

## Ambivalences of mobility: rival state authorities and mobile strategies in a Saharan conflict

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## **Ambivalences of Mobility:**

### **Rival State Authorities and Mobile Strategies in a Saharan Conflict**

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#### ABSTRACT

How do ongoing histories of mobility in economic and political life affect rival state authorities' claims over a disputed territory? In the conflict over Western Sahara, wide-ranging strategies of mobility pose a challenge to familiar tropes of states constraining movement while subjects seek to escape such control. Morocco and its rival, the liberation movement Polisario Front, both curb mobility while their mobile Sahrawi subjects evade the authority of a state; simultaneously, however, each state authority invests in the circulation of persons to support claims over territory while Sahrawis exercise mobility to enhance their position vis-à-vis a state authority. Mobility emerges as an ambivalent means of mediating and transforming power relations, especially between governing authorities and governed constituencies. [*mobility, Morocco, Polisario Front, sovereignty, the state, territory, Western Sahara*]

Mobility in the current historical juncture presents us with an apparent paradox. Both globalization (the accelerated flows of people, things, and ideas) and neoliberal governance (which ostensibly encourages state authorities to loosen regulation, including obstacles to said flows) celebrate selected forms of mobility. But state authorities have simultaneously intensified interventions to constrain unwanted mobilities through such means as the proliferation of visa regimes (e.g. De Genova and Peutz 2010; Jansen 2009; Reeves 2013) and physical walls (e.g. Bowman 2004; Brown 2010; Jones 2012). Meanwhile political appetites for these initiatives have grown in the global north. Certain kinds of states increasingly invest in controlling mobility, whether at home or by exporting control to the global south.

One corollary of such investments in control is that for many people, such as economic migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, mobility seems the best option to escape from a state

authority that is unable to provide economic and/or political protections. While these persons may ultimately deploy mobility to seek protection from an alternative state authority, at the same time they resort to mobility to escape unwanted interference from a state, as have Roma, Maroons, swidden agriculturalists, and mobile pastoralists in other circumstances (e.g. Scott 2009).<sup>i</sup> The apparent paradox of mobility thus accommodates mutually reinforcing paradigms whereby state authorities invest in control (encouraging desirable forms of mobility but restricting the wrong kinds), while some people invest in escape (using mobility to evade a particular state authority).

These seemingly persuasive paradigms of control and escape are nevertheless problematic. An overemphasis on either control or escape reproduces problematic assumptions of two kinds: on the one hand, the “fiction” (Brown 2010) of a state’s sovereign authority over territory belied on the ground by the contingency and fragmentation of state power (Hansen and Stepputat 2005), and, on the other hand, the apparent human desire for “freedom” from the tyranny of governance by a state authority (Jonsson 2012).<sup>ii</sup>

In practice, particular historical forms of state power alternately discourage or encourage mobility according to the latter’s different forms. Similarly, persons may deploy mobility in the hope of being governed by a particular state authority or of achieving a more favorable position within a given set of power relations. Given the heterogeneity of mobility strategies, the partially helpful control and escape paradigms should be situated within a broader assessment of mobility as “an especially dense transfer point for relations of power,” as Michel Foucault (1978, 103) has argued for discourses of sexuality. In specific historical contexts, such as the neoliberal but immigrant-wary global north of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, mobility is less of a paradox than an ambivalent set of practices through which power relations may be mediated and transformed.

With state authorities in the modern era having “monopolized the *authority* to restrict movement vis-à-vis other potential claimants” (Torpey 1998, 240), power relations that play out between state authorities and governed constituencies in particular historical forms are a privileged site for analyzing the ambivalence of mobility.<sup>iii</sup> This ambivalence is perhaps extreme where two rival state authorities compete for a people and a territory. In such a scenario, attempts to control mobility on the part of rival state authorities intensify, as do attempts to escape on the part of those wishing to resist a state authority. Yet, contrary to initial appearances, each tendency towards control and escape may coexist with its opposite.

