protesters in the occupied territories since the 1991 ceasefire. In seeking to explain the absence of violent resistance, we must first describe the types of resistance that we might anticipate. As Wendy Pearlman notes in her study of violent and nonviolent resistance in Palestine, “The question of why movements use violent means . . . is inextricable from the question of why they do or do not use *nonviolent* means.”²⁵ Violence and nonviolence are not necessarily opposites; a movement can choose to use one or both strategies simultaneously. Within each broad category there is also significant variation in tactics, strategy, and intensity. There is also a non-trivial gray area between these two categories; some resistance strategies might be characterized as “quasi-violent,” and violence can be either proactive, as in the case of a suicide bombing, or reactive, as in the case of collective self-defense in response to state aggression. Violence and nonviolence can be both formal and organized or informal and spontaneous. Particular groups or organizations can carry out planned acts of violence, just as individuals within a broader movement can pursue a strategy at odds with their community as a whole.

For the purposes of this article, we are particularly interested in resistance in the occupied territories as distinct from explicitly Polisario-aligned resistance. Since 2001, with the initiation of a new *intifada*, the locus of resistance has moved from Tindouf to the streets of Laayoune.²⁶ Polisario’s nonviolence—the lack of a resumption of war with Morocco—is distinct conceptually and politically from the nonviolence of protesters in occupied Western Sahara itself.

How a resistance movement “chooses” its strategy is the subject of a body of existing scholarship, as are the conditions under which a movement can be said to “choose” at all. A certain level of cohesion is required to ascribe intentionality to a complex social structure as something more than an aggregate property of the collective will of its membership; Pearlman characterizes a movement’s cohesion as “the degree to which it, which is not actually an “it,” acts as if it were.”²⁷ Most accounts of Sahrawi resistance in the occupied territory present it as non-hierarchical and decentralized, lacking the type of leadership structures usually associated with strategic discipline.

The problem here is to explain how, given a population that (like all political movements) presumably includes individuals with a wide range of goals, the pro-independence movement in Western Sahara is able to enforce a particular strategy (nonviolence) across its entire membership, for more than two decades, with essentially no deviations. That is, there has been plenty of violence in the past—the history of Western Sahara as a cartographic entity has been one of persistent, irregular, low-level violence, starting with clashes between Spanish settlers and nomadic raiders in the 1880s, continuing with the birth of Sahrawi nationalism in the twentieth century, and culminating in the war between Morocco and Polisario. Why is there now virtually no violence in Western Sahara, despite a violent and repressive regime, a frustrated and angry population, and plenty of opportunities for individuals to deviate from Polisario’s strategy of nonviolence?

Fieldwork

A complete picture of the Western Sahara conflict would require interviews with Moroccan authorities, Moroccan settlers, and anti-independence Sahrawis. However, this project was limited in scope to explicitly pro-independence Sahrawis—precisely that group whose nonviolence is puzzling. That limited scope simplified the recruitment process considerably. Starting with a small group of initial contacts provided by scholars and journalists who had previously worked on the conflict, interviews were arranged largely by referrals. The resulting sample was, therefore, biased by design in favor of pro-independence Sahrawis who were politically active and more likely to be university-educated than the population as a whole. Nevertheless, the sampling bias does not have a deleterious impact on the results. The research is about gauging strategy and behavior as practiced by a relatively small, decentralized movement; talking to leaders (or at least socially central individuals) within that movement is a more valuable use of limited research time than constructing a broadly representative sample of the population.

Moreover, the sample was robust in some ways. Interviews were conducted in four primary cities: Rabat/Salé in Morocco and Laayoune, Dakhla, and Smara in Western Sahara. As a result, the sample contained a cross-section of Sahrawis living in urban Morocco and several cities with distinct demographics and histories in Western Sahara. The age of participants ranged from about 18 to about 65; consequently, we were able to talk to Sahrawis who had lived under Spanish colonization and fought in the 1975–1991 war as well as those who had grown up under Moroccan occupation. Within this variation, our participants fell into three sometimes overlapping categories. Due to situational challenges and a tendency for open discussion rather than one-on-one sessions, we experienced some difficulties

in precisely defining an “interview”; we spoke with approximately 60 415
Sahrawis as part of this project.

