

A BATTLEFIELD TRANSFORMED: FROM GUERRILLA RESISTANCE TO MASS NONVIOLENT STRUGGLE IN THE WESTERN SAHARA

Dr. Maria J. Stephan and Jacob Mundy¹

INTRODUCTION

In late May 2005, a popular uprising against foreign domination rocked the Maghreb region of North Africa. With scenes reminiscent of the recent unarmed insurrections against unpopular governments in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004-05), and Lebanon (2005), thousands of ethnic Sahrawis from the Western Sahara, a former Spanish colony that has been under strict military control by the Kingdom of Morocco since the latter invaded and occupied the territory in 1975, took to the streets en masse demanding the withdrawal of Moroccan troops and independence for Africa's last remaining colony. Sahrawis are calling their sustained defiance against foreign rule an *Intifada*, or "shaking off".

The desert uprising represents a dramatic turning point in the Sahrawi people's struggle for national self-determination for three main reasons. First: the scope, intensity, and mass civilian involvement in the nationalist uprising took Moroccan occupation forces by surprise. Moroccan police, soldiers, and intelligence agents, who

¹ Dr. Maria J. Stephan is the Manager of Educational Initiatives at the *International Center on Nonviolent Conflict*, a non-partisan, non-profit, non-governmental organization that develops and encourages the use of civilian-based, nonmilitary strategies to establish and defend democracy and human rights worldwide. She received her PhD from The Fletcher School, Tufts University (Medford, MA).

Jacob Mundy was a Peace Corps volunteer in Morocco (1999-2001) and is a graduate student in Middle East Studies at the University of Washington. He is the co-author (with Stephen Zunes) of an upcoming book on the conflict over Western Sahara.

controlled the Western Sahara using violence and intimidation, were suddenly confronted by thousands of fearless civilians. Second: Sahrawis of Western Sahara, a traditionally nomadic people with a distinct language and culture, confronted their oppressors with neither guns nor bombs. Like the first Palestinian *Intifada*, a largely unarmed mass civilian uprising against the Israeli occupation launched in December 1987, the Sahrawi *Intifada* has featured nonviolent “weapons” like symbolic protests, mass demonstrations, civil disobedience, and other forms of nonviolent defiance. Third: like the first Palestinian *Intifada*, this uprising was led by Sahrawis living under occupation and not by any armed vanguard on the outside. The local Sahrawi resistance is being supported by a strong transnational component led by members of the Sahrawi diaspora who are in daily communication with their compatriots using interactive internet chat rooms. This internet communication has helped promote unity, nonviolent discipline, and strategic coordination in the Sahrawi movement.

This paper analyzes the transformation of the Sahrawi pro-independence movement’s strategy from one based on armed struggle and diplomacy conducted by the Polisario, to one based on civilian-led nonviolent resistance led by Sahrawis living inside the occupied territory and in southern Morocco. **Part One** offers an overview of the political history of the conflict over Western Sahara. It chronicles the rise of Sahrawi nationalism and describes the armed resistance offered by the Polisario national liberation movement against colonial powers. **Part Two** discusses the failure of traditional diplomacy, including UN mediation, to resolve the conflict over the Western Sahara. Morocco has systematically obstructed UN efforts to organize a referendum on whether the Western Sahara should be independent or part of Morocco, while

intensifying its repressive grip over the occupied territory. The relatively nonviolent popular uprising launched last May, this article argues, reflects a new asymmetric resistance strategy between talking and killing that has re-focused international attention on a conflict that has destabilized this important geo-strategic region for three decades.

The **Conclusions** assess the factors that will determine how nonviolent resistance could achieve success as a method of national liberation in the Sahrawi struggle. In particular, it will focus on the importance of *unity, nonviolent discipline, and strategic planning* to advance the objectives of the Sahrawi self-determination movement. These variables have been identified by nonviolent conflict scholars as being particularly important to the overall effectiveness of nonviolent civic movements. To be effective, a Sahrawi-led active nonviolent strategy must systematically undermine Morocco's political will and capacity to maintain the occupation. By targeting the Moroccan regime directly and indirectly with various political and economic nonviolent sanctions, and developing strategies to stop Western (particularly U.S. and French) support for Morocco's occupation, Sahrawis, who are the supposedly weaker party in this asymmetric conflict, can wield great power. Meaningful self-determination for the Sahrawi population of Western Sahara could be achieved through negotiations backed by the force of active nonviolent resistance, or what Indian independence leader Mahatma Gandhi called "war without violence".

PART ONE: HISTORY OF REPRESSION AND RESISTANCE

Western Sahara is a sparsely populated territory about the size of Colorado sandwiched between Mauritania and Morocco on the North African coast of the Atlantic. The flat and rocky territory, which was traditionally inhabited by nomadic Arab tribes, boasts natural resources that include fish, phosphates, and possibly natural gas and petroleum off its Atlantic coast. From 1884-1976 Western Sahara was colonized by Spain. While most European colonies in Africa had achieved their independence by 1975, Western Sahara failed to undergo successful decolonization.

Ethnic Sahrawis (literally Arabic for Saharan) claim descent from one of the Hassaniyyah Arabic-speaking tribes geographically associated with the Spanish Sahara. Sahrawi culture combines nomadic roots and Islamic practices.² Like most nationalist movements during the 1960s-70s, Sahrawi nationalism grew in response to colonialism. The *Harakah Al-Tahrir Al-Sahra'* (Movement of Liberation of the Sahara) led by Mohammed Sidi Ibrahim Bassiri was the first organization to call for Western Sahara's independence in 1967. Its first public action was in June 1970, when a group of demonstrators gathered in a square in Al-'Ayun (the largest city in Western Sahara) called Zemla. Spanish colonial forces dispersed the crowd by firing into it, killing at least a dozen Sahrawis. Some Western Saharans now refer to this event as their first Intifada, the *Intifada Zemla*.

Though Bassiri's insurrection failed, it inspired a group of young Western Saharans refugees, then studying in Moroccan universities, to form their own organization. Almost three years after Zemla, a small group of inexperienced guerillas attacked a Spanish outpost on May 20, 1973. This organization called itself Frente

² For more on Western Saharan identities, see Jacob Mundy, "Colonial Formations in Western Saharan Nationalism," in Nabil Boudraa and Joseph Krause (eds.) *Mosaic North Africa: A Cultural Re-Appraisal of Ethnic and Religious Minorities*. Cambridge Scholars Press, forthcoming.

Popular para la Liberación de Saguia el-Hamra y Río de Oro (Polisario), named after the two administrative districts of the Spanish Sahara. Since then, the Polisario has been the most visible face of Western Saharan nationalism.