These dynamics play out in the forty-year-old conflict for sovereignty over Western Sahara, a disputed territory in north-west Africa. Little known outside specialist circles, Western Sahara occupies geographical as well as conceptual margins, falling both in and out of the category of statehood. Nevertheless, “practices and politics of life [in marginal areas have] shaped the

political, regulatory, and disciplinary practices that constitute, somehow, that thing we call ‘the state’” (Das and Poole 2004, 3). An initial examination of the territory suggests how state authorities control mobility while putative subjects deploy mobility as a means of escape. On maps representing Western Sahara (see Figure 1), a line winding north to south across the territory—representing a Moroccan-built wall—immediately stands out, a tell-tale sign of uncompromising attempts by a state authority, here Morocco, to control mobility. For their part, deserts have a reputation and history of being suitable spaces into which those who want to escape a state authority can melt away.

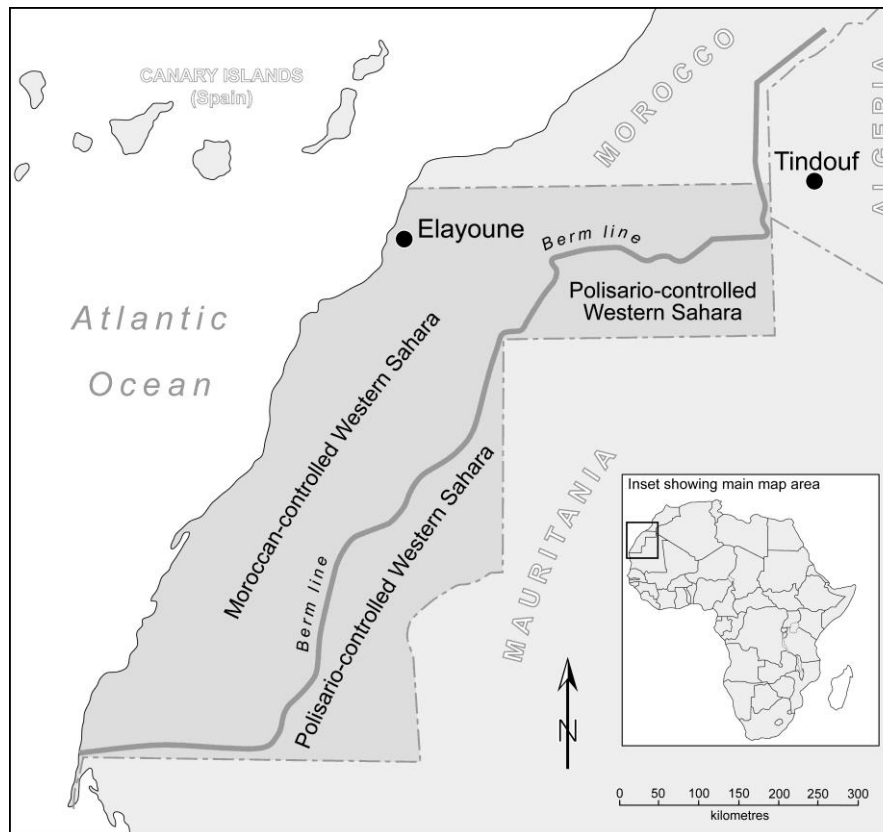


Figure 1: Map of Western Sahara showing the berm which divides Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara and Polisario-controlled Western Sahara.

