

Western Sahara and Migration

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I have been studying the Western Sahara conflict nearly over 10 years, publishing various articles and giving several presentations. In order to begin to summarize the Western Saharan conflict, some arguments need a reference to Europe, for instance drugs, gun running and legal and illegal migration. In my article I shall examine arguments for the migration taking place in Western Sahara. Western Sahara is an organic part of the Maghreb region, where a considerable portion of African migrants depart to Western Europe. The antecedents of migration to Europe go back in history, since the population living here were in close contact with the early colonial powers, e.g. France and Spain, and with refugees from other African countries, who sought better living conditions (or indeed survival.)

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What does migration mean exactly? Migration means a wider population movement or human migration; people change their society and habitation for a longer or shorter period of time. Probably the most typical case of population movement is labour migration, but forced migration emerging from various conflicts is not unknown either.² There is also legal and illegal migration, that both occur in Western Sahara. Before addressing the above mentioned topics I shall introduce the region.

Western Sahara is the only colonized region in the African continent that still has not achieved its independence despite 30 years of continuous effort through international diplomacy to find a reassuring solution regarding the settling of the region's status. After the Spanish colonial authority left the region in 1975, it was soon occupied by the two neighbouring countries, Morocco and Mauritania. Notwithstanding, there has been the commitment of the International Court of Justice in The Hague, as well as several UN resolutions about the self-governance of the various indigenous population. [1] The new outburst of conflict turned into a war that has spread to the neighbouring countries, of which the first to exit was Mauritania (1979), following its political, as well as military defeat by the Polisario movement set up by the Sahrawi. [2] Morocco on the other hand did not leave the previously occupied territory, and despite the relevant international laws also built up its own administration and governed it as its own.

Originally, mainly Berber and Arab tribes lived in the scarcely populated independent territory, [3] until the arrival of the first Spanish settlers whom slowly conquered Western Sahara, which did not belong to anyone until that time. [4: 106–107] The borders of the Spanish

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2 In Hungary one of the best known examples of labour migration in our country was the emigration of more than one million Hungarians to the USA at the beginning of the 1900s, and another relatively well documented example of forced emigration was throughout the 150 year long Turkish occupation of our country when the majority part of the population was forced to leave his/her their previous habitation or residence for political, religious or economic reasons.

colony of that period where guaranteed by Treaties (1900, 1904 and 1912), signed by France and Spain, two major colonial powers. [5: 50]

The borders specified in those Treaties are considered, even now, the international borders. The Spanish occupied the territory only at the end of the 1930s (with French assistance). Up to that time the region was ruled by Sahrawi tribes fighting against the colonists. [6: 19] In the 1970s the power of the Spanish was solidified for real, and because of international pressure they started the decolonization of the territory. Following a referendum for self-government they desired to establish an independent state in close alliance with Spain. This was not simple at all, since the Kingdom of Morocco which had been independent from 1956 also claimed the whole territory of Spanish Sahara, invoking the alliance (baaya) pledged over the past centuries by the majority of the Sahrawi tribes to the Moroccan sultans.³ At the same time locals established their own political organization named Polisario (Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguia el Hamra y Río de Oro — Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Río de Oro), which fought for the population's right to self-government and independence. [7: 158–159] The organization was also recognized by the international community; moreover all International Forums supported self-government as opposed to Moroccan territorial claims.

But the Spanish were unable to provide the right of self-governance of their previous colony, since their power declined after the death of Franco. The Moroccans, taking advantage of the situation forced the Madrid Agreement through a “peaceful” demonstration (Green March) and some blackmailing, this divided Western Sahara between the neighbouring Morocco and Mauritania. [8] Following the conclusion of the Agreement Spain handed over public administration to the new colonists and left Western Sahara definitively. [7: 215–218] Though the local population tried to resist, they were unable to repel the coordinated attack of the Moroccan and Mauritanian troops and were forced to flee to neighbouring Algeria. There, in one refugee tent they founded the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) that was first recognized by Algeria and followed later by other countries.⁴

