


**«Unwavering Resolve:
The Sahrawi Diaspora and the Fight
for Self-Determination»** 

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Abstract: The Western Sahara conflict, stemming from Spain's never finished decolonization process and Morocco's invasion in 1975, led to the displacement of thousands of Sahrawi. The Sahrawi diaspora has become a significant force advocating for self-determination, freedom, sovereignty, and human rights. This paper highlights the diasporas' diversity, noting unique contributions and challenges faced globally. Through its political, cultural and humanitarian activism, the diaspora has kept the Western Sahara issue visible. The article concludes emphasizing the need for sustained international support and solidarity to resolve this conflict.

Keywords: Western Sahara, Resistance, Exile, Diaspora

Resumen: El conflicto del Sáhara Occidental, derivado del proceso de descolonización de España, nunca finalizado, y de la invasión de Marruecos en 1975, provocó el desplazamiento de miles de saharauis. La diáspora saharauí se ha convertido en una importante fuerza que aboga por la autodeterminación, la libertad, la soberanía y los derechos humanos. Este documento destaca la diversidad de las diásporas, señalando las contribuciones únicas y los retos a los que se enfrentan a nivel mundial. A través de su activismo político, cultural y humanitario, la diáspora ha mantenido visible la cuestión del Sáhara Occidental. El artículo concluye haciendo hincapié en la necesidad de un apoyo y solidaridad internacionales sostenidos para resolver este conflicto.

Palabras clave: Sáhara Occidental, Resistencia, Exilio, Diáspora

Historical Background of the Western Sahara Conflict

The Western Sahara conflict, one of the longest-running in contemporary history, began in the mid-20th century. A Spanish colony, Western Sahara's fate became uncertain following Spain's lack of decolonization efforts in the 1970s. This period marked the beginning of a struggle for self-determination, freedom and sovereignty by the indigenous Sahrawi people, represented by the POLISARIO Front, against Spanish and Moroccan territorial claims and occupation.

In 1884, Spain formally established a protectorate over Western Sahara, a region rich in phosphates and with potential offshore oil reserves. The indigenous Sahrawi tribes had little influence over the administrative affairs of their land during the colonial period (Martín, 2010).

In 1975, the International Court of Justice issued an advisory opinion acknowledging the right of the Sahrawi people to self-determination (ICJ, 1975, 1979, 1980). However, this ruling was overshadowed by the Green March on November 6th 1975, a strategic mass demonstration organized by Morocco to assert its claim over Western Sahara. Concurrently,

Mauritania also laid claim to part of the territory, leading to the signing of the Madrid Accords. This tripartite agreement facilitated Spain's withdrawal, handing administrative control of Western Sahara to Morocco and Mauritania without consulting the Sahrawi people (Zunes & Mundy, 2010).

Previous, on October 31st 1975, Moroccan military forces invaded Western Sahara, attacking civilians and initiating a conflict with the POLISARIO Front. POLISARIO, had been formed in 1973 to fight for Sahrawi freedom against colonial Spain. This military act was followed by the Green March which comprised over 350 000 Moroccan settlers which occupied large part of Western Sahara. The Moroccan invasion, including bombings and mass killings, led to intense fighting and a humanitarian crisis, with thousands of Sahrawi fleeing to Tindouf, Algeria where they erected refugee camps (Shelley, 2004). The POLISARIO Front declared the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic¹ in 1976 and launched a guerilla war against both Moroccan and Mauritanian forces. By 1979, Mauritania withdrew its claim, leaving Morocco to control approximately two-thirds of the territory, while POLISARIO maintained control over the remaining areas, primarily the desert hinterlands (Jensen, 2005).

Despite numerous efforts by the United Nations to broker a peace agreement, including a ceasefire in 1991 and the establishment of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara², a lasting solution has remained elusive. The ceasefire agreement included provisions for a referendum on self-determination, which has yet to be realized due to the refusal of Morocco (Lourenço & Teixeira, 2023; Shelley, 2004).

The role of external actors has further complicated the conflict. Morocco has garnered support from key international players, including France and the United States. Algeria has backed the POLISARIO Front, the decisions of the International Court of Justice and the United Nations resolution as well as the constitutive act of the African Union. The Sahrawi diaspora and international activists continue to advocate for the Sahrawi people's right to self-determination. The human rights abuses in the region and the plight of Sahrawi political prisoners, drawing international attention to the human rights dimensions of the conflict are broadly documented (Lourenço, 2014; Lourenço & Teixeira, 2023).

In recent years, tensions have flared periodically, with skirmishes breaking out despite the ceasefire. The failure to hold the promised referendum due to the Moroccans categorical refusal, has perpetuated the stalemate, leaving Western Sahara in a state of limbo.

