

When Does Terrorism Work?

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7 The puzzle of nonviolence in western Sahara¹

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Introduction

At first glance, Western Sahara would appear to be an ideal place to conduct an insurgency. The territory's low population density and the traditional emphasis placed by the indigenous Sahrawi people on moving and surviving in the desert would appear to confer a tactical advantage to a hit-and-run resistance movement. The territory's major cities are all isolated and accessible mainly by air or a small number of main roads, all of which are largely unguarded and vulnerable to sabotage. Moroccan military presence in the territory, though numerically superior to any possible Sahrawi resistance movement, is concentrated in a few areas. The territory's major industries—fishing, phosphate mining, sporadic and tentative oil exploration—are also all vulnerable to sabotage. Although major cities such as Laayoune, Dakhla, and Smara are, for the most part, saturated with Moroccan military, police, and intelligence presence, the rest of the territory is remote and difficult to surveil; the historical Arabic name for the territory, *Bilad as-Siba*, means “the land of no authority,” or “the ungovernable country” (as opposed to *Bilad al-Makhzen*, or lands under direct control of the central government) (Besenyo, 2009: 48).

The motivation for participation in a violent insurgency would also appear to be considerable. Although reliable data about Western Sahara is often difficult to obtain, most of the available evidence suggests that a majority of Sahrawis living in the occupied territory favor independence from Morocco and integration into a primarily Sahrawi state under the governance of the Polisario Front, which currently functions as a government-in-exile based in Tindouf, Algeria. The 1975–91 war between Morocco and Polisario, which hints at how a future desert insurgency in Western Sahara might work, is celebrated by Sahrawis in both occupied Western Sahara and the refugee camps in Algeria. Polisario's commitment to the post-1991 ceasefire agreement has been described as a continuation of “war by other means,” (Zunes and Mundy, 2010: xxix) and Polisario officials have made it clear in both words and actions that they are willing to return to war if necessary. Meanwhile, diplomatic efforts to further the cause of Sahrawi independence in the African Union and the United Nations have largely failed, obfuscated by a combination of Moroccan intransigence and realpolitik

maneuvering on the part of Morocco's international allies. Several scholars—and some of the interview subjects for this project—have noted that many Sahrawi youths in Western Sahara favor a return to war; given these conditions, why has there been virtually no political violence on the part of Sahrawis since 1991?

Resistance can involve a variety of tools, from peaceful activism to suicide bombing, and everything in between; a movement may simultaneously employ a variety of strategies across this spectrum, and may include individuals with differing strategic goals and motivations, or different strategies for achieving specific goals. By studying the lack of violence in Western Sahara on the part of the pro-independence Sahrawi resistance movement, what can we learn about resistance and political violence in general?

This chapter draws on fieldwork carried out in Western Sahara and Morocco in the summer of 2014. Fieldwork was necessitated by the dearth of literature on the conflict; Western Sahara is, in practice, largely closed to journalists and scholars, and much of the literature is motivated by partisan and often unabashedly biased research. The worthwhile literature that does exist is often based on fieldwork conducted prior to 2010 (after which a protest camp and subsequent clash between Sahrawi protestors and Moroccan soldiers at Gdeim Izik made research more difficult) or investigates specific questions of only tangential relevance to this project.

The initial sections situate this chapter in the literature and lay out the research problem: Western Sahara has seen its fair share of violence in the past, and conditions would appear to remain rife with potential for violent resistance. The Methods section discusses the interview process in Morocco and Western Sahara, as well as the most common explanations for nonviolence among the Sahrawi population. Subsequent sections analyze the results, and propose two thought experiments as a means of exploring what might happen in the case of actual violent resistance and potential outcomes. The penultimate section will discuss implications, while the conclusion synthesizes lessons learned and directions for future research.

Literature

The Western Sahara Conflict is notable for its relative dearth of published research. Fieldwork is difficult in the territory: journalism and academic investigations are both heavily obfuscated by Moroccan authorities. Western scholars in the territory have often faced hostility from Moroccan security forces, including arrest, conspicuous monitoring, deportation, and varying levels of intimidation. Sahrawis who collaborate with researchers may also face increased scrutiny or repression. Compounding the security challenges are the remoteness of the territory, physical challenges due to both the harsh climate and the prevalence of unexploded landmines, the language barrier (Hassaniyya Arabic, the Sahrawi dialect, is only partially mutually intelligible with Moroccan Arabic or Modern Standard Arabic, while Moroccan Arabic is itself considered one of the more

difficult Arabic dialects to learn), and the perception of Western Sahara as an underpopulated and relatively lawless space. Popular activist attention to the conflict is limited in part due to the lack of academic research, as well as Morocco's attempts to propagate misinformation about the territory's history and demographics. The "information blackout" imposed on the territory by Morocco has been, by and large, somewhat successful.

While research in Western Sahara's Moroccan-occupied zone is very difficult, research in the Polisario-controlled refugee camps in Algeria is in many ways substantially easier. Polisario has generally been willing to accommodate journalists and researchers and facilitate academic work in the territory. Therefore, many scholars who are interested in doing work on the conflict end up going to Tindouf by default, rather than risking a trip to occupied Western Sahara.

Nevertheless, some good resources do exist, by far the most comprehensive of which is Steven Zunes and Jacob Mundy's 2010 book *Western Sahara: War, Nationalism, and Conflict Irresolution*. Both authors have done extensive fieldwork in the occupied territory and the refugee camps, and their work provides an exceptional survey of the entire conflict, with a focus on diplomatic challenges. The book also provides a sound history of the construction and evolution of Sahrawi national identity.

Both authors have written about various aspects of the conflict elsewhere. Mundy in particular has examined the political and social context of Moroccan settlers in Western Sahara (Mundy, 2012), the transition from violence to nonviolence in the conflict, (Mundy and Stephan, 2006) and the unique case of the Gdeim Izik camp and subsequent riots (Mundy, 2010). Zunes' work has focused on nonviolence, both in theory and practice (Zunes, 2010). Both have also written on the conflict's diplomatic history.