After the Polisario-led armed attacks, Spanish dictator General Francisco Franco promised the indigenous Sahrawi population a referendum on the territory's final status by the end of 1975. Meanwhile, neighboring Morocco and Mauritania claimed that the Spanish Sahara belonged to them. After Moroccan King Hassan II referred the case to the International Court of Justice (ICJ), in October 1975 the ICJ formally rejected both countries' claims to the Spanish Sahara and declared that the right of self-determination for Western Sahara was paramount.³

With Franco's health deteriorating and the United States (which did not want to see the revolutionary leftist Polisario come to power) strongly backing Morocco, Spain reneged on its earlier promise to hold a referendum. In the Madrid Accords signed in November 1975, Spain agreed to divide the territory between Morocco and Mauritania. The settlement, reached without any consultation of the indigenous population, was rejected by the Polisario, which declared independence for the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) in 1976.

Moroccan forces moved into the Western Sahara in 1975 along with 350,000 Moroccan "civilian volunteers" who were sent to "reclaim" the territory for Morocco. During the Moroccan invasion and the so-called "Green March," most of the ethnic Sahrawi population, led by the Polisario, fled to neighboring Algeria. They became

³ A UN Visiting Mission concluded at the time that there "was an overwhelming consensus among Saharans within the territory in favor of independence and opposing integration with any neighboring country." See United Nations General Assembly, Report of the United Nations Visiting Mission to Spanish Sahara, 1975, Official Records: Thirtieth Session, Supplement no. 23, Volume 3, Chapter XIII, A/10023/Add.5 (New York: United Nations, 1977): Annex, page 7, paragraph 18-21. [Cited in Stephen Zunes and Jacob Mundy, "Western Sahara," in *Z Magazine*, October 2002.]

refugees in Tindouf, southern Algeria. Thousands of ethnic Sahrawis who remained in Al 'Ayun demonstrated against the Moroccan invasion and take-over, though their demonstrations received scant press coverage. The UN Security Council unanimously passed a series of resolutions calling for the withdrawal of foreign troops from Western Sahara and recognizing the right of self-determination and independence for the people of Western Sahara.

With arms and aid from Algeria and Libya, the Polisario guerillas, highly motivated and knowledgeable about the terrain, fought against the Moroccan and Mauritanian forces. By 1982 Mauritanian troops had been defeated and Moroccan control was reduced to a bare 15% of the territory. The military tide turned, however, after the U.S., France, and Saudi Arabia dramatically increased their support for Morocco's war effort. This included counter-insurgency training and helping Morocco build an 800-mile sand-wall consisting of two fortified "berms", which closed off more than 80% of Western Sahara from penetration by Polisario fighters.⁴ These mined and heavily defended sand-walls severely limited the Polisario guerillas' freedom of movement. By the late 1980s, what had once appeared to be an incipient Polisario victory had become a military stalemate. Since then, Western Sahara has been divided between a Moroccan controlled section (about 80%) in the west and a Polisario section in the east – the so-called "liberated zone".⁵ There are approximately 180,000 Sahrawi refugees living in Polisario-administered camps in southern Algeria.

⁴ Stephen Zunes, "Western Sahara: The Other Occupation," *Tikkun Magazine*, January/February 2006.

⁵ Besides being home to several UN peacekeeping bases and dozens of Polisario outposts, the Polisario zone -- the "liberated territory" -- is also a place where the refugees from Tindouf will often spend several months year, either practicing their traditions of nomadic herding or taking a break from the relatively crowded camps in Algeria. There are also several permanent settlements, constructed during Spanish colonialism and then converted into bases by Polisario. These stations now serve as symbolic points of national sovereignty. As much as possible, Polisario and SADR attempt to carry out official business and major meetings inside the Territory under their control, rather than on Algerian soil. The only links between the western and

Almost immediately after 1975, Morocco initiated a concerted and often violent campaign to rid the Western Sahara of nationalist sentiment. The early waves of Moroccan state terror focused primarily on activists and supporters of the Polisario, which the Moroccan government accused of fighting a proxy war for Algeria, Morocco's regional rival who allowed the Polisario to establish a government-in-exile on the southwestern part of its territory.⁶ During King Hassan's reign there were severe violations of human rights including systematic torture of political prisoners and widespread "disappearances" of suspected Sahrawi activists, their associates and their relatives.⁷ Entire Sahrawi families have been discovered buried in the desert.⁸

PART II: FAILED DIPLOMACY, "MOROCCANIZATION", AND INTIFADA

International diplomacy has hitherto failed to resolve the conflict over Western Sahara. In 1988, Morocco and the Polisario agreed to hold an independence-or-integration referendum under UN auspices. In 1992, following a UN-brokered ceasefire agreement between the Polisario and Morocco, UN peacekeepers were deployed to the Western Sahara to monitor the ceasefire and to prepare the population for a referendum on the fate of the territory. According to the agreement, Sahrawi refugees living in Tindouf were supposed to return to Western Sahara prior to the UN-supervised referendum, with Sahrawis native to Western Sahara being given the choice of voting in

eastern side are through telecommunications, though some families have been able to stage brief reunions in Mauritania.

Passage through the sand berm is possible, but it requires either a dangerous night crossing or bribing Moroccan soldiers.

6. Polisario comes from the Spanish: Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguia el-Hamra y Río de Oro (Frente POLISARIO).

7 According to a dossier created by indigenous human rights activists in the occupied Western Sahara, there are several cases, allegedly documented, where Polisario activists were flown out over the ocean in a helicopter and dropped from a high altitude, far from the shore. Similar claims were made by Teresa Smith in "Al-Mukhtufin: A Report on Disappearances," in Richard Lawless and Laila Monahan (eds.), *War and Refugees: The Western Sahara Conflict* (New York: Pinter, 1987): 145.

8. Jacob Mundy, Interview with Omar Abdelsalem, President of the Association of Families of Sahrawi Prisoners and Disappeared (Asociación de Familiares de Presos y Desparecidos Saharaouis—AFAPREDESA), Rabouni, Algeria (September 1, 2003).

favor of either independence or integration with Morocco. Neither the repatriation nor the referendum took place due to Moroccan insistence on the inclusion of Moroccan settlers and other Moroccan citizens that it claimed had tribal links to Western Sahara in the voting.⁹

The arrival of an international contingent of United Nations peacekeepers and referendum organizers in 1992 did little to alleviate the poor human rights situation in Western Sahara. The soldiers, officials and employees of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), who found themselves under intense surveillance by Moroccan security agents, reported witnessing acts of intimidation and repression against the indigenous population.¹⁰

MINURSO, plagued by weak leadership and a weak mandate, essentially followed the marching orders given by the Moroccan government. In 1996, Amnesty International charged that MINURSO was a “silent witness to blatant human rights violations.”¹¹ The peacekeepers were bystanders in May 1995 and October 1999 when large, mostly peaceful demonstrations in the Western Saharan capital were violently suppressed by Moroccan security forces. Outside of MINURSO there is virtually no international presence in Western Sahara, which has contributed to the territory’s isolation. Sahrawi activists have used clandestine networks and human couriers to communicate human rights violations to groups inside Morocco and the international community.¹²

⁹ Stephen Zunes, “Western Sahara: The Other Occupation,” *Tikkun Magazine*, January/February 2006.