In November 2020, the long-standing ceasefire between Morocco and the POLISARIO Front collapsed, reigniting armed conflict in Western Sahara. This escalation followed

¹ SADR

² MINURSO

Morocco's military operation in the Guergarat buffer zone, an area near the Mauritanian border, against peaceful civilian Sahrawi protesters. POLISARIO Front responded by declaring the end of ceasefire and resuming the war, marking the end of nearly three decades of the United Nations-brokered agreement (Gali, 2020). The renewed hostilities have intensified the humanitarian crisis, displacing more Sahrawi and straining the already dire conditions in the Tindouf refugee camps in Algeria. International efforts to mediate have been complicated by entrenched positions and geopolitical interests, with Morocco seeking recognition of its sovereignty over Western Sahara and the POLISARIO Front demanding the holding of the referendum on self-determination as stipulated by the UN resolutions. (Lourenço & Teixeira, 2023)

The continued resilience of the Sahrawi people and their diaspora underscores the enduring significance of their struggle for self-determination, sovereignty and freedom.

Significance of the Diaspora in the Context of Western Sahara's Decolonization

At the heart of the struggle between the Sahrawi people, represented by the POLISARIO Front, and the Moroccan occupation, is the role of the Sahrawi diaspora, which has become increasingly significant in advocating for the decolonization of Western Sahara. This diaspora, dispersed across several countries, particularly in Europe, plays a crucial role in maintaining cultural identity, lobbying for political support, and providing humanitarian assistance and keeping the issue of Western Sahara on the international agenda. Due to the oppressive conditions and apartheid within the occupied territory and the lack of opportunities in the refugee camps in Algeria, many Sahrawi have sought refuge and better opportunities abroad (Lourenço, 2018, 2020a). This diaspora, though geographically dispersed, remains united in its quest for self-determination and freedom for Western Sahara. By leveraging the freedoms and resources available in host countries, the Sahrawi diaspora has been able to mobilize support, raise awareness, and put pressure on international organizations and governments to address their cause (Zunes & Mundy, 2010).

One of the key contributions of the Sahrawi diaspora is its role in cultural preservation and education. In exile, the diaspora has established various cultural organizations and initiatives to preserve Sahrawi heritage and educate younger generations about their identity and the ongoing struggle for independence. These efforts ensure that the Sahrawi national identity remains vibrant and resilient, despite the challenges posed by displacement and assimilation pressures in host countries. Cultural preservation is critical for maintaining a unified front and fostering a sense of belonging and purpose among Sahrawi worldwide (Martín, 2010).

"Sahrawis in the diaspora living far from the country face a great challenge in adapting to a new environment, preserving their identity and culture and transmitting it to their children. Parents urge their children to maintain the Hassanya dialect, learn their religion, revive

moral and patriotic values in them and consolidate the link with the Sahrawi cause. They also strive to encourage them to learn the language and culture of the host country, open up to the outside world and maintain relations with all components of civil society.” (Munadil, 2020).

Furthermore, the diaspora plays a pivotal role in lobbying and advocacy. Through non-governmental organizations, community groups, and individual activism, the Sahrawi diaspora has been successful in engaging with international bodies such as the United Nations, the African Union, and the European Union. By organizing protests, participating in international conferences, and engaging with the media, the diaspora highlights the human rights abuses and the need for a fair and transparent decolonization process. Notably, Sahrawi activists in Europe have been effective in influencing policy discussions and decisions, urging governments to take a firmer stance against Morocco’s occupation and advocating for the implementation of UN resolutions that call for a referendum on self-determination (Tavakoli, 2023).

Humanitarian assistance provided by the diaspora is another critical aspect of their contribution. Many Sahrawi in the diaspora send remittances back to the refugee camps in Tindouf, Algeria, where tens of thousands of Sahrawi live under challenging conditions. These financial contributions help to improve living standards, support education, and provide essential services that are often lacking due to the protracted nature of the conflict and limited international aid. Additionally, the diaspora organizes fundraising events and collaborates with international organizations to supply food, medical supplies, and other necessities to the camps (Shelley, 2004).

In the occupied territories of Western Sahara, the Sahrawi population is victim of a social and economic apartheid. To survive without having a fixed income or job opportunities which are reserved for Moroccan settlers makes them largely dependent on the economic aid of the family in the diaspora (Lourenço, 2018).

Therefore, the Sahrawi diaspora plays an indispensable role in the decolonization process of Western Sahara. Through cultural preservation, political advocacy, economic and humanitarian aid, the diaspora not only keeps the spirit of Sahrawi nationalism alive but also exerts significant influence on the international stage to push for a just resolution to the conflict. Their efforts demonstrate the power of a united diaspora in championing the rights and aspirations of their people, ensuring that the quest for self-determination and freedom remains a vibrant and pressing issue in global affairs (Mundy, 2007).

Early Sahrawi Migration Patterns to Spain and the Canary Islands

The Sahrawi people, originally from the Western Sahara region, have a rich history that intertwines with the broader narratives of North African nomadic cultures. Their migration patterns to Spain and the Canary Islands began to take shape significantly in the 20th century, influenced by colonial history, political upheaval, and socio-economic factors (Omar, 2017).