While I conducted ethnographic fieldwork with Sahrawis (denizens of Western Sahara) both in the refugee camps in Algeria governed by the liberation movement for Western Sahara, Polisario Front, and in the Moroccan-controlled areas of Western Sahara, I encountered a more complex scenario. State authorities also invest in mobility to reinforce claims over territory and people. Crucially, these investments go beyond techniques of settler colonialism familiar from other settings of colonialism and state expansionism (e.g. Rabinowitz 1997) and which are also relevant to Western Sahara. Simultaneously, putative subjects invest in mobility as a means of negotiating a more favorable situation within a given regime of governance than is otherwise currently available to them. Thus Sahrawis not only use mobility to resist a state authority (commonly observed of annexed Sahrawis, but also—though less widely observed—relevant to exiled Sahrawis). They likewise use mobility as a means to “solidify their positions” within a given political order, as David Crawford (2008,

148) has observed of rural migrants to Moroccan cities. In this conflict for sovereignty over a primarily steppeland territory, when various parties' motivations to control mobility or to use it as a means of escape could hardly seem higher, mobility emerges as highly ambivalent and malleable for multiple political and economic ends.

I draw on long-term fieldwork with exiled Sahrawis spanning two years in 2007-2009 and shorter trips between 2006 and 2014. In Moroccan-controlled areas of Western Sahara where research access is more restricted I draw on short fieldwork in 2012. My concern is with state authorities that make claims over the people and territory of Western Sahara; I do not address here the interactions of Sahrawis in diasporic communities in Algeria, Mauritania, Spain, and elsewhere with state authorities that do not make claims over the people and territory of Western Sahara e.g. Algerian military patrols and Algerian, Mauritanian or Spanish border personnel. I lived with Sahrawi families, witnessed, and sometimes participated in ordinary and extraordinary happenings. I sought to understand the possibilities and constraints of Sahrawis' lives within prevailing and contested power structures, as well as local perceptions of those structures.

During fieldwork, I focused on political and economic aspects of the making of state power in exile (Wilson 2016) and parallel but distinct trajectories of social change in exile and under annexation (Wilson Forthcoming). Sahrawis' movements between different spaces in north-west Africa and beyond were a constant backdrop. In particular, I was fortunate to visit on three occasions pasturelands where I resided with refugee families raising livestock. I stayed briefly in early April 2008 with a family raising goats. Later that month, after months of trying I obtained a rare permit from Polisario Front (henceforth Polisario) to spend one month during April-May 2008 with a camel herder, Mahjoub, then located in pasturelands near Bir Lehlou in Polisario-controlled Western Sahara.<sup>iv</sup> At the time Mahjoub was accompanied by his wife and children, his sister and her children and a male colleague. A former brother-in-law and work associate was also intermittently present. I encountered privately and publicly owned camel herds, visited the commercial and watering center, Bir Lehlou, and a well-drilling site. I returned briefly to visit Mahjoub and his family in late 2008. These experiences provided insights into the circulation of people, things, and services in the pasturelands. Mindful of the different forms of "thickness" that ethnographic accounts may assume, here I attempt "an understanding both of the meaning and the politics of the meaning" (Ortner 1995, 189) of mobility for exiled and annexed Sahrawis and their rival state authorities.<sup>v</sup>

### **Catching up with mobility**

In the 1990s, the intensified flows of persons, information, and goods associated with globalization (e.g. Appadurai 1996) problematized the sedentarist notion that cultures and people are rooted in particular places (e.g. Malkki 1992). Drawing on these observations, scholars of mobility fostered a "new mobilities paradigm" (Sheller and Urry 2006) as they analyzed how persons, things, and ideas are on the move in novel ways, facilitated by new

technologies. While some observers use the category “migration” in a restricted sense, such as for the movement of persons for at least 12 months to a foreign country (United Nations 2006), “mobility” represents “a dynamic term” which captures the “fluid nature of... regular as well as irregular moves of people on the ground regardless of time or destination” (Cohen and Sirkeci 2011, 7). Although mobility is by no means new, the “new mobilities paradigm” highlights the range of scales of movement from (parts) of bodies to global flows (Cresswell 2010, 18). Notably, the focus on mobility underscores how “social and material forms are... *generated* through movement” (Knowles 2014, 7).