¹⁰Fatima Ziai, *Keeping It Secret: The United Nations Operation in Western Sahara*, Human Rights Watch (October 1995): 30-32.

¹¹. Amnesty International, *Human Rights Violations in the Western Sahara* AI Index MDE 29/04/96 (April 18, 1996): 12.

¹² From an interview with Sahrawi activists in Washington, DC on 13 January 2006.

The agreement to hold a referendum inside the Western Sahara broke down in 2000 when the UN Security Council, led by France and the United States, decided that another “East Timor”¹³ was neither in their interests nor in the interests of Morocco’s new king, Mohammed VI. Since then, Moroccan intransigence on the issue of Western Saharan self-determination has foiled the mediation efforts of former U.S. Secretary of State, James Baker, who presented two proposals (reluctantly accepted by the Polisario) that would have allowed Moroccan settlers to vote in a referendum along with Western Saharans following a five-year “autonomy” period.

The UN Security Council approved the second Baker plan in the summer of 2003. Morocco, however, rejected the plan, claiming that it would not have its “territorial integrity” put to a vote.¹⁴ As they had in regard to the initial UN Security Council resolutions calling for Morocco’s withdrawal, France and the U.S. again blocked the UN from enforcing its mandate and pressuring Morocco to comply with its obligations under international law. Baker and the top UN diplomat assigned the Western Sahara portfolio, Alvaro de Soto, resigned their positions in 2004.

The flow of Moroccan settlers into the Western Sahara continued, until Moroccan citizens outnumbered the indigenous Sahrawi population by a ratio of more than 2:1. As part of its “Moroccanization” policy, the Moroccan government has tried to assimilate Sahrawis by offering them jobs and free housing inside Morocco. Under Moroccan administration in Western Sahara, Sahrawis have very little political and economic power. Much of Morocco’s investment in the Western Sahara has benefited Moroccan

¹³ A reference to East Timor’s transition from occupied and annexed territory of Indonesia to independent statehood following an UN-monitored “popular consultation” in 1999 in which nearly 80% of East Timorese voted in favor of independence. Following the referendum, a wave of violence launched by pro-integration militias (armed and trained by Indonesia) and Indonesian troops resulted in widespread destruction and a humanitarian crisis.

¹⁴ Jacob Mundy, “Mixing Occupation and Oil in Western Sahara,; in *Corpwatch*, 21 July 2005.

soldiers (approx. 120,000) and settlers (approx. 200,000). The few Sahrawis allowed to achieve political rank must swear allegiance to the King.¹⁵

As part of a divide-and-rule strategy characteristic of most other foreign occupations, Morocco has used threats and bribes to entice Polisario members to defect and support integration with Morocco. High-level Polisario defectors are given well-paid positions in government, especially if they are willing to denounce their former comrades internationally.¹⁶ Rabat regularly organizes public displays of Sahrawi fidelity to the Monarchy for domestic and international consumption, though the sincerity of these demonstrations is questionable.¹⁷

First Intifada

Since the death of Moroccan King Hassan II in July 1999 and the ascension of his son King Mohammed VI, Morocco has experienced some political liberalization, including improvements in the Moroccan government's handling of human rights complaints. The positive political space created by the death of King Hassan and removal of his right hand man, former Interior Minister Driss Basri (called "Butcher Basri" by many Sahrawis and Moroccan human rights leaders) allowed for the formation of an unprecedented number of civil society organizations. In November 1999, former Moroccan political prisoners and disappeared created the *Forum for Truth and Justice*,

¹⁵ The other body for Sahrawi representation outside of elected officials, the Consultative Council for Saharan Affairs, was created by the Monarchy and is filled with tribal elders that favor integration.

¹⁶ For example, Brahim Hakim, one of the most significant defections from Polisario to Morocco, was given a governorship for his 1992 betrayal. As another example, a Moroccan diplomat at the United Nations approached journalist Ian Williams to relay a message to the Polisario's UN representative that he would be handsomely rewarded for defection.

¹⁷ According to a UN official based in Al-'Ayun, Arabic-speaking MINURSO peacekeepers once asked a crowd of pro-integrationist "Sahrawis" about their attitudes, only to discover it was Moroccans dressed up for the event.

which pressed for more government action on past injustices suffered by Moroccan political oppositionists during the King Hassan reign.¹⁸

Despite the promises and the hope offered in the early months of King Mohammed's reign, widespread social discontent erupted in the Moroccan-occupied city of Al-'Ayun in September and October 1999. Dozens of Sahrawi students organized a sit-in demonstration for more scholarships and transportation subsidies to Moroccan universities. The students set up tents where they held a constant vigil in Zemla square in Al-'Ayun, similar in purpose to the "tent cities" created by Ukrainian and Lebanese opposition movements recently as the site of mass sit-ins. Former Sahrawi political prisoners seeking compensation and accountability for state-sponsored "disappearances" soon joined the nonviolent vigil, along with Sahrawi workers from the phosphate mines at Bou Craa, and Sahrawi members of the militant Moroccan Union of Unemployed University Graduates.

For twelve days the protestors occupied a square in front of the Najir Hotel, which houses a large proportion of MINURSO's personnel. During the 1999 uprising the Sahrawi organizers deliberately avoided overt political slogans, deciding beforehand to limit their demands to social and economic claims for Sahrawis. Salka Barca, an ethnic Sahrawi who was born in the occupied territory, grew up in a refugee camp in Algeria, and now lives in the United States, where she administers a Sahrawi web-based chat room, said, "The goal at this stage was to test the waters and gauge Morocco's reaction. The leaders wanted to see how quickly Moroccan security forces would

18. Susan Slyomovics, "A Truth Commission for Morocco," Middle East Report 218 (Spring 2001): 20.

respond to the demonstrations and what they would do. It was meant to be a preparation for larger demonstrations in the future.”¹⁹

After twelve days of nonviolent sit-ins, the Moroccan authorities moved in to break up the tent camp. Moroccan police beat and tear-gassed demonstrators. Dozens were arrested and some were reportedly dumped in the desert miles out of town.²⁰ Five days later, with the population increasingly radicalized as a result, a larger demonstration staged, which included pro-referendum and pro-independence slogans. U.S. State Department reports accused Moroccan forces of using “excessive violence” to disperse the demonstrations and “encouraging gangs of local thugs to break into and vandalize the homes and places of businesses of some of the city’s Sahrawi residents.”²¹

In a surprising turn of events, during the 1999 *Intifada*, Moroccan citizens from the shantytowns on the outskirts of Al’Ayun actually joined in Sahrawi uprising.²² The economic thrust of the demonstrations had apparently attracted some poor and disenfranchised Moroccan settlers, especially those of Sahrawi origin.²³ The joint nonviolent resistance involving Sahrawis and Moroccan settlers was an especially

¹⁹ Salka Barca, interviewed by Maria J. Stephan in Washington, DC on 13 January 2006.