There are a number of other histories of the conflict, both from military and diplomatic perspectives. Among these, Erik Jensen's *Western Sahara: Anatomy of a Stalemate?*, Toby Shelley's *Endgame in the Western Sahara* and Pablo San Martín's *Western Sahara: The Refugee Nation* offer particularly comprehensive insights. Several analyses and histories of Western Sahara were written during the 1975–91 war. These works offer interesting snapshots of the conflict at particular times, but are generally subsumed under more recent works.

Much of the best ethnographic work on Western Sahara predates the occupation and its attendant research challenges. Spanish anthropologist Julio Caro Baroja's *Estudios Saharianos*, published in 1955 after extensive fieldwork among the nomads in 1952–3, is still probably the best and most detailed work of Sahrawi ethnography. John Mercer's *Spanish Sahara*, published in 1976, is similarly valuable for its insights on Sahrawi culture before the Moroccan invasion.

There is also a small body of literature specifically on nonviolence in Western Sahara, although much of it is descriptive rather than explanatory. Much of this relates to the case of the Gdeim Izik protest camp, which attracted considerable attention as an apparent deviation from the nonviolent strategy.

Within the field of security studies, there have been attempts to frame Western Sahara as a potential recruiting ground for Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM). The Moroccan monarchy has capitalized on these concerns, playing up fears of widespread radicalization for political advantage. Few, if any, of these studies have any empirical basis. All available evidence suggests a wholesale rejection of radical Islamism by both Polisario and Sahrawis in the occupied zone and the refugee camps. If Sahrawi activists have rejected violence at least partially because it compromises the public image of their struggle, why would they then build ties with Al-Qaeda? It is also difficult to imagine what Polisario might get out of a relationship with Al-Qaeda, although the propaganda benefits of such a narrative to Morocco are quite clear.

There is also a large body of scholarship on nonviolent conflict in general. Much of it is of considerable interest to scholars of Western Sahara. Gene Sharp's typology of nonviolent resistance movements (for instance, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*) remains seminal in the field, as is Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan's *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*, which offers a broad study of many resistance movements over time. There are a great number of other exceptional works in this field; many were reviewed for this project, although this chapter in particular is concerned more with the strategic logic of violence, and its absence, than with the practice of nonviolence in Western Sahara, which is a complex and fascinating phenomenon in its own right. Of particular value for this project's take on violence and its absence were Stathis Kalyvas' *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, Jeremy Weinstein's *Inside Rebellion*, and Wendy Pearlman's *Violence, Nonviolence, and the Palestinian National Movement*.

Kalyvas examines the forces that drive particulate violence in civil wars, which he defines as "armed combat within the boundaries of a recognized sovereign entity between parties subject to a common authority at the outset of hostilities." (Kalyvas, 2006: 5) This definition, as well as his explicit exclusion of secessionist movements, suggest that not all of his core ideas may be transferrable, but there is considerable value to be taken from a book that, at its outset, attempts to explain why violence occurs in some places and not others. By examining the underlying logic of violence, Kalyvas also provides an implicit starting point for examining nonviolence.

Kalyvas' analysis supports the conclusion that violence is neither random nor exclusively strategic and rational. Rather, selective violence "is jointly produced by political actors seeking information and individual noncombatants trying to avoid the worst—but also grabbing what opportunities their predicament affords them" (Kalyvas, 2006: 388). Much of the book examines the relationship between control over a given territory and the need for information as a basis for engaging in selective violence. Within a civil war, control over an area is generally contested by competing political groups; in the case of Western Sahara, (Moroccan) control over urban areas is hegemonic while control over rural areas is only marginally less so, but may be less clearly expressed. The implications are numerous:

The type of sovereignty or *control* that prevails in a given region affects the type of strategies followed by political actors.... As the conflict matures, control is increasingly likely to shape collaboration because political actors who enjoy substantial territorial control can protect civilians who live in that territory—both from their rivals and from themselves, giving survival-oriented civilians a strong incentive to collaborate with them, irrespective of their true or initial preferences.

(Kalyvas, 2006: 12)

With respect to control, information, and violence:

the prediction is that violence is most likely to occur where one actor is near hegemonic, not where this actor is in full control or is being contested. Violence, in other words, is most likely where the organizational demand for information meets its individual supply.

(Kalyvas, 2006: 13)

Like Kalyvas, Weinstein seeks to explain variations in the level of violence seen during civil wars. He uses data on four insurgent movements—in Uganda, Mozambique, and Peru—as the empirical basis for his investigation. Weinstein disaggregates rebel strategy into five distinct mechanisms: recruiting base, structures of internal control, governance of the civilian population, selectiveness/indiscriminateness of violence toward civilians, and resilience. Weinstein's central claim is that rebels who rely on the civilian population for resources, support, and so on differ fundamentally in structure, tactics, and strategy, particularly with respect to violence, from rebels who have some form of external support or inhabit resource-rich territories. Put another way, rebel groups that have exogenous (to their civilian populations) support bases are more likely to engage in seemingly random violence than rebel groups without exogenous support, which in turn tend to produce more of what Weinstein terms "activist rebels."

A taxonomy of "greed" vs "grievance" rebellions exists in the literature independent of Weinstein, although his contribution is insightful and may be particularly useful for Western Sahara. It may be productive here to treat Polisario and the resistance in occupied Western Sahara as politically distinct from one another—in fact, conflating these two entities is a common analytic mistake in general. If both represent rebel groups in some form, then they provide an interesting test of Weinstein's hypothesis—Polisario has some limited external (political) support in the form of Algeria, as well as various types of aid, which can represent resources in this analogy. In occupied Western Sahara, the resistance movement has no functional external support and no access to the resource-richness of the territory. Therefore, we might expect to see—as we do—an "activist rebellion" heavily skewed toward grievance rather than greed, since there is no clear material benefit to participating in rebellion in Western Sahara other than displays of conviction to other group members. The degree to which

this does or does not generalize to nonviolent rebellions is a fruitful avenue for future research.