A major flaw in the interview process lay in gendered dimensions; only 420
two participants were women. As the researchers and translators were male,
the referral system tended to bring us only men, even when we asked to
speak with women. Evidence from the literature and anecdotally from our 425
contacts suggests that women play a large role in the resistance, and female
researchers in the territory have produced significant insights into the role of
gender in Sahrawi society and resistance, but cultural practices dictate some
degree of gender segregation. This problem could have been partially miti- 430
gated by the presence of a female researcher or translator, but it likely does
not represent a significant threat to the integrity of the results; nevertheless,
gendered perspectives could have offered more completeness. 435

Every single one of our participants recognized Polisario as the legitimate 440
representative of both the Sahrawi people and of Western Saharan indepen-
dence. This came as somewhat of a surprise; other literature suggests at least
some degree of disagreement on this point. There are a few possible explana-
tions for this, the most obvious of which is that our referral system allowed 445
our primary contacts to shape the narrative we were allowed to hear.
Nevertheless, it is also probably true that anti-Polisario propaganda in
Morocco has portrayed the group as significantly less representative than it 450
actually is; apart from our interviews, we observed demonstrations and
ubiquitous graffiti that expressed support for Polisario. While it is difficult
to make a conclusive statement on this point, it is at least true that all our
observations suggested overwhelming support for and allegiance to Polisario 455
within Western Sahara.

Furthermore, interview subjects overwhelmingly ascribed Sahrawi nonvio-
lence to an ethical choice. They claimed that they chose to refrain from
violence because it was immoral, or because they had committed, as a
community, to waiting for the UN-mandated referendum, or because they 460
trusted in the international community’s efforts to resolve the conflict. A
large number also ascribed their nonviolence to Polisario’s diplomatic strat-
egy; interview subjects repeatedly said that they personally favored a return
to war but chose not to out of respect for Polisario, or to demonstrate publicly
their recognition of Polisario as their legitimate representative. Responses of 465
this form were remarkably similar across every city and varied little between
people who had never met or heard of each other; the same structural answer
came from political prisoners in urban Morocco and angry young men in
Smara. Some participants hinted at other, less defined disincentives for
violence: Morocco’s overwhelming information superiority in the territory,
for instance, or the fact that violence by any Sahrawi would cast the whole 470
Sahrawi community and resistance effort in a negative light or enable
Moroccan propaganda efforts to cast Polisario as a violent. 475

While there was clearly a performative aspect to all this, it was consistent enough that the unanimity of answers constituted a kind of centripetal force in and of itself; if everyone in the community believes in a certain strategic ethic of nonviolence, then performativity does not matter, even when that performativity is widespread and deliberate. 460

Discussion

Violence—insurgency, self-defense, perhaps terrorism—might or might not “work” in Western Sahara, but whether or not those techniques brought about a desired result, violence would also incur considerable cost to the individuals and the movement. Violence is intuitively unpleasant for most people at the best of times; violence by individuals against a state actor with overwhelming superiority in its ability to retaliate against agitators and their families requires a remarkable degree of motivation and a unique combination of selfishness and selflessness. Aside from individual motivations and deterrents, in what sort of calculus might a cohesive, unitary, and rational resistance movement in Western Sahara engage when choosing resistance strategies? 465 470

“Terrorism” as classically defined is sometimes said to be most effective when used to persuade democracies to end occupation of foreign territory. “Democracy” and “occupation” are both somewhat complicated definitions in practice, but in the case of Western Sahara, we can see how this logic might apply. Countries that are certainly not *more* democratic than Morocco have been persuaded to end an occupation by insurgent activity in the past—for instance, the Soviet Union in Afghanistan during the 1980s. In the case of Western Sahara, though, there are a few reasons to think that terrorism or insurgency might, in fact, be counterproductive or prohibitively costly. 475 480