Following the proclamation of the Sahrawi state a war broke out between the occupying Moroccans and the militants of the Polisario, with various military outcomes it lasted until 1991. By the time of the peace agreement the Polisario achieved certain military and diplomatic advances (e.g. The African Union Organization welcomed it among its members in 1982), but the independence that they hoped for was not obtained. [5: 126] In the meantime Morocco had built a fortification system (Berm) and deployed nearly 200 000 soldiers, which they took over permanently $\frac{3}{4}$ of the territory, while the Sahrawi controlled the worthless part of the country (huge deserts with some tiny oases).⁵ The fortifications, consisting of several wall-systems, forms a border considered final by the Moroccans, and which has torn apart Western Sahara. In the occupied territories Moroccans have introduced a well-functioning

3 In the Arab world oaths pledged by individuals or cities to the ruler, meant the recognition of his superiority as well as the inferiority of the ones taking the oath. Regarding these territories the Moroccan Sultan nominated his own officers (kaid) who controlled the collection of taxes, and guarded the Sultan's rights. In many cases

it was impossible for the weak Moroccan state to control certain tribes or to use them for its own purposes though they had taken the oath for certain reasons.

4 By the end of the 1980s 79 states had recognized the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic, this number has now somewhat decreased as a result of Moroccan diplomatic efforts.

5 Every Western Saharan city, the phosphate mines, fishery, and economically utilizable territory is in the hands of the Moroccans.

administrative system, while the political and military leadership of SADR operates from the Algerian city of Rabuni, and not on the “liberated” territories where there is no public administration whatsoever.

The ceasefire coordinated by the UN and concluded in 1991 conserved this situation, and subsequently reconciliation began regarding the future destiny of the territory. [9: 796] [3] At the beginning it was only Western Sahara that became independent, or integrated into Morocco with a high degree of autonomy, but this has changed over the past 20 years. Today only integration is discussed during negotiations. The peacekeeping operation of the UN (*United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara*; in French: *Mission des Nations Unies pour l'Organisation d'un Référendum au Sahara Occidental* — MINURSO) created for the implementation of the referendum is only able to keep up the status quo or to control the ceasefire; therefore according to many it has lost justification for its existence.

Though the European Union is not directly involved in the conflict, nevertheless because of the proximity of Western Sahara, economic interests (fishing, exploit of oil– natural gas fields, phosphate etc.) and the common cultural and historical past, several European countries (especially Spain and France) are involved in the conflict one way or another.⁶ Due to the aforementioned reasons it is understandable why the number of those involved in migration has increased remarkably over the past few decades. Naturally migration is not the only outcome of the sporadic fighting and economic crisis, but because of the changes regarding social and economic conditions.

The economy of Western Sahara is mainly based on nomadic herding (gradually decreasing), fishing and the extraction of phosphate. It has been well known for some time that Western Sahara and its coastal areas are very rich in petroleum that could be extracted economically, but because of the tense situation, only exploration drillings have been carried out. [10] Though in the past few years in the northern territories agriculture has been undergoing some development, but it is still not significant. Morocco despite the prohibition of related international regulations and the objections of the Polisario, representing the native population, exploits the economic resources of Western Sahara, and most of the vacancies in government employment are filled by Moroccans who have settled down in the country over the past few years, thus locals are gradually being pushed out of the labour market. Naturally Morocco has also carried out some development in the occupied territories, thus creating better living standards there. These are more than the SADR would have ever been able to create in the liberated territories and in the refugee camps.

Because of accelerated urbanization in the occupied territories, 95% of the population has moved to the cities built by the earlier colonists. In hopes of better living conditions more and more nomadic people have moved to the cities and this process has accelerated even more after the Moroccan invasion and the creation of the system of fortifications.⁷ The elimination of

6 Spain and France hold contrasting opinions regarding the question of Western Sahara, partly for historical reasons, and also because of Spain trying to redeem the error committed when not providing the right to self–governance to the natives, but giving them up to Morocco. France on the other hand is in close alliance with Morocco, thus is not neutral in the conflict, having even participated in it in some way (transport of arms, programs of military assistance etc.).

7 Since the wall–system closed down the roads used by the tribes, they have been unable to wander with their herds anymore, and have been forced to settle down and to reduce their livestock radically. Thus a considerable part of the nomadic peoples have remained without work and are forced to move into the city in hope of a better life.

a nomadic way of life was also helped by periodically returning drought and rapidly forming floods during the rainy season, resulting in the death of a part of the livestock. Lack of water or the misuse or pollution of water resources also contributes to the acceleration of migration.