The Spanish colonial period in Western Sahara, beginning in the late 19th century, laid the groundwork for Sahrawi migration to Spain and the Canary Islands. Spanish colonial administration, trade, and the movement of people established early connections between the Sahrawi people and the Spanish territories. These early interactions were mostly limited to trade and occasional movements for labor, but they created a foundation for future migration flows (Pazzanita & Hodges, 1994).

As Spain withdrew from Western Sahara in 1975, the region was plunged into conflict between Morocco, Mauritania, and the Sahrawi nationalist movement, the POLISARIO Front. The ensuing Western Sahara War and the harsh conditions in refugee camps led many Sahrawi to seek asylum and better living conditions abroad. Spain, as the former colonial power, became a primary destination due to established historical ties and linguistic connections (Shelley, 2004), but also to the fact that many Sahrawi had Spanish nationality since they were born under Spanish colonialism. Many Sahrawi sought refuge in Spain, leveraging their linguistic and cultural connections to assimilate and find employment (Pazzanita & Hodges, 1994).

Over the years, the Canary Islands have seen a steady flow of Sahrawi refugees who have sought asylum and temporary protection. The Spanish government has periodically provided humanitarian aid and recognized the unique situation of Sahrawi asylum seekers (Cabrera, 2023).

In Spain and the Canary Islands, the Sahrawi diaspora has gradually formed vibrant communities. These communities maintain their cultural heritage while integrating into Spanish society. Sahrawi migrants have established associations that advocate for their rights and provide support networks. They have also played a crucial role in raising awareness about the ongoing conflict in Western Sahara and lobbying for international support for their cause (Tavakoli, 2023; Zunes & Mundy, 2010).

1960's and 1970's migrations to other European Countries and Morocco

During the 1960s and 1970s, a notable diaspora of Sahrawi people started to grow in various regions besides Spain. France, Belgium, and neighboring countries saw the arrival of Sahrawi. This period was marked by the migration of individuals seeking better living conditions, educational opportunities, and political asylum, as well as by the emergence of influential political movements (Hodges, 1983).

France and Belgium attracted Sahrawi migrants due to its broader economic opportunities and established North African diaspora communities, which provided social support networks for newcomers (Zunes & Mundy, 2010). In Morocco, Sahrawi students played a pivotal role in the political and educational realms during the 1960s and 1970s. Many Sahrawi youths pursued higher education in Moroccan institutions, where they engaged in vigorous political discourse

and activism. The educational experience in Morocco often exposed Sahrawi students to new political ideologies and organizational skills, which they later applied to their nationalist activities (Shelley, 2004). These students were instrumental in raising awareness about the Sahrawi cause and advocating for the independence of Western Sahara. They organized protests, disseminated information, and built alliances with Moroccan political groups sympathetic to their cause (Martín, 2010; Omar, 2017).

The role of the Diaspora against Spanish and Moroccan Occupation

The POLISARIO Front, founded in 1973, emerged as a key political and military organization advocating for Sahrawi freedom, self-determination, sovereignty and end of the Spanish and later Moroccan occupation (Omar, 2017). The formation of the POLISARIO Front was significantly influenced by the political activism of Sahrawi students and intellectuals in Morocco and abroad. The movement aimed to establish an sovereign Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic³ and garnered widespread support from the Sahrawi diaspora (Hodges, 1983). The POLISARIO Front's impact was profound, as it led to armed conflict with Moroccan and Mauritanian forces, and eventually secured recognition from various countries and international organizations (Shelley, 2004).

The POLISARIO Front's ability to mobilize the Sahrawi population, including those in the diaspora, was crucial to its success. The organization utilized the educational and political skills of its members to effectively communicate its goals and gain international support. The diaspora played a significant role in lobbying for the Sahrawi cause at international forums and providing financial and logistical support to the POLISARIO Front (Zunes & Mundy, 2010).

These developments not only shaped the trajectory of the Western Sahara conflict but also highlighted the resilience and determination of the Sahrawi people in their pursuit of self-determination.

Influence of the 1975 Moroccan Occupation on Diaspora Patterns

The 1975 Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara significantly influenced the patterns of Sahrawi diaspora. Following the occupation, a large segment of the Sahrawi population fled the region to escape the ensuing conflict and persecution. The Moroccan invasion prompted a mass exodus, leading to the establishment of refugee camps primarily in neighboring Algeria. These camps, particularly around the city of Tindouf, became the central hubs

³ SADR

for Sahrawi refugees, fostering a sense of community and resistance against the Moroccan occupation (Tavakoli, 2023).

The 1980s were a transformative period for the Sahrawi diaspora, shaped by the Moroccan occupation and characterized by a persistent quest for education and economic stability. The influence of educational opportunities in countries like Cuba, Libya, Syria, and Algeria was profound, equipping the Sahrawi youth with the knowledge and skills needed for their nation's future. Meanwhile, the refugee camps in Algeria became centres of resilience and small economic activity, supported by international aid and the unwavering spirit of the Sahrawi people. These experiences have collectively contributed to the enduring strength and cohesion of the Sahrawi diaspora.