Wendy Pearlman's *Violence, Nonviolence, and the Palestinian National Movement* examines how political movements "choose" to engage in either violence or nonviolence, and the conditions that underlie each choice. The core of Pearlman's argument, which synthesizes much pre-existing work in her field, is that movements are able to engage in nonviolence as a strategy only when they possess the internal cohesion and leadership to dissuade members who wish to engage in violence. For a movement to be labeled nonviolent, it must be (almost always) exclusively nonviolent; as evidence from Palestine suggests, a movement's violent elements can quickly overshadow its nonviolent elements when both strategies co-exist. In her own words:

I argue that while the paths to violence are multiple, there is one prevailing path to nonviolent protest: a path that requires a movement to have or create internal cohesion. When a movement is cohesive, it enjoys the organizational power to mobilize mass participation, enforce strategic discipline, and contain disruptive dissent. In consequence, cohesion increases the possibility that a movement will use nonviolent protest. Inversely, when a movement is fragmented, it lacks the leadership, institutions, and collective purpose to coordinate and constrain its members. Its very internal structure thus generates incentives and opportunities that increase the likelihood that it will use violence.

(Pearlman, 2014: 2)

Pearlman defines cohesion as "the degree to which it, which is not actually an 'it,' acts as if it were. Fragmentation is the degree to which it does not." (Pearlman, 2014: 9) She envisions cohesion as a collaborative bargaining process:

The difficulty of building a cohesive organizational structure is attributable to the multiplicity of potential equilibriums when people bargain on many policy issues simultaneously. In such contexts, no *ex ante* collective choice is equally desirable to all. Decision making by composite political entities, be they congressional committees or social movements, is thus fundamentally different than decision making by individuals.... Strategy cannot be automatically derived from the logic of purposeful interaction with an external adversary.

(Pearlman, 2014: 9)

This view, in which cohesion is necessary for a movement to act in a unitary manner, is implicit in much of what we believe political movements to be; is a movement's output the direct result of its leadership, the cumulative will of its composite parts, or some combination of both? Pearlman's model is at odds with observed results in Western Sahara, where a movement that lacks cohesion by her definition (i.e. strong, intentional leadership and institutions) nevertheless

expresses coherent behavior and an apparently successful structural insistence upon nonviolence. Western Sahara's resistance movement, which does not look like an "it," in Pearlman's words, acts very much like an "it."

While much of the literature on violence, the absence of violence, and nonviolence is germane to a discussion of Western Sahara, and while a nontrivial and increasing body of literature on the conflict itself does exist, the limited empirical and ethnographic research on post-1991 Western Sahara means that the research problem that drives this chapter cannot be answered by means of secondary sources alone. Consequently, the puzzle of nonviolence aside, the chapter also seeks to make a novel empirical contribution to the limited literature on Western Sahara.

Research problem

Western Sahara, and the Sahrawi people, have not always been nonviolent. Conflict pervades much of the territory's history, and conditions have at various times been ripe for internecine violence. The point of this section, then, is to make a case for the study of the present lack of violent resistance in Western Sahara as a genuine research problem that merits investigation.

Politically, the territory now known as Western Sahara is divided by a militarized wall, or Berm, running approximately 2,700 kilometers from Morocco to Mauritania and bisecting the territory. Approximately two-thirds of the territory of Western Sahara lies west of the wall, and is occupied by Morocco; the remaining third to the east is governed by the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), led by the pro-independence Polisario Front. Morocco considers the entirety of Western Sahara to be part of its historical domain within the larger irredentist narrative of Greater Morocco, and does not recognize SADR or Polisario. Currently, Morocco describes Western Sahara as its "Southern Provinces" and administers the territory as a contiguous part of Morocco, albeit under heavy military occupation. The area east of the wall is sparsely populated; the majority of SADR and Polisario personnel and Sahrawi refugees live in a series of camps near Tindouf, Algeria. No United Nations member state officially recognizes Morocco's claim to Western Sahara. SADR is a member of the African Union, and Polisario's claim to Western Sahara is officially recognized by around 80 countries (International Business Publications, 2013: 37).

Although Western Sahara's traditional inhabitants are Sahrawis, an Arab-Berber ethnolinguistic group probably best characterized by their shared use of the Hassaniyya dialect of Arabic, the association between the land and the people is far from straightforward. The definition of Sahrawi ethnicity is historically complex and has co-evolved with the definition and political status of Western Sahara, but there are individuals who identify as Sahrawi (and who speak Hassaniyya Arabic) in Morocco, Algeria, and Mauritania as well as in Western Sahara (Zunes and Mundy, 2010: 93). Traditionally nomadic, Sahrawis have historically existed at several levels of organization; as individuals, as

families, as tribal lineages, and finally as a loose ethnicity that has coalesced partially in response to colonialism and rapid urbanization. As Zunes and Mundy have written:

The term *Sahrawi* ... is often used to mean “indigenous Western Saharan,” although this equivalent is not accurate. Indeed, it is sufficient on most accounts than an “ethnic” Sahrawi only has to claim descent from one of the recognized major or minor social groupings—“tribes” or “confederations”—in or overlapping the former Spanish Sahara.... The most pragmatic definition of Sahrawis is that they are the Hassaniyyah-speaking peoples who claim membership among at least one of the social groupings found in and around the area now known as Western Sahara.

(Zunes and Mundy, 2010: 92–3)

Although reliable demographic figures are hard to come by (and are complicated by the complex definition of Sahrawi identity), the majority of Sahrawis live either in the Moroccan-occupied zone of Western Sahara or in refugee camps near Tindouf, Algeria. The exact Sahrawi population in both locations is a matter of dispute; a 2008 estimate has the population of the Tindouf camps around 125,000 (Human Rights Watch, 2008). There are probably fewer than one million Sahrawis worldwide.

Complicating the question of both an actual definition of Sahrawi identity and any measurement of demographic figures is that, beginning with the so-called Green March in 1975 and continuing to the present, Morocco introduced hundreds of thousands of settlers into Western Sahara, at least partly in an effort to skew the results of an expected independence referendum. Some of these settlers—it is not known exactly how many—were Sahrawis living in southern Morocco, while others were Moroccan Arabs or Berbers from the Rif and Atlas regions (Zunes and Mundy, 2010: 192). During the process of registering voters, many of the non-Sahrawi settlers were trained in Sahrawi customs and in the Hassaniyya dialect; ongoing disputes over which Sahrawis are “real” and which are “constructed” are often credited with derailing the referendum process (Zunes and Mundy, 2010: 193). The inclusion or exclusion of these settlers in the voting process could potentially be the deciding factor in the referendum’s result.