Of these, the one that was most frequently referenced during the fieldwork was international perception of the Sahrawi cause. Western Sahara is obscure by activist standards. A comparable situation in Palestine has persisted despite efforts by international activists, in no small part due to the ease with which Palestinian nationalism can be conflated with—or overshadowed by—its militant elements, as Zunes and others have noted. Although a great deal of the conflict’s obscurity is the direct result of Morocco’s control of information and access, what little attention does exist could be easily overshadowed by a narrative that more readily casts Sahrawi nationalists as a quasi-terrorist movement vulnerable to penetration by Al-Qaeda and related groups. Indeed, such a narrative does exist already, although its loudest proponents are generally pro-Moroccan lobbyists, and even a cursory examination of the conflict’s history suggest the reverse is true; Al-Qaeda and Polisario share no goals or ideologies and are, in fact, diametrically opposed in their visions for the future of North Africa. Nevertheless, most Sahrawis, 485 490 495

especially those who are most politically engaged, are acutely aware of the potential for their struggle to be cast as terroristic. 500

Another strategic deterrent for the use of violence in support of Sahrawi nationalism, intuitively, is that it probably would not work. Moroccan military superiority in Western Sahara is virtually unprecedented; the occupying force literally outnumbers the population. Even a violent insurgency consisting of every single Sahrawi in Western Sahara would be outnumbered by Moroccan security forces—to say nothing of Moroccan settlers themselves—and the Sahrawi population in Western Sahara has no real access to the materials required to mount an insurgency. The segregation of Sahrawis in particular neighborhoods, and the relative ease with which Sahrawis can be identified based on their dress, language, and culture, mean that an insurgent movement in Western Sahara would face considerable difficulty in creating the kind of “identification problem” on which insurgencies generally rely. Consequently, when weighing the low probability of success against the political and social costs of using violence, it seems unlikely that an insurgency in Western Sahara would be an effective strategy for Sahrawi nationalists, particularly without active support by, at the very least, Polisario. 505 510 515

With a lack of success comes backlash; surely Sahrawis who were caught or suspected of participating in or supporting an insurgency would face reprisals from the Moroccan state. Nonviolent Sahrawi activists are routinely beaten, tortured, and detained. Reports of Moroccan soldiers attacking or sexually assaulting wives, mothers, and sisters of known Sahrawi activists are widespread. In a cohesive community such as the one shared by most Sahrawis, these types of threats are often a very effective deterrent to action. 520

Given that an insurgency in Western Sahara would likely be both ineffective and prohibitively costly, it comes as little surprise that activist leaders in the occupied territory have refrained from mounting one—to say nothing of the fact that such an insurgency would probably be unpopular with Sahrawis in general unless it was coordinated with Polisario. Particulate, individual violence, however, is a different matter; some of the same deterrents apply (such as a probable Moroccan retaliation against family members), but much of the literature on political violence correctly disaggregates the strategic behavior of political movements from the individual violence of the people who make up a movement. The degree to which this strategy is both generalized and centralized across a movement that has no real top-down structure is part of what makes the Sahrawi resistance so interesting. 525 530 535

Thought Experiments

Two thought experiments provide an interesting opportunity to contemplate what might occur in case of a violent resistance movement in Western Sahara, and thereby gain some insight into why such resistance does not

actually exist. These hypothetical cases are informed by interview questions and discussions that followed some of our interviews, in which our translators and some interview subjects explored their own reasoning about particular resistance strategies. 540

