STRUGGLING FOR LIBERATION IN THE SAHRAWI REFUGEE CAMPS: A
GENERATIONAL AND GENDER PERSPECTIVE

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STRUGGLING FOR LIBERATION IN THE SAHRAWI REFUGEE CAMPS: A GENERATIONAL AND GENDER PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria are often looked at through a gaze of exceptionalism that focuses either on the unusual protracted situation of its international conflict, or on the unusual behavior of these recipients of aid. This thesis tries to break with these two reductionist approaches by bringing to the fore how Sahrawis experience the camps as the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic and self-identify as citizens of this state in exile. Treating the camps as a state enables me to map out the power relations between the incumbent leadership of the Polisario Front and the citizenry. This research analyzes how different generations of Sahrawi men and women in exile have participated in the struggle for liberation during the war years (1975-1991), and the tensions that arise between the youth and the senior ruling elite in the current situation of impasse of the conflict.
Preface

At 10:00 in the morning in the Algerian Hamada, the temperature was already hovering around 105 degrees Fahrenheit. The few fans situated throughout the conference hall of Dakhla failed miserably in their attempt to refresh the approximately 500 people that had gathered inside the adobe building to attend the first National Youth Conference. “But whose nation is this?” someone unfamiliar with the plight of the Sahrawis might wonder. Despite being on Algerian soil, it was the flag of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) that decorated the place. This flag was designed at the beginning of the 1970s by the Sahrawi liberation movement, the Polisario Front, to resemble the Palestinian one with the purpose of visually and emotionally linking the two Arab peoples that remained colonized: Palestine in the Mashreq, and the Western Sahara in the Maghreb.

The police and the army guarded all the entrances and checked meticulously that everyone carried an invitation for the conference identifying their affiliation, either to the government, the national union of youth or one of the many young brigades that had been mushrooming since mid-2000s. My invitation said “guest” in Arabic, and it didn’t take me long to realize that I was the only foreigner, or nasraniyya as people whispered when I passed by, at the conference. I managed to find a spot behind a large group of young male Sahrawi soldiers, many of whom turned to ask me what had brought me to the Sahrawi refugee camps in summer. It was in fact my fifth day and I had only picked up a few expressions in Hassaniyya, the dialect spoken in the Western Sahara and Mauritania, like homman (heat), irifi (hot wind that carries sand) or zweyn hatta (very nice), so they kindly turned to standard Arabic to answer some of my questions. “We are deployed in the Liberated Territories,” said Ahmed referring to the strip of
land of the Western Sahara that was left outside the sand wall built by Morocco in the 1980s. The Liberated Territories are administered by the SADR, the government in exile run by the Polisario Front and based in the refugee camps in Algeria. “And how do you like it there? I’ve heard that there is less infrastructure there than in the camps.” I asked him. “That doesn’t matter, life in the Liberated Territories is better because that is our land and there we don’t have to live off other people.”

Our conversation was suddenly interrupted by signs of excitement, everyone stood up cheering and clapping as a large group of men and women, mostly middle-aged and some young, entered the conference hall. All of them wore the traditional Sahrawi clothes and waved the Sahrawi flag with passion. They made the victory sign with their fingers and cried out chants: “there is no alternative, oh there is no alternative, but the referendum for self-determination!” (la badil, la badil, ‘an taqrir al-masir), “no, no to the Autonomy Plan, the Sahara’s independence is on its way!” (la, la li-lhukm al-dhati, istiqal al-Sahra ati!), “no boredom and no fatigue, the intifada is the solution!” (la malal, la kalal, al-intifada hiya al-hal!). The panelists asked to leave the first rows “for our guests from the Occupied Territories, who have traveled much and are hungry and thirsty.” Almost the entire SADR government was attending this event and it took them no time to stand up and move to the back of the room, leaving their seats for the delegation of 90 Sahrawis from the other side of the wall, the Sahara under Moroccan occupation. The emotional chants uttered by the Sahrawis from both sides of the Moroccan-built wall seemed to be outlining the Polisario’s current position in the UN peace negotiations: the referendum for self-determination is the only way of solving the conflict, the Moroccan Autonomy Plan is unacceptable, and the Sahrawis in exile support their brothers and sisters in the Occupied
Territories who have been carrying out a peaceful intifada since 2005. In fact, the intifada’s activists were received in Dakhla like heroes. My Sahrawi “sister”—whose family hosted me for two months and who became my closest friend in the camps—was completely thrilled when the delegation entered and kept pointing at them: “That is Salem Tamek, from the group of seven who were tortured and put in prison without a trial! This woman over there… you saw her picture in Awserd after she was tortured. Do you remember, the one with the bleeding eyes? Now she has a glass eye!” My friend checked the Internet daily to follow the events of the intifada in the Occupied Territories. It became routine for me to ask her every night while cooking dinner about the news, and she would often reply “many things are happening for our cause,” and then she would describe a sit-in, a hunger strike, a demonstration or any action involving the Sahrawis in the Occupied Territories and their daily confrontation with the Moroccan authorities. Therefore, it did not surprise me that she could identify many of the intifada’s heroes. However, what I found striking was how passionately she narrated the painful stories of violence of these activists.

According to the governor of Dakhla, this was “a historic day,” for it was the first time that the SADR organized a youth conference at the national level to address the youth’s concerns and improve the “communication between generations,” an expression that I would often hear when talking to government officials. He explained that the beginning of the 3-day conference was planned to coincide with the 35th anniversary of the death of the martyr Luali Mustapha Al-Sayed, the youth who founded the Polisario Front in 1973 and died at the age of 28 in the war for national liberation. He also framed the holding of the conference within the context of the Arab revolutions, where the Arab youth have risen to fight for freedom and democracy. The governor
pointed out that the Sahrawi youth had been carrying on a revolution for the same principles for 36 years. Remarks from SADR officials, including the President, followed one another emphasizing the role of youth in the Sahrawi struggle. However, it was not clear whether the youth they were talking about were those of 1975 or the current generation, since the panelists were people between 40-60 years of age and very few young Sahrawis spoke.

I was interested to learn almost a month after the conference that not all youth groups had been invited to the conference in Dakhla. The Youth of the Sahrawi Revolution, also known as the March 5 movement, were not allowed to participate, nor even to enter the conference hall. One of its founding members told me:

I remember sneaking into a workshop about the intifada, and when I raised my hand to speak I was asked whether I had been invited. I told him [the moderator] that I needed no invitation, that I was a young person and that this was a youth conference, and that I couldn’t understand why a man who was 60 years old had the legitimacy to shut me up in such a context.

Later he was asked by a soldier to leave the workshop during a break.

I went to the Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria for two months to study how different generations of Sahrawi men and women in exile conceived of the struggle for liberating the Sahara, and their participation in it in a context when the struggle over the Western Sahara has reached a point that many authors have described as a “deadlock,” after 16 years of war and 21 years of failed UN peace negotiations (Zoubir, 2003; Aggad: 2004). Additionally, I wanted to see whether the Arab revolutions, an incredible example of people’s capabilities (especially the youth) to break status quo situations, were prompting Sahrawis into taking renewed action.

Attending the youth conference in Dakhla, I realized that the category of “youth” was constructed in the state’s metanarrative as a continuum, according to which the youth that started
the revolution in 1975 were still portrayed as “youth.” As a result of this broad definition, most of the people that spoke that day in Dakhla were 35 years old or older, meaning that very few of the participants had been born in the camps after the 1991 ceasefire. In a similar vein, the Sahrawi struggle was conceptualized as an ongoing revolution that, according to the governor of Dakhla, pursued the same objectives of “democracy” and “freedom” as the current Arab revolutions. I later found out that not only did the Sahrawi leadership of the Polisario Front inscribe the Arab Spring within its own revolution, it also claimed that the Arab revolutions had actually started in the Occupied Territories in the Gdeim Izik camp (October-November 2010).  

Overall, many of the expression that I heard that day at the Youth Conference in Dakhla, such as “communication between the generations,” “national unity,” and “ongoing revolution,” will prove to be essential for analyzing the state’s hegemonic discourse and the complex dynamics that surround three generations of Sahrawi men and women in exile.

1 The majority of the Sahrawi people that I talked to claimed that the Gdeim Izik camp—where approximately 20,000 people camped for a month asking for the end of the discrimination against the indigenous people of the Western Sahara—inspired the rest of the Arab revolutions. Chapter four deals with this widespread notion in more detail.
ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AECID – Spanish Agency for International Cooperation and Development
AFAPREDESA – Association of the Families of Sahrawi Prisoners and Disappeared
ECHO – EU Commission for Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection
IWMF – International Women’s Media Foundation
LLTT – Liberated Territories
OOTT – Occupied Territories
MINURSO – UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara
NUSW – National Union of Sahrawi Women
PLO – Palestinian Liberation Organization
POLISARIO Front – Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia al-Hamra and Río de Oro
SADR – Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic
UJSARIO – National Union of Saharawi Youth
UNHCR – UN High Commissioner for Refugees
UNRWA – United Nations Relief and Works Agency
USAID – U.S. Agency for International Development
WFP – World Food Program
NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

The names of people, places and expressions in Modern Standard Arabic and Hassaniyya dialect have been transliterated into English using a modified version of the guidelines of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, in which I have skipped diacritical symbols to facilitate the reading of those who are not used to precise transliterations from Arabic.
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I am indebted to the Sahrawi people in the camps and the diaspora for welcoming me into their lives and sharing their experiences, hopes, hardships and sense of humor with me. Special thanks to my host family in the camps who made me feel at home at all times. Despite the lack of prospects for a referendum of self-determination to take place, I believe that 2011 has taught the world that people have the power to alter situations that seemed impossible to be changed. With that in mind, I don’t lose the hope to visit all my Sahrawi friends in a liberated Western Sahara one day. Who knows what might happen and what the younger generations of Sahrawis might achieve.

I dedicate this thesis to the memory my uncle and godfather Luisín, who inculcated in me his passion for North Africa and with whom I would have loved to discuss this thesis.

Mercedes Fernandez-Gomez
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Introduction

“Oh, martyr, don’t worry, don’t worry. We will continue the struggle!” (Ya shahid, artah, artah, sanuwasilu al-kifah)

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) envisions three kinds of durable solutions for refugees: repatriation, local integration in the host country, or resettlement into a third country. The majority of the Sahrawi refugees in Algeria, however, are not willing to opt for any of these options, claiming their UN-recognized right to self-determination and to the establishment of an independent Western Sahara. However, given the absence of prospects for this to happen, the fate of the Sahrawis in exile seems to be doomed to perpetuate their “refugeeness” in the forthcoming years or even decades. A large UNHCR sign presiding over a birthing bed in the national hospital in the refugee camps illustrated this protracted situation, for it seemed to be strategically located to welcome new born Sahrawis into their life as stateless people, a status inherited from their parents and the previous generations of Sahrawi refugees.

The impact of the Arab revolutions and the international economic situation provide an interesting regional and global context in which to examine the struggle in the refugee camps. On the one hand, the Arab revolutions have demonstrated the people’s power to change status quo situations. On the other, the economic crisis in the EU—from where the majority of aid and remittances are sent to the camps—is endangering the continuity of the Sahrawi exile and, ultimately, their nationalist claims. For the Sahrawis, their refugee status and the struggle for independence are interconnected, since they consider their exile to be the most compelling argument for their will to have an independent country of their own. According to Stephen Zunes
and Jacob Mundy, “the Polisario and its supporters claimed that most of the Sahrawis had voted with their feet” when they fled from their homeland, illustrating their reluctance to live under Moroccan rule (2010, 114). Within this context, I was interested to look at how different generations of Sahrawi refugees make themselves active in the struggle for liberation, as well as to how the older generations pass the baton of their cause to the younger ones, whom are taught since their childhood the famous chant: “Oh martyr, don’t worry, don’t worry. We will continue the struggle!”

In this introduction I provide a brief historical background of the conflict over the Western Sahara and general information about the refugee camps in Algeria, followed by the literature review and methodology used for this research. Finally, I acknowledge the limitations of my study and explain the organization of the thesis.

**Historical background of the Western Sahara conflict**

The Western Sahara is a disputed territory located between Morocco, Algeria, Mauritania and the Atlantic Ocean. A vast land of 266,000 square km—about the size of the state of Colorado—it is rich in phosphates, iron, fishing waters and oil reserves offshore. Today, Morocco exerts *de facto* control over 75 percent of the territory; whereas the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) —a state recognized by more than eighty countries— controls the remaining 25 percent, the so-called “Liberated Territories” (LLTT). A wall (or *berm*) erected by Morocco in the 1980s separates the LLTT from the Occupied ones. The UN does not recognize the SADR or Morocco as *de jure* administrators of the territory (San Martin 2010, 5).
Spain colonized the Western Sahara from 1884 to 1976, when it handed the territory to Morocco and Mauritania instead of holding the referendum for self-determination that the UN had been calling for since the mid-1960s. The Sahrawi liberation movement (the Polisario Front), which had been previously confronting the Spanish colonial power, engaged in war against these two countries. Mauritania retreated in 1979, and in 1991 Morocco and the Polisaro agreed on a ceasefire under the auspices of the Organization for African Unity and the UN, which sent a mission (the MINURSO, French acronym for UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara) to monitor the 1991 ceasefire and to organize a free referendum in which the Sahrawi people would choose between independence or integration in Morocco.

The ceasefire brought a decade of hope to the Sahrawi refugee camps, marked by the MINURSO’s elaboration of a voting list for the referendum. Many Sahrawis working and studying abroad returned to the camps in order to be registered in the new census. However, the Moroccan government managed to delay the voting by rejecting first the census and later on the possibility of including independence of the Sahara as an option in the referendum. By mid-2000s the SADR’s diplomatic efforts arrived to a deadlock when it became evident that the UN Security Council would not force Morocco to comply with the conditions of the ceasefire. In 2007 Morocco unilaterally proposed an Autonomy Plan by which the Sahara would have a locally elected government that would ultimately be under the king’s control. Despite this limited conception of autonomy, Morocco’s plan was supported by France, the United States, and Spain. Meetings between the two parties resumed in 2007 until the present day, although positions have not varied: Polisario will not accept a solution that does not contemplate the possibility of independence for the Western Sahara. The discontent with the UN negotiations led to a non-
violent intifada in 2005 in the Occupied Territories (OOTT), signaling “a shift in the Western Saharan nationalism’s center of gravity from the refugee camps to the streets of l-Aaiun [the capital of the Occupied Sahara.]” (Zunes and Mundy 2010,123) The Sahrawi intifada reached its peak in October-November 2010, when some 20,000 Sahrawis camped in Gdeim Izik (in the outskirts of l-Aaiun, the capital of the Western Sahara) asking for the end of the economic and social discrimination by the Moroccan authorities.

The Sahrawi refugee camps in Tindouf, Algeria

Sahrawi accounts of the war point out that half of the Sahrawi population, approximately 100,000 Sahrawis (mostly women, children and old people) at the time of the Moroccan and Mauritanian invasions, crossed the border to Algeria. The refugee camps instantly became the seat of the SADR, whose establishment was proclaimed on 27 February 1976, the day after Spain formally withdrew from the Sahara. The exiled Sahrawis played an active role in both the organizing life in exile and constructing the foundations of the Sahrawi state in exile. Nowadays, the Algerian government proclaims that it is hosting 165,000 Sahrawi refugees in Tindouf, divided into four main camps named after the four province capitals of the Western Sahara (l-Aaiun, Awserd, Dakhla and Smara), a smaller settlement which grew around the national boarding school for women (called February 27th) and an administrative center where all the national institutions are located (called Rabouni).  

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2 UNHCR estimates that there are 90,000 Sahrawi refugees hosted in Algeria, although the UN Refugee Agency and the World Food Program provide food rations for 125,000 refugees in an attempt to improve the nutrition status of the Sahrawis. See UNHCR, Algeria country profile website. Available at: www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/page?page=49e485e16 (accessed 23 April 2012).
The Polisario Front also exerts control over the LLTT, the land that was left outside the Moroccan wall built during the 1980s, and that comprise 25 percent of the Western Sahara’s territory. The LLTT are divided into military regions where the Sahrawi army monitors Morocco’s movements and also trains young generations of Sahrawi men. The Polisario Front is slowly developing the most basic infrastructure in these territories (such as hospitals and schools) in an attempt to attract people to settle there.

According to UNHCR, there are almost a thousand Sahrawis living in the Algerian city of Tindouf, and also a large community of Sahrawis live in Zouerat, northern Mauritania. Dawn Chatty et al. estimate that Mauritania hosts approximately 26,400 Sahrawis whom, despite being under the protection of UNHCR, do not receive any assistance from the UN (2010, 41). In addition, many Sahrawi refugees still practice a pastoral life (either in a permanent or a temporal way) and move freely between the region of Tindouf, northern Mauritania and the LLTT looking for pastures for their sheep, goats and/or camels. An unknown number of Sahrawis have migrated to Europe and other Arab countries to work, the majority of whom travel with Algerian or Mauritanian passports and therefore are considered economic migrants. The Moroccan-built wall that divides the Western Sahara is a very porous one, since Sahrawis cross it from both sides. Any person who arrives to the refugee camps and can prove his/her Sahrawi origins is entitled to aid.

During the war (1975-1991) the Algerian Government and the Algerian Red Crescent provided the most basic assistance to the Sahrawi refugees. Once the ceasefire was implemented, the host country allowed different UN bodies to enter the camps, mainly UNHCR, the World Food Program (WFP) and the MINURSO. Since then, there has also been an increase in aid and
workers from the EU (like the EU Commission for Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection, ECHO), bilateral aid from European countries (especially the Spanish Agency for International Cooperation and Development, AECID), the United States (through the US Agency for International Development, USAID) and NGOs from Spain, Sweden, Norway, France, and Greece, among others.

The economy of the camps has significantly developed in the last two decades. During the period of war (1975-1991) there was almost no currency circulation, and practically all the families owned very few items apart from the tent the Red Crescent had provided them with. Scholars and refugees alike mark 1991 as the turning point for the Sahrawi refugees’ economy, when the Spanish Ministry of Defense started paying pensions to those men who had served in the Spanish army during the colonial period (San Martin 2010, and Chatty et al. 2010). This unexpected flow of cash coupled with the return of the men from the war front to the camps gave rise to the establishment of small businesses that over time have sprouted in the camps, such as grocery and clothes shops, restaurants, car repair workshops, and hairdressers, among others.

Tiba, a man of the second generation who studied in Cuba, blamed the emergence of a consumerist society in the camps on Spain’s decision to pay pensions and considered the free market economy to be weakening the Sahrawis’ unity:

Spain sold us out twice, first in 1975 [with reference of the Madrid Accords] and then in 1991, when it started paying pensions. That’s when the free market entered the camps and with it the inequalities among refugees. The cause [for the liberation of the Sahara] requires us all to be united as one. But now many people think only about themselves and how to acquire more and better products. We have become slaves of money.

As part of the state-building process that took place in the camps, hospitals and schools were built and run by Sahrawi refugees, mainly women during the war. Nowadays, Polisario
Front’s officials take pride in their achievement for providing free and universal education and healthcare in the camps. In fact, San Martin argues that the relative “good” living standards of the camps in comparison with other countries, such as Mauritania and Mali, have attracted migration to the refugee camps (2010:112). During the first years of war, children as young as 4 years of age would be sent to Algeria, Libya or Cuba to get their primary, secondary and, in some cases, tertiary education. As more primary and secondary schools are being built in the camps, fewer children go abroad to study or do so at a later age. The conflict’s deadlock has created a situation of mismatch between graduates and the labor market of the camps, that resembles—although in a more dramatic way—the high unemployment rates of many Arab countries (San Martin 2010, Chatty et al. 2010).

**Literature review**

Literature on the Western Sahara is not very abundant and is primarily focused on the territory’s contested sovereignty. Conflict resolution and, more generally, international relations are the fields that have dominated the production of knowledge about what the UN has labeled Africa’s last colony (Zoubir 1990, Maddy-Weitzman 1991, Jensen 2012). These perspectives tend to articulate their arguments through the gaze of the representative entities of the parties involved in the conflict. In the case of the Sahrawi nationalists, this role is played out by the Polisario Front, which is considered by the UN as the only legitimate representative of the Sahrawis. As a result, the literature has a reductionist view of the Sahrawis nationalists, who are portrayed as a homogenous group that forms the base of the liberation movement, especially in the case of those living in the refugee camps where the Polisario has its headquarters. The
occupied Sahara is often mentioned but only in relation to the Moroccan exploitation of its wealth, and to the international and legal debate over the countries interested in exploring the offshore oil or exploiting the Western Sahara fisheries. In his book *Endgame in the Western Sahara* (2004), the journalist Toby Shelly goes beyond this style of representing the refugees and those in the LLTT, and he focuses on the situation of exclusion and discrimination of the Sahrawis living under Moroccan occupation, and how resistance has emerged and evolved, paying special attention to the 1999 intifada (which made its way into both international and Moroccan media). Since the outbreak of the 2005 intifada, more authors have addressed the Sahrawis of the OOTT, such as Stephen Zunes and Jacob Mundy in their comprehensive book *Western Sahara: War, Nationalism and Conflict Irresolution* (2010). In addition, human rights activists have also produced many reports on the state of the Sahrawis on both sides of the wall, but in particular in OOTT, where the Moroccan authorities obstruct the work of researching and reporting human rights violations (Human Rights Watch 2005, Amnesty International 2008, Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice & Human Rights 2011). Regarding the Sahrawis in exile, Zunes and Mundy, as well as Pablo San Martin in *Western Sahara: The Refugee Nation* (2010) have also explored the refugee camps in terms of nation-building, national subjectivity and development of life in general in the camps. In particular, San Martin has studied the historical, political and social factors that have taken part in the process of Sahrawi identity formation resulting in, what he calls, the transformation of “refugees” into “citizens” and “soldiers” into “shopkeepers” (2010,9). He also provides insightful information about the role of the free market in changing the landscape of the camps and the expectations of the youth.
Scholars in refugee studies and the “international refugee regime” have also written about the Sahrawi refugees. Since the beginning of their exodus, many reports and scholarly works referred to the Sahrawis as “exceptional” refugees due to their active role in self-managing the camps’ affairs, and conveying an image of agency and sufficiency, which is in contradiction with the prototypical image of a refugee. According to Lisa Malkki (1992) and Barbara Harrell-Bond, (2002) refugees are portrayed, and in some cases represented themselves, as victims and passive recipients of aid who are in urgent need of foreign assistance for their survival. The Sahrawi exception was reported at the beginning of their exodus, when in 1977 a League of Red Cross Societies’ representative defined the Sahrawi exiles as “the most unusual refugees” because “they were organized, cooperative and determined to be self-sufficient” (quoted in Chatty D., et al 2010, 79). In this same vein, Harrell-Bond described the camps after a short visit in 1981 as a successful example in which not only did refugees not become passive recipients of aid, but they were actively involved in creating an ideal refugee society (1986).

Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2009, 2010, and 2011b) has examined the mechanisms with which the Polisario Front has so successfully projected the camps as an ideal society not only in terms of aid distribution and management, but also regarding gender equality and inter-faith

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3 Lisa Malkki uses the term “international refugee regime” for referring to the different humanitarian relief organizations (such as UNHCR, international organizations, NGOs, and charity groups) that manage certain aspects of the refugees’ lives. Malkki argues that the international refugee regime has played a crucial role in constructing the “refugee” as an object of study, not only by aid workers but also by scholars, thus paving the way for the establishment of “refugee studies” (1995, 506).