Anthropologists and other social scientists have underscored diverse scales and purposes of the movements of persons within and across borders, from international migrants, internal migrants, forced migrants, documented and undocumented migrants (e.g. Cohen and Sirkeci 2011; De Genova and Peutz 2010) to mobile pastoralists, hunter gatherers and Roma (Scott 2009), tourists (Sheller and Urry 2004), local travelers (Marsden 2009) and those whose mobility is symbolic (Rytter 2012) or imaginary (Salazar 2010).<sup>vi</sup> Yet if mobility “is more central to both the world and our understanding of it than ever before” (Cresswell 2006, 2), it is by no means available to all. At the micro-level, kin may influence prospects for mobility (e.g. Gaibazzi 2014) or pressure some to “stay put” after others have migrated (e.g. Reeves 2011). Such local politics of mobility intersect with national and international politics in which state authorities both facilitate and constrain mobility. Consequently, many examinations of mobility are also studies of state power.

Where mobility and state power are jointly scrutinized, two related paradigms often recur. In increasingly spectacular ways, state authorities seek to control (unwanted) mobility. Since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the intersection of globalized markets for labor with precarious and war-stricken populations in the global south and north has led national and international state authorities to increasingly control migration. State authorities have built walls to exclude unwanted migrants on the European Union’s eastern edge, between the US and Mexico, Saudi Arabia and Yemen, and Israel and the West Bank, inter alia. In parallel, state authorities operate sophisticated technologies of deportability for those lacking appropriate travel documentation (Cresswell 2006; De Genova 2002; De Genova and Peutz 2010). Visa regimes constrain which persons may cross borders (e.g. Jansen 2009; Reeves 2013). Some states even seek to control the movement of nationals within or across their own borders (e.g. Chalfin 2010).

At the same time, when colonial and post-colonial state authorities have assumed that mobility “[confounds] the quest for the knowable civil and fiscal subject” (Roitman 2005, 136), they have endeavored to settle mobile populations. The results have been mixed (e.g. Li 2007); the Sahara is no exception (e.g. Leservoisier 1994). Interest in, and means of pursuing, control over mobility are historically specific, evolving processes. Without techniques such as the development of passports—ambiguous documents through which protection can be

claimed and yet movement within and between states controlled—state authorities would not have been able to claim to monopolize movement (Torpey 1998, 240).

The fact that some state authorities have struggled to control mobile subjects foregrounds a further common paradigm in which mobility and state power intersect: the “ambiguity and efficacy of relocation and mobility as modes of political action” (Roitman 2005, 136). From this perspective, as states have tried to control mobile pastoralists, swidden agriculturalists, and Roma, the latter have deployed mobility as a strategy for escaping a state or state-like authority (e.g. Clastres 1972; Gellner 1969; Leach 1954). Relocations to remote places difficult for a state to reach and regular movement difficult for a state to track may allegedly serve as techniques “to avoid incorporation into states and to prevent states from springing up” (Scott 2009, x). Even when an escape to a distant hinterland is not possible or desirable, staged mobility may keep the unwanted intervention of a state authority at bay. Central Asian migrants in Moscow use “faked” mobility in the form of counterfeit exit and re-entry stamps as a means of escaping interference from the Russian state (Reeves 2013).

The paradigms of control and escape are only partially helpful, however. Empirically, while there are putative cases of escape from lowlands to uplands in south-west Asian (Scott 2009), lowlanders who move to uplands may also remain within the political and economic purview of a state authority (Keyes 2010). Conceptually, over-emphasizing mobility for escape (Scott 2009) bespeaks an underlying interest in Western liberal notions of a mutually exclusive choice between freedom (in the absence of state power) and subjugation (in the presence of state power) (Jonsson 2012), as well as an ahistorical understanding of state power (Keyes 2010). Any apparent nexus of control and escape indeed risks reproducing problematic conceptualizations of state power, such as the “fiction” (Brown 2010) that a state may operate as a sovereign authority over territory, people, and resources. Even if many discourses construed by and about state authorities reify their putative power *over* subjects (see Abrams 1988), as Michel Foucault reminds us, “[t]he state is not a universal nor in itself an autonomous source of power” but rather is “nothing else but the mobile effect of a regime of multiple governmentalities” (Foucault 2008, 77). Consequently power relations, including those surrounding the exercise of state power, operate as “a multiple and mobile field of force relations” (Foucault 1978, 102).