From the outbreak of the Moroccan-Sahrawi conflict, many countries supported POLISARIO independence efforts, which opened the floor for the program of educational mobility of youths. The program started in the late 70s, on the basis of bilateral agreements between the Sahrawi government and cooperating countries such as Algeria, Cuba, Mexico, Chile, Venezuela, Syria and Libya. This political project was a result of the post-Cold War division and an interesting example of South- South development and humanitarian aid. (Kluszczyńska, 2022, p. 140)

Cuba, in particular, played a significant role by offering scholarships to Sahrawi students, who were able to study in Cuban universities. This education was not limited to academic pursuits but also included technical and vocational training, which was essential for the development of a self-sufficient Sahrawi society (Calle, 2016). Similarly, Libya and Syria provided educational opportunities that enabled Sahrawi youth to receive higher education and return with valuable skills and knowledge. Many of young Sahrawi that had the opportunity to study in these programs are now the driving force of the POLISARIO Front, not only in the refugee camps in fields of education, health, communication and administrative tasks but also in the international organizations.

Algeria, also supported educational programs within the refugee camps. These programs aimed to provide basic education to children and specialized training for adults, helping to foster a sense of normalcy and hope despite the challenging living conditions.

Refugee Camps and the Quest for Economic Stability

The refugee camps in Algeria became the epicenters of the Sahrawi struggle for economic stability and self-reliance. Life in these camps was marked by harsh conditions, with limited access to resources and opportunities. Despite these challenges, the Sahrawi people demonstrated remarkable resilience and ingenuity in their quest for economic stability.

The POLISARIO Front played a crucial role in organizing the economic activities within the camps. Various initiatives were launched to promote self-sufficiency, including agricultural projects, small-scale manufacturing, and artisanal crafts. These activities not only provided essential goods and services within the camps but also created avenues for economic engagement and skill development (Tavakoli, 2023).

International aid and solidarity also contributed significantly to the economic stability of the Sahrawi refugees. Humanitarian organizations and sympathetic nations provided food, medical supplies, and financial support, which were critical in sustaining the refugee population. Additionally, the diaspora communities abroad sent remittances back to the camps, offering a vital lifeline for many families (Chatty, 2010).

Political Activism in the Diaspora

The diaspora community plays a crucial role in advocating⁴ for Western Sahara on the international stage. Dispersed across Europe, North America, and other regions, Sahrawi refugees, asylum seekers, migrants, students and their supporters actively engage in political activism to bring global attention to their cause.

The Sahrawi diaspora utilizes various platforms and strategies to garner international support. They lobby policy-makers, engage with human rights organizations, and participate in global forums such as the United Nations.

One of the significant challenges faced by the Sahrawi diaspora is counteracting the Moroccan government's narrative and overcoming the media blackout imposed on the region. Morocco has invested heavily in public relations campaigns to portray the Western Sahara conflict in its favor, often depicting the POLISARIO Front as a terrorist organization and emphasizing false benefits of Moroccan rule. The Sahrawi diaspora combats these narratives by highlighting human rights abuses and the repression of Sahrawi people under Moroccan occupation. They leverage social media, independent news outlets, and human rights reports to disseminate information. To enhance their advocacy efforts, the Sahrawi diaspora has formed numerous media groups and associations. These organizations play a vital role in raising awareness and mobilizing international support for the Sahrawi cause.

The Sahrawi Association in the USA^{5,6} is one of the many examples of diaspora-led initiatives

⁴For further reading on the activities of the Sahrawi diaspora: <https://porunsaharalibre.org/tag/diaspora-saharai/>

⁵ SAUSA

⁶ SAUSA. (2016). *Sahrawi Association in the United States of America*. <https://sahrawiusa.com/>

that work tirelessly to promote the Sahrawi struggle for self-determination. RASD TV, the official channel of SADR, through satellite broadcasts and online streaming, reaches a global audience, including the diaspora, helping to unify and inform Sahrawi communities worldwide (San Martín, 2010). RASD TV covers also all major events related in the diaspora and relies as well as other outlets on the collaboration of young Sahrawi in the various countries.

Sahrawi media groups such as Equipe Media, Al Gargarat, Smara News and others founded by Sahrawi journalists in the occupied territories, provide first-hand accounts of the situation on the ground documenting human rights violations and produce content that reaches an international audience. Since the resumption of war the detention of journalists has increased as well as the necessity to exit the occupied territories by all means available.⁷ Sahrawi journalists that fled are now in French Guyana, Spain, France and other European countries adding to the ranks of the diaspora.