The existence of a political entity roughly contiguous with present-day Western Sahara formally began in 1884, with the establishment of a Spanish protectorate that was gradually expanded over the years along with Spanish possessions in present-day Morocco itself (Naylor, 2010: 161). Continued unrest and raids by Sahrawi tribes limited Spain’s formal control over the territory, and by the 1970s, this passive insurgency had coalesced into early Sahrawi nationalism. The Polisario Front (from the Spanish acronym *Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguia el Hamra y Río de Oro*) was established in 1973, and quickly gained de facto control of a large amount of the territory from Spain (Naylor, 2010: 239). By 1975, in the midst of a global trend toward decolonization, Spain was negotiating with Polisario over the possibility of a handover and withdrawal.

Both Morocco and Mauritania objected, claiming that the Spanish Sahara was a historical part of their own territory. The case was turned over to the International Court of Justice (ICJ), which after some deliberation concluded that no binding historical ties existed between the territory and either Morocco or Mauritania; in the court’s opinion, the Sahrawi people had the right to self-determination for the colony (Zunes and Mundy, 2010: 5).

In an audacious diplomatic maneuver, Morocco’s King Hassan II declared in a speech that the ICJ had concluded in his favor; less than a month later, in what became known as the Green March, hundreds of thousands of Moroccan civilians crossed the border into Western Sahara. Shortly after, Spain signed the Madrid Accords, dividing the territory between Morocco and Mauritania and guaranteeing Spanish withdrawal. Polisario established SADR as a government-in-exile, and formed the corresponding Sahrawi People’s Liberation Army (SPLA). Beginning in late 1975, Polisario fought a 16-year long guerilla war against Morocco and Mauritania (Zunes and Mundy, 2010: 5).

Polisario’s initial performance in the war was impressive; long-distance raids deep into Moroccan and Mauritanian territory established the movement’s military credibility, while traditional Sahrawi knowledge of the deep desert made it very difficult for Morocco to implement an effective counterinsurgency campaign. Polisario’s early military strategy focused on Mauritania, and by 1979 Mauritania withdrew from the war entirely, leaving Polisario free to focus on Moroccan targets. With the assistance of many nations, including the United States, Morocco began a novel counterinsurgency strategy, building a sequence of concentric defensive barriers, including the widespread use of landmines, that allowed the Moroccan military to consolidate its gains around major urban centers such as Laayoune. This strategy reduced Polisario to hit-and-run attacks on the expanding wall itself (Zunes and Mundy, 2010: 23). By the late 1980s the war was essentially a stalemate. In 1991, the two sides signed a UN-brokered ceasefire on the understanding that a referendum would follow; Morocco built up its defenses around the wall’s final position. The current Western Sahara Berm, sometimes called the Wall of Shame by Sahrawis, is the longest security barrier in the world (Di Cintio, 2012: 20).

Since 1991, repeated efforts by the United Nations and various diplomats have failed to organize a referendum that is acceptable to both sides. Immediately following the Green March, Morocco began training thousands of Moroccan citizens in Sahrawi customs and in the Hassaniyya dialect in an attempt to pass them off as ethnic Sahrawis who would then vote to integrate into Morocco. Polisario has consistently argued that only those Sahrawis who can demonstrate historical ties to the territory should be allowed to vote. Morocco has also blocked proposed referenda that included full independence as an option, stating repeatedly that Morocco’s “territorial integrity” will never be put to a vote (Zunes and Mundy, 2010: 143). As a result, diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict have largely stalled.

Since 1991, both sides have respected the ceasefire. Inside the territory, resistance by pro-independence Sahrawis has been almost exclusively nonviolent,

manifesting mainly as protests, demonstrations, and symbolic expressions of solidarity with Polisario and commitment to independence. Organizations such as *Asociación Saharaui de Víctimas de Violaciones Graves de los Derechos Humanos Cometidas por el Estado Marroquí* (ASVDH), *Colectivo Saharaui de Defensores de los Derechos Humanos* (CODESA), and *Comité de Defensa del Derecho de Autodeterminación del Pueblo del Sahara Occidental* (CODAPSO) promote human rights and self-determination within the territory but have a limited role in facilitating nonviolent protest. The lone substantiated exception to the nonviolent strategy occurred at Gdeim Izik, near Laayoune, in the fall of 2010. What started as a protest camp quickly evolved into a complex tent city consisting of several thousand Sahrawis—some estimates suggest as many as 24,000 (CODAPSO, 2011)—and organized with a horizontal structure that included a hospital and, according to some accounts, even a prison (Errazzouki, 2014). On 8 November, Moroccan security forces moved in and leveled the camp, triggering violent clashes that left at least 11 Moroccan security force personnel dead. This departure from the nonviolent strategy appears to have been fairly disorganized and spontaneous, although the brutal imagery that accompanied the riot, including footage of a Sahrawi protestor apparently urinating on the corpse of a Moroccan soldier, and another video allegedly depicting a protestor beheading a wounded soldier (Mundy, 2010) damaged international perception of the Sahrawi cause:

In the aftermath of Gdeim Izik, young Sahrawi men did engage in violent acts in response to the incitement and brutality of the Moroccan security forces. The range of intensity included physical attacks against security forces, intentionally hitting a security officer with a car, throwing rocks, and setting fire to buildings. While the response from the Moroccan security forces was equal or greater in its brutality and violence, the acts of violence undertaken by Sahrawis were harmful to the message and the success of the largely peaceful movement by playing into the continuing cycle of violence.... While the original demonstration was meant to be fully nonviolent, the violence perpetrated against the demonstrators did produce a violent response.