Such Foucauldian approaches have inspired anthropologists to historicize understandings of state power. Two interventions are especially relevant to rethinking intersections of mobility and state power. First, apprehending the state in terms of a (shifting) constellation of heterogeneous relations underscores “the multi-layered and pluricentric nature of ‘the state’” as a collection of different actors and interests (Gupta 1995, 387). In a historicized understanding of state authorities, “there is no necessary site for the state, institutional or geographical” or for the production of “state effects” such as, *inter alia*, the constitution of certain kinds of subjects (Trouillot 2001, 127). It follows that the boundaries between where “the state” begins or ends can be ambiguous. Likewise, the forms of power relations in which

a state authority is implicated are highly variegated. A given state authority may have power over life and death but may be weak in regulatory power; it is thus necessary to historicize discourses of a “crisis” of state power (Roitman 2005).

Second, and in parallel, the dehomogenization of the state has exposed the historical specificity of claims to sovereignty being directed primarily over territory. In other contexts such as extensive steppelands (including the Sahara), power over people, animals, and other mobile entities is of greater political and economic relevance (e.g. Grémont 2012; Roitman 2005). In such contexts “circulation and displacement” are “effective modes of wealth creation,” and “certain forms of political mediation, such as alliance and tribute, have been inherent to the exercise of power over people and wealth, as opposed to territory” (Roitman 2005, 14, 17).

State authorities operate with heterogeneous power relations, and mobile persons and things can create political and economic power. These dynamics call for taking a broad view of intersections of mobility strategies and the workings of state power. Alongside strategies of control and escape may lie simultaneous and sometimes apparently contradictory approaches. State authorities may constrain some forms of mobility while encouraging other kinds. Meanwhile, people may use mobility to escape restrictions and to get ahead in a given context, as David Crawford (2008, 148) observes of migrants from rural Morocco who use migration “at cross purposes—some to escape the rural patriarchal order, some to evade particular restrictions of that order, but with an eye to returning to it, and some to solidify their positions in, and the reconstitution of, the traditional village.”

State authorities, then, can encourage some forms of mobility while discouraging others, and people can use mobility either to undermine or to reaffirm a particular form of authority. These apparent paradoxes of mobility underscore the ambivalences of mobility as “an especially dense transfer point for relations of power” (Foucault 1978, 103). Dynamics of control and escape pertain to a wider field of ambivalent strategies of mobility. These strategies present multiple opportunities for the mediation of power relations, especially in interactions between governing authorities and governed constituencies (both of which may take plural, heterogeneous forms). Mobility has been recognized “as a state of in-betweenness” which “has both spatial and temporal aspects that generate possibilities for the transformation of bodies and identities” (Ghannam 2011, 792). These qualities of in-betweenness—the ambivalences of mobility—also lend themselves to the transformation of power relations, especially surrounding state power.



## Disputed sovereignty in the north-west Sahara

In north-west Africa, with the Sahara as its central, “inner” sea, the mobility of people and goods play a central role (McDougall and Scheele 2012). Resources in the region are dispersed and variably available, which makes mobility essential to their exploitation. Prior to European colonialism, the mobile inhabitants of the north-west Sahara—spanning southern Morocco, south-west Algeria, the disputed Western Sahara, Mauritania and parts of Mali—interacted with neighboring state authorities such as the Moroccan sultanate, the empire of Mali, the Songhay empire, or Ottoman Algeria. But as later inhabitants and observers have looked back on such interactions, they have contested whether they signify the effective *local* presence of a state authority.