The Western Sahara Diaspora Post-Ceasefire Era (1991 Onwards)

The Western Sahara ceasefire in 1991 did not lead to a permanent resolution of the conflict, prompting many Sahrawi to seek better living conditions abroad. As a result, the diaspora expanded notably across Europe and other parts of the world. Countries such as Italy, Norway, Sweden, and the UK have gradually become new destinations for Sahrawi refugees. This dispersal has been driven by the pursuit of safety, political asylum, and improved socio-economic opportunities and security that are unattainable in their homeland or economic and development opportunities in the refugee camps in Algeria where many Sahrawi have been living for decades.

The Sahrawi diaspora in Mauritania represents a significant community, with estimates suggesting that around 20,000 to 30,000 Sahrawi live in the country. This diaspora primarily consists of individuals who have fled the ongoing conflict in Western Sahara, which has seen its people displaced over decades. The Sahrawi in Mauritania maintain a strong cultural identity, influenced by their historical ties and the socio-political dynamics of the region. They have integrated into Mauritanian society while also preserving their distinct linguistic and cultural heritage, largely characterized by the Hassaniya Arabic dialect, which remains a unifying element among Sahrawi across the Maghreb region (Almenara-Niebla, 2022).

Despite their displacement, the Sahrawi diaspora in Mauritania continues to play a crucial role in advocating for the freedom and self-determination of Western Sahara. This community is

⁷Lakemfa, O. (2024, 10/05/2024). The journalist as a guerrilla: Saharawi as jungle experts. *VANGUARD*. https://www.vanguardngr.com/2024/05/the-journalist-as-a-guerrilla-saharawi-as-jungle-experts-by-owei-lakemfa/#google_vignette

actively engaged in transnational political activism, leveraging digital platforms to connect with Sahrawi worldwide and to keep their cause visible on the international stage. The diaspora's efforts are part of a broader movement that seeks to highlight the struggles of the Sahrawi people and to secure a resolution to the conflict that respects their right to self-determination (Almenara-Niebla, 2022).

In Germany although the presence of Sahrawi is almost non-existent with fewer than 100 Sahrawi, the work of the younger generation of Sahrawi has been highlighted in a recent article by Judit Tavakoli (Tavakoli, 2023). These efforts help to inform the global community and counter Moroccan propaganda.

In her paper «What will you do When Western Sahara Becomes Free?» Judit Tavakoli (2023) explores the cyber activism of Sahrawi diasporic youth in Germany. It focuses among others on a virtual campaign called #WhenWesternSaharaBecomesFree, initiated by Sahrawi Civil Society Europe. This campaign illustrates how young Sahrawi engage with the Western Sahara conflict through online activism. The study examines the experiences of a small group of young Sahrawi born or raised in Europe, particularly in Germany, and their political engagement both online and offline.

Key drivers for their mobilization include a strong political consciousness, the influence of transnational initiatives, and the desire to contribute to the Western Sahara cause. Despite the lack of a large Sahrawi peer group in Germany, these youths maintain a strong connection to their heritage and a commitment to activism, often integrating their political goals with their career aspirations.

Challenges in Obtaining Asylum and the Issue of Statelessness

The Sahrawi diaspora faces significant challenges in obtaining asylum due to their political status and the complexity of the Western Sahara issue. Many Western countries have stringent asylum policies, and Sahrawi often struggle to provide adequate documentation or proof of persecution required for asylum claims. The status of non-self-governing territory of Western Sahara⁸, complicates their asylum applications. Host countries sometimes do not fully understand or acknowledge the specific plight of Sahrawi refugees, leading to inconsistent and often unfavorable asylum decisions. Furthermore, the Sahrawi in the occupied territories are forced to have Moroccan nationality which complicates the matter even more.

A significant issue faced by the Sahrawi diaspora is statelessness. Statelessness refers to the condition of an individual who is not considered a national by any state under the operation

⁸ <https://www.un.org/dppa/decolonization/en/nsqt>

of its law (UNHCR, 2020). Sahrawi from the SADR do not have recognized citizenship from many countries. On the other hand Sahrawi in Morocco occupied Western Sahara are forced to have Moroccan citizenship which great part of the Sahrawi refuse (Munadil, 2021; Venkov, 2022). The SADR passport owned by many in the refugee camps and diaspora is not recognized in any western country and thus further exacerbates their stateless condition, limiting their ability to travel, work legally, and access social services.

During the first decade of 2000 a group of Sahrawi has obtained the status of stateless in Spain. To be able to solve this issue the Spanish courts have been forced to check again a wavering question, since the abandon of Western Sahara by Spain in 1975 and the situation of international vulnerability in which the native population remained. In fact, Spain continues to be the *de jure* administrative power hence Sahrawi should continue to have Spanish citizenship. The Spanish courts have tried to solve legally a problem of political nature, using the concession from the stateless status to the Sahrawi to modify the official or majority version of what happened with the Western Sahara. (López Baroni, 2014)

Statelessness has profound implications for the daily lives and long-term prospects of Sahrawi refugees. Without citizenship, they cannot participate fully in the political and civic life of their host countries, and they often lack basic rights and protections afforded to nationals or recognized refugees. This precarious legal status also affects their children, perpetuating a cycle of marginalization and exclusion (ISI, 2020).