²⁰ Malainin Lakhali, interviewed by Jacob Mundy in Rabouni, Algeria (November 6, 2005). Lakhali, one of the main organizers, was forced to live underground for several years after the uprising. He later fled to the refugee camps in Algeria.

²¹ United States Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, Western Sahara: Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, 1999 (February 25, 2000): electronic document, http://www.state.gov/www/global/human_rights/1999_hrp_report/wsahara.html, last retrieved October 2004.

²² These Moroccan neighborhoods in the Western Sahara were established after the Second Green March in 1991 when Rabat moved thousands of its citizens into the Territory to vote in what was supposed to be a referendum on the territory’s final status.

²³ The term *Sahrawi* and Western Saharan are often used interchangeably, though this is not accurate. Some of the confusion comes from the fact that all indigenous Western Saharans are ethnic *Sahrawis*. Yet not all ethnic *Sahrawis* are native to Western Sahara. The cities of Tan Tan and Assa in southern Morocco, Tindouf in eastern Algeria, and Zouerate in northwestern Mauritania are predominantly *Sahrawi*. The most unifying aspect of all *Sahrawis* is their use of *Hassaniyyah* Arabic, which is also spoken in Mauritania but is unrelated to either Moroccan or Algerian dialects. An ethnic *Sahrawi* is a person claiming descent from one of the *Hassaniyyah*-speaking tribes geographically associated with the former Spanish Sahara. From its nomadic roots to its approach to Islamic practice, *Sahrawi* culture also has much more in common with Arab Mauritania than it does with neighboring populations in southern Morocco or Algeria. Today there are ethnic *Sahrawi* populations in northern Mauritania, eastern Algeria and southern Morocco, though most are from Western Sahara.

interesting development, because it showed that the cause of self-rule was grounded in political and economic rights as much as ethnic identity.

Responding to international criticism following the violent crackdown, the Moroccan government quickly removed the governor and local chief of police following the demonstrations and proposed elections for a new royal advisory council for Saharan affairs. At the same time, the Moroccan government singled out three Sahrawi activists to prosecute as alleged Polisario spies and sentenced them to four-year terms in June 2000. Two months later, Sahrawi human rights activists created a Western Saharan Section of the Forum for Truth and Justice (FVJ) in Al-'Ayun. This was a branch of the national Moroccan organization that focused on the issue of past political prisoners and "disappearances" of King Hassan's regime.²⁴ The FVJ's Sahara Branch was the first ever Sahrawi-led organization dealing with rights issues - the Moroccan government banned it three years later, claiming it had committed acts of "separatism." Since that time, the political space for Sahrawi activism in the Western Sahara has been extremely curtailed.

Second Sahrawi *Intifada*: A Nationalist Uprising

The seeming calm in the Western Sahara following the 1991 cease-fire masked a high level of frustration shared by Sahrawis, particularly the large youth population, living in the occupied territory and in the camps. From 1999 to 2005, sporadic and small demonstrations continued to occur in the Western Sahara. Tensions grew substantially from the summer of 2004 to the spring of 2005 when the United Nations-

²⁴ Suzan Slyomovics, "A Truth Commission for Morocco?" Middle East Report: http://www.merip.org/mer/mer218/218_slyomovics.html

led peace process ground to a complete standstill and UN envoy James Baker called it quits. Then, in May 2005, the situation exploded.

Morocco unwittingly triggered the second Sahrawi *Intifada* when it initiated the transfer of a well-known Sahrawi prisoner from Al-'Ayun to southern Morocco. The prisoner's family and a small group of Sahrawi activists outside the prison staged a small demonstration on May 23, claiming that this move would make it nearly impossible for the family to visit their imprisoned son. After Moroccan authorities forcefully dispersed this protest, a larger demonstration was organized later in the day. Sahrawis soon shouted pro-independence slogans and flew Polisario flags (an illegal act); some burned tires and threw stones at the Moroccan security forces.

A violent crackdown against the demonstrators provoked larger demonstrations in the Sahrawi neighborhoods of near the squares of Zemla and Ma'atallah. After several hours Moroccan soldiers and military police invaded and besieged the neighborhoods. Several homes were ransacked, the crowds were forcefully dispersed, and dozens of activists were arrested and imprisoned. The next day, demonstrators took to the streets in even larger numbers. The uprising spread to Smara and Dakhla, as well as to the southern Moroccan cities of Tan Tan and Assa. In the Moroccan universities of Agadir, Marrakesh, Casablanca, Rabat and Fez, Sahrawi students organized solidarity demonstrations and condemned the repression against their co-nationals in occupied Western Sahara. After a week of clashes, more than one hundred Sahrawi students had been detained.

Sahrawi activists arrested by Moroccan forces soon went on hunger strike to protest their conditions in prison and the grounds of their arrest. After fifty days of the

hunger strike, the activists were reunited in Al-Ayoun's "Black Prison." Yet even with the well known nationalist activists in prison, smaller demonstrations continued in the following months, including almost nightly clashes between Sahrawi youth and Moroccan police. At the end of October, Moroccan security agents beat a Sahrawi youth to death. Hamdi Lembarki was hailed as the *Intifada's* first martyr. Several more brutal deaths followed, placing a chill over Western Sahara.

During a massive funeral procession in early January 2006, the Polisario's flag was draped over Lembarki's coffin. This was followed by the release of Aminatou Haidar from prison. Haidar, a charismatic mother of two who has spent years in Moroccan prisons, is known as the "Sahrawi Gandhi" by many Sahrawis. Haidar is outspoken in her insistence that the Sahrawi struggle use nonviolent methods and has declared publicly that she harbors no ill will towards Moroccans. Since she was first imprisoned in 1987 after leading a women's-led nonviolent protest against the Moroccan occupation, she has developed close relations with international media and human rights organizations. Haidar's release from prison, which was helped by an international solidarity movement that coalesced around her cause,²⁵ was met with a massive display

²⁵ As a woman and mother of two children who has endured terrible treatment as a political prisoner inside Moroccan prisons, Aminatou Haidar became a local and international icon. After she was re-arrested in June 2005, an international movement was founded on her behalf, which succeeded in collecting thousands of signatures calling for her release. Aminatou was nominated for the prestigious Sakharov prize by the European Parliament last year and won the Juan Brandeis award given by the Spanish Association for Refugees and Human Rights. She was finally released from the "black prison" in Al-Ayoun on 17 January 2006 amidst terrific local and international fanfare. Sahrawis from throughout the occupied territory and Southern Morocco traveled to Al-Ayoun for a large celebration when she was released. During the celebration, Aminatou gave a speech demanding self-determination and independence for Western Sahara. ("Sahrawi Human Rights Defenders Under Attack," *Amnesty International Report*, 24 November 2005. Accessible on-line at: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGMDE290082005>.)

of Polisario flags, pictures of Polisario's leader (Mohammed Abdelaziz) and even Palestinians kuffiyyas.²⁶

Communicating the *Intifada* and International Solidarity

Since 1975, Morocco has maintained stringent control over the flow of information into and out of the Western Sahara, mostly by restricting media access to the occupied territory. After the outbreak of the 2005 *Intifada* several foreign delegations, composed mostly of Spanish politicians and solidarity activists, were turned back at the airport. Al-Jazeera, the Arabic satellite news channel, was barred from entering Al-'Ayun. Moroccan authorities expelled one Al-Jazeera journalist who had just arrived to cover a report on the situation in Western Sahara and Moroccan journalists were held in custody before being released.