(Dann, 2014)

One problem encountered in describing a nonviolent resistance movement lies in the definition of nonviolence itself; what, exactly, would constitute a departure from nonviolence? There are many recorded instances of Sahrawi protestors throwing rocks or Molotov cocktails. In these cases, a violence/nonviolence binary may not be particularly useful. These instances, however, are the exception to the rule. Gdeim Izik is the only reliably attested case of lethal force applied by Sahrawi protestors in the occupied territories since the 1991 ceasefire. In seeking to explain the absence of violent resistance, we must first describe the types of resistance that we would expect to see. As Wendy Pearlman notes in her study of violent and nonviolent resistance in Palestine, “The question of why

movements use violent means ... is inextricable from the question of why they do or do not use *nonviolent* means.” (Pearlman, 2014: 2) Violence and nonviolence are not necessarily opposites; a movement can choose to use one or both strategies simultaneously. Nor are nonviolent resistance and the absence of violent resistance synonymous; nonviolent resistance includes a wide range of active tactics that imply a strong commitment to a cause and a willingness to undergo personal risk. Within each broad category there is also significant variation in tactics, strategy, and intensity. There is also a nontrivial gray area between violence and nonviolence; some resistance strategies might be characterized as “quasi-violent,” and violence can be either proactive, as in the case of a suicide bombing, or reactive, as in the case of collective self-defense in response to state aggression. Violence and nonviolence can both be formal and organized, or informal and disorganized. Particular groups or organizations can carry out planned acts of violence, just as individuals within a broader movement can pursue a strategy at odds with their community as a whole.

For the purposes of this chapter, we are particularly interested in resistance in the occupied territories as distinct from explicitly Polisario-aligned resistance. Since 2001, with the initiation of a new *intifada*, the center of resistance has moved from Tindouf to the streets of Laayoune (Zunes and Mundy, 2010: 140). Polisario’s nonviolence—the lack of a resumption of war with Morocco—is distinct conceptually and politically from the nonviolence of protestors in occupied Western Sahara itself.

How a resistance movement “chooses” its strategy is the subject of a body of existing scholarship, as are the conditions under which a movement can be said to “choose” at all. A certain level of cohesion is required to ascribe intentionality to a complex social structure as something more than an aggregate property of the collective will of its membership; Pearlman characterizes a movement’s cohesion as “the degree to which it, which is not actually an ‘it,’ acts as if it were.” (Pearlman, 2014: 9) Most accounts of Sahrawi resistance in the occupied territory present it as non-hierarchical and decentralized, lacking the type of leadership structures usually associated with strategic discipline.

The problem here is to explain how, given a population that (like all political movements) presumably includes individuals with a wide range of goals, the pro-independence movement in Western Sahara has been able to enforce a particular strategy (nonviolence) across its entire membership, for more than two decades, with essentially no deviations. That is, there has been plenty of violence in the past—the history of Western Sahara as a cartographic entity has been one of persistent, irregular, low-level violence, starting with clashes between Spanish settlers and nomadic raiders in the 1880s, continuing with the birth of Sahrawi nationalism in the twentieth century, and culminating in the war between Morocco and Polisario. Why is there now virtually no violence by Sahrawis in Western Sahara, despite a violent and repressive occupying force, a frustrated and angry population, and plenty of opportunities for individuals to deviate from Polisario’s strategy of nonviolence?

Methods

A complete picture of the Western Sahara Conflict would require interviews with Moroccan authorities and Moroccan settlers, as well as Sahrawis who are opposed to independence. However, this project was limited in scope to explicitly pro-independence Sahrawis—precisely that group whose nonviolence is puzzling. That limited scope simplified the recruitment process considerably. Starting with a small group of initial contacts provided by scholars and journalists who had previously worked on the conflict, interviews were arranged largely by referrals. The resulting sample was, therefore, biased by design in favor of pro-independence Sahrawis who were politically active and more likely to be university-educated than the population as a whole. Nevertheless, the sampling bias does not have a significant deleterious impact on the results. The research is about gauging strategy and behavior as practiced by a relatively small, decentralized movement; talking to leaders (or at least socially central individuals) within that movement is a more valuable use of limited research time than constructing a broadly representative sample of the population.

Moreover, the sample was robust in several ways. Interviews were conducted in four cities: Rabat/Salé in Morocco, and Laayoune, Dakhla, and Smara in Western Sahara. As a result, the sample contained a cross-section of Sahrawis living in urban Morocco and several cities with distinct demographics and histories in Western Sahara. The age of participants ranged from about 18 to about 65; consequently, we were able to talk to Sahrawis who had lived under Spanish colonization and fought in the 1975–91 war as well as those who had grown up under Moroccan occupation. Within this variation, our participants fell into three primarily and sometimes overlapping categories. Due to situational challenges and a tendency for open discussion rather than one-on-one sessions, we experienced some difficulties in precisely defining an “interview”; we spoke with approximately 60 Sahrawis as part of this project.

A major flaw in the interview process lay in gendered dimensions; only two participants were women. As the researchers and translators were male, the referral system tended to bring us only men, even when we asked to speak with women. Evidence from the literature and anecdotally from our contacts suggests that women play a large role in the resistance, and female researchers in the territory have produced significant insights into the role of gender in Sahrawi society and resistance, but cultural practices dictate some degree of gender segregation. This problem could have been partially mitigated by the presence of a female researcher or translator; gendered perspectives could have offered more completeness.

Every single one of our participants recognized Polisario as the legitimate representative of both the Sahrawi people and of Western Saharan independence. This came as somewhat of a surprise; other literature suggests at least some degree of disagreement on this point. There are a few possible explanations for this, the most obvious of which is that our referral system allowed our primary contacts to shape the narrative we were allowed to hear. Nevertheless, it is also

probably true that anti-Polisario propaganda in Morocco has portrayed the group as significantly less representative than it actually is; apart from our interviews, we observed demonstrations and ubiquitous graffiti that expressed support for Polisario. While it is difficult to make a conclusive statement on this point, it is at least true that all of our observations suggested overwhelming support for and allegiance to Polisario within Western Sahara, and none of our observations suggested the opposite.