Mahmoud Zouida Rais and Ali Bachir Mustafa, both Sahrawi refugees, have faced significant challenges in obtaining stateless status in France. Their experiences highlight the complexities and emotional toll of navigating the bureaucratic processes while maintaining a firm sense of identity as Sahrawi. In an article published in March 2023 by Guit News⁹ these two Sahrawi men explained their path to statelessness in France.

Mahmoud, originally from Western Sahara, arrived in France in 1989 to pursue his studies. As a Sahrawi, he lacked a recognized nationality, making his journey towards obtaining a legal status fraught with difficulties. Upon arriving in France, Mahmoud's status was uncertain. He applied for stateless status, a legal recognition that would allow him to reside in France without being considered a national of any country. The process was complicated and lengthy, involving substantial paperwork and legal procedures. Stateless status in France requires proof of not being recognized as a citizen by any state, a challenging task for those from occupied territories.

⁹Witter, L., & Michel, A. D. (2023, 15/03/2023). Ni d'ici, ni d'ailleurs : Mahmoud & Ali, réfugiés Sahraouis, racontent l'apatridie #4. *GUITI NEWS*. <https://guitinews.fr/cest-leur-histoire/ni-dici-ni-dailleurs-mahmoud-ali-refugies-sahraouis-racontent-lapatridie/>

After several years of persistence, Mahmoud was granted stateless status in 2003. This recognition was a significant milestone, providing him with legal protection and rights in France. In 2005, Mahmoud took another significant step by acquiring French nationality, further solidifying his status and enabling him to fully integrate into French society.

Ali Bachir Mustafa was born in a Sahrawi refugee camp, in Tindouf region a place marked by limited resources and international aid dependency. He decided to move to France in 2019, seeking better opportunities and stability. His journey was driven by a desire for a life where he could freely express his identity and aspirations. Applying for stateless status involved proving his lack of nationality, a process hindered by bureaucratic red tape and the intricacies of international law. The two-year wait was marked by uncertainty and emotional stress, highlighting the often-overlooked human aspect of legal processes.

In 2021, Ali was officially recognized as stateless by the French authorities. This status granted him certain protection and the right to reside in France.

Both Mahmoud and Ali's stories underscore the resilience and determination of individuals navigating the complexities of statelessness. Their journeys are not just legal battles but also deeply personal struggles to maintain their cultural identity and sense of belonging. Despite the challenges, both men have managed to carve out lives in France while staying true to their Sahrawi heritage.

Recent Migration Patterns and Routes – French Guiana

In recent years, Sahrawi migrants from Western Sahara have increasingly turned to a new route to seek asylum in France by traveling to French Guiana, an overseas department of France located in South America. This shift is driven by the dangerous and often deadly Mediterranean crossings and the complex geopolitical landscape in Western Sahara, occupied largely by Morocco.

French Guiana is a part of the EU, and it is the only territory in the mainland Americas to be fully integrated into a European country. It can take four months for a preliminary interview to request asylum, and at least five further months to appeal if turned down. By law, the process is supposed to take nine months maximum, but it can drag on twice as long (Thebia, 2021).

The journey typically begins in Morocco, with migrants traveling to Turkey or Qatar before flying to Brazil, which does not require visas for Sahrawi with Moroccan passport. From Brazil, they make their way to the northern city of Macapá and then illegally cross the Oyapock River

to reach French Guiana. This route, though lengthy and expensive¹⁰ and dangerous, is seen as a safer alternative to the Mediterranean crossings (Chambost, 2023).

Upon arrival in French Guiana, Sahrawi migrants face significant challenges. French Guiana is already under strain from high numbers of asylum seekers, with limited resources and infrastructure to support them. Many migrants live in precarious conditions, often in makeshift shelters or overcrowded accommodations. The local administration provides a small allowance, but this is insufficient to cover the high cost of living, leading many to work illegally in harsh conditions (Thebia, 2021).

The French government has been overwhelmed by the number of asylum applications in French Guiana, leading to a backlog and lengthy processing times. In 2021, only a small fraction of Sahrawi applicants was granted asylum, highlighting the difficulties they face in securing legal status. Despite these hurdles, migrants persist, driven by the hope of safety and better opportunities away from the repression and conflict in their homeland (Chambost, 2023).

For many Sahrawi, reaching French Guiana is part of a broader strategy to eventually move to mainland France, where they believe they might have better chances for integration and support. However, the journey remains fraught with uncertainty and challenges, both in transit and upon arrival.

The Sahrawi woman in the diaspora, a few examples

Sahrawi women in the diaspora play a crucial and evolving role in the struggle for Western Sahara's self-determination, freedom and sovereignty. Unlike the past, when women were involved in armed struggle and establishing spaces in refugee camps, today's focus has shifted towards non-violent activism. These women are active in various sectors such as education, health and administration, reflecting their continuous involvement in the cause.