In the absence of free media in occupied Western Sahara, Sahrawi activists have been savvy users of alternative media and communications technology. Images of Morocco's violent crackdown against unarmed Sahrawi protestors taken with digital cameras and cell phones quickly reached international audiences. International outrage at the Moroccan regime was sparked when photos from inside the Black Prison circulated on the Internet. Some of the photos, taken from a camera-phone during the height of the demonstrations, showed the prisoners crammed into a tiny room, sleeping on the floor, and even in toilet stalls. Even the strictly controlled domestic media in Morocco printed critical articles.

²⁶ In terms of normal clothing, Palestinian Kuffiyyas are very rare in Morocco and almost unheard of in *Sahrawi* society. Its deployment in demonstrations is obviously for symbolic effect. The visible use of Polisario flags is also an interesting development. Toby Shelley, a Financial Times journalist with years of experience in the Moroccan controlled Western Sahara, claims that Polisario flags were rarely seen less than a year ago. Now they are ubiquitous in demonstrations. Personal Correspondence with Jacob Mundy (January 2006).

In Spain, with its close cultural and colonial ties to Western Sahara, solidarity groups have been especially active in demanding that their government pressure the Morocco to uphold its obligations under international law. Activists from pro-Sahrawi solidarity groups staged demonstrations in Seville and Almeria to protest the violent repression against Sahrawi protestors during the May uprising. The Spanish Human Rights League (SHRL) condemned Morocco for violating the fundamental human right of free speech and assembly in Western Sahara.

A few Moroccan journalists and activists have also paid a heavy price for their outspoken criticism of King Mohammed's regime. At the end of last year, Moroccan journalist Ali Lmrabet, well known for his political satires and critiques of the Moroccan government in French and Arabic weekly magazines, was banned from practicing as a journalist for ten years.²⁷ Lmrabet, who criticized the government's propaganda on Western Sahara and visited the Sahrawi camps in Algeria, was banned from reporting in Morocco after he dispatched reports from the camps.²⁸ Although very few Moroccans openly support Western Saharan independence (to do so publicly is illegal) there has been cooperation between Moroccan human rights organizations and Sahrawi activists.²⁹ Western Sahara nevertheless remains a largely taboo topic in Morocco.

²⁷ "Shock and Concern After Ali Lmrabet Banned from Practicing as a Journalist for 10 Years," *Reporters Without Borders*, 12.4.05.

²⁸ "Shock and Concern After Ali Lmrabet Banned from Practicing as a Journalist for 10 Years," *Reporters Without Borders*, 12.4.05.

²⁹ The Moroccan Association for Human Rights (AMDH), which supports a "democratic solution" to Western Sahara, operates an office in Al-'Ayun, and works closely with *Sahrawi* human rights defenders. Though AMDH has to be very cautious, it nonetheless attempts to address human rights issues objectively, calling for the accountability of Moroccan government agents in Western Sahara. Though the Sahara Branch of the FVJ was closed down, there are still several *Sahrawi* members of the national FVJ organization. The far Left political party, Ennahdj Eddimocrati (Democratic Path), the successor to Morocco's old Marxist parties, supports the right of self-determination in Western Sahara. On the other end of the political spectrum, the most influential dissident Islamic leader in Morocco, Shaykh Abdeslam Yassine, contentiously said he would understand why Western Sahara would not want to be a part of Morocco, though he probably does not support the secularism of Polisario.

Current Situation and Sahrawi Options

The Moroccan government has never attempted to enter into a dialog with Sahrawi nationalist leaders who favor independence. Although the regime of King Mohammed has acted with more restraint than that of his father towards overt acts of “separatism,” there is no indication today that Rabat is willing to dialogue with any of the Sahrawi leaders of the *Intifada*. Instead, these leaders have been arrested, imprisoned, and put on trial for their role in last summer’s demonstrations. King Mohammed’s declaration in November 2005 that Morocco was willing to offer the Western Sahara “enhanced autonomy” under Moroccan sovereignty has been largely rhetorical. Cracking down on Sahrawi civil society, offering oil exploration contracts and improving its defenses along the sand-berm are just a few signs that Morocco intends to maintain control of the Western Sahara. Thus many observers find it difficult to believe that the Moroccan government is sincere in its offers of autonomy, which to most Sahrawi nationalists is a non-option anyway.

With negotiations stalled, the referendum on independence postponed indefinitely, and violent crackdowns on Sahrawi protestors intensifying, the people of Western Sahara would appear to have few options. The Polisario, which maintains a standing army, could seek to reinvigorate the military option. Just before the outbreak of the second Sahrawi *Intifada*, Polisario's chief negotiator, Emhamed Khadad, told Reuters that nationalist forces were considering resuming armed struggle if UN led peace talks continued to stagnate. This declaration was denounced by many Sahrawi activists, including the leaders of the nonviolent uprising, as being out of touch with reality. Morocco has overwhelming military superiority and is backed by major Western

powers. The Polisario could possibly turn to urban warfare inside Morocco, though this move would be vociferously denounced by a vast majority of Sahrawis and would lead to major international backlash.

Sahrawis have never used terrorism as part of their liberation struggle. During the armed struggle launched by the Polisario from 1975-1991, Sahrawi guerillas targeted security forces exclusively and consciously avoided civilian targets. The rejection of terrorism as a method of struggle has afforded the Polisario a certain level of international legitimacy. More than 70 countries, most recently South Africa and Kenya, now recognize the SADR, which is democratically-elected every three years. It has been difficult for Morocco to brand the Polisario as a terrorist organization and be taken seriously. As British journalist Toby Shelley has written, "Attempts to tar Polisario with the Al Qaeda brush have been as cack-handed as the previous depictions of Polisario fighters as being, variously, Cuban mercenaries, Iranian-backed revolutionaries, and allies of [Palestinian terrorist leader] Ahmed Jibril."³⁰ It would be easier for Morocco to brand the Polisario as a terrorist organization, however, if it resumed armed struggle.