4 In camps where refugees are dependent on the provision of aid for their survival, an unbalanced power relation between the aid givers and the aid receivers usually develops. Harrell-Bond has explored some of the strategies employed by refugees to navigate the “authoritarian character of camp administration” (2002, 57) and secure aid by self-representing themselves as the ideal or “good refugee,” that is compliant with the rules, passive and grateful. This performance might result in an actual diminishing of the refugee’s capabilities. Characteristics such as these are what make a refugee “deserving” of aid and therefore many refugees play by these rules in order to secure basic assistance in a situation of powerlessness (Harrell-Bond 2002, 58).
dialogue. The author analyzes the construction of this discourse, which she argues is tailor-made for an international donor audience, and how Polisario officials perform this society’s idealness when foreign delegations visit the camps. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2010) explores generational dynamics within the National Union of Sahrawi Women (NUSW), where she shows that younger and better-educated women are systematically excluded from decision-making positions, and where the rising rate of girls’ dropping out of school is not even addressed. Dawn Chatty’s edited volume analyzes and compares the ways in which Afghan and Sahrawi refugee children and youth perceive and express the deterritorialized national situation in which they were born. Although this book does not draw deep conclusions, it offers a detailed account of many aspects of the everyday in the Sahrawi camps, focusing in particular on the effects that the summer program in Spain Vacaciones en Paz (Vacations in Peace) has on the Sahrawi children and their families (Chatty et al. 2010), as well as on habits of food consumption (Cozza 2010).

The scarce literature that deals with the Sahrawi refugees has been primarily focused on addressing the camps’ self-management, nationalism, and the construction and performance of the Polisario’s official discourse to attract and channel foreign aid. In order to study how different generations of Sahrawi men and women refugees take part in their national struggle and perceive each other’s participation in it, it is useful to draw parallels with studies that focus on the Palestinian refugees, who have been in exile for considerably more time than the Sahrawis and have received more attention from academia. Randa Farah (2003, 2007, 2009) has been the first scholar to compare the two protracted cases of colonization and exile in the Arab world. In “Refugee Camps in the Palestinian and Sahrawi National Liberation Movements: A Comparative Perspective” (2009) Farah compares the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and the
Polisario Front in their different historical and geopolitical contexts. The author also analyzes how nationalism and institution-building take place in Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan and in the Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria, concluding that the Palestinian project is entrenched in the past, whereas the Sahrawi one is based on developing in exile the institutions and national ideology of an independent Western Sahara.

In *Landscape of Hope and Despair*, Julie Peteet (2005) provides a comprehensive and historical account of the process of identity formation throughout different generations of Palestinian refugees in camps in Lebanon. Looking into their everyday life and how it transforms places, Peteet examines how the refugees turned the camps from places of defeat to places of hope and plans for the future. She identifies different generations according to how historical moments shaped the way Palestinian refugees understood and identified themselves: “jeel al-UNRWA” (the UNRWA generation, 1948-late 1960s) experienced the effects of the humanitarian regime through the UNRWA’s control of many aspects of their daily lives, which evoked for some “years of dependency and humiliation” and reluctance to being identified as “refugees” (:98); “jeel al-thawra” (the generation of the revolution, 1968-1987) was marked by the Palestinian Liberation Organization’s rule of the camps, resistance and identification as “fighters”; and the generation that followed the Oslo Accords—when the Palestinian refugees were left out of the negotiation—characterized by the Palestinians’ self-identification as “refugees,” which Peteet describes as a claim to their right of return.

In *Confronting the Occupation Work, Education, and Political Activism of Palestinian Families in a Refugee Camp* (2004), Maya Rosenfeld studies how three generations of

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5 The acronym UNRWA stands for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency.
Palestinian men and women refugees in Dheisheh camp in West Bank have dealt with and confronted the Israeli occupation. She uses the household as her unit of analysis and develops her own conceptual and analytical framework by studying the “cumulative effects” of education, labor, and political mobilization; three spheres that she regards as “avenues of social transformation” (2004:15) Rosenfeld describes the transformations that occurred through generations and gender, noting higher levels of education (older siblings, especially women, would work in order to enable the younger ones to continue their studies), significant changes in labor (from employment in the UNRWA to migration to the Gulf countries), and the growing politicization of the Palestinian youth to the extent that, during the first intifada, most of the households would have several young male members in Israeli prisons.

In sum, scholars of international relations and refugee studies approach the Sahrawi refugee camps with a gaze of exceptionalism that focuses either on the unusual protracted situation of this international conflict, or on the unusual behavior of these recipients of aid. Building on San Martin’s analysis of the transformation of “refugees” into “citizens,” as well as on Peteet’s study of Palestinians’ place-making in refugee camps in Lebanon, this thesis brings to the fore how Sahrawis experience the camps as the Sahrawi republic and self-identify as citizens of this state in exile. Treating the camps as a state enabled me to map out the power relations between the ruling elite and the citizenry, and to study the ordinary life of the Sahrawi refugees. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh’s articles, in which she deconstructs the SADR’s official discourse, were very useful for contrasting my own observations about gender dynamics and power relations, and for analyzing the public transcript in the camps. Rosenfeld’s study about three generations of Palestinian refugee men and women was central for this thesis, not only because I
also focused on the fields of education, labor and political activism, but also because I followed her methodology for applying a gender and generational perspective to this research, as I explained in the following section.

**Methodology**

I stayed in the camps for two months (June and July 2011), hosted by a family of 11 members that live in February 27th camp, the smallest of all the camps and the only one with electricity. In order to study how different generations of Sahrawi refugee men and women participate in the cause for liberating the Western Sahara, I followed Maya Rosenfeld’s generational approach employed in *Confronting the Occupation*. Rosenfeld divided the camp population in three generations delimited by pivotal historical events that deeply influenced each generations’ youth, such as: the creation of Israel in 1948, or the different administrations that have governed the West Bank (Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian National Authority). In the case of the Western Sahara, I identified two turning points: the 1975 exodus and the ceasefire in 1991.

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6 In general, foreign visitors stay with families, who generously host them without asking for any money (although it is expected from the guest to contribute to the expenses somehow). Only those aid workers who spend long periods of time in the camps are offered an apartment in Protocol (*tashrifaat*), an apartment compound with relatively good infrastructure where they all live. February 27th camp is usually the place where foreigners stay for two reasons: the electrical supply (which makes a difference in terms of living standards) and the headquarters of the National Union of Sahrawi Women (NUSW), which is located there and is the focus of many researchers interested in women issues in the camps. Beside its size, the only important difference between this camp and the rest is that a significant share of the female population of this settlement (especially from the first and second generations) work for the NUSW. This is quite logical since the camp grew out of the February 27th National School for Sahrawi Women, where the NUSW put a lot of effort to provide basic, technical and military education to the Sahrawi woman. Many of the school students settled their tents (*khaima*) around the school and have permanently established residences there.
Thus I have grouped the refugee population in three generational groups (excluding persons under age) as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generational divisions</th>
<th>49-80 years</th>
<th>34-48 years</th>
<th>18-33 years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Old generation</strong></td>
<td>Born in Western Sahara under Spanish rule and fled to Algeria in 1975 while being adult/young</td>
<td><strong>Intermediate generation</strong></td>
<td>Born in the camps/were children during wartime (1975-1991)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Young generation</strong></td>
<td>Refugees that only “know” life in the camps under the ceasefire</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Karl Mannheim explained in his essay “The Problem of Generation” (1923), which is considered the foundational text for sociological theory of generations, that what makes individuals part of the same generation are particular historical events experienced during youth “from the same or similar vantage point,” marking this group of people’s transition into adulthood (Edmunds and Turner 2005, 560). Grouping the refugee population in three generational groups according to age enabled me to calculate proportional representation quotas according to estimates about the demography of the camps prior to my arrival to the field. However, as the experiences that marked each generation became clear to me during my fieldwork research, I started treating the generational groups with more flexibility while maintaining the generational quotas. The most problematic delimitation that I found was between
the first and the second generation of women. As it is argued in chapter three, the second generation was engaged since childhood in the “educational front,” which entailed their separation from the families to study abroad. However, not all the females that were children at the beginning of the war were sent abroad to study, many stayed in the camps and carried out lives more similar to the women of the first generation, who worked intensively in the construction of the SADR and management of the refugees’ affairs, as well as were responsible for keeping a high fertility rate.

I conducted 40 interviews that I attempted to make as proportionally representative of the demographics of the camps as possible, by dividing them in groups of gender and age based on data published by Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2011a). However, it must be taken into account that statistics on the demography of the camps are not reliable, since issues regarding the refugee population are a very sensitive matter for the Polisario. The age and gender breakout of the sample was the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1st Generation (approximately +48)</th>
<th>2nd Generation (approximately 34-48)</th>
<th>3rd Generation (approximately 18-33)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My recruitment process started with snowball technique by requesting my host family to put me in contact with friends and relatives who might be willing to talk to me. As time passed

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7 If a referendum or any sort of voting ends up taking place, making public a census of the Sahrawis in the camps would be like providing a list of the number of Sahrawis that would vote for the independence of the Western Sahara. As it was quoted above, “the Sahrawis had voted with their feet” when they chose the exile over the Moroccan occupation (Zunes and Mundy 2010, 114).
by, I met people outside of my host family circle by attending youth meetings and celebrations, frequenting Internet cafes and volunteer associations, and by simply introducing myself to the neighbors. In addition, I repeatedly visited the Ministry of Media and interviewed journalists, technicians and politicians as part of my collaboration with International Women’s Media Foundation (IWMF) in a project about media, for whom I agreed to undertake an initial assessment of the state of production and consumption of media in the camps. Information from this secondary research is employed in the thesis, especially for illustrating the Polisario’s official line and the role of official media in the camps.\footnote{The IWMF and I have an agreement upon which I will be referenced if they decide to use anything from the report I wrote for them.}

Many of my interviews were conducted in Spanish, particularly with the men of the first generation, who had mastered this language during the Spanish colonization. The majority, however, was conducted in a mixture of Modern Standard Arabic and Hassaniyya dialect, from which I learned the basics during my stay in the camps. When referring to my interviewees, I employ pseudonyms to ensure their anonymity and provide information only about their gender and generation, except in the cases of high-ranking officials of the Sahrawi state, who spoke to me as representatives of different SADR institutions.

**Limitations**

My affiliation with IWMF also had a significant downside for my research. Apart from being a relatively important project in monetary terms, the liaison for IWMF in the camps was Khadija Hamdi, the Minister of Culture and also the wife of the SADR’s president. For the month of June, she scheduled my agenda on a weekly basis to meet with people who could
potentially be part of the media project. Additionally, she took me to events where other members of the Polisario/SADR government participated, such as the Youth Conference in Dakhla; poetry recitals; school exhibitions; and the celebrations of the world refugee day, the environment day, among others. Even though I would have never been able to see the entire media apparatus of the refugee camps or attend some of these events without Hamdi’s help, being seen and related to her unfortunately positioned me close to the circles of power. This had an obvious negative effect when interviewing people about their political activism and its generational divide for, like in many other Arab countries, the generation that led the liberation movement has clung to power, as it is explained in chapter four. As a result of my positionality, the majority of my interviewees adhered to the state’s metanarrative, as it is described in chapter two. To counterbalance the high share of normative responses that I gathered through interviews, participant observation and lengthy interviews with key informants play a fundamental role in deconstructing the state’s metanarrative which—as chapters two, three and four demonstrate—was obscuring generational and gender differences.

Floya Anthias (2002), in her research on narrations of collective belonging, has argued that analysis of biographical narratives should take into account the narrator’s gender, age, ethnicity and class. Given the widening gap between Sahrawis in economic terms, and the past history of enslavement of the black Sahrawi population, the fact that this research does not take into account class and ethnicity is a clear limitation. Although I did not interview any black Sahrawi formally, some of my young informants pointed out that they are being discriminated

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9 Sahrawis both self-identify and categorize the former slaves as “black.” For instance, I met a woman who sewed SADR flags, and she also asked me to send a common friend regards from Mneina “la negra” (the black one).
against by the state in terms of jobs in the government. Due to my short stay in the camps, and to the fact that most of my interviewees followed the official line (i.e., denial of the existence of problems within the almost perfect Sahrawi society), it was very difficult for me to identify socioeconomic classes among my informants.

**Organization of the thesis**

By deconstructing the official discourse which most of my interviewees adhered to, this research traces the transformations that the different gendered and generational fronts of the Sahrawi struggle have undergone during 36 years of unresolved conflict. Additionally, it analyzes how some oppositional sectors of the younger generation are contesting the state’s metanarrative in order to redefine by their own terms how they engage in the struggle. The first chapter demonstrates the validity of looking at the camps as a state by considering the Sahrawis’ self-understanding as citizens of the SADR. It also analyzes the political economy of the Sahrawi republic, which functions as a semi-rentier state, allocating access to goods, services and cash in order to strengthen alliances and coopt opposition. Chapter two examines the normative responses that the majority of my informants, who adhered to the official line, conveyed to me. In particular, it analyzes how they conceptualized the struggle, and how differences between the generations were articulated (many denied the existence of differences altogether, and some government officials blamed the youth for bringing “problems” from abroad into the camps). The third chapter classifies each generation of men and women according to the fronts of struggle in which they participated: waging war, constructing a state in exile, receiving education abroad, or performing voluntary work. Chapter four focuses on the youth complaints about the
way the Polisario is managing both the state and the struggle for national liberation. In this chapter, I also analyze how the state reacted to the creation of a youth movement inspired by the Arab revolutions (the March 5 movement), employing its hegemonic discourse to exert a subtle coercion against these youth for voicing discontent against the “old” and incumbent leadership of the Polisario Front.
Chapter 1

Looking at the refugee camps as the Sahrawi state

A review of the mainstream literature about the Sahrawi refugee camps, whether academic or from the humanitarian aid regime, reveals two main trends in the ways they are represented: either as the headquarters of one of the conflict’s main players, the Polisario Front, or as the locus of “unusual” recipients of humanitarian aid in a protracted exile situation. The aim of this chapter is to provide an approach that draws on the significance of the camps for the Sahrawis living there; for Sahrawis whom SADR is a reality that is both tangible—through daily interactions with its bureaucratic institutions and national symbols, for instance—and inherently interconnected with the Sahrawi exiles’ “self-understanding” as members of the Sahrawi state.\(^\text{10}\)

The purpose of this chapter is to bring to the fore a sense of the ordinary in a place that is looked upon through a lens of exceptionality because of the conflict’s protracted situation, and the refugees’ uniqueness in self-managing their lives in exile. First, it provides a historical background of the SADR nation-building process, and analyzes the Sahrawi refugees’ self-understanding as “citizens” of the SADR. Secondly, it examines the social contract that binds the Sahrawi state with its citizens—which is based on the provision of aid goods and services—that has allowed the Polisario to maintain its legitimacy as the Sahrawis’ leadership despite its failure to liberate the Sahara. The third section looks into the political economy of the SADR, a semi-

\(^{10}\) I am employing “self-understanding” as described by Brubaker and Cooper in their article “Beyond Identity,” where the authors dismiss the use of “identity” as a unit of analysis and propose other terminology for referring to the different meaning that the concept of “identity” has ended up conveying. Therefore, “self-understanding” is “a dispositional term that designates what might be called ‘situated subjectivity’: one’s sense of who one is, of one’s social location, and of how (given the first two) one is prepared to act” (2000, 17).
rentier state that allocates goods and services to strengthen alliances and coopt opposition. The last section reflects on the impact of the global economic crisis in terms of the SADR’s viability as a state in exile and the possible outcomes that a significant reduction of aid and remittances might have for the Sahrawi cause.

SADR’s nation-building and its outcome: Citizens of a stateless-nation

On 27 February 1976, the day after the Spanish army left the Sahara, the Polisario Front proclaimed the SADR. This decision served to cover the administrative and legal vacuum created by Spain’s abandonment of the territory, and proved to play an important role in the international arena, given the fact that more than 80 countries have recognized the SADR and it is a full member of the African Union. (Uld Es-Sweyih 2001, 31-32). Since its proclamation, the SADR has been nested in the refugee camps located in Algeria, which were not only the war’s rearguard but also the embodiment of the nationalist desires of the Polisario Front and the Sahrawi refugees. The camps were constructed physically, administratively, politically, and emotionally as the embryo of the future Sahrawi state. By putting into practice the kind of state that the Polisario envisioned to establish in the Western Sahara upon its liberation, the Front not only prevented the interference of international organizations (Farah 2009, 82), but it has also proven the viability of the Sahrawi republic which, upon the liberation of the territory, would be transferred from the camps into the Western Sahara (San Martin 2005, 568 and Zunes 1987, 46).¹¹ In the words of Mouloud Said, the Polisario representative in Washington DC:

¹¹ Proving the viability of the SADR is an important argument since the Moroccan propaganda claims that an independent Western Sahara would be another failed state in Africa (Morocco Board).
The phase of thinking how [the Sahrawi state] would be has already passed, because the problems of an independent state and its vision is something we have been working on since many years ago (…). We have already trained the people. For example, we have a program that has been implemented in order to be able to meet of the requirements of a state, from training the personnel that manages ports, control towers, banking... It is something we have been working on for a very long time.

After 36 years of institution-building and state-running, the SADR not only has its own flag and anthem, it also has a large bureaucracy (22 ministries and four provincial governments), as well as its own media outlets (a TV channel that is broadcast via satellite, a national and four local radios channels, a news agency online, and several journals), army, police, courts, national associations (around the issues of labor, women and youth), educational and health systems, postal service, vehicle plates, identification cards and, as San Martin rightly notes, the Sahrawis also have their own way of using money (2005, 574). Interactions with the bureaucracy, as Ilana Feldman argues in Governing Gaza, bind people into the government “whether [by] working in it as a civil servant or [by] approaching it as a private citizen”, as well as it plays a central role in creating a sense of ordinary life with its routine repetitions (2008, 12). In the same vein, the numerous Sahrawi state institutions and symbols impregnate the daily life in the camps and impact the self-understanding of the refugees who, above all, consider themselves citizens of the SADR (San Martin 2005 and 2010). For instance, on a July morning, two Algerian UNHCR workers came to my host family’s house to conduct a household survey about number of members, education, illnesses and frequency with which they go to the doctor, consumption of aid goods and services and their satisfaction with these. At the end of the interview, the mother

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12 Although the currency used in the camps is the Algerian dinar, the Sahrawis refer to it as the Sahrawi peseta, which has a different value from what it is marked on the bill notes and coins. The peseta was the currency used in Spain (and its colonies) before the establishment of the euro. The Sahrawis use the “duro” system for counting money, in which 1 duro equals 5 pesetas. San Martin draws a very illustrative parallel between the currency and the state, arguing that they both are social constructions that the Sahrawis enhance on a borrowed currency and land, respectively (San Martin 2005).
and the eldest daughters—the only ones at home with the children—were asked if they knew their rights. The eldest daughter took no time to reply: “As citizens of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, we…” She was interrupted by one of the UNHCR workers, who clarified his question: “No, no, I mean if you know your rights as refugees” [emphasis added.] In sum, this collective performance of the Sahrawi state has transformed refugees into citizens. It has resulted in a sense of “normalcy” inside the camps, which, in the eyes of San Martin, are like “any other cit[ies] in any other state” (2005, 568).

Sahrawi “citizens” and “refugees:” Shifting categories according to the audience

During my fieldwork, it was not difficult to realize that, in the everyday language, Sahrawis referred to themselves as “citizens” (muwatinin), employing the word “refugee” (laji’) only when talking to foreigners. Similarly, the term “camp” (mukhayyam) was absent from the everyday language of the Sahrawis, who instead used the term “province” (wilaya), echoing the names of the province capitals in the Western Sahara.13 This shift in the categories used for referring to themselves and their geography shows a collective awareness of their dependence on aid and active efforts to gain the foreigners’ support for their cause and thus secure aid. For example, the person responsible for the media archives—whom I interviewed as part of my research for IWMF’s media project, and who was interested in attracting aid to his department—spoke about what Lisa Malkki (1995) has termed the depoliticizing effects of the humanitarian regime, which obviates not only the political causes of the refugees’ exile, but also their needs beyond the provision of the basic trinity of food, health and education:

13 To avoid confusion between, for instance, the two Dakhlas, the Sahrawi refugees employ the term “the Dakhla in the Occupied Territories” (al-Dakhla fi-l manatiq al-muhtalla) in contrast with “the province of Dakhla” (wilayat al-Dakhla).
There is a very serious problem. When NGOs and states give aid to the refugees it is always framed in humanitarian ways, you know, food, education, and so on. But there are other basic needs that are not addressed, like culture. Culture is another need. Can you imagine the needs of a refugee who is a university graduate from Cuba when he/she comes back to the camps? This person needs to read, to research, it is a human right. Why forbid that? Providing food is not enough, especially for us, who are refugees as a political act, not like in other countries, and our problem is when the political aspect is not addressed. If we were in the Sahara, we would not be here anymore asking for help!

In *Landscape of Hope and Despair*, Julie Peteet traces changes in the subjectivity that takes place in relation to the Palestinians’ self-identification as refugees. She argues that during the “days of UNRWA,” from 1948 until the late 1960s, Palestinians “disliked being referred to as ‘refugees’” because of “its implications of powerlessness, denationalization, and the disdain of being charity cases” (2005, 124). However, after the Oslo Accords when the Palestinian refugees were left out of the negotiations, Palestinians in the Lebanese camps started claiming their refugee status, which meant not only their entitlement to humanitarian assistance, but also and more importantly their right of return; as well, claiming this right became a form of activism.

I found the Sahrawi emphasis on their refugeeness when they deal with foreigners or speak to an international (donor) audience to be very similar to the Palestinian self-identification as refugees in the post-Oslo era, for the Sahrawis stress their right to self-determination and to humanitarian assistance via their refugee status. Given my short stay in the camps, in comparison to the long span of time in which Peteet conducted her research, I am not able to historically trace changes in the Sahrawis’ self-identification. Nonetheless, it is clear from my conversations that men who participated in the armed struggle, especially those from the first generation who spent their youth at war, often referred to themselves as combatants (*muqatilin*). Being a combatant was the third most common way of self-describing that I found in my interviews after “citizen” and “refugee.” It is only used to describe those who fought in the war; whereas none of the young
people that I interviewed employed that term to refer to him/herself. In a similar fashion to the militant Palestinians in the revolution days, Sahrawi men during the armed struggle might have referred to themselves first and foremost as freedom fighters. Despite the fact that women received military training during the war, very few of them went to the war front and the majority of those who did performed nursing tasks. Throughout my conversations and formal interviews, no one described women as “revolutionaries” or “combatants.” Additionally, in a book published in Spanish by the NUSW in 2011, *Women’s Strength: the Experience of the Sahrawi Woman*, women are mentioned as martyrs, mothers of martyrs and donors of financial contributions to the Front.

**SADR’s social contract**

Despite the Polisario Front’s failure to deliver what was supposed to be its *raison d’être*—the liberation of the Western Sahara—Mohammed Abdelaziz has been the Front’s leader for the last 35 years. In addition, Abdelaziz has also been the SADR’s President for the same amount of time, since the Sahrawi constitution provides that the Polisario’s Secretary General also holds the SADR’s presidency. Many other positions within the Polisario Front and the SADR’s government overlap, creating an interwoven and complex relationship with each other that Fiddian-Qasmiyeh exemplifies in the term “Polisario/SADR” (2009). This duality, which has been present since 1976, has enabled the Sahrawi leadership in exile to switch between the roles of the liberation movement and the republic’s government. The social contract that bounds the
SADR and the Sahrawi citizens is the provision of basic goods and services.\textsuperscript{14} San Martin’s research and many of the narratives that I collected confirm that after the ceasefire the state institutions multiplied, and that the Polisario/SADR explicitly adopted the policy of improving the living conditions of the population (2005, 576). When asked about how the ceasefire changed life in the camps, a second-generation man that works in Protocol dealing almost daily with foreign visitors answered:

The Sahrawis in the refugee camps have many needs, many sufferings. Many things changed [after the ceasefire]. Now, for example, we say that we moved from the movement to the state, now we have duties for the state, we have institutions, we have to deal with the problems of the society, needs of the society, social groups that need this and that, and… we entered the thinking and the dynamic of a state. Yes, it is in exile, but it is a state.