Furthermore, interview subjects overwhelmingly ascribed Sahrawi nonviolence to an ethical choice. They claimed that they chose to refrain from violence because it was immoral, or because they had committed, as a community, to waiting for the UN-mandated referendum, or because they trusted in the international community's efforts to resolve the conflict. A large number also ascribed their nonviolence to Polisario's diplomatic strategy; several times, interview subjects said that they personally favored a return to war, but chose not to out of respect for Polisario, or so as to demonstrate publicly their recognition of Polisario as their legitimate representative. Responses of this form were strikingly similar across every city and varied little between people who had never met or heard of each other; the same answer came from former political prisoners in urban Morocco and young men in Smara. Some participants gave other disincentives for violence as well: Morocco's overwhelming information superiority in the territory, for instance, or the fact that violence by any Sahrawi would cast the whole community and resistance effort in a negative light, or make Moroccan propaganda efforts to cast Polisario as a violent actor considerably easier.

While there was clearly a performative aspect to all this, it was consistent enough that the unanimity of answers constituted a kind of centripetal force in and of itself; if everyone in the community believes in a certain strategic ethic of nonviolence, then performativity does not matter, even when that performativity is widespread and deliberate.

Discussion

Violence—insurgency, self-defense, perhaps terrorism—might or might not “work” in Western Sahara, but whether or not those techniques brought about a desired result, violence would also incur considerable cost to the individuals and the movement. Violence is intuitively unpleasant for most people at the best of times; violence by individuals against a state actor with overwhelming superiority in its ability to retaliate against specific agitators and their families requires a remarkable degree of motivation and a unique combination of selfishness and selflessness. Aside from individual motivations and deterrents, what sort of calculus might a cohesive, unitary, and rational resistance movement in Western Sahara engage in when choosing resistance strategies?

“Terrorism” as classically defined is sometimes said to be most effective when used to persuade democracies to end occupation of foreign territory. “Democracy” and “occupation” are both rather complicated definitions in

practice, but in the case of Western Sahara, we can see how this logic might apply. Countries that are certainly not *more* democratic than Morocco have been persuaded to end an occupation by insurgent activity in the past—for instance, the Soviet Union in Afghanistan during the 1980s. In the case of Western Sahara, though, there are a few reasons to think that terrorism or insurgency might in fact be counterproductive or prohibitively costly tools.

Of these, the one that was most frequently referenced during the fieldwork was international perception of the Sahrawi cause. Western Sahara is obscure by activist standards. A somewhat comparable situation in Palestine has persisted despite efforts by international activists, in no small part due to the ease with which Palestinian nationalism can be conflated with—or overshadowed by—its militant elements. Although a great deal of the conflict's obscurity is the direct result of Morocco's control of information and access, what little attention does exist could be easily overshadowed by a narrative that more readily casts Sahrawi nationalists as a quasi-terrorist movement vulnerable to penetration by Al-Qaeda and related groups. Indeed, such a narrative does exist already, although even a cursory examination of the conflict's history suggests the reverse is true; Al-Qaeda and Polisario (as well as Sahrawi activists within the occupied zone) share no goals or ideologies and are in fact diametrically opposed in their visions for the future of North Africa. Nevertheless, most Sahrawis, especially those who are most politically engaged, are acutely aware of the potential for their struggle to be cast as terroristic.

Another strategic deterrent for the use of violence in support of Sahrawi nationalism, intuitively, is that it probably would not work. Moroccan military superiority in Western Sahara is virtually unprecedented; the occupying force may outnumber the population it occupies. Even a violent insurgency consisting of every single Sahrawi in Western Sahara would be massively outgunned by Moroccan security forces—to say nothing of Moroccan settlers themselves—and the Sahrawi population in Western Sahara has no real access to the materials required for an insurgency. The segregation of Sahrawis in particular neighborhoods, and the relative ease with which Sahrawis can be identified based on their dress, language, and culture, mean that an insurgent movement in Western Sahara would face considerable difficulty in creating the kind of “identification problem” that insurgencies generally rely upon for success. Consequently, when weighing the low probability of success against the political and social costs of using violence, it seems unlikely that an insurgency in Western Sahara would be an effective strategy for Sahrawi nationalists, particularly without active support by, at the very least, Polisario.

With a lack of success comes backlash; surely Sahrawis who were caught or suspected of participating in or supporting an insurgency would face reprisals from the Moroccan state. Nonviolent Sahrawi activists are routinely beaten, tortured, and detained. Reports of Moroccan soldiers attacking or sexually assaulting wives, mothers, and sisters of known Sahrawi activists are widespread. In a cohesive community like the one shared by most Sahrawis, these types of threats are often a very effective deterrent to action.

Given that an insurgency in Western Sahara would likely be both ineffective and prohibitively costly, it comes as little surprise that activist leaders in the occupied territory have refrained from engaging in one—to say nothing of the fact that such an insurgency would probably be unpopular with Sahrawis in general unless it was coordinated with Polisario. Particulate, individual violence, however, is a different matter; some of the same deterrents apply (such as a probable Moroccan retaliation against family members), but much of the literature on political violence correctly disaggregates the strategic behavior of political movements from the individual violence of the people who make up a movement. The degree to which this strategy is both generalized and centralized across a movement that has a limited formal top-down structure is part of what makes the Sahrawi resistance so interesting, and certainly merits future research attention.

Thought experiments

Two thought experiments provide an interesting opportunity to contemplate what might occur in the case of a violent resistance movement in Western Sahara, and thereby provide some insight into why such resistance does not actually exist. These hypothetical cases are informed by interview questions and discussions that followed some of our interviews, in which our translators and some interview subjects explored their own reasoning about particular resistance strategies.