The situation of those living in the refugee camps somewhat differs from that of the Sahrawis living in the occupied territories. They theoretically continue the nomadic life-style of their ancestors, but the refugee camps are situated on the most barren areas of Algeria, where the period when livestock grazing is possible lasts for no more than 4–5 months a year. It is clearly understandable that those working in the fields could reach only limited results here. [11]

Many think that refugee camps, because of being very organized, generate a kind of process leading to urbanization, but it is not true. In other places people move to the city to find better living conditions (employment possibilities, higher standards regarding services and better health care etc.) The things missing from the refugee camps are exactly the above mentioned factors, since people are forced to arrive there and they do not desire to stay for a long period of time. Although several researchers concerned with the Western Saharan conflict praise the refugee camps near Tinduf and their perfect organization, it does not mean that a process of urbanization is taking place in the refugee camps. Those staying in the Algerian refugee camps already live in houses built mainly from mud bricks and not in tents, but only basic services are available for them. People living here do not have enough clean water, and water that can be found below the surface is undrinkable because of improper waste-water treatment, thus in many places water is brought by water carrier trucks. Electricity is provided by the Asylum Support Office of the UN in the camps, and only minimum health care is available. [10] In the camps many diseases are present (eye diseases, cholera, asthma etc.) caused by a very hard way of life and unusual weather conditions (frequent sandstorms, significant temperature fluctuations). In general we can say that the inhabitants of the camps live almost exclusively on aid provided by the international community, the decrease or the cessation of which would cause an unforeseeable catastrophe. [12] The only advantage of the refugee camps are better education. Illiteracy has been almost entirely eliminated in the refugee camps, since almost all of those living there have learned to write and to read. We find considerably fewer people among the Sahrawi under Moroccan rule who know how to read and write.

It is very difficult to estimate the exact number of people affected by migration, since we do not even have precise information about the location of the native population. This is partly the result of the fact that over the past few years the problem has become political and not professional, since originally natives could have had the right to vote regarding independence from or integration into Morocco. The fact that the nomadic tribes living on the territory did not settle down permanently, but kept wandering and from time to time left the Western Saharan territory for longer or shorter periods created a problem. The question arose regarding those who were born outside of the Western Saharan territory but were living there, whether to consider them Sahrawi or not, or regarding those who were born in Western Sahara but

were presently living in Southern Morocco or Mauritania.⁸ Based on surveys carried out by the staff of the UNHCR there are more than 24 600 Sahrawi living in Mauritania who are originally from Western Sahara. [13] Nevertheless the greatest problem since the outbreak of the conflict is that the larger part of the native population lives in refugee camps. [14]

The last official population census — accepted by everyone — was carried out by the Spanish back in 1975, and recorded not only the natives but every person living on the territory of Spanish Sahara. If we try to subtract from the data provided by the census the number of Europeans and other Africans we get the number regarding Natives living there at the time, it amounts to 73 000 people. Of course the above result is contested by many, referring to the impossibility on the part of the Spanish to calculate the exact number of all the nomads, but no one is able to provide more precise information, and moreover the above data has served as a basis for the preparation of the referendum lists by the UN. The exact number of the people remaining in the territories occupied by the Moroccans and the Mauritians can only be estimated, though all the people dealing with the matter agree that most of the Natives have fled. The number of those remaining was augmented in favour of the referendum by those arriving from other territories of Morocco, and the occupying soldiers and their families.

In September 1982, based on the referendum of the Moroccan authorities, they found 163 838 people in Western Sahara, out of which 96 784 were living in Laayoune. [15] According to the estimations of the FAO the population of Western Sahara is somewhat above 300

000. According to a study of the AFASPA, as a result of “moroccanization” the proportion of natives amounts to only 30% of the total population, but this is contested by the Polisario as well. According to the staff of the Office of Identification of MINURSO, founded by the UN, out of the 86 381 Sahrawi entitled to vote, 48 000 had lived in territories occupied by the Moroccans. A further 120 000 people regarded as Sahrawi by origin, by the Moroccan Authorities, could only be accepted as Moroccan by the World Organization because of their uncertain origin.

