

Western Sahara and Palestine: shared refugee experiences

by Randa Farah



Still Pictures/Julio Etchart

*Polisario 27th
February camp,
Western Sahara*

As a student in 1977 I attended a meeting at which the Polisario representative urged students to assist yet one more struggle for liberation and self-determination. Although at the time most Arab students supported the Sahrawi cause, a minority, invoking notions of ‘Arab unity’, denounced Polisario as a ‘separatist movement’. Today, the Moroccan regime relies on similar slogans to deny the Sahrawi people the right to self-determination set out in a 1975 ruling by the International Court of Justice.

Twenty five years later, as I flew to Tindouf in the Algerian desert to visit the Sahrawi refugee camps, I wondered why I – as a Palestinian refugee researcher – had not made the journey earlier. As I pondered the question I felt that the silence of the sand echoed the disturbing silence in the Arab world on the urgent conflicts in Western Sahara and Palestine. Indeed, all those I met in both Palestinian and Sahrawi camps bitterly complained that the Arab world has

abandoned them, forgotten their existence or sided with their enemies.

Headed by the Frente para la Liberación de Sagiau al-Hamra and Rio de Oro (Polisario Front) and the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR¹), the refugees of Western Sahara are efficiently and highly organised, have democratic institutions and processes and a high level of participation in decision making. Laws and institutions guarantee social equality, including women’s rights, provide free education and health services and the right and duty to work. In general, the level of democratisation I encountered in the camps is unmatched elsewhere in the Arab world. Could the experience of the Sahrawi refugee-citizens and their mini state-in-exile provide a beacon of light amidst the bleak despair engulfing the Arab world?

Historical background

In 1884 Spain colonised Western Sahara. Prior to the termination of

Spain’s colonial mandate in February 1976, both Morocco and Mauritania made territorial claims which were rejected by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in its verdict in October 1975. A UN Inquiry mission that visited the territory in May-June 1975 reported that the Sahrawi population had overwhelmingly expressed their wish for independence and that Polisario appeared as a prominent political party in the territory. On the same day, Morocco’s King Hassan II led a ‘Green March’ during which approximately 350,000 Moroccans crossed into Western Sahara, carrying a bizarre bricolage of white banners, American flags and the Holy Koran.

In 1991 the Security Council mandated a UN peace-keeping force (MINURSO)² to oversee a referendum to decide whether the Sahrawi people wished to integrate with Morocco or opt for independence. Morocco’s role in obstructing the referendum has been amply documented. The latest Moroccan autonomy proposals were aborted in July 2002, when the

Security Council adopted Resolution 1429 "underlining the validity of the Settlement Plan" and expressing its readiness to consider any approach which provides for self-determination.

The democracy of the desert: SADR and its citizens

The Moroccan takeover of Western Sahara led to the displacement of approximately 150,000-200,000 refugees. Many carry the memory of the American napalm and phosphorous bombs dropped indiscriminately on them by the Moroccan army as they fled in 1975. Four refugee camps and one unofficial settlement have been established in what is referred to as the 'uninhabitable' desert near the Algerian town of Tindouf.

The SADR - currently based in the camps - has successfully drawn upon democratic and egalitarian principles rooted in nomadic, Arab and Islamic culture and history. Islam, as practised by the Sahrawis, is tolerant and liberal. One of several examples of how SADR

has been able to draw upon local

traditions is its institutionalisation of women's rights. Traditionally, women have total autonomy in managing the daily activities in and around the tent. Any form of violence against women, verbal or physical, is condemned and the man is usually ostracised by society. Consequently, these incidents are so rare that the issue of domestic violence against women or children is almost non-existent.

However, the Sahrawi people are neither 'primitive' - as some orientalists would argue - nor 'communist'. They have developed livelihood strategies to adapt to the physical and political environment and respond to the Moroccan occupation by maximising what little resources they have. Their numbers are few as are their financial and material resources. They have to depend almost totally on humanitarian aid and a high level of efficiency, organisation and democratic mechanisms to be able to wage their political, social, economic and diplomatic battles.

Wilayas and camps

The Sahrawis refer to the camps as *wilayas*, or provinces, which in turn are subdivided into *da'iras*, or municipalities. Each *da'ira* is subdivided into several *hays*, or districts. The *wilayas* and the *da'iras* are

named after towns and areas

in Western Sahara, such as

Smaara, *al-Ayoun*, *al-Dhakle* and *Oauserd*.