CONCLUSIONS: ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE NONVIOLENT STRUGGLE

As with the South African and Palestinian resistance movements, the exiled Sahrawi leadership has acknowledged the growing importance of the resistance within the country. Highly respected SADR president Mohamed Abdelaziz observed in a recent speech,

³⁰ Toby Shelley, "Burden or Benefit? Morocco in the Western Sahara," Speech given at the Middle East Studies Centre, Oxford University, February 18, 2005. Accessible on-line at: <http://www.arso.org/TSh180205.htm>.

The Sahrawi reality continues to gain strength and spread to all areas of Sahrawi presence, in the South of Morocco, in the territory and outside it. The insurgency is the clear proof that the Sahrawi resistance is making headway and that the struggle for national liberation is moving head on to achieve its objective....The Sahrawi uprising is a shining peaceful expression of this resistance, it is a perseverance of the militant action in the occupied territories and in the south of Morocco, and not limited to these areas but to wherever the Sahrawi live to express their insubordination and active and strong opposition to the Moroccan occupation of parts of the Sahrawi Republic.³¹

How viable is a Sahrawi strategy based on nonviolent resistance? In recent decades, nonviolent civilian-based resistance has emerged as a popular method for prosecuting conflict forcefully and effectively throughout the world, in a variety of cultural and political situations. Nonviolent conflict has been used successfully against authoritarian regimes, foreign occupations, and other repressive opponents in places like India (the Hindu-Muslim nonviolent resistance against British colonizers), the Philippines (against the Marcos dictatorship), in Central and Eastern Europe (the 1989 “people power” revolutions against communist regimes), in South Africa (against apartheid), in East Timor (against the Indonesian occupation), in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (during the first *Intifada*) and most recently in Lebanon (against Syria’s overbearing role in that country).³²

In the cases mentioned above, the systematic application of nonviolent sanctions

³¹ Speech of President Mohamed Abdelaziz of the Sahrawi Republic on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the Polisario Front, Saharan Press Service (SPS), 20 May 2003.

³² Classic texts that analyze historical popular nonviolent struggles against different adversaries include: Peter Ackerman and Jack DuVall, *A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2001); Peter Ackerman and Christopher Kruegler, *Strategic Nonviolent Conflict: The Dynamics of People Power in the Twentieth Century* (Westport: Praeger, 1994); Kurt Schock, *Unarmed Insurrections: People Power Movements in Non-Democracies*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005; Gene Sharp, *Waging Nonviolent Struggle: 20th Century Practice and 21st Century Potential*, Boston: Porter Sargent Publishers, 2005; Stephen Zunes, Lester R. Kurtz and Sarah Beth Ashler, eds. *Nonviolent Social Movements: A Geographical Perspective* (Malden, MA, Blackwell Publishers, 1999); Ralph E. Crow, Philip Grant, and Saad E. Ibrahim, eds. *Arab Nonviolent Political Struggle in the Middle East* Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1990. Paul Wehr, Heidi Burgess and Guy Burgess (eds), *Justice without Violence*, Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1994.

like protests, boycotts, strikes, civil disobedience, and the creation of parallel civic structures helped empower the civilian populations whilst stripping power away from their opponents. The popular movements disrupted the status quo just as political violence is often used to disrupt the status quo. In nonviolent struggle, power flows from resistance joined by a much broader part of the aggrieved population than in any violent struggle. Power in nonviolent struggle comes from the disruption of control by an occupier or unelected ruler when groups and individuals withdraw their consent from them.³³ Strategic disruption – not violence – is what explains the force of civilian resistance.

The conflict dynamics involved in a national liberation struggle or movement for popular self-determination differ from those involved in domestic struggles against dictatorships or authoritarian regimes. In the latter examples such as in the recent “people power” movements in Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan the popular resistance involved citizens with direct leverage over their corrupt and repressive governments. This leverage came through their participation in the national bureaucracy, security forces, labor unions, businesses, media, and other domestic organizations and institutions. When the regimes in power attempted to steal elections, the opposition movements mobilized these different groups on the basis of lost rights and demands for transparency and accountability in their governments.

In struggles inside Western Sahara, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Tibet, and West Papua, the occupied populations have limited or no direct economic leverage over their oppressors. For example, if Sahrawi workers inside the occupied Western

³³ Doug Bond, “Nonviolent Direct Action and the Diffusion of Power.” In *Justice without Violence*, ed. Paul Wehr, Heidi Burgess and Guy Burgess. Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1994.

Sahara went on strike, this would not impose significant economic costs on the Moroccan regime. This is because the occupied populations are more economically dependent on their oppressors than vice-versa. Mobilizing for a referendum on independence and forcing the withdrawal of foreign troops is more important to these struggles than protesting fraudulent elections. This does not mean that nonviolent struggle cannot work in these cases; rather, it suggests that the strategy would need to be different. Strategy, a theme we turn to next, is as important in nonviolent struggles as it is in armed struggles.³⁴

Lessons From Past Nonviolent Struggles: Unity, Nonviolent Discipline, and Strategic Planning

Past nonviolent struggles have highlighted the importance of unity, nonviolent discipline, and strategic planning to the overall effectiveness of this method.³⁵ Leaders of nonviolent movements must be able to appeal to diverse constituencies and mobilize them to participate actively, in small and large ways, in different campaigns of nonviolent resistance. As long as a movement only attracts the support of an elite vanguard, it will remain marginal and largely powerless. Achieving functional unity, or cohesion around shared interests, is as important as unity based on collective identities. Functional unity would permit tactical and strategic cooperation between ethnic Sahrawis, pro-democracy Moroccans, and international activists.

During the first Palestinian *Intifada*, the active participation of nearly all segments of Palestinian society (Muslims and Christians, farmers, workers, and business leaders,

³⁴ See Peter Ackerman and Christopher Kruegler, Strategic Nonviolent Conflict: The Dynamics of People Power in the Twentieth Century (Westport: Praeger, 1994)

³⁵ Peter Ackerman and Jack DuVall, "People Power Primed" *Harvard International Review*, 2005.

youths and the older generations) was an important ingredient in its success. After more than twenty years of PLO-led guerilla violence and terrorism against Israel, the Israeli government could no longer reasonably claim that Palestinian resistance to the occupation was confined to a non-representative militant group on the outside. Rather, the first *Intifada* was an expression of the Palestinian masses who were demanding an end to occupation and independence. This unity eventually broke down and factionalism (including a sharp rift between secular nationalist and Islamist factions) prevailed over a unified approach to ending the Israeli occupation.

In the East Timorese struggle against Indonesian occupation, it was only after two formerly antagonistic Timorese political factions (the UDT and Fretilin) came together under a single umbrella of resistance (the National Council of Timorese Resistance, or CNRT) that the Indonesian occupation was truly threatened. These groups adopted a common charter and road-map for achieving independence that even encouraged cooperation and reconciliation between Indonesians and East Timorese. The Indonesian strategy of divide-and-rule was rendered ineffectual once the East Timorese could present a unified front to the international community.