What might follow if a particular Sahrawi resistance cell attempted to obtain weapons with the intention of carrying out a lethal attack on Moroccan security forces? In this case, we are interested in disorganized resistance that differs from the actual observed resistance in its intent—to cause lethal harm—and its use of firearms or explosives. Presumably, smuggling weapons into Western Sahara would involve a certain amount of prior planning, and would thus be vulnerable to disruption by Moroccan security services. Some degree of smuggling does take place in the territory, although it is not clear how organized or formal this might be. It is, therefore, hard to predict how vulnerable such activity might be to Moroccan intelligence penetration, although constraints on movement and assembly would probably make it very difficult. The pervasiveness of surveillance in major cities would make it difficult to organize an urban attack, although a nomadic movement in the desert might be easier; it would be less risky to attack a rural target. In particular, the phosphate belt at Bou Craa is vulnerable—it has been subjected to low-level sabotage on occasions, though with limited success (Western Sahara Resource Watch, 2015)—and a more sophisticated attack could potentially disrupt Moroccan phosphate extraction. The same is probably true of the fishing industry in Western Sahara and of future oil exploration, although these industries lack the single point of failure represented by the phosphate belt.

In this case, the most effective deterrent is probably the Sahrawi community's self-policing structure. Several interview subjects said that any Sahrawi who

engaged in violence without the consent of the broader community would be ostracized, and most cited this collective sense of identity and mission as the main deterrent, either abstractly or as a distinct factor, preventing them from doing exactly that. We heard two primary explanations for this phenomenon. The first was the collective struggle for independence. Many of our interview subjects attributed generalized and persistent nonviolence to the entire population's awareness that violence would allow Morocco to more easily cast Sahrawi resistors as terrorists and tarnish the pro-independence movement's international reputation. A second explanation was the implicit threat that severe violence by one Sahrawi, even (or perhaps especially) a Sahrawi whose identity was unknown, would result in Moroccan violence against the entire community, perhaps throughout all of Western Sahara.

In the case of these counterfactual examinations, Sahrawi explanations for nonviolence—even if theoretically unlikely—are the most valuable means of investigation, as they shed light on the community's own narratives of nonviolence and the means by which individuals and groups reason about resistance strategies. Collective identity and cohesion is difficult to prove, and sometimes harder to analyze, but the narrative of collectivism persists, and may go a long way toward simulating—or instantiating—actual cohesion, even if it is performative in some aspects. The same may be said of other persistent narratives of the occupation and resistance. The belief of many Sahrawis in Polisario's military prowess appears to run counter to established facts—although this was also true in 1975, at the outset of a war Polisario seemed to be on the verge of winning for several years—but it has an impact on how resistance is practiced, and on how many Sahrawis view the potential value of diplomatic resolutions. Similarly, the belief in the omniscience of Moroccan surveillance, though clearly based on a visible, tangible reality, probably exaggerates the actual precision of that surveillance but nevertheless shapes how the resistance mobilizes protests and what sorts of actions it chooses, both collectively and individually.

In practice, of course, an individual or small group that attempted to smuggle weapons into the territory and carry out a violent attack would face considerable obstacles: Moroccan intelligence and military superiority, for example, and the technical ability required to operate heavy weapons or build and manage explosives. Morocco would almost certainly publicize such an attempt if it was discovered, as it has done with Islamist cells in urban Morocco.

How might the above reasoning differ in the case of a pre-existing, organized violent resistance? As discussed, an urban insurgency in Western Sahara would be difficult to sustain given the largely segregated and heavily surveilled layout of major cities. A rural insurgency might have a longer lifespan, but would probably face many of the same problems, especially without an area beyond the reach of Moroccan reprisals. A drawn-out conflict would also likely provoke attacks by Moroccan settlers on Sahrawi neighborhoods, as have been observed most notably during the Wakkala riots in Dakhla in 2011. A sustained insurgency would also face considerable problems in obtaining and maintaining weapons; Polisario had a number of external allies (notably Algeria) but

smuggling in the deep desert, while largely uncontrolled, would probably be restricted in the event of a violent conflict. Such an insurgency would also face previously discussed difficulties in organizing in the first place, social censure from the majority of Sahrawis, and then justifying continued operations in the face of generalized Moroccan retaliation. Violence in the territory, while not just difficult and heavily discouraged, would actually be nearly impossible to sustain in the face of Moroccan military and intelligence superiority without external support.

Could Polisario fund and support an insurgency in Western Sahara without itself going back to war? Many of the same counterarguments apply, as any suspicion of Polisario power projection (in the form of weapons shipments, personnel, and so on) would probably result in more restrictive border controls by Morocco and possibly even retaliatory attacks on Polisario bases in SADR. During the 1975–91 war, Morocco used napalm against civilian populations (Zunes and Mundy, 2010: 114), and could do so again. Once again, the threat of indiscriminate or unrestrained violence as well as the precarious international stalemate surrounding the conflict likely discourages both sides from significant escalation. There may also be internal incentives for avoiding a return to war for Polisario leaders; for instance, losing a war against Morocco, even if the result was a return to the status quo, might mean an overhaul of Polisario's leadership and strategy. Polisario would likely be unable to offer much material support to an insurgency in Western Sahara short of an actual return to war, but even if it could, it is difficult to imagine what the incentive would be for an implicit violation of the ceasefire.

Implications

The first lesson that follows from Western Sahara is that caution must be employed when assessing with any level of rigor such politically charged and often manipulative terms as “terrorism” and “violence.” After all, this chapter has framed Western Sahara as interesting partially because of the *lack* of terrorism—by which we mean, presumably, that Sahrawis do not engage in terrorism against Moroccans. By any reasonable definition, though, the Moroccan government has engaged in terrorism, or state terror, against Sahrawis. Moreover, by describing the Sahrawi resistance as *not* terroristic, we seem to imply that Sahrawis in Western Sahara are a population from which terrorists might otherwise be drawn—which in itself suggests a narrow, and perhaps problematic, definition of terrorism as something practiced by minorities and marginalized populations against larger populations, rather than vice-versa. All this is to say that questions like “Does terrorism work?” are perhaps less valuable than “Why do some people choose to resort to violence, and others not?” Terrorism works sometimes—depending on what you define as terrorism, and what you define as success—and other times, it does not. Success for a movement that employs violence as a strategy—for instance, the ousting of an occupying force, the dissolution of a power structure, or similar—may not square up with the goals of an

individual practitioner of violence, whose particular psychology may be subject to a bewildering and more or less unstudyable haze of countervailing forces. Conflating organizational and individual motivations is a significant error. Moreover, it is worth examining what common factors exist between cases selected for study; what do we expect to learn from aggregating dramatically different groups unified only by their common practice of a certain type of political violence in a certain context?