One of these duties that the state has contracted with the population is the provision of free education, even if it means sending students abroad, for all the Sahrawis. Luali, a third-generation man who studied business in Algeria and has an administrative job at the Ministry of the OOTT and the Diaspora, explained his entitlement to education as a citizen. However, he clarified that it is not the duty of the state to provide jobs according to everyone’s career, since the labor market in the camps is very limited: “Education is my right as a citizen. I have the right to study. But employment is not something that we can demand, because there is no economy here, there are no jobs for everyone. So we end up working in things that have no relation with what we studied, but at least we are progressing as a people and getting more education.”

\textsuperscript{14} Providing a safe environment, away from Morocco’s attacks, was also highlighted by many interviewees as another service that the SADR gave to its citizens. However, the kidnapping of three European aid worked in October 2011 has questioned the security of the camps, where, until that day, there had not been any attacks or infiltration by a foreign armed group (García de Blas 2012).
I argue that, by highlighting its role as a state through the provision of services (like education) and goods (mainly food aid), the Polisario/SADR leadership managed to maintain its legitimacy even as the UN peace process reached its current deadlock, placing its role as a liberation movement on a secondary plane. Indeed, some interviewees argued that such provision of services actually divorced citizens from the national struggle. For instance, a third generation man complained that the improvement of the living conditions in the camp has made many Sahrawis lose interest in the cause:

The ceasefire changed everyone’s lives. I wasn’t here [born] when there was war and I don’t have much information about that, but according to what I’ve heard, life then was worse. Now people struggle to get a better life for them and their families, and there is no interest in whether the land is liberated or not. The most important thing is that tonight my family is well-provided for, that no one is sick, that there is food, clothes, shoes and everything, and I am not interested if we attain independence, but if we do, then I am with them, and if not, then I continue living in the desert.

In addition, the Sahrawi geography in exile not only mirrors that of the Western Sahara (by naming the camps after its four provinces), but in many cases it has even replaced it, referring to the camps as provinces of the Sahrawi republic, and calling the Sahara under Moroccan occupation the OOTT. Whether this place-naming is part or not of a deliberate policy to reinforce the role of the Polisario as a state, it contributes to normalize life in exile. Both the symbolic geography of the camps and the success of the performativity of the Sahrawi state reify and reproduce the sense that Sahrawis live in a “normal” state, which enables the Polisario to push the liberation of the Sahara into the background.
SADR’s political economy: A semi-rentier state in exile

The location of the SADR in the Algerian Hamada, a barren desert, impedes the Sahrawi state from promoting any sort of economic production. The inflow of external revenues into the camps, mainly in the form of foreign aid and remittances, is not only key for the survival of the Sahrawi exiles, but also for the state’s fulfillment of its social contract as a provider of goods and services to its citizens. As will be analyzed throughout the following chapters, the Polisario/SADR has elaborated an effective discourse for a Western donor audience that attracts important amounts of aid into the camps. According to definitions of rentier and semi-rentier, the SADR meets the two fundamental characteristics to qualify as such: dependence on external rents and a central role of the state in allocating these rents (Beblawi 1990, 87-88). This section first explores the type and volume of aid and remittances that reach the SADR. Secondly, it maps out the functioning of the Sahrawi state in attracting and allocating rents, which—as in other rentier and semi-rentier countries—is indispensable for the cooptation and coercive methods employed by the Polisario/SADR leadership to reinforce its alliances and stay in power. Thirdly, it evaluates the impact that the global economic crisis might have on the Sahrawi cause.

International Aid

A wide diversity of humanitarian entities works in the Sahrawi refugee camps: international organizations (UNHCR, WFP, European Commission), bilateral aid agencies (especially the Spanish AECID), and NGOs from Algeria, Spain, Sweden, Norway, France and Greece. To provide an aggregated amount of aid to the camps is a challenging task that falls beyond the scope of this research. However, to shed some light on the volumes of aid, UNHCR’s budget for Algeria in 2010 reached USD18 million, doubling the previous years’ budgets
(UNHCR 2012), whereas the Spanish aid agency’s contribution to the camps fell from 21 million euro in 2009 to 12 million in 2010 (AECID).\textsuperscript{15}

Despite the Polisario/SADR’s complaints about UNHCR’s aid being solely focused on the “digestive system” (Villafranca et al. 2012), UNHCR implements in partnership with the Sahrawi Red Crescent educational and health programs, together with other development projects that go beyond humanitarian relief, such as financing Internet cafes, sport programs and garbage collection. Regarding the food aid provided to the refugees, it consists of a very caloric diet of rice, flour, sunflower cooking oil, lentils, and chickpeas that are allocated once a month in a ratio of one kilo of each per member in the household. Fresh foodstuffs, like onions, carrots, and potatoes are delivered on a 25-day basis. Other products like tomatoes and apples are distributed on a non-fixed basis. In the case of my host family, products like eggs, bread, milk and goat meat had to be purchased in the camps’ stores to complement the aid diet. According to UNHCR, there are high rates of malnutrition and anemia among infants, children and pregnant women (2012). While I was in the camps in June and July, due to the heat and the inability to store kilos of onions, potatoes and carrots that are provided by UNHCR/WFP, many of these products rot before they could be consumed, and were used to feed the sheep and goats. The services provided by NGOs in the camps vary from micro-loans, technical and vocational training, prescription glasses, film and photography classes, film festival, construction techniques for building adobe houses that protect from the heat and withstand the winter rains, among many other services. Non-Western aid is even more difficult to assess. Nowadays, Algeria is providing for water and electricity supplies, and it is very likely that it also helps finance the SADR.

\textsuperscript{15} According to AECID’s website, these figures include Spain’s contribution to UNHCR and international and Spanish NGOs operating in the camps.
institutions, which has developed an incredible bureaucracy (including a symbolic salary system) that does not self-finance itself by tax-collection.

Remittances

The most relevant form of income comes in the form of remittances from the Sahrawis working abroad. Spain hosts the largest community of Sahrawi economic migrants: approximately 4,000 Sahrawis by 2004, a figure that has probably increased in recent years despite the economic crisis (Shelley 2004, 175). Moreover, not only are Sahrawi expatriates a source of rent, solidarity groups and acquaintances also contribute to the economy of the camps. For instance, the Spanish families that host Sahrawi children during summer in the program called *Vacaciones en Paz* (Vacations in Peace) send the children back to the camps with an average of 200 euros per child. Thus in a year in which 9,000 children participate in the program, 1.5 or 2 million euro reach the camps (San Martin 2010, 161). Donations in kind of tradable goods, from food to vehicles and electrical appliances, are even more difficult to measure but their value should not be underestimated. For example, solidarity caravans from Spain that carry to the camps tons of foodstuff and other commodities.  

Centrality of the state in the distribution of external rents

Practically every state institution has a cooperation department, which is devoted to finding foreign donors in order to finance its activities. For instance, throughout my research for the IWMF’s media project in the camps, I had as my main interlocutor the Chief of Cooperation of the Ministry of Media, who was in charge of arranging meetings with the different

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16 For example, the town of Hernani (in the Basque Country, Spain), which has a population of less than 20,000 inhabitants, sent a solidarity caravan to the camps that consisted of six trucks and two buses that carried 150 tons of foodstuffs, among other goods (Manjarres 2012).
departments of the Ministry that had suggestions for the project. Every project in the camps has
to be implemented in partnership with the specific SADR institution in charge of the area
targeted by that project. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh’s (2010) study of the Sahrawi Women’s Union and
its relationship with donor agencies reveals that most NGOs and aid actors partner with the
SADR’s institutions without questioning if the needs identified by the SADR institutions are the
same as the populations’ needs. The partnerships that the SADR develops with the humanitarian
aid regime enable the state to play a central role in the allocation of external rents, in this case
aid. Having the monopoly of this distribution allows the state to be given credit for providing
these services and goods, even if these are financed and brought to the camps by international
organizations, individual states, or NGOs. The statement of a man of the second generation
serves to illustrate how the SADR is given credit for the provisions of goods and services: “I
thank, and thank, and thank, and thank the Polisario for taking us to a safe place, for preventing
us from being hungry, for giving us free education and work. What other country gives you
education and food for free?”

The centrality of the state in the distribution of resources is also fundamental for building
alliances and coopting opposition. Given the nature of most of the aid received in the Sahrawi
camps, which revolves around providing food aid and services to the refugees, it is not cash that
the state allocates in order to benefit its supporters and coopt its critics. Rather, the
Polisario/SADR offers access to additional aid products (that are in many cases smuggled into
Mauritania or sold to the refugees in private-owned stores), resources (such as water, electricity,
or even the Internet), employment either in the administration (which does not provide
particularly high salaries) or in the aid sector, Algerian passports, health assistance abroad,
scholarships to study abroad, and the possibility to establish acquaintances with foreigners that might result in receiving cash donations, remittances or assistance to migrate (De Juan Canales 2010, 13).

The claims of clientelism based on tribal ties and plain corruption brought up by some of the third generation people that I interviewed coincide with my observations and those of other authors (Cozza 2010, International Crisis Group 2007, and Uld Es-Sweyih 2011). Even though distribution of the basic food items (such as flour, rice, cooking oil, lentils, some vegetables and tuna cans) seems to reach every refugee on a monthly basis, it is common to see stores, in particular in the administrative center (Rabouni), selling aid products. Being left out of the circulation of additional resources can position a family in a situation of economic hardship, especially since another form of state monopoly on power is the denial of Algerian passports, which reduces a refugee’s chances to leave the camps and work abroad.

The resources that the state allocates might be losing relevance given the fact that commodity prices are rising at a faster rate than the quantity and quality of the goods provided by the SADR. As it was mentioned in the introduction, since 1991 a more consumerist society has developed as a result of the pensions paid by Spain and the arrival of men to the camps from the frontlines. This consumerism is pushing many Sahrawis to migrate to Europe in order to improve their families’ living standard in the camps. A survey conducted by a Spanish NGO in 2009 estimated that the average expenditure of a household of 10 members was around 337 euros per month. However, this average has most likely increased since then as many products

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17 According to the report, the average of members per household was 10, although it is not indicated whether this information was provided from the Sahrawi authorities, an NGO or from their own observations. The sample was 10 households in Samara and Awserd camps and the survey included
have experienced a significant inflation. According to an interview I conducted with Mujtar Lebuehi, an economist and the Polisario ambassador in Bogota, the SADR does not keep track of changes in the goods’ prices, not even those of first necessity. However, Lebuehi has observed that the prices of camel meat and sugar in 2005 experienced an increase of 100 percent and 150 percent respectively by 2011.

The Polisario is concerned with the volume of emigration from the camps and has established a symbolic salary system for public employees. It has also asked aid agencies to dedicate an amount of project funds to pay their Sahrawi workers. Nevertheless, the state’s efforts seem to be negligible in comparison with the potential revenues of migration, which is especially appealing to young single men, who have to gather at least 3,000 euro in order to get married. Therefore, it can be assumed that remittances are a form of external expenditure that is gaining importance in the society and that is financing growing patterns of consumption. Since the state does not appear to have any sort of control over the remittances, and given the fact that there are no taxes that help fund the state, the SADR can be considered as a semi-rentier state in exile.

**Impact of the global crisis**

The global economic crisis has already affected the aid provided by Spain, the main donor to the Sahrawi refugee camps, which has almost halved its annual budget since 2010 (an questions regarding monthly, trimestral and annual expenditures. Although the methodology does not explain the economic background of these families and their data is far from representative, it matches the levels of consumption that I observed during June-July 2011 (although prices have increased). Therefore, I treat this data as a conservative approach to the average monthly expenditure of a middle-class family (Elizondo 2010, 80-81).

18 Due to the fact that during the war there was no money circulation in the camps, public employees received no monetary compensation for their work. In 2006 general practitioners received 50 euros a month, soldiers 30 and teachers 25. (De Juan Canales 2010,13).
average of 14 million euro). Approximately, 60 percent of the Spanish aid originates from the regional governments and city councils, which have reduced the aid they send to the camps by 50 percent at the beginning of 2012 (AECID). The significant reduction of US aid for the next fiscal year (Myers, 2011) is likely to severely decrease the overall budget of the UNHCR, which will worsen Sahrawis’ living conditions and might challenge the leadership’s legitimacy as a service provider. Furthermore, the Sahrawi state’s inability to control inflation will fuel increasing economic inequalities among the refugees, at least until the prices finally readjust to a decreased demand.

It is difficult to assess the impact that brain drain is having in the living conditions of the refugees. It is particularly striking how few physicians are currently working in the camps, especially since their education has been free of charge thanks to the agreements of the SADR with other states, mainly Cuba and Algeria (Chatty, D. et al. 2010,57). Most of the medicine graduates end up migrating, attracted by better salaries and working conditions offered in Spain. Salek, a second-generation school teacher who earns 30 euro a month, expressed his concern about the insignificance of the salaries provided by the state and those found abroad, referring in particular to the physicians’ case:

The Polisario Front is like a mother to us and it would like to give us good salaries, but the problem is that it has no money. The people, many people, don’t take this into consideration. But we need to be aware of this reality, the reality of the real life. The Polisario Front, the Sahrawi state, or whatever, the party, would like to pay to those who work something more than incentives… Don’t you think that a physician who works in Spain and earns 3,000 euro a month is not a problem for the Sahrawis? Here there are two physicians right now, despite the fact that it was the Sahrawi state that provided an education for them free of charge!

If migrating to Europe becomes less profitable due to the crisis, it is probable than more Sahrawis will cross the sand wall erected by Morocco and settle in the occupied Sahara attracted
by Morocco’s economic incentives (Zunes and Mundy 2010, 120-122), a phenomenon that, according to some of my interviewees, peaked in 2008. In the current context in which France, the United States and Spain are supporting Morocco’s Autonomy Plan as the most realistic solution to the conflict,\(^{19}\) the fact that there are people leaving the camps to settle (even if it is temporary) in the Sahara under Moroccan occupation can be interpreted by the international community as if some Sahrawis were dropping their claims for an independent Sahara an accepting autonomy within Morocco. Additionally, this migration may be seen to support the Moroccan argument that the Sahrawi refugees are prisoners in the refugee camps, where the Polisario deprives them of freedom of movement and use them for its separatist purposes (Zunes and Mundy 2010, 114). If the global economic crisis reaches to the extent of strangling the viability of life in exile and emptying the camps, then the Polisario might end up losing the war, at least in the way it has been conceived since 1975 as a struggle against the Moroccan occupation with the objective of establishing an independent Western Sahara. The Front’s strength relies in the refugee population and the strong statement of their 36 years of exile, which illustrates their preference for living in exile claiming their right to self-determination rather than under the Moroccan regime.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter was to bring to the fore how Sahrawis live and experience the camps as the Sahrawi state, and how SADR’s performativity as a state through its institutions and resource distribution shape, at the same time, the Sahrawis’ self-understanding as members

of the Sahrawi republic. I argued that the Polisario/SADR managed to maintain legitimacy despite its failure to liberate the Sahara by emphasizing its role as a state, and developing a social contract with its citizenry by which the SADR provides to its people free basic goods and services. Moreover, the sense of normalcy within the functioning of Sahrawi republic and the geography of the exile—which replaces the topography of the homeland—contribute to reinforce the idea that the Sahrawi state already exists, thus concealing the failure of the Polisario and pushing the liberation of the Sahara to the background. As a result, the Polisario/SADR leadership not only manages to stay in power without delivering its raison d’etre, but also profits from the humanitarian situation of the Sahrawi refugees by allowing visible corruption.

Looking at the camps as a state has enabled me to apply the concept of rentierism to the Sahrawi republic, demonstrating that the SADR functions as a semi-rentier state in which rents are allocated to strengthen alliances and coopt potential rivals and, ultimately, stay in power. Since securing aid is therefore essential for the survival of the Polisario/SADR regime, the state has developed a refined discourse for attracting foreign aid, which I discuss further in the next two chapters. In addition, the chapter also looks at the repercussions the global economic crisis might have for the struggle of liberation, in terms of both the challenges to the financial viability of life in exile, and the growing inequalities between Sahrawis which might lead young people to leave the camps, some of them opting to establish in the OOTT. Crossing the wall into the occupied Sahara weakens the Polisario’s claims of independence, since the return of Sahrawi exiles to their homeland under Moroccan occupation could be understood as an implicit acceptance of the Moroccan Autonomy Plan, a plan that does not include the independence of the Western Sahara.
Chapter 2

The SADR’s public transcript: Analyzing normative responses on the “struggle” and “differences between generations”

I think that there are three generations in the Polisario Front. There is the generation that carried out the revolution, who were war leaders, martyrs, and so on and so forth. This is the generation that is in power, they have been in power for over 38 years. The second generation is 35-45 years old, like my father. This second generation is less involved in politics, and I think that this is because they were not able to make their opinions count vis-à-vis the first generation. What I see is that the third generation is the most radical of them all, very radical. This might be because they are more exposed to the world, they have seen that many young people in the world have more rights and opportunities [than them] and ask: ‘Why don’t I have them? Oh, because I don’t have a country, so I have to liberate my homeland.’ This generation is calling to return to war with more insistence than the others (Third generation man)

I first met the above quoted informant at the end of June, when the black outs in February 27th had become a daily routine during the hottest hours of the day from 11am to 7pm. As soon as the electrical supply was back, I would leave my cell phone charging at home and rush to the Internet café to check the news, my email and hang out with some of the assiduous users. That night one of my friends pointed at him and whispered to me: “You have to talk him. He is one of the young people who have been asking for change. He’ll give you a good interview.” My friend was right. I approached that young man and I could tell that I had his full attention when I mentioned the words “generations” and “struggle.” The quote above is the first thing that he said when I turn on my recorder, without waiting for me to ask him a question… and I felt incredibly relieved. Until that night, none of my interviewees had acknowledged that there were differences among generations. He not only seemed to have reflected upon it a great deal, he had actually started a youth movement (called March 5) that articulated its complaints around three main points: the incumbency of the old generation in power, the SADR’s bad governance of the camps, and discontent with the Polisario’s leadership of the revolution. That was the first of a
series of interviews and informal conversations with him and another member of the March 5 movement. Among the 40 people that I interviewed, only four—and all of them youth—criticized the Polisario/SADR leadership in front of me.

The rest of my informants were reluctant to speak about problems within their societies, differences between generations or to express dissent against the government. Collectively, the majority of them portrayed the SADR as an ideal and almost perfect society, characterized by gender equality, educational progress, democracy, freedom, and even lack of criminality. This situation is more than understandable if my positionality within the field is taken into account. I was a foreigner from Spain—former colonial power and currently the most important donor country in the refugee camps—working for a US foundation that was designing a media project financed by Howard G. Buffet and coordinated in the camps by Khadija Hamdi, the Minister of Culture and also the wife of the president. Additionally, I was also a graduate student from Georgetown University conducting research for my M.A. thesis, but this was the least problematic of all the ways I could be perceived. The work relationship that I had to develop with the Minister of Culture and my affiliation with a future source of funding situated me very close to the circles of power and in a donor-recipient relation. Chapter one explained that the semi-rentier system in the camps was financed thanks to a well-constructed official discourse aimed at an international donor audience. Subsequently, most of the information that my interviewees disclosed followed the official line.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the normative responses that I collected through interviews regarding the current conceptualization of the struggle, and whether informants considered that people of different generations engaged in the cause in different ways. In terms
of the struggle, the vast majority of my informants portrayed it in a very broad sense, describing all activities of their daily lives as acts of resistance against the Moroccan occupation (i.e. maintaining their refugee status as a way of struggling). In addition, some informants also thought that the Sahrawis in exile played an important role supporting, motivating and serving as loudspeakers for what happens in the OOTT. The second part of the chapter is devoted to explaining a clear trend within the narratives aligned with the official discourse: the reluctance of many first- and second-generation informants to acknowledge differences between generations. In cases where older generations admitted the existence of “differences,” these were conceived of as problems within society that were brought by the youth. This discourse not only portrays the camps as ideal societies, but also pathologizes youth, constructing them as vulnerable to Morocco’s strategies to break down Sahrawi unity, and responsible for bringing societal problems to the camps from abroad.

“Being a refugee is a way of fighting:” Conceptualization of the struggle in the current context

How do I participate in the cause? What do you mean by ‘participate’? Here everyone is resisting, everyday, with everything they do. For example, I breastfed my children and many orphans during war. That is very important. Now I’m old but I keep struggling. Here I am, in this hot weather, in the Algerian Hamada… and right now I’m talking to you. You see? (Sukaina, woman of the first generation)

Sukaina, the first woman that I interviewed in the camps, looked at me puzzled. The way my question was framed, using the verb “to participate,” conveyed for her the struggle as an activity in which Sahrawis could participate or opt not to. For her, as well as for all the people I interviewed afterwards, the Sahrawis in the camps are always resisting, because enduring the conditions of their exile is a way of struggling. The majority of my interviewees framed their
struggle in terms of having steadfastness and conviction for coping with the exile and all its hardships. A woman of the third generation considered surviving in exile as a daily victory against Morocco: “We have been here [in exile] for 36 years, with a lot of steadfastness (sumud), surviving in a land where even the animals cannot live, and this shows a big resistance. We have a lot of sumud and strength, and every day [in the camps] is a victory against the Moroccan occupation.” Being a refugee, surviving in exile despite the weather and the scarcity of resources in the camps, makes a clear stance to Morocco and the international community to see namely that generations of Sahrawi refugees prefer living in exile rather than under Moroccan rule. Fatimetu, a woman of the third generation explained the political act of being a refugee:

You struggle according to your own conditions. If you are a journalist, then you tell the world about our cause. If you are a student abroad, you become like an ambassador and you raise awareness on our conflict. But even the old women here, just by being here, enduring the heat and the wind, they are demonstrating that they don’t want to be in their own homeland as Moroccans. This is another way of fighting, even if they are not talking about the land, even if they are not talking at all. Staying here, being a refugee is a way of fighting.

In fact, most of my interviewees perceived the current period of “no war and no peace” as another phase of the war against Morocco. In this phase, the Sahrawis’ conviction and steadfastness is fundamental for defeating the Moroccan strategy of attracting Sahrawis to the other side of the wall and emptying the camps. The testimony of the Minister of Media illustrates well this conceptualization of the present war: “How is the Moroccan occupation waging war now? It is waging war trying to attract the Sahrawi people that are here. This is the current state. We are facing this desire of the occupation with our sumud, reaffirming our objective by staying firm, dealing with these sufferings here (…) So that we don’t give the Moroccan occupation any chance.”
Besides everyone’s *sumud* and conviction, each Sahrawi struggles according to his/her own means, as Fatimetu mentioned earlier. Chapter three deals in detail with the significance that education, labor (voluntary or remunerated) and marriage have had in the struggle through the three generations of men and women. Working, studying, bearing children, cooking and cleaning, all that comprises the daily lives of the Sahrawis are part of their struggle. As Mohammad Salem, a man of the first generation who was left disabled in 1989, said: “We can fight speaking or with the war, it’s the same, it’s the struggle and the struggle takes many shapes.”

Many of my interviewees pointed out that talking about the cause by participating in interviews (like they did with me) or in more informal contexts, was another way of resisting. The Sahrawis are aware that their conflict does not gather much attention in the foreign media and, in order to spread their cause and build international networks of solidarity and support, they welcome visitors to do research, volunteer or just spend a few days living with Sahrawi families. Sidi Ahmed, a man of the first generation, described the act of “talking about the cause” as a collective effort for gaining support in the West: “We have to convince the West that we are a people that deserve to be helped. We do campaigns with the civil society of Western countries, to convince them, even one by one, that we are a people that deserve to be free.”