Despite periodic rifts within the Polisario, the Sahrawi nationalist movement has been formally unified since 1973. The only criterion for membership in Polisario is for a Sahrawi to agree that the ultimate shared goal is liberating Western Sahara. At the same time, the Moroccan government counts on the support of pro-Moroccan Sahrawis as part of its strategy for maintaining control over the territory. Winning over pro-Moroccan elements of the Sahrawi population to the side of independence would appear to be an important intermediate goal for pro-independence Sahrawis.

After unity, the second main ingredient in successful nonviolent struggles is the ability to maintain nonviolent discipline. Effective asymmetric warfare, including asymmetric nonviolent warfare, involves acting in ways not anticipated by the adversary. In *War Without Weapons*, Hans Boserup and Anders Mack described interviews with German Nazi generals conducted after WWII that revealed that the German occupation forces were much more comfortable dealing with violence than with disciplined, orderly nonviolent resistance led by the populations under occupation.³⁶ Security forces are trained to fight against opposing armies and armed militants - not masses of unarmed civilians.

This does not mean that soldiers and police will not use violence against nonviolent protestors. They often do. But it is more difficult to justify this type of violence, which contributes to a loss of morale in the opponent's military, not to mention harsh international criticism when international audiences are made aware of it. Nonviolent action scholar Gene Sharp called the process by which the opponent's use of violence against unarmed protestors ends up weakening it due to the loss of domestic and international legitimacy (along with defections by members of the security forces) "political jiu-jitsu."³⁷ In political jiu-jitsu, the use of violent repression backfires against the militarily superior opponent.

For political jiu-jitsu to be triggered confrontations between security forces and unarmed protestors must be captured by media and disseminated to sympathetic audiences.³⁸ During the first Palestinian *Intifada*, media images of Israel's "iron fist"

³⁶ Hans Boserup and Anders Mack, *War Without Weapons*, 1967.

³⁷ Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* Boston: Porter Sargent, 1973.

³⁸ Brian Martin and Wendy Varney, *Nonviolence Speaks: Communicating Against Repression*: Hampton Press, Inc: New Jersey, 2004.

crackdown against Palestinian protestors, which included soldiers breaking bones, helped turn the tide of domestic and international public opinion against that occupation after the footage was broadcast around the world. Similarly in East Timor, after foreign journalists captured video images of a brutal Indonesian crackdown on unarmed Timorese protestors during a funeral procession in the capital city of Dili in 1991, this helped galvanize international support for the East Timorese cause and general indignation towards the Indonesian occupation.

Not surprisingly, occupying powers often go to extreme measures to prevent international eyes and ears from reporting on their activities. Regimes often deploy infiltrators and *agents provocateurs* to provoke demonstrators to use violence. Leaders of the nonviolent movement must find ways to expose these individuals and prevent them from contaminating the movement.³⁹ Even the throwing of rocks and Molotov cocktails can be used as a pretext by security forces to use greater force against the protestors.

In a number of past examples, security forces have disobeyed orders and refused to use violence against unarmed protestors. Sahrawis do not need masses of Moroccan security forces to defect and join their independence movement. A more achievable objective is finding ways to neutralize the impact of Morocco's weapons by showing Moroccan security forces that disobeying orders to use violence against them is in their best interests. There could be "refusenik" equivalents, for example, if the presence of Moroccan troops in Western Sahara (and their violent repression of nonviolent Sahrawi protestors) were discredited in Morocco. This highlights the

³⁹ Robert Helvey, On Strategic Nonviolent Conflict: Thinking About the Fundamentals: Boston: The Albert Einstein Institution, 2004.

strategic importance of working with respected Moroccan intellectuals and civil society leaders to educate the Moroccan public about the situation in Western Sahara. An education campaign inside Indonesia was a very important part of the East Timorese self-determination struggle, and one that won the pro-independence movement important allies within their opponent's camps.⁴⁰

Strategic planning, perhaps the most important criterion for effective nonviolent struggle, involves developing a plan of action that conjoins available resources with desired goals. It involves knowing which nonviolent methods to use, when to use them, how to use them, and with what specific objectives in mind. Strategic nonviolent conflict, which is different from ad hoc, sporadic protests and demonstrations, is based on an analysis of the sources of power available to the resistance and those available to your opponent. Robert Helvey refers to this preparatory analysis as the "strategic estimate."⁴¹ Good execution of strategy, which should flow from the strategic estimate, involves the use of nonviolent methods to build campaigns designed to exploit your side's strength(s) and your opponent's vulnerabilities.

Strategic nonviolent conflict is based on identifying the key institutions and organizations - domestic and external - that permit an opponent, even the most brutal opponent, to hold onto power or maintain an unjust system of oppression. In the Sahrawi case these "pillars of support" might be located within the occupied territory itself, inside Morocco, or in the international community. It is incumbent upon Sahrawi strategists to assess the relative strength of these groups and organizations while developing strategies and campaigns designed to undermine them or win them over to

⁴⁰ Maria J. Stephan, "Nonviolent Insurgency: the Role of Civilian-Based Resistance in the East Timorese, Palestinian, and Kosovo Albanian Self-Determination Movements," Unpublished Dissertation, Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, 2005.

⁴¹ Helvey.

their side. If these local, regional, and international pillars of support are undermined, co-opted, or neutralized, it becomes morally and materially impossible for Morocco to maintain its occupation over Western Sahara.⁴²

Good strategy involves expanding the repertoire of nonviolent sanctions.⁴³ Street protests and demonstrations are only two of literally hundreds of different nonviolent methods that have been used by different movements over the course of history to strip power away from their opponent. Sharp identified over two hundred different nonviolent methods ranging from symbolic protests (vigils, wearing special clothing or symbols as a sign of protest) to acts of non-cooperation (strikes, boycotts, civil disobedience) to nonviolent intervention (fasts, sit-ins, the creation of parallel structures).⁴⁴ The categories of nonviolent sanctions differ based on the level of risk and organization involved in their successful execution.

Sahrawis living in refugee camps, inside the occupied territory, and in the Diaspora have used a wide assortment of nonviolent methods during the past thirty years, though not necessarily as part of an overarching strategy. They have employed various nonviolent methods to actively resist assimilation, or what Sahrawis refer to as “Moroccanization”. During the recent *Intifada* this has involved specific campaigns whereby Sahrawis wear only traditional Sahrawi dress while walking in the streets of occupied Western Sahara. Sahrawis have also launched boycotts of Moroccan products as part of the May 2005 uprising. Other nonviolent methods used by Sahrawis as part of their resistance include disseminating leaflets explaining the pro-independence position and highlighting Moroccan human rights violations, painting pro-

⁴² Helvey.

⁴³ Ackerman and Kruegler.

⁴⁴ Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* Boston: Porter Sargent, 1973.

independence slogans on walls, refusing to sell property to Moroccan settlers, and preserving the Sahrawi language.⁴⁵

Key to the success of the East Timorese self-determination movement was its dual strategy of “internationalization” and “Indonesianization”.⁴⁶ Internationalization consisted of actively pressing the case for East Timor abroad while developing close ties with human rights and solidarity groups, notably those from countries that were providing Indonesia with significant economic and military support. East Timorese students who were studying at universities in Indonesia organized clandestinely and launched a number of dramatic nonviolent actions in major cities, including a series of nonviolent sit-ins at foreign embassies in Jakarta.