Women in the diaspora engage in non-violent protests and organize and participate in demonstrations, debates, conferences, and exhibitions. These activities aim to raise awareness about the conflict in Western Sahara and highlight the necessity of achieving self-determination and peace, aligning with United Nations resolutions and international law. They actively work to get media coverage of their cause, striving to break the silence and keep the struggle's flame alive. Sahrawi women in the diaspora have a unique responsibility to make their voices heard internationally, a task that is more challenging for those in refugee camps and occupied territories.

¹⁰ Costing around 2000€

Tesh Sidis life history and political position has been on several news outlets in Spain. Three¹¹ of her main interviews shed a light on her life journey. Born in 1994 in the Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria, she endured the harsh and nomadic life. She first lived in the camps, travelling afterwards to Mauritania. Her early life was often marked by absence of the most basic nutrition and water. Sahrawi children are expected to mature quickly due to the challenging conditions. This accelerated maturity shaped Sidi's resilience and determination. At nine, she moved to Spain as part of a foster program, seeking better opportunities. Integrating into her foster family and adapting to a new culture posed significant emotional and cultural challenges. Despite the initial difficulties, she excelled academically becoming a computer engineer and working in the world of big data in banking.

In 2023, Sidi was elected to the Spanish Congress as a member of the Sumar party. Her political career is marked by her advocacy for the rights of Sahrawi people and other marginalized groups, using all of her knowledge and skills¹². She rejects the romanticizing of poverty, emphasizing that poverty should not be seen as noble or character-building, but as a critical issue needing pragmatic solutions (Salcedo, 2022). She often highlights geopolitical issues involving Western Sahara and Spain's relationship with Morocco, stating that «*Spain is kidnapped by Morocco*» (Salcedo, 2022) pointing to the political influences affecting her homeland. In the Spanish Congress, Sidi continues to push for policies that support the Sahrawi cause and address broader issues of poverty and inequality.

Her unique perspective as a former refugee and her steadfast commitment to her identity make her a powerful advocate for change. Her journey from a refugee camp to a significant political role in Spain exemplifies her determination and ability to overcome adversity while remaining true to her roots.

Khadja Bedati, is a university student, now twenty-seven years old, and is Deputy Chairwoman of Jusos¹³ Leipzig, member of the Association of Ethical Shareholders Germany and also active

¹¹ Cánovas, I. (2023, 22 / 06 / 23). La saharauí de Sumar, de nómada al Congreso: “España está secuestrada por Marruecos”. *El Independiente*. <https://www.elindependiente.com/espana/2023/06/22/la-saharai-de-sumar-de-nomada-al-congreso-espana-esta-secuestrada-por-marruecos/>; Salcedo, J. S. (2022). Tesh Sidi, informática y activista. *Mundo Negro*. <https://mundonegro.es/tesh-sidi-la-pobreza-no-se-puede-romantizar/>; Rojas, M. (2024, 11/07/2024). Entrevista a Tesh Sidi. *Cadena SER*. <https://cadenaser.com/nacional/2024/07/11/tesh-sidi-diputada-la-primera-vez-que-pude-votar-en-espana-me-vote-a-mi-misma-cadena-ser/>

¹² An exemple is the online platform Sahrawis Today: saharawistoday [@saharawistoday]. (2022). ¡NO HEMOS LLEGADO HASTA AQUI PARA DETERNOS!Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CipoeN-NohT/?locale=pt_P&img_index=1

¹³ Leipzig, J. (2020). *Jusos Leipzig-Vorstand*. Retrieved 7/15 from <https://jusos-leipzig.de/vorstand/>, *ibid.*, *ibid.*

in the academic world. In an interview to the German Magazin *Disorient*¹⁴ Bedati explained how she spent her early childhood, until the age of six, in the Sahrawi refugee camps. In the camps she formed her earliest memories, relationships and experienced the sense of community and resilience among the Sahrawi which left a lasting impression on her. When she moved to Germany with her family, the stark contrast between her new life and the one she had known fueled her desire to advocate for her people.

Over the years, Bedati has become a dedicated human rights activist, passionately advocating for the rights of the people of Western Sahara. When asked why this cause is so important to her, Bedati's response is rooted in profound empathy and a deep sense of justice¹⁵.

In Europe, particularly in Germany, there is scant coverage of the human rights abuses and the ongoing conflict in Western Sahara. Unlike the extensive media attention given to other countries in the West Asia and North Africa¹⁶ region during the so-called «Arab Spring» the situation in Western Sahara remains largely ignored. Bedati's activism is driven by both past and ongoing injustices suffered by her people. She vividly recalls the tragic incident of 14-year-old Najem Algarhi, who was shot while delivering food to his family in the protest camp of El Aaiun in 2010 during the peaceful Gdeim Izik uprising. This personal connection to the violence and suffering of her people has been a powerful motivator in her activism. The sense of loss and injustice she felt at such a young age has never left her, driving her to speak out and seek justice for others (Jagemast, 2021).