**The role of the refugees in the Sahrawi struggle**

When describing the struggle, the majority of my informants also included in their narrations the acts of resistance of the Sahrawis under Moroccan occupation. The OOTT were perceived as the center of the action of the Sahrawi cause. Mohammed, a man of the third
generation, explained that the peaceful intifada in the OOTT was a change of strategy in their war against Morocco during the current ceasefire:

The people don’t want to lose more time, neither those who are here [in the camps], nor those who are in the OOTT. But because we agreed on a ceasefire that we… that the SADR, which is the representative of the people, signed under the flag of the UN, we cannot mess up with what the SADR has done. But we have shifted the game since 2005, waging a new war, a peaceful one, in the OOTT.

With the progressive spread of mobile phones, satellite TV and, to a lesser degree, Internet in the camps, the refugees have been able to communicate with the Sahrawis in the OOTT in an unprecedented way. In fact, this advancement in communication has enabled the Sahrawis on both sides of the wall to strengthen their bonds and, in an emotional and political way, their imagined community. Benedict Anderson grants the newspaper and the novel key roles in the birth of the nation, since they enable people to think of themselves as part of a community. These printed and circulating materials “provided the technical means for ‘representing’ the kind of imagined community that is the nation” (2006, 25). For Hayat, a woman of the third generation, these new ways of communication have brought the two groups together to the extent that: “Now it’s like the OOTT and the camps are one only place, and this is because of the Internet and the new media, which have also created more political awareness.”

The Polisario Front, as the only legitimate representative of the Sahrawi people, has developed a strong media network. The Ministry of Media was one of the first ministries founded in 1976, when it ran a magazine printed in Algeria and the national radio, which,

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20 For example, by 2011 the SADR had established a real network with which to spread its message: a TV channel (RASD TV), that broadcasts via satellite and is streamed online; a news agency that publishes news online in Arabic, English, Spanish and French; a national radio that can be heard in the camps, the OOTT, Algeria, and parts of Mauritania and Libya (and that will be soon available in internet); and a wide variety of magazines and newspapers.
according to the Minister, played an important role “gluing all the Sahrawis together” during the war. The TV and the Internet have allowed the Polisario media apparatus to broadcast to the world what happens in the OOTT, breaking to a certain extent the media blockage imposed by Morocco.\textsuperscript{21} The new media has also enabled all the Sahrawis to “see the images as they happen in reality,” follow the events of the intifada, and share the “sufferings of the Sahrawis there” (Minister of Media, first generation man).

The new means of communication and the media, therefore, are playing an essential role in linking the acts of resistance of the Sahrawis in exile and in the OOTT. Furthermore, some of the Sahrawis in the camps perceived their role in the struggle as supporters of the Sahrawis at the other side of the wall. For example, the journalists that I talked to described the role of the SADR’s media as a loudspeaker for informing the world of the intifada and Moroccan repression. This act of support is also carried out by other organizations in the camps, besides the official media, that work as platforms for the voices of the Sahrawis under Moroccan occupation, such as AFAPREDESA (Association of the Families of Sahrawi Prisoners and Disappeared), a human rights group whose office is part of the practically compulsory tours that Protocol organizes for foreign delegations and visitors.

\textsuperscript{21} An example of this blockage is found in the difficulties that the chief of RASD TV, Mohammad Salem, faced when he was looking for a satellite that would broadcast the Sahrawi TV. The two major Arab satellites, Arabsat and Nilesat, refused immediately due to pressure from Morocco. RASD TV approached first British Telecom and later on Hispasat (the Spanish one) but in both cases the satellite companies backed off after having negotiated a price with them, proving the international weight of Morocco and its indisputable ally, France. Mohammad Salem finally arrived to an agreement with Intelsat 14, which covers the area between Nigeria and Finland. He explained that “the problem is that we are alone [meaning that they are the only Arabic channel in that satellite]. It is difficult for the Sahrawis in the Occupied Territories because all the parabolic dishes there are east-oriented whereas ours is 45 degrees west, which means that it is very easy for the Moroccans to spot Sahrawi houses if they want […] The fact that we are alone also means that the Sahrawis have to buy two dishes.”
On an individual level, very few of my informants used the Internet due to the limited number of Internet cafés in the camps and the fact that a small share of the population knows how to use a computer. This limited use of the Internet means that the national media outlets are still the main sources of news produced by Sahrawis. The possibilities that the Internet provides to individuals to narrate their own stories are deliberately restricted in the camps. For instance, many national and regional institutions have wireless connections that cover significant parts of the camps, but the general public cannot access them because they are password protected. Additionally, my research in the Ministry of Media made evident that the Polisario’s priority was to channel funds to improve the infrastructure of its institutions. For instance, a journalist argued that the Polisario, as the representative of the people, has the responsibility of looking after the population and, for doing so, it needs all the means available, dismissing as “romantic” the idea of enabling the “refugees” to use the Internet:

The priority is [providing] Internet for the institutions and I’ll tell you why. It is romantic, it is good to say ‘oh these poor refugees and this and that.’ But these refugees need a voice, and their voice is the Polisario and its institutions, which are fighting to bring them forward, to bring them food, to bring them aid, to bring them visibility. They [the people] don’t have the means to do that and, on the top of that, some ministries still don’t have [Internet] connection.

It seemed clear to me that, unless a donor explicitly wanted to make Internet accessible for the general population, the Polisario/SADR would always opt for strengthening their own media apparatus and, therefore, their monopoly over representing the voice of the Sahrawis.

22 By the end of June, UNHCR was implementing a project to open one Internet café in every camp. February 27th had two Internet cafés, one had four computers and the other six, the Internet connection was too slow to have voice conversations over Skype and the temperature inside these centers sometimes reached 108 degrees Fahrenheit. The Internet café ran by the NUSW was for free, but the other one cost one euro per hour.
A few of my interviewees (those who used the Internet) emphasized the importance of spreading the use of Internet and the social networks in the SADR. For example a man of the third generation explained:

We need to get rid of this nomad mentality and understand that we are in the year 2011, and that today the world speaks another language, the language of computers and English. And the Sahrawi citizen should be educated according to this context, because we are not longer living in the 70s or the 80s. And doing this would be super easy, you just have to open an Internet café in every neighborhood, then you gather all the children of the neighborhood and you teach them how to use a computer. In four years these children will be able to share their cause with the world even from their house… Also, making Wi-Fi available to everyone. And like this, everyone will be able to communicate. It’s super basic.

Despite the limited use of the Internet, most of the Sahrawis that I interviewed followed the events in the OOTT through the TV and telephone communications with relatives and friends at the other side of the wall. Many of them described the roles of the Sahrawis as providing moral support for those in the OOTT, as it is conveyed by a man of the first generation:

The refugees are the essence that gives strength to the struggle in the OOTT. You have to take into account that every Sahrawi has relatives there and now, thanks to the cellphones, you know immediately anything that happens in the OOTT: ‘Such-and-such has been arrested’ or ‘so-and-so has been raped.’ That is how their fight reaches here, and people here feel outraged. From here we organize rallies, meetings of support, we issue communiqués denouncing what is happening. Lately, we have brought to the camps many activists from the OOTT. All these things motivate them to continue with their struggle. It is as if they are the ones carrying the torch and we are the ones lighting it up.

The Polisario’s media outlets represent the Sahrawis in the OOTT as “suffering bodies.” The TV and the news agency circulate on a daily basis images of tortured people and of repression against peaceful crowds by the Moroccan police. Pictures of these “suffering bodies” are for domestic and international “consumption,” since they are exposed in school exhibitions, meetings, human rights organizations such as AFAPREDESA, as well as on the online news agency, and international conferences about human rights. On an individual level, many
Sahrawis that I met insisted on showing and recording for me CD’s full of these pictures, so that I could also circulate them as a proof of Morocco’s violations of human rights against the Sahrawis. This phenomenon of circulation and consumption of images of torture, repression and death is also found in Palestine. Lori A. Allen in “Martyr Bodies” (2009) explains this practice within the context of the growing “human rights regime” in the Palestinian Occupied Territories since the 1990s. The author argues that the representations of torture and death in the media are a way of appealing to the audiences’ human condition (and not the political conviction) by sharing proofs of human suffering. The purpose is to demonstrate that this suffering or “martyr bodies,” as she puts it, make Palestinians deserve to qualify as humans and being protected by the human rights regime. Furthermore, the idea of suffering as indispensable for receiving attention from the human rights regime and the international community was present in many of my informants’ accounts, as it is evident in the testimony of Khadija, a third generation woman: “Gdeim Izik became famous, even in countries where they had never heard about the Sahrawi cause, because of how the Moroccan regime repressed the protests. You see? Nothing comes without suffering, without martyrs, without wounded, without victims, without imprisonment.” Overall, suffering the conditions of exile and sharing the suffering of the Sahrawis in the OOTT was how most of the Sahrawis in the camps explained their resistance in this period of “no war, no peace.”

The SADR’s public transcript: Unity and continuity

James C. Scott’s concepts of the public and hidden transcripts are very useful for analyzing the collective adherence to the state’s metanarrative that I observed in the camps. Scott describes the public transcript as a “self-portrait” of the elite, who have the power to impose on
the subordinated population a sort of etiquette that conceals what the subordinated group truly thinks or feels (1990, 18). At the same time, the subjugated group also accepts this self-repression as a mechanism to avoid punishment. My positionality as an outsider affiliated with potential source of funding and very close to the camps’ elite prompted the majority of my interviewees to adhere to this “etiquette” elaborated by the Polisario/SADR leadership, or what I call the state’s metanarrative directed to an international (donor) audience. By “hidden transcript,” Scott refers to the speeches, behavior and practices of both the elite and the subjugated when they are “offstage.” The author argues that hidden transcripts can enter into the public one for different reasons, such as social protests (1990, 10), as in the case of the two members of the March 5 movement that I interviewed, and whose views (along with those of two other young people) are fundamental for mapping out youth complaints against the old guard and how they are managing the Sahrawi cause (as will be explained in chapter four).

The Polisario/SADR’s metanarrative portrays the camps following the pattern of what Kandiyoti has named “the trinity of democratization, good governance and women’s rights” (mentioned in Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2010, 64). The origins of this discourse date back to the beginning of the revolution, when the construction of the SADR started. The Polisario/SADR has framed the building of a new functioning state from scratch as a “social revolution” within a revolution for independence (San Martin, 2005:569; Farah, 2003:83). This was conveyed by Sidi Ahmed, a first generation man:

I think that we are the only people in the history of humanity that has carried out an armed struggle and, at the same time, has constructed a new society. We cannot forget that in 1975 we were a completely different society. When we were a Spanish province, for example, the woman had a marginal position in society. Today, we are a society in
which the woman is its fundamental pillar, and in many aspects we are at the same level of gender equality as the most advanced countries in the world.

Within the official discourse, the progress that a nomad and illiterate people has attained—particularly in terms of gender equality, education and health, dismantling tribalism, and establishing a democratic system—is portrayed as one of the greatest achievements of the revolution. The image of such progress is circulated in official publications, websites, speeches in front of foreign audience, as well as within peoples’ oral histories and descriptions of their life in exile, as indicated in the quote above. While the successes of the SADR during the war are undeniable, it must be questioned whether this portrayal of their society matches the current conditions on the ground. Chapter three argues that this metanarrative is an anachronistic and idealized description of some of the Sahrawis’ “achievements” during the war, and that nowadays this discourse only reflects the situation of those men and women of the first generation who have clung to power. The rest of the people, whose experiences had no room in the state’s metanarrative, adhered to this discourse in the public transcript for two reasons: avoiding the “subtle” repression of the state (explained in chapter four) and helping the government secure aid, upon which the survival of many Sahrawi refugees depend.

This section analyzes the official line present in the majority of my respondents’ narratives by tracing how individuals and state institution officials talk about “differences” in the camps. First, it describes the reluctance of people to even acknowledge the existence of differences between generations. Secondly, it examines how people who did admit the existence of differences, in particular officials of the Womens’ and Youth’s Unions, explained them as

23 The official discourse portrays the Sahrawis in the period prior to the 1975 invasion as illiterate and nomadic, although by 1974, 60 percent of the population was settled.
influences from foreign countries that entered the camps through the Sahrawi youth, which is criminalized by the state.

“There are no differences between the generations:” Portraying the camps as an ideal society

The uniqueness of what the Polisario was building in the Algerian exile was praised in 1977, when a Red Cross League representative admired the determination of the Sahrawi refugees to manage their affairs, the level of social organization and the orderly manner and solidarity that reigned during distribution of aid (San Martín 2010, 110). Since then, the camps have been portrayed by humanitarian and refugee studies as an ideal refugee society, where the refugees are not only in charge of aid distribution, but they have also built a “twentieth-century democratic nation” and achieved “women’s equality” (Harrell-Bond 1986, 156). The current chief of the UNHCR office in Tindouf employed the same rhetoric when he described the camps:

Look at what they have done, you know, woman’s empowerment, the education… where would you find these things in other refugee populations? Where is it? You can go and see. Yeah, they have problems, but look, they have a parliament, and women in the parliament, women are almost in every aspect they are in charge. And then you know, it is peaceful, there is security (…) I was told, I don’t know if it’s true, that in 35 years they’ve only had one murder. This is what I’ve heard. Where, where [else do you find] this thing? I mean, look at other countries, I’m sure they have more criminality than in here. So they have their positive side, which has not been highlighted the way it should be. So yeah, it is a good experience because UNHCR encourages refugees to take on responsibilities, manage themselves, be responsible for themselves, so here they are doing that, very… in a good way, so that is… it is something, which again, I would say is unique.

This perceived uniqueness of the Sahrawi camps is not unknown to the refugees, who take pride in the fact that “we are the best refugee society.” Khadija, a woman of the third generation conveyed it in this way: “We are the only refugee society where there is no problem. In other countries they are dying, they kill each other to take the aid. Not us, there is respect between us. There are cases in which [refugees] die of hunger and there is no dignity. We want a
society that is the best of all societies.” Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2010), one of the first authors deconstructing the idealness of the Sahrawi refugee camps, has argued that this metanarrative conceals societal problems and leaves them unaddressed, since NGOs and humanitarian agencies have no other alternative than to partner with SADR institutions for assessing the needs of the population and implementing the programs. For example, the UNHCR chief in Tindouf explained: “So we work very closely with the Sahrawi authorities, we work very closely with them. They are part of the planning, we plan together, we assess together, we plan and we execute together.” In chapter one I argued that this close partnership between the SADR and the humanitarian aid regime is what enables the Sahrawi state to monopolize the distribution of aid, which is fundamental for both the state’s coopting mechanisms and its fulfillment of the social contract as a provider of goods and services. The SADR is given credit for securing aid and distributing it, despite being the humanitarian aid regime the one financing and bringing goods and services to the camps. Additionally, the close working relationship that the SADR has developed with international agencies and NGOs—of which the UNHCR chief seemed to be very proud of—reinforces the state’s hegemony by abiding to its metanarrative, and implementing aid projects according to the assessments of the ruling elite.24 The aid provided by the humanitarian regime is playing a fundamental role in maintaining the Polisario/SADR leadership in power by financing its semi-rentier economic system and reinforcing its hegemonic power.

24 For instance, in chapter three I describe one of the social inequalities that this metanarrative conceals: girls dropping out of school. This phenomenon contradicts the state’s portrayal of the camps as a society where there is gender equality and a strong emphasis on education. See also Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2010).
The clearest pattern present in the information that I collected through interviews was the refusal of the older generations to acknowledge the existence of differences between generations, even if we had been previously discussing the different conditions in which each of these generations grew up and became adults. I would ask the interviewees how they thought that their youth was/had been different from that of their parents’, grandparents’ or children’s, and the first and second generation quickly stated that there were no differences between the generations. Maadla’s words, a woman of the second generation, serve to illustrate this discourse: “Alhamdulillah there are no differences here. All the Sahrawi youth want the same and only thing: the independence. They cannot fulfill any of their dreams until they get their right. Every Sahrawi young person, regardless of the period he/she is in (…) There is no difference between anyone who carries a drop of Sahrawi blood, never.”

Most interviewees, when asked to elaborate upon their responses, argued that there were changes in life styles due to the free market, experiences living abroad or the media exposure in the camps through satellite TV and lately the Internet. Nonetheless, many people of the older generation would assure me that none of those things altered what was important about the generations, their commitment to the cause, as it is conveyed in the following dialogue:

Ali: There are no differences. Have you seen… have you seen in these two months, have you seen any difference between the generations?

Question: In every society there are differences between generations, in many aspects. And you mentioned it before that life has changed.

Ali: In some aspects of life styles only.

Question: And why don’t you consider these things as differences?

Ali: Because, according to me, I don’t consider them differences. I consider them a difference if they revolve around the cause.
This reluctance to even verbalize “differences” between the generations can be explained by the emphasis that the state’s metanarrative places in “national unity.” The fact that the revolution has not concluded allows the Polisario/SADR to employ a discourse of unity to discourage discordant opinions from being voiced, arguing that factionalism would weaken the resistance—such as has happened in the Palestinian case—and give ammunition to Morocco to pit one group against the other. For example, a man of the first generation drew lessons about the importance of unity by comparing the Sahrawi case with the Palestinian one: “We cannot forget that we are in a peculiar situation, that we are refugees and that we have to learn from the Palestinian experience in that we cannot let different opinions divide us, but gather all our different opinions under the same umbrella and for the same objective, which is our freedom.” Another example of how the metanarrative portrays the Sahrawis as one united people is found in the answer that I received after asking a man of the third generation if there was an opposition to the government: “We are united and we don’t like any foreigner knowing what we are requesting to our government. If you get into our own affairs, then we are going to end up thinking that you don’t like us. I’m not answering your question, I’m just saying…” This was the only occasion in which I was told to mind my own businesses. In general, not many people talked about the political debates that go on in the Sahrawi society and that are not openly exposed to the foreign population in the camps.

In addition to unity, it is interesting to note how the official discourse constructs the youth that started the revolution in 1975, which was led by Luali Mustapha Al-Sayyed (a 27 year-old man). The 1975 youth comprised the oldest generation in my study, and those that led the revolution are still in power nowadays. Despite being “the old people,” as many of my
younger interviewees called them, there is an attempt from the state to keep framing the youth of 1975 as “young people.” For instance, the Chief of Media of the Youth’s Union (UJSARIO) explained that in their last congress held in 2009 the definition of youth was extended to cover people between the ages of 15 to 45 (before the congress the limit was 36). The explanation for including people between 35-45 years old was: “We cannot exclude them, if we did we would be losing their experience. Also we did it for respect and because, right now, the priority is the liberation of the country.” Not only is the definition of youth officially changing in order to incorporate some of the people from the older generations, denying differences between generations is also employed for portraying the youth of the revolution along a continuum that has not changed. This notion of an open-ended youth is evident in the words of the Polisario/SADR representative in Washington, DC: “Today, they [the youth] are not bringing anything new to the motivations, the Sahrawis’ determination, or their objectives. (…) So it is impossible to make any difference between the Sahrawi youth of 1976 and the one of 2011.” I argue that this construction of the older generations as an open-ended revolutionary youth is due to a contradiction between the metanarrative, which portrays the Sahrawi struggle as a youth revolution, and the current generational power dynamics within the Polisario/SADR, where the youth are disenfranchised from the political life and the older generations leave no room for a change of guard (as I further explain in chapter four). Therefore, a way of solving this apparent contradiction is by, on the one hand, constructing the youth of the revolution as an open-ended category which encompasses the 1975 young revolutionaries, and, on the other, by denying the existence of differences between the youth of different periods.
However, this open-ended construction of the revolutionary youth within the metanarrative was contested by some of the young interviewees, who argued that it justifies the incumbency of the older generations and the marginalization from the political life of the younger ones. This contestation is evident in the statement of a third generation man, who was shocked by the average age of the people that attended the Youth Conference in:

You know who went to [the Youth Conference in] Dakhla? The old people. It is quite weird that the people who went to the Conference were older than 30 years old, even some of them were 70 and 80 year old! (…) The people that started the war, our cause, were young people, the oldest of them might have just been 28. They are no longer 28, these people have grown old, and what they don’t want to understand is that the cause was started by the youth and that they should let it in the youth’s hands. They might be too old to lead the cause.

Nonetheless, many of my younger informants adhered to the metanarrative and were reluctant to acknowledge any differences between generations. For others, verbalizing differences did not compromise the unity of the Sahrawi people, something that they all reaffirmed in their responses. Only a few acknowledged differences, and also questioned whether these changes between the younger Sahrawis and the older ones were somehow endangering the cause. For instance, Mahdi explained: “If the young people live dreaming about going to Spain, building a house, getting a car… even if you have to steal to have one. These ideas can make you take a step backwards in the cause, and that is a problem.”

This section has explored the reluctance of many interviewees to acknowledge differences between the generations. I argue that this reluctance is due the hegemonic discourse of the Sahrawi state, to which the majority of my informants adhered. The metanarrative’s portrayal of the Sahrawi society in exile as an almost perfect society “with no problems,” its emphasis on national unity underneath the Front’s leadership to avoid factionalism, as well as the
open-ended conceptualization of the revolutionary youth (that stretches to include people of the older generations), are three important factors that explain why so many of my informants were not able to even verbalize the notion of difference between generations of Sahrawi refugees. As a result, the metanarrative not only conceals the incumbency of the older generation in power and the disenfranchisement of the youth from the SADR’s politics, but it also does not recognize the different contexts in which the current youth live. A few of the young people I interviewed did contest this discourse and also expressed concerned about the effects that the consumerist society in the camps might have for the cause, for, as one of the informants quoted above argued, it is making people forget about the struggle to liberate the Sahara.

Explaining differences from the perspective of a perfect society: Pathologizing the youth

I found that it was easier for first and second-generation informants to address transformations in their ways of living by asking them how they thought the ceasefire had changed life in exile. Within these responses, a second clear pattern emerged when interviewees discussed changes in society—in terms of mentality, behavior and expectations—they attributed such changes to factors outside the SADR that penetrated the camps through the young people. Within this rationale expressed by many of my older interviewees, the young people were affected by foreign cultures through their exposure to satellite TV and the Internet, as well as through experiences living and studying abroad. According to this narration, Sahrawi youth compare themselves with youth from developed countries and seek to emulate them. However, they realize that life in the camps does not allow them to “imitate” the life style of “the youth of the world,” as a woman of the first generation described it:

Today, in this [period] of no war and no peace, these young people are wondering about how their lives are going to be. The youth of the world, of their same age, they have all
the means, good prospects… They are a youth with no problems who can live their lives fully, and do whatever they want. And ours want to imitate them, to do whatever they want but they have no means, so they are trying to get a better life with the means available but they are not enough.

A similar perspective emerged in my interviews with two members from the Women’s and the Youth’s Unions. They talked about the reluctance of the youth to work for the state on a voluntary basis, a phenomenon that they both blamed on the influence of foreign cultures on Sahrawis when they study abroad. Bukhari, a second-generation man who is responsible of the media in the Union of Sahrawi youth (UJSARIO), also portrayed young people as weaker than the older generations and, therefore, vulnerable to the Moroccan propaganda that aims at attracting the youth from the camps to the OOTT:25

The youth are the weakest point. Those between 15 and 23, it is easy to play with their minds. When they go to school they see the Algerians, and they think: ‘When I finish school, I’ll work, I’ll have a car,’ you know… So when they come back they see that they don’t have those things [here] and it is easy to lose faith in the cause… Especially if you think: ‘I am not going to work with the youth [union] or the government because they are not going to give me money.’ (…) The Moroccans have tried to send some young people here to talk to our youth, like to say: ‘Come to Morocco, you are going to live a better life, why do you stay here under the sun, enduring the wind and this terrible weather? You can come and you are going to have a better life, and you are going to have a job, you are going to have a house. Why are you still here?’ (…) Those who have lived during the war and during the revolution, you cannot easily play with their minds and tell them to give up.