The “Indonesianization” component of the East Timorese strategy involved working with and through Indonesians to educate the Indonesian people about the situation in East Timor. This involved meetings with prominent Indonesian intellectuals and with activist groups on college campuses. Indonesianization also involved coordinating efforts with Indonesian human rights and pro-democracy groups (including workers’ unions) who were protesting against the corruption and incompetence of the Suharto regime. By working with Indonesian groups, East Timorese activists established indirect leverage over their occupier. Indonesian “people power” combined with the Asian financial crisis of 1997 led to the nonviolent overthrow of Suharto, whose replacement, B.J. Habibie, agreed to allow a referendum on East Timor’s independence. As East Timorese leader Xanana Gusmao said at the time, “Democratization for Indonesia and self-determination for East Timor are two sides of

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Maria J. Stephan, “Nonviolent Insurgency: the Role of Civilian-Based Resistance in the East Timorese, Palestinian, and Kosovo Albanian Self-Determination Movements,” Unpublished Dissertation, Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, 2005.

the same coin.”⁴⁷

Sahrawis are already engaged in internationalizing their independence struggle. Solidarity demonstrations involving activists living in other countries have created enough pressure on foreign oil companies to force them to break their contracts with the Moroccan government. Solidarity groups from 14 countries recently lobbied fund gatekeepers to avoid investment in Kerr-McGee (U.S.-based corporation) because of its oil exploration work in the Western Sahara.⁴⁸ Currently only two oil companies, Kerr-McGee and Total (French) have maintained contracts for oil exploration in the Western Sahara with Morocco. Just as international solidarity groups played a crucial role in the East Timorese and South African struggles, by pressing their governments to limit military and economic support for the Indonesian dictatorship and the South African apartheid regime and organizing boycotts and divestment campaigns⁴⁹, similar transnational solidarity campaigns could help challenge French and American support for Morocco’s occupation.

A low-level strategy of “Moroccanization” is also occurring. Sahrawi activists (notably Sahrawis studying in Morocco) work with Moroccan human rights organizations, journalists, and leftist activists. These groups have become increasingly outspoken of their government’s mishandling of the Western Sahara situation. Extending the nonviolent battlefield, or forming alliances with groups outside the principle zone of conflict, is especially important in cases where the indigenous movements have only limited leverage (especially economic) over their oppressors.

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ Shelley.

⁴⁹ See Stephen Zunes in Brendan O’Leary, Ian Lustick, and Thomas Callaghy, Rightsizing the State: The Politics of Moving Borders, Oxford University Press, 2002.

However, these efforts should be seen as an extension of the indigenous struggle taking place inside occupied Western Sahara.

National liberation movements that have relied on armed struggle or insurrectionary violence often encounter problems related to governance once the revolutionary phase ends – because the revolution was led by a small number of people whose power came from “the barrel of a gun,” thereby instilling martial values and a strict military-style hierarchy rather than from broad-based civic participation. The Sahrawi population has demonstrated its embrace of democratic ideals and practices. The 180,000 or so Sahrawis living in refugee camps in Algeria under the Polisario administration have organized themselves in a remarkably democratic way. As Stephen Zunes has remarked, the camps have developed a “remarkably progressive political and social system governed by participatory democracy and collective economic enterprises within a limited market economy in the camps.”⁵⁰ Sahrawi women, while devoutly Muslim, are “unveiled, enjoy equal rights with men regarding divorce, inheritance and other legal matters, and hold major leadership positions in the Polisario’s administration, including several cabinet ministers.”⁵¹

The only real aspect of SADR is its constitution and government, though Sahrawis are very proud of the democratic institutions and procedures they have developed in the camps. Some people see the camps themselves as a kind of idealized working model of a future state in the Western Sahara. In the past, there was little difference between Polisario’s elite vanguard and SADR, but since the late 1980s the refugees have had more democratic controls on the leadership of Polisario and the

⁵⁰ Stephen Zunes, “Western Sahara: The Other Occupation,” *Tikkun Magazine*, January/February 2006.

⁵¹ Zunes, *Ibid.*

various Ministers and officials of SADR. The Polisario-led government in exile is also a founding member of the African Union, participates at all levels of the organization and even contributing to AU peacekeeping forces. It is a classic example of a highly functional parallel structure. SADR has recently even begun soliciting contracts for offshore oil exploration from transnational energy corporations. Polisario claims that these contracts will go into effect once they achieve independence. However, they are also hoping that they can force an international legal battle to challenge similar concession granted by Morocco to other companies.

The Sahrawi pro-independence movement's greatest strengths include the legitimacy of its claims under international law, the high level of international support that the SADR has attained, the cohesion of the Sahrawi population, and the progressive self-organization and democratic governance that a people living under occupation and in exile have achieved. The SADR based in Tindouf has achieved a remarkable level of democracy, including the significant participation of women, which bodes well for future independence. It remains to be seen is whether the nonviolent Sahrawi uprising that began last May will continue, and whether it will be made part of an overall strategy for achieving national liberation that combines skillful negotiations with campaigns of nonviolent resistance that focus on concrete intermediate goals, such as family reunification, de-mining and opening up the sand-berm between the western and eastern parts of Western Sahara , and a UN-monitored referendum on the territory's final status. Focusing on such intermediate goals rather merely demanding independence will help the Sahrawi population maintain confidence in a strategy of nonviolent resistance while encouraging a step-by-step approach to achieving it.

Any hope for regional security and economic development in the Arab Maghreb region will be thwarted as long as the conflict over Western Sahara remains unresolved. Fundamentalist jihadist groups, which have already developed footholds in Morocco and Mauritania, could exploit the instability and the frustration of a people living under occupation and in refugee camps.⁵² Frustrated Sahrawi youths are particularly vulnerable to being manipulated by jihadis and the allure of weapons, lest they become available.

The largely nonviolent *Intifada* launched by Sahrawis beginning last May, this article has argued, represents a powerful “third way” between diplomacy and armed conflict that could provide the impetus needed to transform this intractable conflict and end a repressive occupation. The international community and particularly the French and U.S. governments, which have hitherto blocked enforcement of UN resolutions calling for Moroccan withdrawal and the successful completion of de-colonization for Western Sahara, should see the on-going *Intifada* as an opportunity to reinvigorate negotiations between the Moroccan government and Polisario-SADR representatives.

⁵² See Ana Gomes, Member of the European Parliament, “Western Sahara: Neglect Plays into the Hands of Terrorists,” *Terraviva Europe*, 15 November 2005. Accessible on-line at: <http://www.ipsterraviva.net/Europe/article.aspx?id=2596>