Numbers regarding those living in refugee camps also differ greatly. There are certain studies according to which 155 000 Sahrawi refugees presently live in the four refugee camps. According to the official position taken by the UNHCR, there are 165 000 Sahrawi living presently in refugee camps, while the World Food Programme in 2003 provided aid for “only” 158 000 people, and in November 2006 the estimated number of those staying in Tindouf amounted to only 125 000. The reason for these contradictory data can be found partly in the fact that for several years aid organizations had been working with numbers provided by Algeria and the Polisario, and the aid organizations had not been able to provide precise numbers either, because of certain restrictions. The picture becomes unclear also because numerous families moved out into the liberated territories from the refugee camps, where they had more freedom than in the camps. Their number most probably amounts to 20 000 people. [10]

As I have mentioned earlier we can differentiate several types of migration in Western Sahara. The first, may be considered traditional, is internal migration, and within its framework

8 Who counts as a “Sahrawi” is a very delicate question, from a legal as well as a political aspect. In the Arab language Sahrawi stands for the people living in the desert, regardless of their tribe or people of origin. Over the past years international public opinion started to apply this term to the tribes that earlier lived on the territory of Spanish Sahara. The elimination of the tribal system was first started by the Polisario, and that was the time when the term Sahrawi started to be used for all tribes in general to make it possible for the people of the various tribes, previously fighting against each other to be able to view themselves as an independent nation.

livestock herding, nomadic tribes “wander around” the territories of present Morocco, Algeria, Western Sahara and Mauritania, and are greatly influenced by weather conditions. This sort of migration does not exist anymore due to international borders. This is why it could happen, that in Mauritania, that later became independent, a considerable Sahrawi minority living there caused quite a few problems for the Mauritanian government at the outbreak of the conflict. The French as well as the Spanish tried to restrict this type of migration — or at least keep it within certain limits — with more or less success. Finally the coup de grace regarding the wandering of the Sahrawi tribes was the construction of the system of fortifications that made movement between the two opposing parties impossible. On the territories controlled by the Polisario, between Algeria and Mauritania nomads can still move around freely, engaged not only in herding but in the smuggling of various goods. [16]

The second migration directed towards Europe, had already started at the beginning of the 1950s, when the primary destination was still Spain. This caused no considerable problems, since Spanish Sahara was viewed by the colonists as an overseas province of Spain and therefore they considered this type of migration as internal. Decision-making regarding migration was also eased by the fact that the official language of the colony was Spanish, and that every Sahrawi learnt to speak at least at a certain level, thus making settlement easier in other Spanish territories. This can be explained by economic reasons, at the time the political factor did not play a major role regarding migration towards Spain.

The number of migrants increased as a result of the ongoing battles following the Madrid Agreement, and many decided from the refugee camps to migrate to Spain. Since the integration of Western Sahara by Morocco into its public administration, it is very difficult to distinguish among the Moroccan legal and illegal migrants, the number of those of Sahrawi origin. [17]

Since the Spanish Non-profit Organizations are represented in a considerable number in the refugee camps, it is quite logical that migrants turn first to them. A process that can be well observed in the refugee camps is that migrants living and working there move abroad for a few years to support their families from their foreign earnings. Of course migration may also happen related to scholarships, not only related to the seeking of employment, since many students are given the opportunity to study abroad (Spain, Italy, Cuba, Great-Britain etc.), and some of these students do not return to the refugee camps once their studies are completed. According to certain estimates there are supposedly 26 000 Sahrawi migrants in Europe who left the camps this way. Sahrawi migrants also get into Europe through an unusual example of migration, not always voluntarily. A couple of years ago an opportunity was given and taken by nearly 10 000 children between 8 and 12 years of age to spend their summer and winter holidays in the homes of Spanish families (Holidays in Peace Program), providing them with full board, and some aid for their families in the form of presents and some cash sent back with the returning children. Several times the Spanish families did not want to send back the children to the “barren desert”, but kept them in their homes based on the decision of the local courts. Thus these children did not go back to the refugee camps but remained in Spain, though the settling of their status requires a long time (adoption, acquisition of the Spanish citizenship). [10]