What might follow if a particular Sahrawi resistance cell attempted to smuggle weapons in from Mauritania, Mali, or even across the berm, with the intention of attacking on Moroccan security forces? In this case, we are interested in disorganized resistance that differs from on which intent to cause harm by means of firearms or explosives. Presumably, smuggling weapons into Western Sahara would involve a certain amount of prior planning and would thus be vulnerable to disruption by Moroccan intelligence services. Some degree of smuggling does take place in the territory, although it is not clear how organized or formal this might be. It is, therefore, hard to predict how vulnerable such activity might be to infiltration by Moroccan intelligence, although constraints on movement and assembly would probably make it very difficult. Pervasive surveillance in major cities would make it difficult to organize an urban attack, although nomadic movement in the desert might be easier; it would be less risky to attack a rural target. In particular, the phosphate belt at Bou Craa is vulnerable—it has been subjected to low-level sabotage on occasion, though with limited success²⁸—and a more sophisticated attack could potentially disrupt Moroccan phosphate extraction. The same is probably true of the fishing industry in Western Sahara and of future oil exploration, although these industries lack the single point of failure of the phosphate belt. 545 550 555 560

In this case, the most effective deterrent is probably self-policing by the Sahrawi community. Several interview subjects said that any Sahrawi who engaged in violence without consent of the broader community would be ostracized, and most cited this collective self of identity and mission as the main deterrent, either abstractly or as the main factor preventing them from doing exactly that. We heard two primary explanations for this phenomenon. The first was the collective struggle for independence. Many of our interview subjects attributed generalized and persistent nonviolence to the entire population's awareness that violence would allow Morocco to cast Sahrawi resisters as terrorists more readily and to justify brutal crackdowns. A second explanation was the implicit threat that violence by one Sahrawi, even (or especially) a Sahrawi whose identity was unknown, would result in Moroccan violence against the entire community, perhaps throughout all of Western Sahara. 565 570 575

In the case of these counterfactual examinations, Sahrawi explanations for nonviolence—even if theoretically unlikely—are the most valuable means of investigation, as they reveal the community's own narrative of nonviolence and the means by which individuals and groups reason about resistance strategies. Collective identity and cohesion is difficult to measure, and 580

sometimes harder to analyze, but the narrative of collectivism persists and may go a long way toward simulating—or actually instantiating—actual cohesion, even if it is performative in some aspects. The same may be said of other persistent narratives of the occupation and resistance. The belief of many Sahrawis in Polisario’s military prowess appears to run counter to established facts—although this was also true in 1975, at the outset of a war Polisario seemed to be on the verge of winning for several years—but it has an impact on how resistance is practiced, and on how many Sahrawis view the potential value of diplomatic resolutions. Similarly, the belief in the omniscience of Moroccan surveillance, though clearly based on a visible, tangible reality, probably exaggerates the actual precision of that surveillance but nevertheless shapes how the resistance mobilizes protests and what sorts of actions it chooses, both collectively and individually.

In practice, of course, an individual or small group that attempted to smuggle weapons into the territory and carry out a violent attack would face considerable obstacles: Moroccan intelligence and military superiority and the technical ability required to operate heavy weapons or build and manage explosives. Morocco would almost certainly publicize such an attempt if it was discovered, as it has done with Islamist cells in urban Morocco.

How might the above reasoning differ in the case of a preexisting, organized violent resistance? As discussed, an urban insurgency in Western Sahara would be difficult to sustain given the largely segregated and heavily surveilled layout of major cities. A rural insurgency might have a longer lifespan but would probably face many of the same problems, especially without an area beyond the reach of Moroccan reprisals. A drawn-out conflict would also likely provoke attacks by Moroccan settlers on Sahrawi neighborhoods, as have been observed most notably during the Wakkala riots in Dakhla in 2011. A sustained insurgency would also face considerable problems in obtaining and maintaining weapons; Polisario had a number of external suppliers (notably, Algeria and, for a time, Libya), but smuggling in the deep desert, while largely uncontrolled, would probably be restricted in the event of a violent conflict. Such an insurgency would also face previously discussed difficulties in organizing in the first place, social censure from the majority of Sahrawis, and justifying continued operations in the face of generalized Moroccan retaliation. Violence in the territory, while not just difficult and heavily discouraged, would actually be nearly impossible to sustain in the face of Moroccan military and intelligence superiority without external support.