The fact that not many of my interviewees mentioned that youth were migrating to the OOTT is related to the image of an ideal society they wanted to portray. Those who did refer to it, described this phenomenon as a result of the new form that the war between Morocco and the Polisario has taken during the current “no war and no peace” period. According to their

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25 These “weak” youth that Bukhari refers to does not coincide with the official definition of youth (from 15 to 45 years of age), but to a narrower sample of the population (from 15-23 years old), as he explained in the interview.

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narratives, like Noha’s (a woman of the second generation), the mind of the youth has become a battlefield in which the enemy plays with materialism, “the wait and boredom” to “weaken the national cause.” The majority of the people that addressed this phenomenon reconciled the implications that it might have for the cause by assuring me that most of the young people, if not all, return after taking the incentives that Morocco used for attracting them into the OOTT in the first place, such as money and a house, that they sell back. Noura, a woman of the second generation, conveys this reconciliation, but points out that young people see migration to the OOTT as treason:

Morocco’s propaganda takes advantage of the youth, of those who want to have a car, and those who want to marry. And because they see people around them owning things that they cannot have, Morocco offers them that possibility. They are given a house, a car and money. They are given all those things so that they go to the OOTT, and the youth goes because they have ambitions. But they leave their family here, and they don’t find a job there, and then they return back to their family. Most of them get the money, sell back the house and bring the car. Because they don’t stand living there (…) The door is open and everyone is able of doing what they want. (…) Society doesn’t consider that wrong. Here, especially the youth think of them as traitors, but the older ones don’t blame them. The door is open, and we are not prisoners here, you can leave whenever you want.

In fact, some of the young people that I talked to about this issue considered it a serious problem. Sukaina, despite insisting that this only happened between 2008 and 2010 and that all the youth came back, considered it a problem: “It is a big problem when the people start acting like that because it means that they don’t believe in anything, they have no faith [in the cause.]” However, the fact that the UJSARIO is addressing this issue in its program in an indirect way, seems to point out that it is an ongoing concern. Bukhari spoke about campaigns to raise awareness among the young people about Morocco’s strategies for destroying the Sahrawi cause, which not only include bribing the youth into crossing to the OOTT, but also the contamination of the Sahrawi youth with “diseases” and other problems:
We talk to the young about the will of the Moroccans to destroy all what the Sahrawi people have built in the refugee camps (…) because some young run from here to there and they came back with diseases, actually, and with lots of problems. So we are talking about it with other [people] who have not had these experiences or don’t know [about it].

As it was mentioned earlier in this chapter, the Sahrawi refugees emphasize the importance of their steadfastness to endure in exile and confront the Moroccan plans for breaking down the Sahrawi cause which, as the Minister of Media explained, consists of enticing the Sahrawis to cross the sand-built wall and settle in the OOTT. According to the officials of the NUSW and the UJSARIO that I interviewed, those vulnerable to the influence of Morocco are the youth and, therefore, the UJSARIO is carrying out campaigns to raise awareness among the younger generation of the strategies employed by Morocco during this current period of “no war and no peace.” It is interesting to note how the UJSARIO attempts to discourage youth from migrating to the OOTT, even if they are planning on returning to the camps, by telling them about the many diseases and troubles that the young people bring back after living for a period under Moroccan occupation—an argument which reinforces the notion of the idealness of the camps, and that constructs Morocco as its opposite, a corrupted society.

In a similar vein, a second-generation gendarme blames the appearance of criminality on Morocco’s plan to break the Sahrawis’ unity. It is interesting to note that, in his narration, the source of this criminal practices are the influence that the Sahrawis received when they study abroad, and that are later on exploited by Morocco.

Those that went to Cuba, or Algeria, or Libya, or Mauritania, Spain, brought different cultures and different traditions and values. This is what changed what originally was the Sahrawi nature, that is why now there are crimes, and other things that were not here before. There are deaths, thefts, etc. These exist now, and Morocco participates in all of this, it is playing a major role in expanding this. It is trying to break our steadfastness (…) This is a weapon, the biggest weapon that exists, and is used by Morocco against the Sahrawis. It is not influencing the old ones; the ones that are more prone to be influenced
are the younger ones (...) There are all the types of crimes now, thefts, corruption, drugs, rapes, murder, burning things. Many, many things. The armed conflict stopped, but the war now is corrupting and influencing the Sahrawi people.

Thus “differences” are conceptualized as foreign problems that have entered the camps and that Morocco uses as ammunition against the Sahrawis’ unity. I argue that this sort of externalization of the SADR’s social problems is due, on the one hand, to the metanarrative’s portrayal of the camps as an ideal refugee society where “there is no problem” (as a woman of the third generation described, quoted above). Acknowledging tensions and inequalities in society would contradict this discourse, and therefore SADR officials must blame external factors as a means for deflecting accountability to the citizenry for social and economic problems. Within this rationale, the state deals with these problems brought by the youth by enforcing its hegemonic discourse of unity and continuity upon society in an attempt to erase differences between the generations. As one NUSW official explained:

Smoothing the differences through communication between the generations, and explaining the value of things in society and reflect about them, reflect about our traditions, customs and heritage… until there are no gaps between generation, and until there is a unity with all the generation that can better preserve our traditions and values, all of this on behalf of the nation.

Not many young people explicitly addressed the state’s conceptualization of the youth as pathologically weak, carriers of social problems and vulnerable to Morocco’s influences. However, one of the March 5 movement’s demands was to end the “demonization of youth.” This indicates that at least some youth disagree with the way in which the state describes them and want to contest this misrepresentation.
Conclusion

In this chapter, I have first examined how the Sahrawi refugees conceptualize the struggle. Overall, most of the people I talked to considered their endurance of exile not only as an act of resistance, but also as a “victory against the Moroccan occupation.” Additionally, the majority concurred that the “action” is taking place in the OOTT and that the refugees play an important role providing the Sahrawis under Moroccan rule with moral support, and by acting as a loudspeaker to voice their “suffering.” Secondly, I explained that the reluctance of many interviewees of the older generations to even acknowledge differences between generations is due to the emphasis that the state places on national unity and its efforts to portray the leaders of the 1975 revolution as presently young people. Officials from state institutions, such as the women’s and youth’s unions or the gendarmerie, who work on societal issues but, at the same time, adhere to the state’s metanarrative that represents the camps as an ideal society, could only address generational differences by framing them as problems that youth bring from abroad and that Morocco plays upon against the Sahrawis’ unity. Within the discourse that dominates the public transcript, the contextual particularities that inform today’s young generation either have no recognition (such as in the case of those who do not recognize differences) or are used to pathologizing the third generation, who are deemed as too weak to resist Morocco’s strategies for breaking the Sahrawi unity.
Chapter 3

Engaging the youth of the three generations in the struggle through education and labor

The origin of many of the state’s metanarrative leitmotifs dates back to the state-building process that women led in the camps while the men were at war. The experience of these women has infused the official discourse with images of women entering and dominating the public sphere, and educational progress becoming the first priority of the newly born Sahrawi republic. In this chapter, I argue that the Polisario framed waging war, constructing the state, and pursuing education as three fronts in which the society fully engaged in the struggle during the war. However, the state’s metanarrative has become an ahistorical account of the “Sahrawi experience,” failing to incorporate the daily realities of the third generation, the youth of the “no war and no peace” period. The purpose of this chapter is to look into education, labor and marriage as ways of struggling for the national cause, and trace the transformations that these fronts have undergone according to gender and generation.

Education

The progress attained in the field of education plays a central role in the state’s metanarrative, according to which the Polisario has turned an almost illiterate nomad society into an example of educational development for the entire continent. The Polisario/SADR representative in Washington DC explained that: “Since the beginning [of the revolution] we have put a lot of effort in education, and that is why we are now one of the African countries with the largest percentage of literate people.” This section first focuses on the importance that
education was given within the cause during the war years. Secondly it analyzes how national commitment to education changed during the “no war and no peace” period. Additionally, it deals with a rising phenomenon of young women dropping out of school in order to help at home with the household chores.

**Participating in the cause through the educational front**

Official accounts situate of the illiteracy rate among the Sahrawi population at the time of the Moroccan invasion at 90 percent, “a legacy of the Spanish colonialism,” whereas nowadays “the Sahrawis have reversed this number, having achieved a literacy rate of 90 percent.” (ARSO) My sample, although it is not representative of the Sahrawi population, shows a significant gender difference in schooling levels during the Spanish colonization of the Sahara. At least half of the first-generation men that I interviewed had been enrolled in the colonial schools for different periods of time; they all mastered Spanish, and the interviews were conducted in this language. Women, on the other hand, had never received formal education prior to their arrival to the refugee camps. Since education was a priority for the Front, most of the older women I interviewed were taught how to read and write, and received vocational training during the war. According to a NUSW official, today’s literacy courses target both men and women of the first generation.

Nonetheless, the second generation and the ones that followed have been the main beneficiaries of the Front’s educational policies. From 1975 until the present time, thousands of Sahrawi children and youth have benefited from scholarships from friendly states to study (from primary to university level) in Algeria, Libya, Cuba, Syria, Spain and Italy. In fact, education abroad was conceived as the front in which the children and youth born after the war participated.
in the struggle. As a Sahrawi man that studied 15 years in Cuba and graduated from engineering explained:

Luali [the founder of the Polisario Front] was very clear since the beginning that educating the Sahrawis had to be a priority. So there was a double front: education and the war. The Sahrawis could not continue being ignorant, because if independence was achieved the following day, who was going to build the Sahara? That’s why we need teachers, doctors, engineers, all the careers need for building a country… so I went to Cuba in 1977 with my brothers. My father joined the combatants in 1979. […] But my mother didn’t want me to go [to Cuba] because all my brothers were already there, and my father was a military man with few days of leave. Who was she going to stay with?

The narratives of both first-generation mothers and their children describe this separation in a context of war, exile and lack of means of communication as a normal experience that many Sahrawi women and children went through collectively.\(^2\) Due to the protracted situation of the conflict, this pattern of sending children abroad to study is being reproduced today in the camps, so that women of the second generation who were sent abroad to study, have done the same with their own children. For instance, Noura, a second generation woman who studied in Libya and who has already sent two of her children abroad, explained:

Question: How was your experience studying Libya when you were a kid? Was it difficult?
Noura: No, it was normal, we were a lot of kids studying together.

Question: Was it possible to communicate with your family?
Noura: No, for years there were no means of communication. We could spend almost a year without knowing a thing about our families. We had no news about them and they had no news about us.

Question: Maybe that’s something normal here, but in Spain when a child studies abroad for so many years, that’s a family drama.
Noura: It is a drama but you are an independent society. We have a different experience because of the occupation. It was a priority for the young generations to be

\(^2\) During the war, Sahrawis that studied in Cuba spent their whole educational period there (between 10 to 15 years) without returning to the camps. Students in Algeria and Libya returned at the end of the academic year and stayed in the camps during the summer vacations.
educated, to study, to become knowledgeable (...) And there was no possibility for all of us to study here.

Question: What about your experience when your children went abroad to study? As a mother, wasn’t it difficult for you?

Noura: No, because when they were abroad I could communicate with them. We were always communicating. But when I was little and I was studying in Libya, there was no way of knowing if your family was alive, if there had been a plane bombing. There were no resources.

Only one of my informants spoke of this period of her life in terms of hardship. Teshla, a woman of the second generation who studied in Algeria from intermediary school until university, could barely hold back her tears when she described the yearly separation from her mother, and her anxiety about being isolated from her family. Nevertheless, she understood that receiving an education was her duty towards the state:

It was really hard, because we knew nothing about the state of our families for almost a year. And not only [we did not know] about those in the camps and the war front, we were also isolated from those that were studying abroad like us, even if we were in very close towns (...) It required a lot of conviction, but I believed that my society needed educated youth to help the cause move forward, so I proceeded with my studies.

When I asked Teshla about how her mother managed to separate from her every year, she framed her mother’s decision as a collective sacrifice that all Sahrawi women endured on behalf of the construction of the Sahrawi state:

My mother coped like any other Sahrawi mother (...) They all had a very strong conviction for the Sahrawi state, and these mothers were also the responsible for everything [regarding life in the camps], and they understood the necessity of educating their children for their future and the future of the state, even if it meant sending their children to Algeria, Libya, Cuba (...) They were one front, and there was also the war and they agreed, as the base of the Front, to have a more educated future generation.

The educational progress attained by the Sahrawis in exile during a period of war and exile is undeniable. Women of the first generation, who had not received any sort of education during the colonial time, had the opportunity to learn how to read and write, and get vocational
training useful for life in the Algerian Hamada. The second generation, those who were children during the war, was the biggest beneficiaries of the Polisario educational policy thanks to scholarships provided by friendly states. Education abroad was conceptualized as a revolutionary front through which children and later on youth performed their own sacrifices for the common good, enduring separation from their families in order to acquire knowledge that would be indispensable for constructing a viable independent Sahara. Sahrawi mothers, as it is explained on the second section of this chapter, were in charge of building the embryo of the Sahrawi state in exile and maintaining a high fertility rate. Additionally, as Teshla explained, they also took part on the educational front of the second generation by coping with separation from their children, a collective sacrifice that has marked the mothering experiences of thousands of Sahrawi women.

The third generation: Shift in the youth’s commitment to education

The second generation frames education as a duty, more or less painful, that was endured for the common good. As it was mentioned above, the rationale of the educational front of the struggle was to equip the younger generations with the necessary knowledge and skills to build a functional and independent Western Sahara. However, informants from the second generation (and also one of the oldest among the third one) have noticed that the impasse of the conflict is affecting the younger generations when it comes to educational decisions, for their educational choices are currently made on the premise that they will return to the camps upon graduation, and not to a liberated Sahara. Mohammed, a man of the second generation who studied economics in Cuba and works as a journalist for the news agency, explained this difference between his generation and the younger one in the following terms:
I graduated in economics in Cuba but, because we are living in refugee camps far for our land and our resources, we cannot work in those fields in which we were trained. Of course, you can ask me then why I chose to study economics knowing that I wasn’t going to work on that? Well, the thing is that, when I was a kid, I was always told that ‘by the time you graduate, the Sahara will be free and you will be able to work there.’ It is with this desire and hope… even when we were in university, we were wishing, we all had the hope that our degrees would help build our independent country. However, I graduated in 2003 and here I am, working as a journalist for the news agency (…) But these hopes end up dying with the pass of time. It doesn’t die in terms of giving up on our cause, no, it’s not that. But now children at school… well, I don’t hear their parents telling them ‘study and when you graduate, you will work in the Sahara’ as they told us. At that time, when there was the war, people were feeling that independence was very close but today, people see these slow negotiations, in which the same scenes are reproduced: they met and they didn’t reach any agreement.

Like Mohammed, many other Sahrawis are working in fields completely different from the one they specialized in, others are underemployed or even unemployed in the camps. Within my sample, and according to many of my informants, the third generation is leaning towards careers that can be applicable in the camps. Among the 18 young people that I interviewed in the camps, only two (a man and a woman) were university graduates and were currently doing administrative work for two Ministries (Diaspora and Culture). The rest had different educational levels: some of the men had completed secondary school, and the majority of the men and women had enrolled in different vocational and training courses in the camps. According to the person responsible for the youth center in Smara, young women are usually the ones learning languages and computer skills, which sometimes leads to employment in the government; while young men “have less patience” and prefer vocational training like car repairing, construction, and others. The need to perform wage labor and the impasse of the conflict has thus resulted in a decrease in the number of people that pursue a university degree or even complete secondary school, and an increase in technical and vocational training.
If during the war education was a national project for ensuring that the future citizens of a free Western Sahara will have the capabilities to successfully run the country, the inconclusive UN peace process progressively changed the social meaning of education for the Sahrawis in exile, turning it from a national project into a family one. Rosenfeld (2004) richly describes in her study of Palestinian refugees how education is understood as a household project, in which the family strategically takes educational choices in order to increase the income of the household and provide the sons and daughters with capabilities for upward mobility. Mohammad, quoted above, explained how Sahrawi parents are no longer encouraging their children to choose their careers in view to applying them in a liberated Sahara. This shows, on the one hand, that educational choices are also a family project in the Sahrawi camps and, on the other, that the loss of commitment towards the educational front is a transformation that has taken place both in older and younger generations, despite the fact that some people of the older generations reproached the youth for their lack of educational commitment to the cause. For instance, Sidi Ahmed, a man from the first generation, conceives the education of the young Sahrawis both as a privilege that resulted from the older people’s sacrifices, and as the youth’s duty towards the cause:

You [the youth] have to think for the good of those who will be your children, for the following generation, the same way that I thought for the good of your generation. I have given 16 years of my life to the war so that you can study, and you have to keep struggling for improving this society. We have been pushing this forward, but we still haven’t reached the finishing line. It is you who have to keep pushing it!

Views like this one fail to recognize both the economic changes that have taken place in the SADR and the role of parents in influencing educational decisions. For instance, a family that I met was planning to send the older brother to Cuba to study medicine, which is a very lucrative
profession since many Sahrawi doctors end up working in Spain, earning salaries that are significantly higher to the average wages in the camps, and sending remittances home to ensure that the family is provided for.

Another example of how education has changed from being a national project to a family one is evident in a striking trend that I found among the young women informants, among whom four out of nine dropped out of secondary school due to “personal reasons,” which in all the cases were related to the death or illness of the mother or the grandmother in the family, and their responsibility, as females, for taking care of the household chores. I do not claim that this pattern within my small sample is representative of the Sahrawi society, especially since I have not been able to add a class dimension into my study. However, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh has also reported the increasing withdrawal of girls from school registered in the camps, especially in the cases of the eldest daughters who are forced out of school to help their mothers with house work (2010, 81). Hayat, a woman of the third generation, explained her withdrawal from school to help at home in the following terms:

I studied primary school in the Smara camp and in Algeria I did only intermediary school. I couldn’t prepare for the baccalaureate because my mother was sick and my father was dead, this is the reason why I couldn’t complete my studies and by the age of 17 I had to take the responsibility of looking after my brothers and sisters. These family concerns did not take me away from participating in the activities of the national cause (...) I had the chance to study photography and film-making and this allows me to portray the real image of the conditions in which the Sahrawi people are living in the camps.

The cases of these young Sahrawi women who are withdrawn from school to provide free labor at home attending to the household chores can be compared to the patriarchal forms of control studied by Rosenfeld (2004) in a Palestinian refugee camp, where the labor of a female member of the family allows the rest of her siblings to attain higher education. However, in the
Sahrawi case, the labor of these young women does not translate into higher levels of education for the siblings, since educational attainment has experienced a step back from the second to the third generation (as explained above). I argue that Sahrawi families do not see enough benefits in putting their children through education in their context of protracted exile, preferring that the young men engage in wage labor through vocational and technical training while young women help older female family members with the house work.27

The contradiction between these accounts and the official discourse over the importance given to education in the camps and the great success achieved through the years is difficult to conceal. However, when I discussed these facts with Polisario/SADR officials, they would either deny them, arguing that these are rare cases of very traditional families, or asserting that young girls in general were more interested in getting married than in studying, as Sidi Ahmed comments:

There are many opportunities for studying available to women, but very few of them decide to enroll. Here, the majority of the girls that are 16 are not thinking anymore about studying, but about marrying, because marriage is a synonym of freedom for them. While they remain single, they are going to be controlled by their bothers, father, mother. But when they marry they become free, they obtain their own house and they can move freely wherever they want.

Despite being forced out of formal education, the young women that I interviewed and many others that I met had a strong desire for learning in order to improve their economic situation and be active in their society, which led them all to register in courses ran by the NUSW in English language, computer skills, photography, and film-making; others enrolled in sewing courses or aerobic training to become sports teachers. Moreover, when compared with

27 From my experience in the camps, taking care of the housework was a hard task given the scarcity of appliances, the harshness of the weather (high temperatures and sand storms), and the hustle and bustle of children and constant visits.
the level of education attained by women from the second and third generation from my sample, the second generation had a higher share of women who had graduated from secondary school, whereas the majority of the third generation women had not completed secondary and supplemented this lack with language and vocational courses taken in the camps. The popularity of these courses among the younger generation is due both to the arrival of NGOs to the camps after the ceasefire, and to the deadlock situation of the conflict since the beginning of 2000s.

In sum, the irresolution of the conflict and the increasing need to take on wage labor in the camps have practically brought down the educational front of the cause, by which the Front aspired to equip itself with the human resources required for constructing a viable and functioning independent Sahara. The new needs for life in the camps, given economic changes, require a large share of the young population to enroll in technical and vocational training, instead or completing secondary school and pursing university degrees. Nonetheless, the change of mentality has also taken place within the older generations, some of whom, as shown in the cases reported here and in Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, are pulling girls out of school in order to benefit from their free labor at home. Therefore, the official discourse on education no longer reflects the reality of educational practices and possibilities in the camps. Rather, it serves to conceal a step back in women’s education.

**Labor and marriage**

According to the state’s metanarrative, the “Sahrawi woman” is portrayed as builder of the state, in charge of institutions and very visible in the public sphere, as well as respected in society and enjoying social equality with her male counterpart. In fact, the official line exploits
this image of gender equality to distance the Sahrawis from the rest of the Arabs and Muslims, since Western audiences (both public and within the donor community) tend to associate Arabs and Islam with machismo. For instance, a first generation man who worked at the Ministry of Culture explained that: “I have traveled a lot around the world and when I meet any Arab they tell me: ‘you are neither Arabs nor Muslims,’ they say that because of our cultural differences, in particular because of how we treat our women and the respect we have towards them.” By constructing the Sahrawi refugees as “good Arabs and Muslims,” the Polisario/SADR is implicitly positioning the Sahrawi people in binary opposition with the Arabs and, in particular, with the Moroccans, who were described by many informants as “poor, illiterate” and having “no respect for women.”

Looking at labor in terms of the Sahrawi cause through generational and gender perspectives entails focusing on many topics that are tightly interwoven, such as participation in the labor market and in the household chores, marriage, child-bearing, migration, and the change in economic landscape in the camps since 1991. To cover all of these themes, this section first examines and compares the gender roles before and after the ceasefire. Secondly, the section focuses on the problems the younger generation face in being absorbed into the camps’ precarious labor market, as well as on the rising phenomenon of migration and the tensions that it creates in society. As it was the case with the topic of education, the official discourse on labor also conceals current practices that are in direct contradiction to what the official line preaches.
Labor division during the war years: Two gendered fronts (1975-1991)

During the war years there were two clearly demarcated gendered fronts in the cause: men’s front was the armed struggle against the invader forces, and women’s front was the construction of the Sahrawi state in exile. Building the SADR was essential for the cause because, in the words of the Minister of Media, “there had to be certain conditions for the resistance to be maintained in exile, and this was enabled through the development of the institutions,” such as education and healthcare. Sidi Ahmed, a first generation man, described with pride the work that women carried out in their front:

During these 35 years we have been able to exist, to become a society, to be a state thanks to the women. Women were the ones who, when the men were at the war front, carried out the effort on the other front, building hospitals, schools, being the teacher, the nurse, the mother, the daughter, the wife. They constructed this society. That is why we are so proud of our women, that is why we respect them so much.

Although women from the first generation did not explicitly describe themselves as the agents of the state-building front, all of them spoke of the immense amount of work they carried out, from which they particularly emphasized the construction of buildings, a profession that is nowadays practiced only by men, as it is illustrate in Mneina’s word:

I didn’t see my youth, it was wasted in the war... me and my generation. I am 46 years old, and when the war started I was 11. My youth left me in the war. All I did was work, work, and work in the neighborhood, with the [National Union of Sahrawi] women, sewing, and... In Dakhla I was responsible for a neighborhood, and I did some training in medicine for the women, and I also worked doing rugs and blankets and bricks [she gesticulates to explain how they mixed sand and water to make adobe and then use woods to shape the bricks.] It was a lot of effort. There were no men during the war, it was all made by us. We only made bricks for the hospitals. Then the priority was for the hospitals, for taking care after those that were wounded.