The third type of migration, arriving through the Maghreb region, causes the most serious trouble for Western European states. [18] Not only the Moroccan or Sahrawi refugees arrive from here, but refugees from almost every African country. Since Western Sahara is very near

the southern borders of the EU (less than 100 kilometres from the Canary Islands), it became one of the main intersections for international migration directed towards Europe. Migrants arrive following itineraries that have been used as caravan routes over the centuries. One of the main gathering points of Sub-Saharan refugees is Accra, or Bamako from where bigger and smaller groups go to Tamanrasset, located in the Southern part of Algeria. From there they continue towards Morocco (through the city of Oujda), Tunisia and Western Sahara (Mauritania). [16]

The flow of refugees in Western Sahara began in the middle of the 1990s, when migrants trying to make their way across the Mediterranean Sea⁹ started to prefer getting to Europe from the various ports of the Atlantic with their dinghies. Since in the territories controlled by the Polisario there is no centralized government, and the Mauritanian border patrol is practically symbolic, more and more refugees depart towards Europe not from the direction of Morocco but from Western Sahara. [19] The Moroccan government has therefore, on several occasions, accused the leadership of the SADR and that of Algeria of supporting actively the entrance of refugees into Morocco, destabilising the country. The parties concerned reject such accusations but they continued not stopping the illegal immigrants. [20] Peacekeepers of MINURSO have often reported that during their patrols they come across more and more Black African refugees — sometimes whole caravans — accompanied by the “usual” smugglers and armed men of the Polisario. The UN warned the leadership of the Polisario several times to stop the flow of illegal migrants. Finally the Sahrawi yielded to pressure and in 2004 in the vicinity of Tifariti they caught a group of refugees from Pakistan and Bangladesh, first putting its members into prison then letting them go near the Mauritanian border. [21]

Of course the flow of refugees did not stop, on the contrary, in 2005–2006 more and more refugees arrived to the territory from Senegal, Gambia, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Mali, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Nigeria, Republic of Democratic Congo, Cameroon, Sudan and even from distant Asian countries. [22] Only between January and September of 2006 did 24 000 illegal immigrants arrived at the Canary Islands, compared to the year before when this number was only 4 472 of. Out of the refugees rejected by the official bodies of the Maghreb countries, many do not go back to their countries but settle down right on the spot (their number is more than one million in Algeria, Mauritania, Morocco, Sudan, Libya and Tunisia), and later they attempt to get to one of the European countries again. According to several Organizations of Human Rights (UNHCR, Amnesty International and a Human Rights Watch) refugees are being abused by the border guards and the policemen of the North African as well as the European states, thus often violating basic human rights standards.¹⁰

This cannot be mitigated even by the fact that Europe has had enough of the more and more radicalized Muslim masses, that are capable of provoking bloody conflicts from the

9 The principal migrant “route” across the desert led towards the Spanish enclaves (Ceuta and Melilla) located on the territory of Morocco, then from there they tried to get into Europe on small fishing boats or dinghies. The Spanish government in cooperation with the Moroccan authorities and other African countries tried to stop the flow of refugees, often through very harsh methods (construction of a huge radar and fence-system, enforcement of various coercive measures, common patrol with the Moroccan authorities, reinforcement of sea patrol in the Strait of Gibraltar, imprisonment of refugees etc.)

10 In October of 2005 several hundreds of Sub-Saharan refugees broke through the fence-system built by the Spanish authorities. Panic broke out among the Spanish soldiers guarding the border, and they reacted against the migrants more violently than usual, it resulted in several migrants losing their lives. Simultaneously the Moroccan authorities took 1 500 captured migrants to a deserted spot in the desert and left them there to their fate.

police within a second, and that are admittedly hostile towards the states receiving them.¹¹ Unfortunately the European approach towards the illegals is based on security rather than on a comprehensive policy or economic considerations, and for them it involves more negative than positive aspects. Sahrawi migrants, until now, have not caused any troubles to the states receiving them, but unfortunately they are more and more often considered together with radical Muslim immigrants arriving from various Muslim states.

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¹¹ A good example of this happened in 2012, arson, vandalism, robberies started mainly by Muslim immigrants, later other criminal groups joined with various backgrounds, first in London then in other cities of Great-Britain.

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