Similarly, most Palestinian refugee camp areas are called after the villages of origin and/or main urban centres, such as *manteqat al-Quds*

(Jerusalem) and *al-Khalil* (Hebron), or significant events and symbols in the political history of Palestine. In both cases, the names of original places in the country of origin had been granted to the places of exile as a form of popular resistance against 'forgetting' and an affirmation of the inseparable relationship between those exiled and places in their homeland.

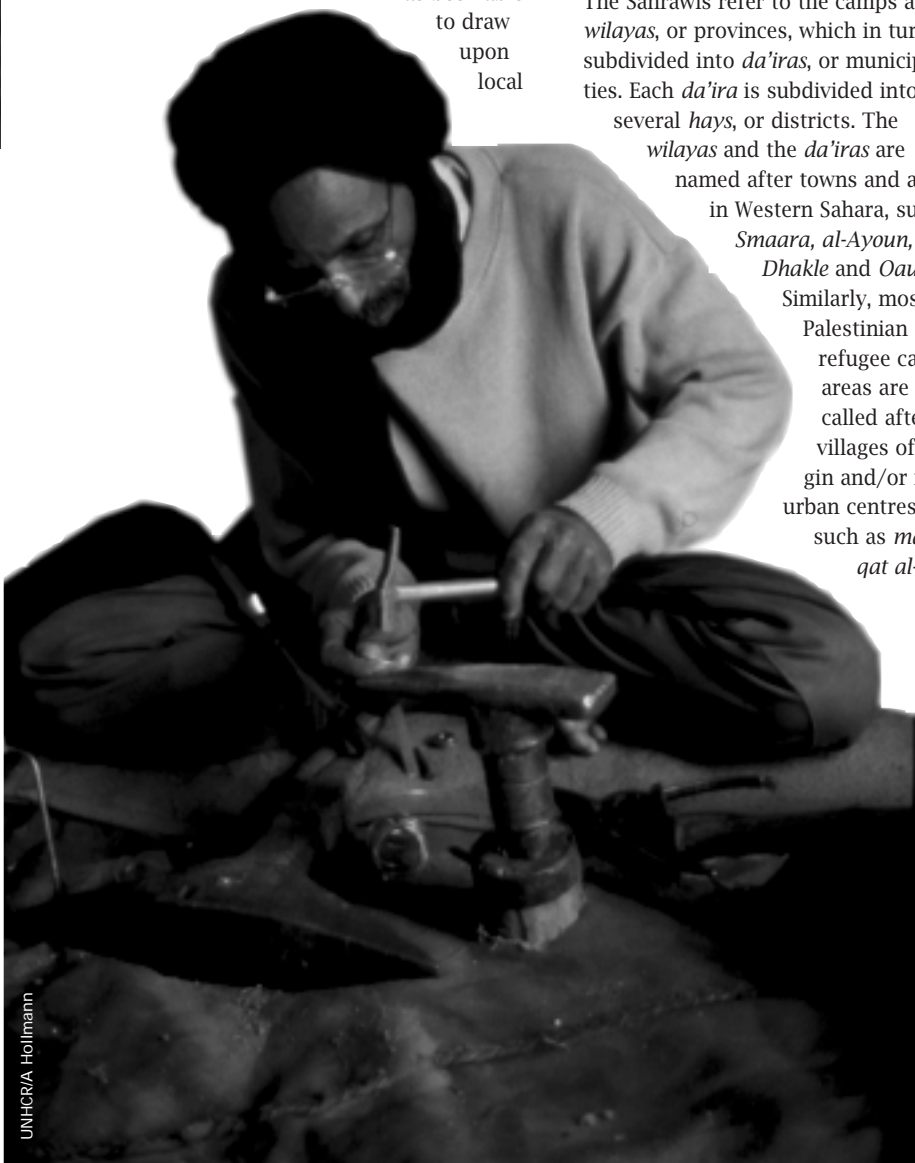
Over time most tents in the *wilayas* have been replaced with brick homes. The adobe huts have basic furniture, blankets and kitchen utensils. Despite the lack of public electricity in the camps, some families have acquired TV sets powered by solar energy in order to access the outside world. In Palestinian refugee camps, TVs are found in the majority of homes, one of the few affordable items for entertainment, especially for children.

Needless to say, there are important differences between the Sahrawi *wilayas* and the Palestinian refugee camps. Not least is the fact that the latter exist within or near urban centres whereas a massive desert separates the *wilayas* from Algerian urban centres and society. However, the underlying social and economic imperatives and dynamics in both cases are not as different as may at first appear.