Second, it should be clear that “violence” is a muddy and controversial analytical and ontological category. Studies that purport to draw general conclusions about what violence “does” or what sort of people engage in violence should be approached with, at the very least, considerable methodological skepticism. Sahrawis throw rocks at Moroccan security forces fairly often; what they do not do is use firearms, or bombs. Where does one draw the line between violence and nonviolence (or the lack of violence) for the purposes of a single study, let alone a larger policy? Moroccan security forces routinely detain, imprison, torture, and sexually assault Sahrawi activists and their family members; actual deaths are less common, although several are reported each year. By what logic, therefore, do we conclude that the Western Sahara Conflict is nonviolent? The best phrasing might be to simply say that Western Sahara is not as violent as it could be; both sides exercise at least some degree of restraint. Surely, if enough of them tried, Sahrawi activists could, eventually, build a bomb or smuggle a gun into the territory, if they were determined to do so. Similarly, Morocco could, in theory, actually ethnically cleanse the territory and simply murder hundreds of thousands of Sahrawis or hundreds of activists. There are good reasons, both strategic and ethical, to avoid either of the above strategies, but at the very least Western Sahara reinforces the idea of violent and nonviolent resistance as endpoints on a continuum, rather than as discrete and mutually exclusive behavioral categories.

So much for analytic precautions. Violence is complicated, and often politically charged. Terrorism, if it exists as a coherent description of behavior, is significantly more so. What have we learned about Western Sahara?

In terms of answering the question “Why don’t we see more political violence in Western Sahara?”, this study (with the above caveats about the actual definitions of several words), proposes several parallel explanations. The most generalizable of these is occupation density; via a combination of settler-colonialism and a massive occupying force, Morocco is able to effectively pre-empt most mobilization of effective resistance. This was only obliquely attested in interviews; many participants mentioned the difficulty of living under constant and overwhelming surveillance. It was more apparent in terms of observations; Laayoune, for instance, was more or less impossible to move in without being immediately detected by the Moroccan security services.

What is implied by this surveillance is violence; specifically, mass surveillance and militarization in Western Sahara creates the impression among the population that acts of resistance, whether actual insurgent violence or merely expressions of solidarity with Polisario or support for independence, will be met

with violence from the Moroccan security services—several participants in this project suggested that Moroccan soldiers and police officers routinely raped or threatened to rape the wives and sisters of Sahrawi activists. In this sense, terrorism absolutely works: by promising violence, and indicating that it was willing and able to act on that promise, Morocco was able to modify, through fear, the behavior of a population for a political goal—in this case, continued hegemony over Western Sahara. What this suggests, if anything, is that terrorism works when the perpetrators of terror are able to create the perception that their promise of violence has a reasonable chance of being fulfilled. All of this begs a number of interesting questions about who is actually capable of engaging in terrorism, and what the limits of such behavior might be; such investigations could be fruitfully explored in a longer and far more philosophical chapter than this one.

Conclusion

When asked about their motivations and their strategies of resistance, Sahrawis who participated in this study tended to ascribe the absence of violence to a set of social and political factors. Some of these were clearly performative, recited for the benefit of the researchers. Other motivations, such as the nonviolent nature of the Sahrawi people, seemed important to bring up for other reasons; true or not, narratives about what a particular group of people “are like” can become part of a group’s strategy. Polisario’s 1991 ceasefire with Morocco was an agreement between two military forces. Diplomatic explanations, and questions of military superiority, do explain a great deal of the behavior of Sahrawi *organizations*; what they cannot account for is the absence of violence by individual Sahrawis.

Violence is a complex phenomenon, realized quite differently in different contexts and dependent upon a host of cultural, political, social, economic, and environmental factors that resist simple explanations. Generalizations, therefore, must be done with considerable caution and should always be taken as provisional and tentative. Viewed one way, Sahrawi nonviolence is a function of a particular type of Moroccan state repression—a massive occupation enabling correspondingly massive informational asymmetry between occupiers and occupied—that is perhaps unique in the modern world and almost impossible to replicate in other contexts. It is also probably at least partially the result of a unique social structure created by rapid post-colonial urbanization, a social structure that, like its nomadic antecedents, is exceptionally cohesive and necessitates a level of interdependency, trust, and accountability that is difficult to appreciate until one has witnessed it. The actual condition of prolonged, almost unanimous nonviolence among Sahrawis in Western Sahara, therefore, is unique; a less overwhelming occupation, or a similar occupation of a different social group, would have different results.

Nevertheless, it is possible to make some fairly robust claims about the resistance in Western Sahara. The proposed explanation for nonviolence on the part

of Sahrawis is multifactorial, contingent upon both the large occupying force and unique Sahrawi social dynamics. The generalizability of these findings to other cases may be limited.

Future research could take a number of directions. The Sahrawi attribution of nonviolence to social cohesion is interesting, but not rigorously defined; a study could fruitfully compare the social graph of a given Sahrawi community with those found in other occupied territories (Palestine, for instance) and link connectivity to cohesion in a formalized way that allows for more predictive power. It would also be useful to compare the opinions, explanations, and attitudes of Sahrawis in the occupied territory to those living in the Polisario-governed camps in Algeria.

Much of the value of studying Western Sahara is contrastive, but it is not immediately obvious which comparisons might be the most useful. Palestine and East Timor are both frequently invoked in the literature, but the differences between these cases are at times substantial. Western Sahara is somewhat unique in the size of the occupying force and the settler population relative to the indigenous population; thus, Western Sahara may possibly be more aptly compared to the conditions of indigenous peoples in North America and Australia. In the end, the most important lessons of the Western Sahara Conflict may be ethical rather than pragmatic; one is reminded of the quote, variously attributed to a number of historical figures: "The measure of a civilization is how it treats its weakest members." The same may be said of the present international system.

Note

- 1 The English version of this chapter originally appeared in *Democracy and Security*, 12 (2), 2016: 65–84; republished with permission.

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