Bedati expresses her frustration with Germany's stance on the Western Sahara conflict. Despite the persistent human rights violations, Germany remains largely unresponsive¹⁷. She acknowledges the efforts of former UN Special Envoy Horst Köhler, who made significant attempts to address the issue, including visiting refugee camps and showing empathy towards Sahrawi children and youth. However, his mission ultimately failed due to a lack of support from powerful countries and continuous blockade from Morocco as faced by his predecessors.

The involvement of European and international companies in the occupied territories of Western Sahara, particularly in the exploitation of natural resources, is another major concern for Bedati. She has actively called out companies like Siemens AG for their operations in the region¹⁸. When addressing these companies, Bedati often encounters justifications that fail

¹⁴ Jagemast, H. (2021). Als würden wir nicht am Leben sein. *dis:orient*. <https://www.disorient.de/magazin/als-wuerden-wir-nicht-am-leben-sein>

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ WANA

¹⁷ Jagemast, H. (2021). Als würden wir nicht am Leben sein. *dis:orient*. <https://www.disorient.de/magazin/als-wuerden-wir-nicht-am-leben-sein>

¹⁸ Ibid.

to acknowledge the reality of the Sahrawi situation. Siemens, for example, argues that their wind projects benefit the Sahrawi by providing renewable energy. However, Bedati questions whether Siemens decision-makers have ever witnessed the oppressive conditions under which the Sahrawi live, which prevent them from benefiting from their own resources¹⁹.

Dr. Raabub Mohamed Lamin, is a doctor and Sahrawi, in an interview made in 2020²⁰ she spoke about her reality as a woman, mother, doctor and Sahrawi and the struggle for the freedom, self-determination and sovereignty of her country putting an end to Moroccan occupation.

She was born in Western Sahara, grew up in the Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria, studied in Cuba and lived and worked in Portugal and Spain and since 2023 in Switzerland. In the diaspora she is part of a Sahrawi doctors' association that actively works in the refugee camps, dedicating almost their entire vacation time to this work.

Educating children in the diaspora poses significant challenges, particularly in preserving cultural identity and language. Dr. Raabub underscores the importance of parents being role models and actively teaching their children about their heritage. This includes participating in demonstrations and instilling pride in their Sahrawi identity. She highlights that children learn not only from what they are told but also from observing their parents' actions and commitments.

Language preservation is a critical aspect, with Dr. Raabub emphasis that the time spent by her children in the refugee camps immerses themselves in their cultural and linguistic heritage. This exposure helps them learn Hassaniya and understand Sahrawi traditions and the realities of refugee life.

Dr. Raabub's insights provide a comprehensive view of the multifaceted role of Sahrawi women in the diaspora. Their contributions to the struggle for independence are significant and evolving, marked by a commitment to non-violent activism, cultural preservation, and community support. Their experiences and actions underscore a deep-seated desire for independence and a resilient connection to their Sahrawi identity.

Diaspora as a Waiting Phase

Despite the challenges faced, the Sahrawi diaspora has utilized the waiting phase to return to a free and sovereign homeland to advocate for their cause. In 2022, when hostilities resumed in

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Lourenço, I. (2020b). Difficulties of a Saharawi doctor in exile. *Jornal Tornado Online*. <https://www.jornaltornado.pt/difficulties-of-a-saharawi-doctor-in-exile/>



Map 1 – Saharwi Migrations Patterns

Western Sahara, this period of waiting was transformed for many young Sahrawi. Frustrated by the lack of progress and driven by a renewed sense of urgency, many young Sahrawi returned to the refugee camps in Tindouf to enlist in the military and join the POLISARIO Front in their renewed struggle against Moroccan control²¹. This mobilization underscores the deep-rooted desire among the Sahrawi youth to actively contribute to the fight for their homeland, rather than remaining passive victims of a protracted conflict.

The experience of the Sahrawi diaspora is marked by a continuous state of waiting – for legal recognition, for a resolution to the conflict, and for the possibility of returning home. The protracted asylum processes in host countries exacerbate this waiting phase. Many Sahrawi spend years in legal limbo, navigating complex immigration systems that do not always recognize their unique plight. This uncertainty is compounded by the lack of a universally recognized status for Western Sahara, which complicates their asylum claims (Bhabha & Robinson, 2011).

²¹ <https://www.elmoudjahid.dz/fr/monde/le-ministre-sahraoui-de-la-defense-les-jeunes-sahraouis-favorable-a-une-reprise-des-armes-1726> Le ministre sahraoui de la Défense : «les jeunes sahraouis favorable à une reprise des armes». (2020, 17/11/2020). *EL Moudjahid Monde*. <https://www.elmoudjahid.dz/fr/monde/le-ministre-sahraoui-de-la-defense-les-jeunes-sahraouis-favorable-a-une-reprise-des-armes-1726>

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