Could Polisario fund and support an insurgency in Western Sahara without itself going back to war? Many of the same counterarguments apply, as any suspicion of Polisario power projection (in the form of weapons shipments, personnel, and so on) would probably result in more restrictive

border controls by Morocco and possibly even retaliatory attacks on Polisario bases in SADR. During the 1975–1991 war, Morocco used chemical weapons against civilian populations²⁹ and could do so again; in the Tindouf camps, this would result in enormous casualties. Once again, the threat of indiscriminate or unrestrained violence as well as the precarious international stalemate surrounding the conflict likely discourages both sides from significant escalation. There may also be internal incentives for avoiding a return to war for Polisario leaders; for instance, losing a war against Morocco, even if the result was a return to the status quo, might mean an overhaul of Polisario’s leadership and strategy. Polisario would likely be unable to offer much material support to an insurgency in Western Sahara short of an actual return to war, but even if it could, it is difficult to imagine what the incentive would be for an implicit violation of the ceasefire.

Implications

The first lesson that follows from Western Sahara is caution when assessing with any level of rigor such politically charged and often manipulative terms as “terrorism” and “violence.” After all, this article has framed Western Sahara as interesting partially because of the *lack* of terrorism—by which we mean, presumably, that Sahrawis do not engage in terrorism against Moroccans. By any reasonable definition, though, the Moroccan government does engage in terrorism, or state terror, against Sahrawis. Moreover, by describing the Sahrawi resistance as *not* terroristic, we seem to imply that Sahrawis in Western Sahara are a population whence terrorists might otherwise be reasonably drawn—which in itself suggests a narrow, and perhaps explicitly racial, definition of terrorism as a phenomenon associated with minorities and marginalized populations against larger populations, rather than vice versa. All this is to say that questions such as “Does terrorism work?” are perhaps less valuable than “Why do some people choose to resort to violence, and others not?” Terrorism works sometimes—depending on how terrorism and success are understood—and other times, it does not. Success for a movement that employs violence as a strategy—for instance, the ousting of an occupying force or the dissolution of a power structure—may not square a phenomenon associated with with the goals of an individual practitioner of violence, whose particular psychology may be subject to a bewildering and more or less elusive haze of countervailing forces. Conflating organizational and individual motivations is problematic. Moreover, it is worth examining what common factors exist between cases selected for study—what do we expect to learn from aggregating dramatically different groups unified only by their common practice of a certain type of political violence in a certain context?

Second, it should be clear that “violence” is a muddy and controversial analytical and ontological category. Studies that purport to draw general conclusions about what violence “does” or what sort of people engage in violence should be approached with, at the very least, considerable methodological skepticism. Sahrawis often throw rocks at Moroccan security forces; but they do not use firearms or bombs. Where does one draw the line between violence and nonviolence for the purposes of a single study, let alone a larger policy? Moroccan security forces routinely detain, imprison, torture, and sexually assault Sahrawi activists and their family members; actual deaths are less common, although several are reported each year. By what logic, therefore, do we conclude that the Western Sahara conflict is nonviolent? The best phrasing might simply be to say that Western Sahara is not as violent as it could be; both sides exercise at least some degree of restraint. Surely, if enough of them tried, Sahrawi activists could, eventually, build a bomb or smuggle guns into the territory, if they were determined to do so. Similarly, Morocco could, in theory, actually ethnically cleanse the territory and simply murder hundreds of thousands of Sahrawis. There are good reasons, both strategic and ethical, to avoid either of the above strategies, but “nonviolence” is, in some sense, a misnomer when applied to Western Sahara.

So much for analytic precautions. Violence is complicated, and often politically charged. Terrorism, if it even exists as a coherent description of behavior, is significantly more so. What have we learned about Western Sahara?

In terms of answering the question “Why don’t we see more political violence in Western Sahara?,” this study (with the above terminological caveats) proposes several parallel explanations. The most generalizable of these is information saturation; via a combination of settler-colonialism and an occupying force that literally outnumbers the indigenous population, Morocco is effectively able to effectively pre-empt any mobilization of effective resistance. This was only alluded to obliquely in interviews; many participants mentioned the difficulty of living under constant and overwhelming surveillance. It was more apparent in terms of observations; for instance, it was more or less impossible to move in Laayoune without being immediately detected by the Moroccan security services.