28 According to Mundy, a first generation combatant, approximately 85 percent of the men joined the liberation army, with the exception of the elderly and those that were “nurses or teachers who helped the women in the camps.” Despite the fact that many women received military training, the number of women that went to the front was negligible (and those who went, did so as physicians or nurses).
Maintaining a high fertility rate also became a state policy during the years of war. Most of the women of the first generation that I interviewed were already married by the time the war broke out, and a significant number of them re-married (some of them several times) after losing their husbands in the war. Dih, a first generation woman who has been working for several decades in the NUSW and now is the chief of the department of cooperation, explained the position that the NUSW adopted to respond to the state’s policy of high fertility, what she considered “a national service as well as an Islamic act”:

During the war there were people dying every day and the government established a policy to increase the fertility rate. We, as women, are responsible for the growth of the Sahrawi society, so we are responsible for bearing children. But how? Here is where the NUSW did incredible work, because woman’s health was necessary to increase the population. They made women’s health a priority, organizing a health system for protecting the pregnant woman, protecting her from anemia, and other problems. The state needs more children but is also needs strong and healthy women.

Not only did bearing children fall under women’s responsibility, but also child-rearing and running the household. Given the short breaks men had in the camps, the figure of the father was almost absent from the children’s lives.²⁹ For Mneina, one of the most important differences between the people born during the war and those born after the ceasefire is the presence of both parents:

He/she had both parent, his/her father wasn’t in the war. During the war, men would come for only a few nights, and when he came back, he couldn’t even recognize his children because they all grew up without him being around. During the war years, the responsibility of the children was on the mother, now it falls on both parents, before it was all on the mother. But nowadays, it is on both, this is better.”

The majority of the men from the first generation that I interviewed were combatants during the 16 years of war. Most of them got married and had children during the war period, such as in the

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²⁹ During the war years, combatants could go to the camps every three months for a period of 15-20 days.
case of Brahim: “I was 16 when the war started and by the time the war ended I was father to two children.” Male informants of the first generation were not prone to describe the war years, with the exception of two of them, who gave detailed information of the routines they developed when they were not engaged in a mission or a strife, such as long walks through the LLTT, or a list of all the books that they read during the war.

The second generation, as it was mentioned in the section on education, was included as active participants in the struggle since their childhood through the conceptualization of their education as another front. However, upon graduation, they were expected to join the two gendered fronts alongside the first generation. Men became combatants and every three months they would take a break from the war in the camps. Women, on the other hand, returned to the camps and collaborated in building the state and in bearing children according to the national policy of high fertility rate. In this respect, Noha, a second generation woman, has a very similar story to that of many women of the first generation about their loss of male relatives and husbands to the war, and their hope for bearing the future liberators of the Sahara: “We have given our fathers, our brothers, our sons to liberate out land, and we had hope… every day we were having children with the hope that they would liberate the land.”

The labor that men and women performed during the 16 years of war was devoted to liberating the Sahara. The first generation, those who were young during the war, engage in the struggle through two gendered revolutionary fronts: men became combatants, whereas women built the Sahrawi state in exile, maintained a high fertility rate and managed the daily life in the camps, from the institutions to their own households. Given the length of the armed struggle and
the irresolution of the conflict, when the second generation graduated from their studies abroad, they went back to the camps and joined in the gendered fronts alongside with the first generation.

Gender roles during the “no war, no peace” period (1991-present)

As it was mentioned in the introduction, a free market economy emerged in the camps when Spain started paying pensions to former Sahrawi soldiers in 1991, coinciding with the permanent return of many men from the war front. Since then, a consumerist society progressively emerged in the camps to the extent that the average consumption of a household family of 10 members is more than 300 euros per month. As this new economic context developed, the Sahrawi man adopted a role of provider for his family and started gradually to get engaged in wage labor. Brahim, a man of the first generation, described that the role of being a father had changed after the war, requiring the man to become the breadwinner: “During the war everyone was focused on the struggle, no one was paying attention to the family’s needs. But after the ceasefire… for example, now all the efforts… to buy clothes, furniture, food, to earn money and to improve our living conditions… all of this falls upon me.” One of the first remunerated jobs men performed upon their return to the camps was making bricks, a role that was typically female during the war. Sukaina, who had been making bricks during the war to build hospitals and storehouses for medicines, commented that “men started making bricks, and with that they made some money.” The demand for construction was very high in the aftermath of the halt in the armed struggle, since the SADR allowed the construction of houses for the first time after the ceasefire.

The 1991 ceasefire transformed the landscape in the camps: adobe houses were built next to the tents provided by the Algerian Red Crescent, money started creating inequalities among
the Sahrawi refugees, and men took over women’s roles in the public sphere. The SADR shifted from being a state run mostly by women to one where men were more significantly visible. What I encountered when I visited the camps in 2011 was a bigger share of men in public posts and private businesses, whereas women were generally relegated to the domestic domain. Currently, there are only three women in the highest cadre of the government: the ministers of Culture (Khadija Hamdi, who also happens to be the president’s wife) and Education (Mariam Salek Moulud), and the Secretary General of the National Union of the Sahrawi Women (NUSW), Fatma Mehdi, who also has a seat in parliament. In fact, the most significant exception for this gender division of labor is found at the NUSW, the women’s wing of the Polisario Front, which is very well funded and counts with representatives in every district of the camps.\(^{30}\)

Within the household, all the chores fall on the shoulder of the female members of the family who are responsible of cleaning, cooking, bringing water from the containers or looking after the children. Moreover, those young women who work outside home, have to prove that they can cope with the “double shift” in order to be allowed to work; whereas the male member, even those are unemployed, do not help with any of the housework. This picture contradicts completely with the state’s metanarrative and its image of gender equality. The dialogue with a woman of the third generation is very illustrative of this situation:

Khadija: Look, this winter it was only my mother and me at home, and my brother and my father. My mom works at 8am and I have to be at work at 9. I wake up at 7am and cook. I don’t go to Rabuni [where she works at the library of the ministry of culture] until lunch is ready, so that when she returns she only has to take care of preparing tea. Because when I get home at night I am too tired to do anything.

\(^{30}\) It is impossible to calculate the aid that the NUSW channels annually, but the fact that every project related to women has to be implement through it, is an indicator of the financial means that this Union has.
Sometimes I get home after 7.30pm, I get home, change my clothes and go to the kitchen to cook dinner. I have to put a lot of effort.”

Question: And your brother and father don’t help?

Khadija: The Arab man, in general, is like that. There isn’t the concept that a man enters the kitchen and cooks, that doesn’t exist. Some people even say that that is shameful. Although I have a friend whose husband, mashallah, I wish I found one like that. He helps her in everything, mashallah. He cooks, he helps, when she doesn’t want to do something, he does it, he goes to to [feed the] the goats…”

Question: No way. He feeds the goats?31

Khadija: Incredible, right? She says ‘can you bring me water?’ And he does.

On the other hand, the new male role of provider for the family put many additional pressures on single men, who need to save up to 3,000 euros in order to be able to finance marriage and its requirements including: the wedding celebration, the dowry, the house and all the furniture and appliances within in. The cost of getting married nowadays in the camps contrasts dramatically with the humble celebrations and little resources (or lack of thereof) that men were expected to bring into marriage during the war years. A third generation woman compares the current situation with the past, pitying the man for the enormous efforts working and saving required to marry:

When a woman got married, her dowry was something simple, maybe a melhfa32 or two. Now the man has to bring to the marriage this, and this, and this, and a TV, and a washing machine… Many things have changed. In the past, 20 dinars were enough; now that is not enough, millions are needed. And all the other material things are very expensive, even the food for the wedding, the meat, the drinks, the fresh vegetables… In the past everything was more simple. I really, as a girl, pity men for this… with a humble job, how are they going to gather all these money and things? They have to save, and

31 Feeding the goats is a female activity. Cattle is kept outside every neighborhood, and “going to the goats,” as the Sahrawis say, implies working a relative long distance carrying buckets of leftover food. Women feed the goats twice a day and, in my experience, we used the night walk to the goats to purposely run into friends, relax in the dunes and chat without being interrupted by children or the requirements of adult family members.

32 “Melhfa” is the traditional dress made out of cotton that the vast majority of women wear in the camps since their adolescence.
save, and save for years, while the woman is only asking for things and comparing what she has with what the neighbors have (...) We really don’t need to have everything, we only need our conviction. It’s not necessary to have your husband or wife in Spain making 1,000 or 2,000 euro a month, while here someone earns 50 euros every 6 months, there is no room for comparison. How can someone who makes 50 can live with the same style and someone who makes 2,000 a month? (...) This is why many of the young men don’t want to get married because it entails so many expenses, it is so expensive.”

Within the Sahrawi society, as in other Arab countries, marrying is the gateway through which youth transition into adulthood. In Hassaniyya dialect, a married person is called mutakhayyim/a, that is, the one who has his/her own house (khaima). The current economic requirements are, as many informants pointed out, delaying the age of marriage among the youth. Some young men migrate to Europe, like Jallud, who after almost a decade working in Italy managed to secure the sufficient money for starting his adult life as a married man in the camps. His brother, Selmu, who occasionally smuggles food aid into Mauritania, told me when I asked him if he was planning to marry soon: “Me? I have no money, I will need to gather money little by little, but I need to have the money before even thinking about it.” Other men resort to marrying Mauritanian women from poor families, who are less exigent in adding requirements to the marriage contract, a phenomenon that is taking place in other Arab countries.\textsuperscript{33} In the longer term, and with the economic crisis in Europe being far from over, it is likely that the tendency among men to marry at a later age will keep increasing, thus delaying the youth passage into adulthood and keeping them in a state of “waithood,” which Dhillon et al. describe as a limbo situation in which youth are “waiting to become full adults” (2009, 16).

\textsuperscript{33} For example, many Arab men from the Gulf are choosing to marry Syrian women “due to the ever more extravagant dowries and huge pressure to offer lavish wedding celebrations” that women from the Gulf request (Taha, 2003).
Despite the economic impediments that are delaying the age of marriage for both men and women, most of my young female informants expressed their desire to get married at an early age in order to evade their family’s control over their movements, education and labor, as a young woman portrayed:

I went to Algeria to study secondary school, but here we have a stupid tradition that says that it is not important for a woman to be educated, and so my family decided that I had already studied enough and that it’d be better if I became a servant rather than continuing my studies (...). I spend my days cleaning and they [my family] spend their days getting everything dirty. I feel like Cinderella, cleaning day and night, and I feel as if I was empty inside, I don’t even have time to read a book, they don’t let me any time for myself. And they are even going to have more babies! I haven’t gone crazy yet because there are many girls in this same situation. We all want to marry, so that at least we will be responsible for our own house, because if one day you don’t feel like cleaning, you don’t have to do it.

The permanent settlement of most of the men to the camps in 1991 signified the return of patriarchy to the Sahrawi society in exile, which imposed a clear-cut gender division of labor: men reclaimed their position in the public sphere running the state and engaging in wage labor to fulfill their role as breadwinners, while women became responsible for the private domain of homemaking. In fact, during the transition into the “no war and no peace” period, women have passed from being in charge of the state-building front into the home-building one. Yuval-Davis argues that women are constructed in patriarchal discourses as “the cultural reproducers of the collectivity, the ones responsible for keeping oral traditions of cooking, dress, and general folklore going from generation to generation” (2009, 11). The role that Sahrawi women play in reproducing the Sahrawi culture and tradition is essential for the conflict over the Western Sahara, which is not only framed in terms of historical ties and colonial borders, but also in terms of whether the Sahrawis can be considered as a nation whose culture and political aspirations differentiate them from the “patchwork” of ethnicities and tribes that inhabit Morocco (Shelley
Thus, the female role of passing the set of values, customs, and traditions that constitute the *Sahrawiness* from generation to generation is an important front in the struggle which, however, does not have much value in the foreign donor realm. Thus, a contradiction exists between the patriarchal system that has relegated women to the home domain, and the metanarrative – directed in large part at foreign aid agencies – that emphasizes women’s active participation in the public sphere.

Overall, 1991 was a turning point for the gender division of labor in the SADR. The role that women played building and managing the state in exile during the war was displaced with the permanent settlement of men in the camps who took over the public responsibilities of women. As a result men started to control the political and income-generating aspects of life, while women were left in charge of the private domain of the household. This transformation in the gender division of labor contradicts and is concealed by the image portrayed by the state’s metanarrative.

**Third generation’s labor: Engaging in the cause through voluntary work**

The Polisario/SADR has developed a discourse on “voluntary work” to pressure the younger generations to volunteering within the public institutions. Nonetheless, as it was mentioned in chapter two, the older generations reproach youth for requesting remuneration in exchange for their labor. Dih, the NUSW official, explained that

> Young people have expectations to work in exchange of a salary, this is their culture. But this doesn’t exist in our society… those that study in Cuba, in Algeria, in Libya, and they see the world in which there is money and a consumerist society, so they request [when

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34 This phenomenon in which women dominate the public sphere while men are at war, and their step back from positions of responsibility once the soldiers return to their homes, has taken place in many countries, such as in Europe during the two world wars.
they come back] money because they have compared the economic situations between these places and the exile.

Moreover, although all jobs within the state’s institutions are “voluntary work,” from the president to the janitor of the building of the Presidency, the problem, as many young people pointed out, is that it is very evident that some “volunteers” get no incentives, others get small ones, and there is a third group that receives very significant ones. A third generation man denounced this “big contradiction” arguing that: “They [the high ranking officials in the state institutions] say: ‘this is voluntary.’ And then, suddenly, they have a 4x4 Toyota, they have nice *melhfas*, new glasses… So what are they telling us, that for me this is voluntary and you make a fortune?!” Thus despite an image of equal status as all volunteers for the state, unequal access to resources is apparent.

Among my third-generation informants, half of the men were employed in the government (nurse, teacher at the military school, administration) and received symbolic incentives (between 50-80 euros every three months). The other half had learned skills that they could use in the private sector, although they find employment on temporary basis. Among the women that were employed (all of the in public institutions), only two of the women received incentives for their work (in minister of culture’s library and at the Smara cultural center). Three of the nine young women worked for the NUSW and received no incentives at all in exchange for their labor. Also, they were often denied incentives meant for them. For instance, two of them would spend several days with foreign delegations working as translators, get paid nothing and days later receive a call from one of the visitors asking if they had received the tips that were left for them. “They are a bunch of thieves,” said an interviewee. The UNSW also employs men; one
of the male informants of the third generation have also had a similar experience with “the women,” as they are usually called:

Question: Is it difficult to find a job with the government?
Selmu: I don’t want to. I was working for the women as a driver but they never paid me. I was working a lot for them and they were just not paying me. They are thieves.

Question: But the women have a lot of money, no?
Selmu: Yes, they have a lot of money, but they give it to their relatives.

Selmu’s critiques against the NUSW are also applicable to other national organizations, where the first generation that started these institutions has clung to power and allocates positions and resources along tribal and also generational lines (these critiques are dealt with in more detail in chapter three). Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2010) has also observed a generational pattern in the distribution of responsibilities within the NUSW, where the women that started the revolution have monopolized the positions of power and kept the more educated second generation at a prudent distant. Regarding the third generation, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh also reports the NUSW’s concerns with the lack of interest expressed by the young women about joining and taking responsibilities within the women’s organization. In addition, those women of the older generation who work, manage to do so because they pass their “household burden” to the younger generation. For instance, I interviewed the NUSW’s Chief of Cooperation at her house and, as expected, she adhered to the official line and talked about gender equality and women’s empowerment in the camps. However, the most interesting information that she gave me was when, after I had stopped my recorder, she apologized for not having offered me tea. She excused this lack of hospitality by arguing that she only had sons and that without a daughter it was very difficult to keep up with the household work.
Additionally, there are also groups of young volunteers that, beside their job in the public or private sector, carry out activities that range from helping those in need (the poor, the elder with no children, the war victims, the widows, etc.) with their daily activities, to cleaning the camps or tutoring children. Sumud Brigade was the pioneer of these groups.\textsuperscript{35} It was founded in 2004 by five young Sahrawis who “had seen many foreigners helping our country while we were sitting doing nothing,” explains its current chief. Although during their first years of existence Sumud did not issue political statements, the nature of their work—helping those collectives that have been “abandoned by the state,” as a volunteer put it—was inherently political. However, problems with the youth’s union arose in 2009 when some of Sumud’s members started to address political issues explicitly and began debating outside of the frames provided by the political establishment, as one of the founders and former member of Sumud commented: “When we started organizing talks where the youth could explain and discuss their problems, the UJSARIO started moving around us, and started using propaganda about the fact that we were outside the UJSARIO, and began paying attention to what we were doing.” The chief of communication of UJSARIO confirmed that in 2009 youth volunteer groups had to register with UJSARIO prior to starting their activities so that they could be better organized and recognized by the law: “What we want to do is to organize these groups and be working [all together] in the same direction (…) Now all the volunteer groups have papers and signatures and they have now the right to build any center and to participate in anything they want to, because now they are under the law and they are organized.”

\textsuperscript{35} By June 2011, when the first conference of young volunteers was held, there were more than 16 brigades spread in all the camps.
Former members of Sumud, who had left the group when they faced inner opposition for their political activism with the March 5 movement, pointed out that the state has managed to deprive the brigades of their political meaning and coopt them, as one of my interviewees conveyed:

Volunteer groups have ended up doing the work of the Sahrawi Red Crescent, instead of pressing the Sahrawi Red Crescent for doing their work. These groups were born because the state didn’t reach out to these people. But it is the Sahrawi Red Crescent the one responsible for these people and has the money for taking care of them but, in my opinion, it just doesn’t want to reach them. That is why Sumud was created in 2004, but now I am not part of it… It was created because we felt, as the youth, responsible of helping this people out. If it were for the state, this idea would’ve never happened. I think that it is great that young people want to do things and help others, but we have to understand that we ought to put pressure on our own politicians to do their work, because they are supposed to be working on behalf of all the Sahrawis (…) But now, the Polisario is trying to benefit from them [the volunteer groups]. But if their members are intelligent, they shouldn’t allow the state to control them, because if the state control you, you are no longer developing your idea and you end up working for them.

Thus, I argue that the “voluntary work” discourse has also been employed in the cooptation of the young brigades. By claiming that older generations of Sahrawi men and women devoted their labor to the cause on a voluntary basis, the state situates the work of the brigade within a continuum of voluntary work, denying the youth brigades the novelty and the political aspect of their labor. The words of the current chief of Sumud illustrate the de-politicization of his group:

“We are not doing anything new within the voluntary work, which is a principle of the Sahrawi

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36 It would be interesting to find out if Sahrawis during war considered their struggle, whether in the battlefield or in the camps, as “voluntary work.” The data I collected shows that most of the first-generation men self-identify today as “combatants” in relation to their work as soldiers. However, some first- and second-generation officials constructed their identity in a continuum they classify as voluntary work. I highly doubt that these men and women who were struggling to defend their homeland framed their resistance in the binary categories of paid/voluntary work. Anna Phoenix, in her study about transformation of transnational biographical memories, argues that memory “does not simply re-present past events, but is constructed in ways that simultaneously construct identities” (2009, 268). In this case, there is a clear agenda for constructing a “voluntary” identity within the struggle for independence: not remunerating youth for their labor.
people. We are just reviving it (...) For example, the women have been running the camps during the war, and at that moment everything was voluntary. There was no money. Everything was voluntary. It is a patriotic work.” This discourse attempts at engaging today’s youth in the cause through voluntary work, developing a civic aspect of the struggle by which the young volunteers contribute to the revolution by helping other Sahrawis and working for the common good of the community. Salek, a man of the second generation who ran his own voluntary group in Dakhla had internalized this discourse, as it is evident in his words: “Volunteering is a way of contributing, it is a way of sacrificing and giving something to the Sahrawi society, so that it can get out of this. Because the struggle is not only a struggle with the gun, but also with one’s labor, doing things, this is a way of struggling, of getting our people out of the exile.”

To sum up, the state has managed to neutralize the potential of these volunteers’ work to become a source of political criticism by officially situating the brigades within the UJSARIO, and by discursively inscribing voluntary work as the youth’s front during the “no war and no peace period.” As one of my interviewees pointed out, the young volunteers are now working for the state—which has the monopoly over the revolution—instead of holding the politicians accountable for their bad governance in the camps.\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{37} In addition, the state also resorted to individual cooptation. For instance, the current chief of Sumud was not only allowed to participate in the Youth Conference of Dakhla —unlike the members of the March 5—, he also played an important role in it and in the voluntary groups’ conference, as well as he was awarded with a scholarship to spend July and August in Algiers raising awareness about the Sahrawi cause. These are, at least, the personal incentives that Badr received during the time I was in the camps: space and respect within the public sphere and a plane ticket to spend the summer away from the Hamada’s weather. Badr’s cooptation was evidenced when he became the intermediary between the government and the new political movement, participating in their social ostracism as it is explained in chapter four.
Given the emphasis with which the Polisario/SADR encourages youth to engage in the cause by working for the common good in exchange for (almost) nothing, some tensions arise in society when people devote their time to the private sector or migrate to work abroad, as it is conveyed by Fatimetu, a woman of the third generation:

If I had the chance of living abroad I would take it. That would not mean that I am going to stop struggling, because I have been here struggling for 22 years, talking about my homeland and I am never going to forget it, even if I haven’t been born there or I have never seen it. On the other hand, I am not going to spend until my last day here, living in poverty if nothing is going to happen. And if I cannot leave, then I will look for ways for improving my life here. I don’t need to wear a torn melhfa to be able to struggle, I can wear a more beautiful and expensive one and keep on with my struggle.

Fatimetu, like most of my interviewees, dismissed the notion that migration or working for improving one’s life affects people’s commitment to the cause. In fact, very few of my informants argued that individual vested interests towards living comfortably—either by having a business or receiving remittances—diverted people’s efforts in working towards the liberation of the homeland. Mahdi, a third generation man, asserted that if people live comfortably, they do not care where they actually live:

If you are struggling to survive, then all you are going to dream about is returning to your homeland, and this is going to make you struggle even harder to achieve it [independence.] But if you live here [in exile] comfortably, then you are not going to care whether you live here or there. ‘Here I live well, why would I struggle, take up arms and go to war if I am OK here?’

Sahrawis migrate as labor workers to Mauritania, Algeria, the Gulf countries, or Europe. A number of Sahrawis, who were registered in the 1974 census elaborated by Spain, can apply to Spanish citizenship; additionally, acquaintances with Spanish civil society organizations sometimes results being useful in getting working visas. Although there is no information available, it is logical to consider that many enter Europe illegally. Shelley estimated that there were 4,000 young Sahrawi men working in Spain (2004, 175)
Most of my informants saw no conflict between migration and the struggle because, as a woman of the first generation put it: "We all have to live and you cannot live without money. Everyone has the right to look after his/her family, to work and to have a house of their own [getting married.]" Interviewees frequently stressed that “no one is forced to stay” and that the “doors are open,” in a clear counter-response to the Moroccan claim that the Sahrawi refugees are retained against their will in the camps by the Polisario, who use them for the Front’s nationalistic purposes.\(^{39}\) It is interesting to observe how in these narratives men’s migration is not problematized because it is explained as a way of fulfilling their role as providers. Starting a family and helping its members resist exile a bit more easily is a way of incorporating migrants’ labor into the resistance discourse.

When talking about migration and its effects on the cause, almost everyone insists that migration did not entail a rupture with the cause to liberate the Sahara, and almost everyone referred to the events of 2000, when the Paris-Dakar rally attempted to cross the Western Sahara without the SADR’s permission. The President Abdelaziz issued a communiqué asking all Sahrawis to return and be ready to wage war. Noha, a second-generation woman, argues that the fact that all the Sahrawis returned in response to the president’s call demonstrates everyone’s commitment to the cause:

"All the sons of the Sahrawi state came from Norway, from America, from Spain, and came from Nigeria, and form Senegal, from the Gulf, from Lebanon, from all the corners of the world, and gathered in Tifariti [a city in the Liberated Territories] carrying their weapons. And this is a proof that, despite having people that work abroad, that trade, that put their effort in a company, that build houses... their only craving is to recover their country, because anyone alive craves for freedom."