In both cases, the communities are not and never were homogeneous. Sahrawis were never totally nomadic as by the 1960s a sizeable force was working in the phosphate industry. Similarly, in Palestine, though the economy was predominantly agricultural, a significant number of the *fellahin* subsidised their agricultural resources with mercantile activities, while others worked in urban centres as wage-labourers. In both cases the initial years of exile levelled the socio-economic status of the uprooted population and introduced new forms of differentiation.

Undoubtedly, humanitarian aid and its management procedures contribute to the emergence of social and economic variance among refugees. Thus some entrepreneurial Palestinians were able to fill a niche in the 'refugee market' by mediating between households and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). New small merchants bought and sold rations, as some families needed cash while others needed more sugar or flour. A few of these

Saharawi refugee, Dakhla camp



entrepreneurs succeeded in generating capital and expanding. Commercial enterprises began to appear as some shelters were transformed partially or totally into little retail shops and today there are large markets in most Palestinian refugee camps. Needless to say, there are other factors that contributed to differentiation within Palestinian camps, such as the size of the household, the availability of members with marketable skills and labour markets, remittances from expatriates and social and political relationships.

In the Sahrawi community, although the distribution processes of humanitarian aid is egalitarian, nevertheless some households have economic advantages. A few families who served the Spanish colonial administration receive pensions which give them economic and social leverage. Others have relations abroad who send goods or cash. Already there are a few shops in the camps selling goods brought from Algeria, Mauritania and elsewhere. Through informal economic trade networks, the seeds of a cash economy and a market are beginning to emerge in the *wilayas*, mirroring similar processes in Palestinian camps.

Collective political mobilisation and socio-economic imperatives

New generations are being born in the *wilayas* and SADR's efforts to invest in their education have begun to bear fruit. Hundreds of students study abroad, returning with degrees in medicine, education, chemistry and the social sciences and with new ideas to contribute to the cultural and political life of the community. Children are participating in a Spanish programme, *Vacaciones en Paz*, under which thousands of Spanish families host Sahrawi children in their homes for two months every summer. The emphasis on education as a strategic objective for the Sahrawi people echoes the Palestinian strategy to redeem 'home' and 'homeland' and tackle poverty by acquiring education and political awareness.

The Sahrawi graduates work in the various *wilayas* and attempts are made to place the right person in the appropriate job. However, with the passage of time, especially with cut-

backs in international aid and stalemate in the political situation, a growing population of Sahrawis may be pressed to look for alternative social and economic possibilities. Underlying all these processes is the question of how to reconcile the growing social and economic needs of individuals with the collective political will in order to withstand the Moroccan tactics of procrastination and stalemate.

The Palestinian case provides insight, if not answers, to this issue.

Examining the Palestinian movement over five decades, it is obvious that a sense of collective belonging and mobilisation appear during some periods as intense and other times as subdued. This is due to the fact that the reproduction of identity is a political and ever changing dynamic that includes active agency but also external dynamics. The current *Intifada* has had a clear impact in reawakening a collective sense among Palestinians in the diaspora, most of whom have never seen Palestine. Those who are hoping that the passage of years will weaken the Sahrawis' collective resolve need only look at the Palestinian case to see that time and distance are no guarantees that conflict will disappear.

The UN, self-determination and 'autonomy'

Sahrawi refugees call 1975 the *al-ghazu* ('invasion'), paralleling the Palestinian *nakbah* ('catastrophe') of 1948. Since these traumatic junctures in the lives of the two peoples, numerous UN and international resolutions and declarations have been accumulating dust. Both the Oslo agreements and the Moroccan 'autonomy' proposal for Western Sahara violate principles of international law.

The right of the Palestinians and the Sahrawis to self-determination is a non-negotiable right enshrined in principles of international law. Indeed, it is a central principle in the UN Charter, as expressed in Article 1(2) and reaffirmed as a human right in Article 1 of both international covenants. In 1960, the UN General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, which affirmed that "all peoples enjoy the right of self-determination".

The Zionist-Israeli argument that Palestine was not a nation state prior to the establishment of Israel and hence does not have a right to self-determination is invalid. In 1919 the Covenant of the League of Nations recognised the Palestinian people as an independent nation to be "provisionally" placed under the British Mandate, the British acting as a "custodian" to lead people "not yet able to stand by themselves" to independence.

The Oslo framework for peace provided for a form of Palestinian 'autonomy' or 'authority' with ultimate sovereignty remaining in the hands of the Israelis. The consequences of 'autonomy' have become clear to the Palestinians: Israeli



Still Pictures/Julio Etchart

land annexations have continued and the settler population doubled since the peace process began. The Moroccan-American autonomy option proposed for Western Sahara would have had similar consequences, leaving key matters such as defence, foreign affairs and the currency under Moroccan control.