What is implied by this surveillance is violence; specifically, mass surveillance and militarization in Western Sahara creates the impression among the population that acts of resistance, whether actual insurgent violence or merely expressions of solidarity with Polisario or Algeria, will be met with violence from the Moroccan security services—several participants in this project suggested that Moroccan soldiers and police officers routinely raped or threatened to rape the wives and sisters of Sahrawi activists. In this sense, terrorism absolutely works: by holding out the specter violence and by

signalling a willingness to act on that promise, Morocco was able to modify, through fear, the behavior of a population for a political goal—in this case, hegemony over Western Sahara. What this suggests, if anything, is that terrorism works when the perpetrators of terror are able to signal a credible commitment to follow through. All this raises a number of interesting questions about who is actually capable of engaging in terrorism, and what the limits of such behavior might be; such investigations could be fruitfully explored in a longer and far more philosophical article than this one.

Conclusion

Asked about their motivations and their strategies of resistance, Sahrawis who participated in this study tended to ascribe nonviolence to a set of social and political factors. Some of these were clearly performative, recited for the benefit of the researchers. Other motivations, such as the nonviolent nature of the Sahrawi people, seemed important to bring up for other reasons; true or not, essentialist narratives about what a particular group of people “are like” can become part of a group’s strategy. Polisario’s 1991 ceasefire with Morocco was an agreement between two armed forces. Diplomatic explanations and questions of military superiority do explain a great deal of the behavior of Sahrawi *organizations*; but they cannot account for the absence of violence by individual Sahrawis.

Violence is a complex phenomenon, realized quite differently in different contexts and dependent on a host of cultural, political, social, economic, and environmental factors that defy simple explanations. Generalizations, therefore, must be drawn with considerable caution and should always be taken as provisional and tentative. Viewed one way, Sahrawi nonviolence is a function of a particular type of Moroccan state repression—a massive occupation enabling correspondingly massive informational asymmetry between hegemon and occupied—that is perhaps unique in the modern world and almost impossible to replicate in other contexts. It is also probably at least partially the result of rapid postcolonial urbanization that gave rise to a social structure that, like its nomadic antecedents, is exceptionally cohesive and necessitates a level of interdependency, trust, and accountability that is difficult to appreciate until one has witnessed it. The actual condition of prolonged, almost unanimous nonviolence among Sahrawis in Western Sahara, therefore, is unique; a less overwhelming occupation or a similar occupation of a different social group would have different results.

Nevertheless, it is possible to make robust claims about the resistance in Western Sahara. The proposed explanation for nonviolence on the part of Sahrawis is multifactorial, contingent on both the large occupying force and unique Sahrawi social dynamics. The generalizability of these findings to other cases may be limited.

Future research could take a number of directions. The Sahrawi attribution of nonviolence to social cohesion is interesting but not rigorously defined; a study could fruitfully compare the social graph of a given Sahrawi community with those found in other occupied territories (Palestine, for instance) and link connectivity to cohesion in a formalized way that allows for more predictive power. It would also be useful to compare the opinions, explanations, and attitudes of Sahrawis in the occupied territory to those living in the Polisario-governed camps in Algeria.

Much of the value of studying Western Sahara is contrastive, but it is not immediately obvious which comparisons might be the most useful. Palestine and East Timor are both frequently evoked in the literature, but the differences between these cases are at times critical. Western Sahara is somewhat unique insofar as the occupying force is larger than the population it occupies; thus Western Sahara may possibly be more aptly compared to the conditions of indigenous peoples in North America and Australia. In the end, the most important lessons of the Western Sahara conflict may be ethical rather than pragmatic; one is reminded of the quote, variously attributed to a number of historical figures: “The measure of a civilization is how it treats its weakest members.” The same may be said of the present international system.

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