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\(^{39}\) For instance: “The Polisario Front has created these camps to keep them in a territory that is not their own, taking people who have no identity documents as hostages and confining them into camps without any freedom of movement” (Campamentos-Secuestrados, 2007).
However, not everyone is willing to accept the fact that those who leave the camps for personal and family interests have not given up the struggle even with the pretext that all the migrants will return if the President requested them to. Like those who criticized the third generation for not studying specialties that would be useful for an independent Sahara, some emphasize the need to pass on the culture of personal sacrifices for the collective good, instead of thinking about one’s personal living standard. For instance, all the nurses I talked to were particularly critical of the migration of physicians, as the testimony of a second-generation female nurse illustrates: “The majority of the Sahrawis that study medicine, instead of returning to work in the camps, go to Spain to make money and send it back to their families. The state makes an effort to offer them their education for free and it doesn’t return to society, only to the families that receive the remittances.” During the two months that I stayed in the camps, there were only two general physicians working at the national hospital in Rabouni for the entire population, while the hospitals and clinics in the camps were run by nurses. Since it was summer, those with the means—and among them many of the doctors, Sahrawis and Cubans—had left the camps to spend the hottest months of the year in places with cooler temperatures. Other informants, as it was discussed in chapter two, blamed the migration of the youth and of skilled Sahrawis on Morocco’s current strategy to weaken the cause, as it is evident in the statement of Salek, a male school-teacher from the second generation:

What have we achieved during the years of no war no peace? We have lost [political] cadres that have left us, doctors, engineers, teachers, brains that are migrating. The youth are getting tired of the Sahara question, always in the same routine. We are losing. In this period of no war and no peace, only 3 or 4 countries have recognized us over 21 years, whereas in the 16 years of war we got recognition from more than 80 countries. And this, this is a war prepared by Morocco so that the Sahrawis get tired. (…) People migrating to
Spain, to Mauritania, Mali, they want to have the nationality because they don’t trust in this anymore.

Overall, since the Polisario constructs the revolutionary fronts through which different generations of men and women participate in the struggle based on the performance of individual sacrifices for the common good, it is normal that tensions arise in society when individuals devote their efforts to improve their own and their families’ living conditions. A few of my informants blamed the increasingly consumerist nature of life in the camps for diverting people’s interest and labor from the cause and, therefore, weakening the struggle for liberation. The majority, however, negotiated this tension by arguing that engagement in the private sector and migration not only enables men to fulfill their gender role as providers for their families, but it also allows the relatives of these income-earners to endure exile with some ease. The recurrent story of the Paris-Dakar also served many informants to deal with this tension, arguing that if the President asks the Sahrawis in the diaspora to return and wage war against Morocco, they have proven to be ready to reply to his call.

Conclusion

As it was mentioned at the opening of this chapter, the state’s metanarrative is rooted on the experiences of the Sahrawis during the war years. Looking at two key aspects of the official discourse—education and labor —facilitates understanding how different generations of Sahrawi men and women have engaged in the cause. The first generation is characterized by a participation in the struggle through two gendered fronts: the war front (the male space), and state-building and child-bearing in exile (the female space). The creation of a third front based on the SADR’s prioritizing of education, enabled the second generation to engage in the cause at an
early age by going abroad to study and enduring family separation in a context of war and exile, as well as by taking educational choices on the premise that they would return to their land and use their education for the construction of an independent Sahara. Therefore, if war and exile marked the youth of the first generation of Sahrawi men and women, education abroad characterized the childhood and part of the youth of the second generation. Upon graduation, the second generation engaged in the struggle through the two gendered fronts along with the first generation of men and women.

The 1991 ceasefire and its aftermath of endemic irresolution have changed the landscape of the camps in many ways, namely the return of the majority of men to the camps and the emergence of a consumerist society. The exceptional conditions of occupation of the homeland and war that prompted the active role of women in the nation-building front was reversed when men joined them in the camps and most of the women had to step back from their public posts of responsibility. The traditional patriarchal gendered division of labor was back in place. Men’s domain became the public sphere, and they also had to fulfill the role of breadwinner, whereas women’s domain became the household. Thus, the Sahrawi women passed from being engaged in the nation-building front to the home-building one, which, in some cases, was imposed on young women who have been pulled out of school to help their mothers and grandmothers tend to the household chores. On the other hand, young men now bear the responsibility for gathering a considerable amount of money in an unproductive economic land in order to get married and, therefore, transition into full adulthood. The current economic crisis will likely exacerbate men’s hardships and delay even further the age of marriage among Sahrawi youth.
The transformations within the economy of the SADR and the gender roles in its society, have significantly affected the meaning of education, which has passed from being a national collective project, to a family matter. Parents and children no longer invest in education as a future project for a free Western Sahara, but rather base educational choices, in particular for their sons, on the labor market available in the camps and on the possibilities of migrating, mainly to Europe. In the case of both men and women of the third generation, my sample and testimonies point out to an increase in technical and vocational training, and a decrease in completion of secondary school and higher education.

In terms of labor, the young male informants were engaged in wage labor (either in public posts or through temporary employment in the private sector), whereas only one of the female interviewees was earning a symbolic salary from the state. This is the result of what I call the “voluntary work” front, which has been developed by the state in order to absorb the third generation into the state institutions as almost free labor. Some young people criticized this discourse, since the Polisario/SADR leadership is allowing certain sectors of society to profit from the humanitarian aid, at the same time as the state preaches about the revolutionary principle of voluntary work throughout the history of the Front.

Having examined the transformation in the fields of education and labor that have taken place after the ceasefire, it is evident that the metanarrative of the state is an anachronistic discourse built upon the experiences of the older generations, which does not take into account the current circumstances in which today’s youth live and try to make sense out of their refugee condition. Given this lack of recognition of the experiences that are shaping the youth of the third generation, the next chapter focuses on the narratives of four young informants who openly
contest the ways in which the state in conceptualizing youth, as well as the “voluntary work” front. It examines how youth are confronting the state’s metanarrative and actively seeking for ways to participate in the decision-making circles which, as they denounce, have been monopolized by the older generations.
Chapter 4
Youth’s complaints about the old guard’s management of the struggle

Working for a US foundation in close coordination with the Minister of Culture was a significant impediment for moving beyond the public transcript of the Sahrawis’ society in exile, which is dominated by a discourse meant to attract aid, and that portrays the camps as an ideal, united, equal and democratic society. As explained in chapter two, this is the reason why the majority of my informants adhered to the state’s metanarrative so tightly. However, a few young people shared part of their hidden transcript with me. Four informants, out of the eighteen youth that I interviewed, criticized the Polisario/SADR in front of my recorder without asking for their identities to be concealed by pseudonyms. The four of them were among the most eloquent youth that I interviewed, and I believe that their political awareness and their disenfranchisement from the economic and political life in the camps were two fundamental factors in their willingness to talk to me more freely than the rest. Moreover, two of them had formed a protest group inspired by the Arab revolutions, and were interested in discussing their complaints, dismantling the official discourse, and also informing me about the subtle repression with which

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40 However, in order to ensure their protection, I have chosen not to use their names. Two of these informants have started a youth movement that has gathered the attention of international media, in particular Spanish media. Since they have granted interviews that are available online and were interested in sharing with me their demands and opinions, I have decided to conceal their names but not their affiliation to this movement, which was central for their narratives. Regarding the other two informants, I only provide a brief description about their disenfranchisement from society (detailed in footnote 47), which, as I have observed, are common characteristics among many other Sahrawi youth.

41 One of them was a nurse who could not get promoted because he lacked tribal connections, the other one was a woman that was forced out of school and who did not get any remuneration from her work with the NUSW, the other two were politically active men who were employed in the government (one worked as a teacher and the other one as administrative) and had founded the March 5 movement.
the state and the society reacted to the creation of their group: the Youth of the Sahrawi Revolution, known in the camps as the Mach 5 movement.\footnote{The March 5 movement held its first demonstration in front of the SADR Presidency on 5 Mach 2011, coinciding with the 35\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the formation of the first SADR government. Since then, its adherents have been demonstrating in front of the presidency on the 5\textsuperscript{th} day of each month.}

The critiques of these young people revolve around their discontent with how the Polisario/SADR leadership is managing the revolution and the state, and the diminishing legitimacy of the leadership. Specifically, the March 5 movement claimed that its main purpose was to manifest the will of the Sahrawi youth to struggle for social justice and fight against the “decay of the spirit of the revolution,” as they stated in their foundational letter. The movement articulated its demands in seven points: 1) improve the condition of the army and raise its salaries; 2) show more “co-responsibility” and attention towards the sacrifices made by the Sahrawis in the Occupied Territories so as to avoid the “shameful” attitude of the government regarding the events of Gdeim Izik (taking more than one week to issue an statement of support); 3) provide special attention to the war victims, martyr’s families and the founding members of the SADR; 4) reform the judicial system and the administration; 5) reform the electoral law to make it more representative and change the procedures for electing the President and the Parliament; 6) stop tribalism practices and the “demonization of the youth,” so that they can also participate in the political life; and 7) hold accountable those who have been involved in corruption and make them return the sacked resources.\footnote{The foundational letter of the March 5 movement is available online at: http://www.arso.org/juventud.html.}

By analyzing the critiques of these young people, this chapter deconstructs the democratic aspect of the Polisario/SADR and exposes the mechanisms used by the state to
repress oppositional opinions, such as those expressed by the March 5 movement. This chapter first explores what I call the “ongoing revolution frame” by which the Polisario/SADR attempts to maintain an image of democratic participation within the organization while at the same time justifying the lack of change within the leadership and the one party system through a discourse on “national unity” aimed at discouraging criticism against the government. Secondly, it examines the tribal clientelism and widespread corruption that the Polisario/SADR permits in the camps in order to secure alliances and coopt opposition. These practices, as expressed by my informants, delegitimize the Polisario’s leadership, whom are perceived as profiting from the Sahrawis’ refugee status. Third, it focuses on the complaints of the March 5 movement about the Polisario’s poor leadership of the cause, in particular with respect to the UN peace negotiations, the empty threats to return to war, and the Polisario’s appropriation of the intifada in the OOTT.

**The SADR: A democracy in an exceptional situation of “ongoing revolution”**

The construction of a democratic and free society in exile is another important aspect within the Polisario/SADR’s metanarrative. Back in 1987, Zunes had already praised with excitement the political system of the Polisario/SADR in these terms: “The Polisario appears to maintain the support of the majority of the Sahrawi population, and has created perhaps the most democratic, unified, and well-functioning political system that exists in Africa today” (1987, 33). This rhetoric is very much alive in the camps today. For instance, many of my interviewees highlighted with pride the democracy built in the camps, and some of them even referred to their political system as one of the most democratic in the world, as illustrated by Mohammed’s statement, a man of the third generation: “You attended our [Youth] Conference the other day in
which we were talking about our political issues between the young people and the politicians, and you were able to see that democracy. What we have here, you cannot get it in any other place in the world.”

Despite this emphasis on the SADR’s democracy, it is hard not to draw parallels between the incumbents that the Arab revolutions have toppled, such as Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali (who was in power for 24 years), Hosni Mubarak (30 years), and Mu’ammar el-Gaddafi (42 years), and also quite long presidency of Mohammed Abdelaziz, who has been the head of the Sahrawi state and secretary general of the Polisario Front for 35 years. In general, the entire leadership of the Polisario/SADR has not changed much during the last three decades (International Crisis Group, 2007:13), showing some common patterns with other Arab regimes, in which the generation of the revolution clung to power and attempted to avoid a change of guard by any means.44

This lack of change of the guard, along with the functioning of the Polisario as a one party state are justified to both international and domestic audiences by the peculiar situation of occupation and exile in which the Polisario is embedded: an ongoing revolution. The Polisario cadre has been able to maintain itself in power despite its failure to liberate the Sahara by a revolutionary discourse within which exceptional provisions take place on behalf of the cause “until the day of liberation,” a date that is constantly referred to by officials and citizens, but that is not likely to happen in the near future. A first generation man described the day of the liberation as someone’s birthday, and the SADR as the birthday cake: “This society is like a

44 For instance, Habib Bourguiba, who led the Tunisian liberation movement, was President of Tunisia for 30 years after independence in 1956. In Algeria, the National Liberation Front (FLN) has been the political party in power since the country’s independence in 1962, and its presidents men of the generation who carried out the war of liberation.
cake. Everyone has his/her part, but we cannot touch it. Why? Because the date of the birthday hasn’t arrived yet. The day of the birthday is the day of independence, and then each of us will be able to take our piece.” On the other hand, a founding member of the March 5 movement described the wait for liberation day as an excuse for lack of reform of the Polisario/SADR: “’Until we liberate the Sahara,’ that is their excuse for everything, for delaying all reforms.”

Uld Es-Sweyih, a Polisario diplomat,45 explains—speaking in the name of the Sahrawi people—the lack of will and need to change the leadership of Mohammed Abdelaziz in the current context of ongoing revolution:

In the SADR’s case, the longevity in power of the president does not seem to concern much the Sahrawis, who remember that the president is still young, has good experience in the political and military realms, and is accepted by a people who do not wish, out of prudence, a change of president in this crucial moment of the struggle’s evolution (…) In addition, the history of all the national liberation movements in Africa and in other parts [of the world] reveal that other peoples embedded in liberation struggles had the prudence of maintaining their leaders in power until the liberation, and even after it in some cases (2001, 46).

The four young informants, however, contradict Uld Es-Sweyih’s words, since one of their main complaints is the monopolization of the Polisario’s leadership by the first generation and the lack of participation within the decision-making circles. One of these youth denounced the political status quo:

It unbearable to have leaders who have been in power for 38 years, who haven’t reached their main objective, which is the independence and who, on the top of that, are looking for ways in which to live comfortably… We have to remind them that our people are in exile, that the people are suffering in the Occupied Territories, that there is a wall, that most of the countries are against us, and that we need politicians with their eyes wide open, with an economic mentality… But, above all, we need there to be more participation in the power structures.

45 When Uld Es-Sweyih wrote his book El primer estado del Sahara (The First State of the Sahara), he was the SADR ambassador at the Organization of African Unity.
When I asked some first- and second-generation officials about the petitions of March 5, the response was to criticize these youth for demonstrating in an imitation of the Arab revolutions instead of trying to change things from within the system (e.g., running for elections). This widespread view is illustrated by Lhabib, a man of the second generation:

They [the youth] have demands, social demands, economic ones. They have tried to start a movement imitating what happened in the Arab world [he sort of laughs] they try to implement it here in our situation, sometimes they want to demand some economic and social improvements, reforms, which are legitimate and no one can be against that, they are legitimate, but I say to many of them: ‘You want change? Go to parliament, run for elections, be active politically’ (…) If you don’t do that, for me these demonstrations … they are just a waste of time.

Nonetheless, the critical young people that I talked to were reluctant to take part into the complex electoral system of the Polisario/SADR structure because, as one of them explained, the younger generations have no trust in a political system that they see as impenetrable: “The young people are not interested in politics because they have arrived to the conclusion that the old generations have got hold of power and they will keep clinging to it until death takes them all, one after the other.” The metanarrative officially encourages the participation of youth in national institutions through the “voluntary work” front, as I explained in chapter three, although it has established a set of norms that regulate how this participation can take place. On the one hand, the state has explicitly established that youth engagement has to occur on a voluntary basis (i.e. without asking for monetary compensation). On the other, the state has made clear in a more implicit way that those who wish to participate in the institutions have to do so without challenging the legitimacy of the leadership. For instance, the state pressured Sumud Brigade to

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46 One of the points where the relationship between the Polisario Front and the SADR is more complex is in the electing process. Every three years the Polisario Front holds a Congress. The delegates who participate in it are elected by the base (i.e. the population in the camps). However, these delegates choose the entire SADR government and establish its agenda for the three coming years.
register within the UJSARIO when the young volunteers started raising awareness about the state’s neglect of the people the Brigade was working for (seniors, relatives of martyrs, widows, poor people, among others); this resulted in the cooptation of the group’s work and, subsequently, limited the group’s capacity to hold the state accountable for neglecting these groups. In a similar way, the March 5 movement has been ostracized in society (as I explain later) for demanding changes within the Front, such as reforming the electoral law to make it more participatory. An example of how the state excludes the March 5 movement from participating in the political life in the camps is found in the Youth Conference in Dakhla, which March 5 was barred from attending.

The discourse on “national unity:” A powerful tool for muting discordant opinions

The fact that the revolution has not concluded allows the Polisario/SADR to employ a discourse of unity to discourage discordant opinions from being voiced, arguing that factionalism would weaken the resistance—such as in the Palestinian case, they argue—and give ammunition to Morocco to pit one group against the other, as it was explained in chapter two. According to the official line, the Polisario functions as an “intermediary phase between the one party and the multi-party system,” and all ideologies coexist under the framework of the common Front for the Liberation of the Sahara (Uld Es-Sweyih 2001, 54-55). Only after independence, would a multi-party system be implemented, as the Polisario representative in Washington explained; “By then [after the independence,] there will be different political parties, and I guess that the Polisario will end up in the museum, unless somebody adopted its name for a political party because as a state it will cease to exist.”
The young informants, on the other hand, do not see national unity under threat because of discordant opinions, as the Polisario’s official line tries to assert. Rather, these young people accuse the government of reviving tribal affiliations, which they argue goes against the early attempts of the Polisario to establish social justice and unifying all the Sahrawi people under the Front, as one of these youth denounces:

When you speak up here, they [the politicians] tell you that you are going to break the national unity. But national unity is already breaking because they are supporting tribal chiefs. You can see that in the ministries. Every time [a new minister] arrives, he/she comes with his/her cousins. Most of the ministries are divided by tribes and Mohammed [Abedaliziz] is allowing this to happen.

Under these peculiar circumstances of the ongoing revolution, the Polisario Front has the prerogative of being the only legitimate voice of the Sahrawi people. The role of the Front, as the representative of the Sahrawi nationalist aspirations, is recognized by the UN, as well as by the Sahrawis that I met in the camps who envisioned the struggle and the independence only underneath the leadership of the Front. Furthermore, a leitmotif that I constantly encountered while talking with Polisario officials or in state publications is the association between the Front and the Sahrawi people, as if both things were the same. For instance, the man responsible of the media archives equated “the Sahrawi struggle” in general\(^{47}\) with the revolution led by the Polisario, claiming that the Front’s magazine (*Sahra Hurra*, founded in 1975) is “the ideal archive of the struggle of the Sahrawi people because everything is in there (...) since the Moroccan invasion to present times.” I argue that the emphasis placed on the Polisario as being

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\(^{47}\) The “Sahrawi struggle” is a very broad term that has come to mean the current struggle against the Moroccan occupation of the Sahara. However, the Sahrawis resisted Spanish attempts to control the territory since the late 1880s. An example of this struggle is the Sidi Ifni War (1957-1958) in which Moroccan and Sahrawi insurgents fought against the Spanish colonization. See for instance, Camino 2009.
not only the legitimate representative of the Sahrawi people, but also the people and its history, enables the Front to call into question the Sahrawiness of those who raise their voices against the Front’s leadership, labeling them as “pro-Moroccans” or even “Moroccans.” This is what happened with the March 5 movement and also with Khatt al-Shahid (The Line of the Martyr).48 Although both groups ask for change within the leadership, they do not question the Front’s legitimacy as the only representative of the Sahrawi people. The Polisario cadre, however, framed the critiques of both groups as threats to the national unity and to the Front itself, which enabled the leadership to place these groups outside the Front (i.e. against the Front) and to label them as “pro-Moroccan.” One of the founding members of the March 5 movement explained to me that the state did not confront them with violence or imprisonment, but that its propaganda apparatus quickly and effectively ostracized them to the extent that “my own father believed for a while that I was working for the Moroccans… I encountered a lot of social pressure.” The members of March 5 were also offered “money, passports, visas to Spain and scholarships to study abroad.” Nonetheless, they refused the state cooptation, and up until now the movement remains outside any Polisario institution. The price that they pay for asking for change within the Front, without challenging the national unity, is being ostracized from society.

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48 Khatt al-Shahid was created in July 2004, in the midst of a general resentment towards the Front for having accepted Baker Plan II – suggested a 4-year period of “autonomy” under Moroccan rule followed by a voting between integration or independence – without consulting with the base first (Zunes and Mundy 2010, 122). In its first communiqué, Khatt al-Shahid accused the Front of not being loyal to the foundational principles of the Polisario Front, listing a series of mistakes undertaken by the Polisario incumbent cadre, such as: excluding the younger (and better educated) generation from the decision-making process, the gradual “destruction” of the army, the lack of attention given to war victims and martyrs’ families, and turning the election process into a “theater piece” to secure that the current leadership would stay in power. Their communiqué is available at: http://www.arso.org/opinions/FPalualifr.htm
SADR’s bad management of the state: Tribalism and corruption

There is rising discontent in the camps with the ways in which the Polisario is managing the state. As it was argued in chapter one, the SADR functions as a very particular semi-rentier state, in which alliances are reinforced and potential rivals coopted by enabling access to goods, services, jobs, and contact with foreigners. One of the ways in which the Polisario leadership has managed to stay in power over more than three decades is by allowing a tribal clientelism and corruption.

These young informants severely criticized the government for inciting tribalism in society. One of them explained that tribalism was discouraging many young people from studying, since their employment choices would later on depend on their bloodlines. He bitterly complained about the situation in the national hospital in these terms:

Here people don’t value the one who’s better, but the son of so-and-so and the son of such-and-such family. Because… can you believe that the director of a national hospital is an X-ray technician? When there are physicians?! Well, now you see how things work here, they assign the X-ray technician because he is the son of so-and-so. This is very sad. You ask yourself: why did I study? So that things like this happen? You are going to end up feeling like you wasted away the years that you spent studying.

San Martin’s observations support the views of these young informants. He explains that during the period of “no war and no peace” that followed the 1991 ceasefire, there was a relaxation of the “social codes of the revolution” that was evident in the revival of tribalism, which happened at the same as time as the growth of the bureaucracy (2005, 572).

Corruption is openly practiced by Polisario/SADR officials, in particular by those in charge of aid products and services, as other observers have reported (International Crisis Group 2007, 13 and Cozza 2010, 133). Sharing daily activities with the women of my host family, it was difficult not to see Spanish foodstuffs, which came from the solidarity caravans, in stores...
instead of being distributed among those in need. Potable water was supposed to be distributed twice a month for free, for it is a service provided by UNHCR. However, the second distribution was not free of charge and, according to one of my informants, the only time that people publicly complained in the February 27th camp, those that protested were not even given the opportunity to buy the second allocation of water for 15 days.

Inequalities among families were visible inside the houses (furniture and electric appliances), in the ways of moving around (some people had their own cars, others did not have enough to pay for a taxi and had to hitchhike), in the diet (the presence of fresh vegetables, fruit and meat was a sign of high class), appearance (quality and variety of clothes) and, the most obvious of them all: whether they had the resources for leaving the camps in summer. Some refugees rented apartments in Tindouf (raising the rent during the summer season, according to UNHCR personnel), in Mauritanian cities with electricity supplies (mainly in Nouadhibou and Zouerat), others vacationed in Spain (in Canary Islands or Andalusia), and the rest had no other option but to stay in the camps and endure the weather. I was there during June and July; by the beginning of July the women’s and the youth’s unions were closed, as well as many departments in the administration. The ministers and other high-ranking Polisario/SADR people had vanished from the Algerian Hamada.