The state, the nation and the nation state

The five million Palestinian refugees and exiles were marginalised in the Oslo negotiations and relegated as a 'final status' issue. They feel betrayed by the Palestinian Authority. Their political nexus in the form of the PLO-PA was torn away as a result of Oslo as refugees were abandoned to fend

stayed in Morocco. The 150,000 Moroccan soldiers in Western Sahara persecute those who oppose integration with Morocco or support the Sahrawi right to a referendum.

Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War (12 August, 1949) clearly outlaws settlements: "the Occupying Power shall not deport or transfer parts of its own civilian population into the territory it occupies". The purpose of the Article is to protect the civilian population of an occupied territory and to reserve permanent territorial changes, if any, until settlement of the conflict. Both Israel and Morocco have violated the Fourth Geneva Convention by radically transforming the occupied territories by bringing in new settlers in order to change the demographic make-up of the territories under their occupation and to utilise the natural resources.

In both the Sahrawi and Palestinian cases it is difficult to think of repatriation and self-determination as mutually exclusive. Rather, they should be viewed as part of a larger political solution that amalgamates the two concepts and is solidly grounded in international law.

Berms, fences and borders

Western Sahara is split in two by the 900-mile long Moroccan *berm*, a defensive wall extending from the north-east corner of Western Sahara down to the south-west near the Mauritanian border. Built in the early 1980s, following advice given to Hassan II by Ariel Sharon, the *berm* is made of earth and reinforced with soldiers, anti-personnel and anti-tank mines, trenches and detectors. It has been estimated that 1-2 million landmines have been planted by Morocco. Ariel Sharon is now building a similar wall which will devour chunks of Palestinian land legally considered part of the West Bank. It too will be fortified with electric fences, trenches and motion detectors.

For 27 years Sahrawis have been separated from relatives and neighbours, some living under Moroccan occupation and others in the *wilayas* in Algeria, Mauritania and elsewhere. Palestinians too have not seen their relatives for decades. In Lebanon I

met a refugee who goes to the southern border fence to see if he can glimpse his original village across the border. When he cannot, he hopes a breeze originating in his land will blow his way.

Walls erected by occupiers are indicative of a culture of fear and are raised precisely because the occupier realises that their occupation is opposed by the rightful inhabitants. It is only a matter of time before the enclosed and imprisoned populations find ways to overcome the barriers. Occupying powers must reflect on history to realise that walls are no match for people's struggle for freedom. When will they realise the paradox and absurdity of negotiating peace while simultaneously building walls?

Conclusion

The Arab world should stand up for the rights of the Sahrawi people for self-determination and learn from the successful experiences of democracy and the building of civil institutions of this small but resilient people. If left to fester, the Palestinian and Sahrawi conflicts are threats to regional and global stability. It is time that the silence of the sand is shattered. Louder Arab voices must be heard calling for the universal application of international law to put an end to the impunity with which occupying powers strip occupied peoples of their rights to self-determination and return.

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The most comprehensive and regularly updated source of Internet information on Western Sahara is the Western Sahara Referendum Association (ARSO): www.arso.org/index.htm. Other Sahrawi links are on the FMR website at: www.fmreview.org/4DWSahara.htm

1. The SADR website is: www.arso.org/03-0.htm
2. The MINURSO website is: www.un.org/Depts/DPKO/Missions/minurso/body_minurso.htm

walls are no match for people's struggle for freedom.

for themselves. Israel's refusal to contemplate the right of return has been supported by the failure of the Oslo agreements to refer to UNGA Resolution 194 (III), which calls for their right of return, compensation and restitution. Oslo's emphasis on building state-like institutions in the statelet (22% of Mandate Palestine) granted to the Palestinian Authority ignored key questions fundamental to the Palestinian predicament.

Who was to represent the Palestinians in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and the rest of the world? Settlers and settlements would have been a major hindrance to the contiguity of its territory. Schisms over political representation would have emerged between the PNA and host countries, especially Jordan - the only country to grant refugees full citizenship rights - where 40% of all UNRWA-registered refugees reside. The relationship between Palestinians living within Israel and the Palestinian state was undefined.

Mirroring the Israeli determination to create demographic facts, the Moroccan authorities have lured over 150,000 settlers into the occupied territory in order to change the results of the long-delayed referendum. As in the occupied Palestinian territories, settlements are heavily subsidised, giving the inhabitants considerably higher incomes than they would have enjoyed if they had