Within such a small population, people knew who was taking advantage of their position and profiting from aid goods and services. Despite the visibility of corruption, only these four informants talked about it in the formal interviews. A young woman expressed her frustration with corruption, arguing that the Polisario is benefiting from the irresolution of the conflict at the expense of the Sahrawi refugees:
Those from the March 5 movement are right. We cannot accept staying here for so long, that’s unacceptable. And, in addition, there are a lot of people who are taking advantage of this situation, and we are the victims. I don’t want to be a victim for the rest of my life. I love my people and I want our freedom, but that doesn’t mean that I want to be a victim so that people can look at and say ‘look at this poor thing,’ and then the organizations come to give you food and they [those responsible of the aid] sell it abroad.

Moreover, the members of the March 5 movement argued that the Polisario has neglected the struggle for liberating the homeland, focusing only on exploiting the Sahrawis’ situation as refugees to attract aid to the camps and finance their semi-rentier state in exile. As one of my interviewees eloquently expressed: “Now all the efforts go to getting humanitarian aid, receiving it, building houses and filling their accounts [the Polisario/SADR’s] with money.”

**The Polisario’s bad management of the revolution**

A starting point of this research was to study how the Sahrawis in exile dealt with the situation of impasse in which the conflict over the Western Sahara entered at the beginning of 2000s, especially since the action for liberating the land no longer originates in the SADR, but in the OOTT through the peaceful intifada. Everyone that I talked to in the camps blamed this situation on the UN for pressuring the Polisario to accept a ceasefire whose conditions the UN was not willing to enforce. Within these immobile UN negotiations, the Sahrawi refugees feel like their destiny is in somebody else’s hands. Ali, a second generation man, compared it to “a soccer game in the hands of the UN” and Hayat, a third generation woman, with “a chess game between Morocco, France and the UN.”

Many of my respondents expressed their dissatisfaction with the current situation, but did not question the Polisario’s management of the revolution. The only exceptions were these four young informants, who openly criticized the Front and questioned its commitment to the
struggle. In particular, they criticized the Front for not putting enough effort in liberating the land and not preparing the following generations to take over from them. One of these young informants illustrated the youth’s frustration with their leadership arguing that:

The first generation, the one that is now clinging to the chair has forgotten that they are the leaders of a revolution. The problem is that all what they care about is being in power, and they have no trust at all in the next generations, [they think] that they aren’t capable of confronting Morocco. My concern, as a young person, is when I hear another young person saying ‘I am not interested in politics,’ and I’ve heard that many times… all what the youth care about is being comfortable, having a Mercedes, a store, a girl, this and that. The youth not being interested in politics is a danger for the Sahrawi conflict, it is almost as if we were giving up. (…) The Polisario is responsible of this, they weren’t able… well, they were able of constructing the Sahrawi state and the Polisario Front, but they have not been able of transmitting what is the significance of liberating a country. They give you speeches, yes, but in practice there is no transmission.

Delegitimizing the Polisario leadership allows these informants to reverse the state discourse that was used against the March 5 movement by accusing the Polisario of breaking national unity through corruption and tribal practices. Additionally, criticizing the Polisario for neglecting the struggle for liberation enables these youth to submit the Front’s leadership to a process of “othering” similar to the one the March 5 movement was subjected to when the state’s discourse portrayed them as “pro-Moroccans.” Indeed, they even compared Mohammed Abdelaziz with the Moroccan king, as one interviewee stated: “He behaves as if this was a monarchy, as the king he hates so much. He holds audience every Monday to listen to people’s problems and hand out money. He is preparing his sons for succession. His sons are never around here [in the camps], people don’t know them.”

The Polisario’s unwillingness to return to war

Both oppositional groups, March 5 and Khatt al-Shahid, draw attention to the situation of the army. March 5 asks the state to improve its means and the soldiers’ salaries, while Khatt al-
Shahid denounces the gradual destruction that the army has been undergoing. Although I was not able to interview many military men (only one of the first generation and another one of the second), and I could not corroborate in what shape the Sahrawi army was, it is interesting to note how people voice their desire to return to war and how the state reacts to this popular claim.

First, the only space within the public transcript in which disagreement with the Polisario/SADR was voiced and, therefore, allowed, was in relation to people’s dissatisfaction with the continuing UN peace negotiations and a collective desire for resuming war. Everyone that I interviewed and talked to, except for a woman of the third generation, wanted the armed conflict to resume. Informants referred to the war as the only alternative they had left, as is evident in the words of this second generation man: “There is a big disappointment towards the international community and towards the UN. The young, even the old, everyone agrees that the solution would be to return to war, because that is the only option.” Furthermore, everyone agreed that the youth “is the most radical of all the generations” in terms of “requesting to take up arms,” and that it is pressuring the Front to change its tactics, as a third generation man put it. This space for expressing dissent has been used by the Polisario Front since the Paris-Dakar controversy in 2000 to threaten the UN peace process under the pretext that the entire population, but in particular “the military and the youth, are insisting on taking up arms” (Diagonal Periodico, 2008). In fact, before every congress of the Front, Polisario/SADR officials issue

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49 Zunes and Mundy have reported this recurrent practice by the Polisario (2010, 26-27).
declarations about the probability that in the forthcoming congress the delegates will choose to return to war. Nevertheless, each congress ends with the Polisario deciding not to go to war yet. Nevertheless, when I asked people why war has not been resumed yet, if the vast majority of the people ask to take up arms, almost everyone responded emphasizing the need to respect the discipline within the Front. According to a man of the first generation: “Many people, me included, want to return to war, but there is discipline within the Front and we have to abide by its decisions.” The members of the March 5 movement were the only ones that I encountered who were proactively trying to change the system so that the people’s will can be translated into action. They were also the only ones among my interviewees who were concerned about the state of the army and its readiness if needed to wage war. As it is evident from the critiques quoted above, for these four youth, the Polisario has no interest in going back to war and, as a result, is not investing in readying the army in case it was needed.

Appropriating Gdeim Izik: Who started the Arab revolutions?

In their foundational letter, the March 5 movement demands more “co-responsibility” and “attention” towards the “sacrifices of the population who are carrying out the independence Intifada in the Occupied Zones,” as well as a commitment that “the shameful position taken in relation to the events of the Gdeim Izik camp” would not be repeated. This demand refers to the massive protest in the Gdeim Izik camp in 2010, and the tardiness with which the Polisario reacted to this spontaneous protest against the Moroccan occupation. However, almost everyone that I talked with in the camps considered Gdeim Izik the biggest success in the cause since the

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50 For example, prior to holding the Polisario congresses of 2007 and 2011, the Front issued declarations about the Sahrawi people’s readiness and will to return to war. See Canarias 7 2007, and Sahara Press Service 2011.
end of the war. Except for the youth of the March 5 movement, no one referred to the “shameful reaction” of the Front. On the contrary, people attributed this success to the Sahrawis’ cause and, subsequently, to the Front, since it has the monopoly over the representation of the nationalist aspirations of the Sahrawi people. Brahim, a military man of the first generation, when talking about the importance of Gdeim Izik, includes himself within the agents of the protest, even though he did not take part in it, showing how Gdeim Izik is conceived as a collective success:

I think that it [Gdeim Izik] is the most important blow against Morocco in the history of the struggle since the ceasefire, because we showed to the world what are Morocco’s intentions with us. They [the Moroccans] say that they want to give us autonomy, but look what happened, they killed us, women and children. What for? No one was carrying weapons. [Emphasis added.]

The Polisario has appropriated Gdeim Izik and included it into its discourse about national struggles in order to get credit from this event and gain some legitimacy from the population. An example of this appropriation is found in the hundreds of calendars and posters that the Ministry of Culture has produced and distributed to the refugees, showing a collage of symbolic images of the Sahrawi resistance and identity, including images such as: the traditional tent and ornaments from the pastoral pre-colonial times, the first camps erected in Um Dreiga that were bombed by the Moroccan aviation, the army in the battlefield, women dressed in military uniforms parading, children studying in the camps, female doctors taking care of the children, Sahrawis demonstrating with Spanish slogans and, big and clear on the background, a photograph of a sea of tents of the Gdeim Izik protest. The only Sahrawis that I met who

51 As I explained in chapter two, almost everyone in the camps considered the peaceful protest of Gdeim Izik a success against the Moroccan occupation. This is because of the media attention that the protest drew, especially when Morocco dismantled it by force and barred international media services from entering in the occupied Sahara.
questioned the role of the Polisario in Gdeim Izik were the members of the March 5 movement.

In the words of one of its founding members:

Gdeim Izik is free propaganda for them [the Polisario]. They are going to use it in their discourse to get to people’s nationalists feelings and get their votes (…) I think that it has no relation with the revolutions in the Arab Maghreb (…) And why did it take the Polisario a week to issue an statement about Gdeim Izik? Because it also took them by surprise. My analysis of it is that the Polisario did not have a say in it. Can it take advantage of it for our cause? Of course.

The SADR regime shares many similarities with other Arab countries, in particular the disenfranchisement of the youth due to their marginalization from the economic and political life of these societies. By appropriating Gdeim Izik, the Polisario developed a strategy for evading the potential influence of the Arab revolution in the camps, by claiming that Gdeim Izik was the origin of the Arab revolutions. Almost everyone I talked to argued that Gdeim Izik had happened before the Tunisian revolution (in October 2010) and that it was the first example of a long-term protest camp. As Khadija asserts:

The [Arab] revolutions started in the Gdeim Izik camp. (…) In the Gdeim Izik camp, there were 20,000 people who camped outside I-Aaiun, there was no food there, no medicines, and the protesters organized everything. The Tunisians were saying ‘no we were the first ones,’ we were the ones starting the revolution. But no, Gdeim Izik was the first camp, it created the atmosphere, it woke up the people (…) and then Tunis did the same, and in Tahrir. It was the Sahrawi people who started the revolution in Gdeim Izik, from there the rest of the revolutions took off. It’s not the other way round. The revolutions have not influenced us, it was us who influenced them.

Moreover, many people backed up their arguments referring to Noam Chomsky, who has claimed on different occasions that the Sahrawis should be given credit for starting the Arab Spring.\(^{52}\) Additionally, the theme of “ongoing revolution” also enabled the Polisario/SADR to

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\(^{52}\) The Sahrawi refugees consider Chomky’s declaration a victory, not only because he is supporting their claim for being the spark of the revolution, but also because he had been a supporter of the Moroccan
describe the uprising in the Arab countries as revolutions that aim at the same objectives as the Sahrawi one, as it is evident from the narration of the Polisario representative in Washington DC: “The impact [of the Arab Spring in the Sahrawi cause] can only be positive. Any change towards democracy and freedom is positive because, at the end of the day, we have been struggling for 35 years for the same objectives: democracy and freedom.”

In chapter two I described how the Polisario/SADR has built an extensive media network that serves to make the Sahrawis in the camps participants in the acts of resistance and suffering that the Sahrawis in the OOTT endure. I argue that the Sahrawi media network and the Polisario’s monopoly over the Sahrawi revolution have enabled the Front to appropriate the successes of the intifada in the OOTT, such as the Gdeim Izik protest. At least in the discourse of the public transcript, the majority of the Sahrawis considered this massive protest a collective victory against the Moroccan occupation and, as a member of the March 5 movement declared, the Polisario/SADR is using Gdeim Izik “as free propaganda” to increase its legitimacy. Furthermore, the Front is attempting to evade possible spillovers from the Arab revolutions within the camps through two mechanisms. First, it is claiming that Gdeim Izik was the spark that ignited the Arab revolutions, since it happened before the Tunisian uprising. Secondly, by equating the objectives of the Arab Spring with those of the Sahrawi revolution, the Polisario/SADR is attempting to deprive the Arab revolutions of any novelty. However, the foundation of the March 5 movement proves that the Polisario/SADR is not immune to wave of popular and youth uprisings that is sweeping the Arab world (and beyond) claiming for more participation of the youth in the politic and economic spheres of their countries, and more

arguments until the uprising in Gdeim Izik. For Chomsky’s words on the Sahrawi revolution, see for example: Democracy Now! 2011 and Usher 2011.
democratic and accountable political systems. The March 5 movement also demands a leadership that is committed to delivering to the Sahrawi people the aspiration for which approximately 160,000 refugees endure exile: the liberation of the Sahara. They denounce the current leadership is neglecting the liberation front.

**Conclusion**

Building on the narratives of four informants of the third generation, this chapter brings to the fore the critiques of some of the Sahrawi youth against the government, specifically against the incumbent leaders of the first generation who have clung to power for more than three decades. The disenfranchisement of some young people, and the political activism carried out by the other two, are fundamental factors for explaining why they shared with me part of their hidden transcript. They complained about the lack of space for young people to participate in the decision-making process of the Polisario/SADR. They perceived political power to be monopolized by the President, his cohort, and tribal chiefs; and they openly criticized the leadership’s performance in terms of two of the struggle's fronts: liberating the land and constructing the state. For them, the politicians are neglecting the objective of liberating the land, profiting from the aid aimed at the refugees, as well as they are breaking down national unity and social justice by allowing tribes to regain prominence in society and politics. These youth are also aware of the state’s pathologization of the youth, and have asked for the end of the “demonization of the youth,” as the March 5 movement expressed it.

The previous chapters have shown that the older generations reproach today’s youth for breaking the national commitment with education as an investment for a future independent
Sahara, and for resisting the discourse about “voluntary work,” which attempts at incorporating the youth in the public institutions on a voluntary basis. This chapter has shown the efforts of some of youth to have their education and labor recognized by society (as in the case of the woman working for the NUSW and the male nurse), and trying to make state politics more participatory and open to youth. These youth argue that they are ready to be included in the decision-making circles and have the baton of the cause passed on to them.

Only time will tell if the third generation will be able to frame the struggle during the “no war and no peace” period in their own terms; or whether the state’s hegemonic discourse will prevail in defining the struggle’s fronts and, subsequently, in pathologizing the youth as the weak link in the chain for not adhering and complying with discourse of the state.
Conclusion

For decades the Sahrawi refugee camps have been typically approached by academic, humanitarian and journalistic literature with a gaze of exceptionalism that focuses either on the unusual protracted situation of its international conflict, or on the unusual behavior of these recipients of aid. Through this research, I have sought to describe how the Sahrawis live, experience, and construct these spaces as provinces of their state in exile, which at the same time transforms these exiles into citizens of a country built on foreign soil, the SADR. I agree with San Martin’s observation that the camps are like normal cities anywhere else in the world (2005, 568). My experience living there for two months is that the camps felt almost like any other country, except for certain symbols that reminded me on a daily basis of the stateless nature of the Sahrawi republic, such as the sacks of foodstuffs marked with the language of the aid and humanitarian regimes (UNHCR, USAID, ECHO, AECID). This sense of normalcy cohabits with an exile that has been lasting for more than 36 years and that, given the impasse of the conflict over the Western Sahara, is likely to continue for years or even decades, resulting in new generations of Sahrawis being born into a life of statelessness.

The purpose of this thesis was to find out how three generations of Sahrawi men and women in exile take part in their cause for liberation in a context in which the international conflict over the Western Sahara has reached a deadlock. After 21 years of the implementation of the ceasefire between Morocco and the Polisario, the UN peace negotiations have not brought an end to the conflict. Even though the holding of a referendum for self-determination was a clause of the ceasefire, Morocco has managed not only to postpone such voting, but also has succeed in convincing other countries to drop the idea of holding a referendum in which independence
could be an option. Nowadays, the United States, France and Spain are supporting the Moroccan Autonomy Plan as the only realistic solution to the conflict. The Polisario Front and the Sahrawis in exile, who have endured an exile of more than 36 years waiting for a chance to exert their right to self-determination, are not willing to give up their nationalist aspirations. Therefore, as long as life in exile continues to be viable for the refugees, the conflict will persist.

Economic and social factors might end up being decisive for the future of the Sahrawi cause. The global economic crisis, in particular in the European countries, is having important repercussions in the camps, since both inflows of aid and remittances are significantly decreasing. From 1991 onwards, the camps have gradually turned into a consumerist society—where young men need to gather as much as 3,000 euro in order to get married—in which a decrease in the external “rents” that make consumption possible might prompt people, in particular young men, to migrate. EU countries like Spain and Italy are among the most common countries of destination for Sahrawi laborers but, given the fact that the economic crisis is not near its end, it is logic to expect that migration to Europe will become more and more complicated as the EU applies stricter immigration policies.

An alternative that many Sahrawi youth have already adopted is leaving the camps and settling in the occupied Sahara since Morocco offers incentives to Sahrawi refugees who decide to “return” to their homeland. This migration to the OOTT is perceived by the Polisario/SADR authorities and by many refugees as a problem, since Morocco can use the inflow of refugees as an argument for claiming that the Sahrawis want to accept the Autonomy Plan, but that the Polisario keeps them as prisoners in the camps. For the Sahrawis refugees, enduring exile and, as a young woman said, “just being a refugee” is their most important form of resistance against the
Moroccan occupation, which, in the words of the Minister of Media, is “waging war by trying to attract the Saharawi people that are here.” Therefore, the Sahrawi refugees see their role in the cause as first and foremost resisting in exile and, secondly, supporting the Sahrawis in the OOTT by telling the world about the abuses that Morocco perpetrates against them. In this way, the Sahrawis in exile keep the conflict alive and try to draw attention to Moroccan human rights violations, which the Polisario point to as proof that autonomy within Morocco, a violent state that discriminates and abuses Sahrawis, is not a viable solution.

Approaching the refugee camps as a state has enabled me to examine the hegemony of the Polisario/SADR leadership, which has managed to stay in power for more than three decades despite its failure to liberate the Sahara. In chapter one I argue that the Polisario has retained legitimacy thanks to developing the Sahrawi state, whose institutions grew exponentially after 1991, and binding the citizens to the SADR through a social contract that positions the state as a good and service provider. In order to fulfill this pact, the Polisario/SADR has elaborated an effective discourse to attract aid. Moreover, the Sahrawi republic functions as a semi-rentier state, since it depends on external rents (i.e. aid) that the state allocates for strengthening alliances and coopting opposition. The Polisario/SADR’s discourse for attracting aid depicts the camps as an ideal society characterized by equal educational opportunities, women’s visibility in the public sphere, and a democratic system. This discourse permeates the public transcript in the camps to which the Sahrawi especially adhere to when talking to foreigners like me. My positionality, working for a U.S. foundation in close collaboration with the Minister of Culture (who also happens to be the wife of the President), led almost all of my interviewees to adhere to
the public transcript. Therefore, deconstructing this discourse plays a fundamental role in this research.

Building on James C. Scott’s definition of the public transcript, I argue in chapter two that the SADR’s metanarrative is a “self-portrait” of the ruling elite, which in the Sahrawi case is that of the youth that led the revolution in 1975 (what I call the first generation), represented by the President Mohammed Abdelaziz who has been in power for 35 years. The metanarrative of the state is rooted in the experiences of this first generation during the war years, when the men were at the war front, and women had their own front in exile building the state—which has infused the image of gender equality that the Polisario sells to an international donor audience. The second generation, those who were children and young during the war, also receives recognition in the metanarrative, in particular with reference to the emphasis on educational attainment and gender gap reduction. Education abroad was the front through which the children of the war engaged in the struggle for liberation, since education was conceived as a collective nationalist project to equip the citizens of an independent Western Sahara with the knowledge required to successfully run their independent country.

This discourse idealizes the older generations, in particular the first one, which has clung to power and does not allow for a change of guard to take place. As I have shown in chapter three, this metadiscourse does not recognize the transformations that the revolutionary fronts have experienced after the implementation of the ceasefire. In 1991, men returned to the camps and the traditional patriarchal order was back in place, leading most of the women to step back from their positions in the public sphere and into the home-building front. Men have taken over the responsibilities of the state, as well as the provision for the family. In addition, the market
economy that has gradually developed since 1991, and the lack of prospects for the establishment of an independent Sahara have led the educational front to lose its nationalist significance. Nowadays, education is a family project that is planned in order to secure financing of the household and the possibility for upward mobility. As a result of this, there is a decrease in secondary school completion, since youth tend to register in vocational and technical training that could translate into wage labor in the camps or abroad. Since women do not have to provide for the family, many girls are being pulled out of school to help their older female relatives with the household chores. Overall, the daily life of the camps during the “no war and no peace” period contradicts the metanarrative and its images of women’s empowerment and educational progress proves to be an anachronistic account of the Sahrawi experience which does not recognize the context in which the current youth, the third generation, lives.

The youth of the “no war and no peace” period is constructed in the metanarrative of the state as bringing societal problems from abroad, and being vulnerable to the influences of Morocco. Thus, Sahrawi youth are not conceptualized as challenging the values and traditions of the older generations—as it happens in most of the societies—but they are pathologized as the weak link in the chain that can endanger the unity of the people and the Sahrawi cause altogether. Four young people who transgressed the public transcript when talking to me, show that a least a sector of the Sahrawi youth that is disenfranchised from political and economic life contests what some called the “demonization of the youth.” Not only are these four youth confronting the misrepresentation of young people, they also oppose the revolutionary front that the state is trying to impose on the youth, namely the “voluntary work” front. This front is attempting to absorb the labor of the youth into the public administration on a voluntary basis
(for free in the cases of most of the young women of my sample, and for meager incentives for the men). These youth are proactively seeking to define in their own terms how they engage in the cause. They demand that the old incumbents reform the electoral law in order to make the political process truly participatory, for they want to have a say in the decision-making process, especially since they accuse the Polisario/SADR cadre of neglecting the struggle for liberation and focusing on sacking the aid resources aimed at the refugee population.

The Sahrawi youth are left in a difficult situation, in which not only do they have to deal with the struggle for liberation, but they also have to face their own struggle for transitioning into adulthood, which for the man means taking on wage labor, while for the woman it entails breaking free from the patriarchal control of her family environment. Despite the difficulty that the young population—who are the bigger demographic group in the camps—face on a personal level in their process of becoming full adults, the state does not recognize these challenges specific to today’s youth since its portrayal of the camps as an ideal society leaves the state almost no room to maneuver and address the roots of these tensions and inequalities. In this way, the state also avoids being hold accountable for its bad management of the SADR. Official institutions that deal with women and youth envision a solution for the problems of the young people based on imposing discipline until “there is no gap between the generations,” as an official of the Union of Women expressed. Only time will tell if the third generation will be able to frame the struggle in their own terms during the “no war and no peace period,” or whether the state’s hegemonic discourse will prevail in defining the struggle’s fronts and conceptualizing the youth as weak and vulnerable to Morocco’s influences.
This research has important limitations because it does not take into consideration class or racial aspects of Sahrawi society. Additionally, since only a few young people shared part of their hidden transcript with me, the only generational confrontations that I have been able to map out are between a sector of the Sahrawi youth (which I do not claim to be representative of the entire youth population) and the discourse of the old ruling elite. Given the fact that no one from the first and second generations voiced views that differed from the official discourse, I have not been able to address how sectors of the older generations disagree and contest the state’s metanarrative.

Much more research needs to be done about this society which, as this research shows, is not as ideal and exceptional as much of the academic literature portrays. The international humanitarian regime and many scholars of refugee studies have praised the Sahrawis’ self-management of aid in the camps, considering it a “good experience,” in the words of the UNHCR Chief in Tindouf, which could be scalable to other refugee populations. However, I believe that “self-management” should not be considered as the panacea of aid management in refugee camps. In the Sahrawi case, financing the SADR’s government without negotiating with it how the aid is distributed and implemented has served to reinforce the Polisario’s hegemonic power. Underneath UNHCR’s praising and financing of the SADR lay many different realities that contradict the discourse of gender equality and democratic practices, and that ultimately disempower those refugees who are not part of the semi-rentier system of the SADR.

The daily lives of the Sahrawis living under Moroccan occupation should receive more attention from academics and journalists in order to break the silence over the discrimination and human rights violations that take place in the OOTT. It would also be interesting to study the
political activism of the Sahrawis in the OOTT from a gender and generational perspective, and find out whether and to what extent the hegemonic power of the Polisario reaches out to the other side of the wall.
Bibliography