Indeed, the crux of Morocco’s and Polisario’s competing claims on Western Sahara concerns whether the mobility of those who have come to call themselves Sahrawis facilitated resistance to the potential encroachment of neighboring state authorities, especially the Moroccan Sultanate. Each party’s claims were assessed by the International Court of Justice (1975). Among the evidence scrutinized were diplomatic documents from the 18<sup>th</sup> century CE in which the Moroccan Sultan at times denied that he was able to rule the tribes in this part of the desert (Abu-Mershid and Farrar 2014, 10). The Court’s eventual Advisory Opinion (International Court of Justice 1975) found that such ties as had existed between the Moroccan Sultanate and some tribes in what would become Western Sahara did not amount to territorial sovereignty, and thus that the people of Western Sahara should have the right to self-determination. Even after the advent of European colonialism, Sahrawis continued to deploy mobility to avoid a state. Sahrawis resistant to interference from colonial authorities crossed colonial borders to escape pursuit by French or Spanish authorities (Caratini 2003).

Sahrawis’ experiences nevertheless demonstrate the need to distinguish between mobility as part of an art of not being governed *by a state* (the scenario that Scott explores) and the compatibility of mobility with alternative forms of governance. At least for present-day Western Sahara, at specific historical moments in the pre-colonial period, politically dominant tribute-claiming tribes constituted an alternative “project of sovereignty” to state power (Wilson 2016). Mobility in this case may thus be more helpfully understood as a technique which, if potent for keeping at bay government by a state, nevertheless does not preclude and may even facilitate government in another “project of sovereignty” such as tribes in specific historical contexts.

Although the UN has been calling since 1963 for the decolonization of present-day Western Sahara, Spain’s abandonment of its colony Spanish Sahara in 1975 led to the territory’s partial annexation by Morocco (and, until 1979, Mauritania). Both Morocco and Polisario claim the same territory as (part of) a projected national territory. During their period of active warfare until the UN-brokered cease-fire of 1991, each acquired control of some territory—Morocco a larger, westerly portion with the principal towns, mineral resources and

coastal access, and Polisario a smaller, easterly portion. The two areas are divided by a Moroccan-built military wall or berm (of disputed length), completed in the 1980s to keep Polisario's army away. Regional and international geopolitics have seen efforts to resolve the conflict, or organize a UN-sponsored referendum on self-determination for the people of Western Sahara, fail repeatedly (Hodges 1983; Zunes and Mundy 2010; Boukhars and Roussellier 2014).

The prolonged stalemate has created ample opportunity for each rival state authority to stage claims over the people and territory of Western Sahara. With Polisario working in close coordination with the partially recognized state authority that it founded for Western Sahara in 1976, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), it is helpful to think of Polisario (and not only of Morocco) as a state authority.<sup>vii</sup> Polisario governs parts of the Western Sahara territory as well as the Sahrawi refugee population composed of those Sahrawis who fled annexation from 1975 and settled in refugee camps in south-west Algeria near Tindouf, some 50km from the border with Western Sahara. The size of all Sahrawi populations is contested. According to UNHCR estimates, the refugees may have numbered some 160,000 by the late 2000s (Chatty et al. 2010, 41). A 2000 UN list of voters for a potential referendum found 41,150 and 33,998 annexed and exiled Sahrawi adults respectively (Zunes and Mundy 2010, 214). Algeria has delegated authority over the refugee camps, their population and the immediate surrounding areas to Polisario.<sup>viii</sup> SADR and Polisario work in conjunction to control some national territory, govern a civilian (refugee) population, and operate embassies, a Parliament, elections, courts of law, prisons, ministries and customs for Sahrawis importing goods to trade in the camps (see Wilson 2016).

Annexed and exiled Sahrawi populations experience different political and material living conditions. Annexed Sahrawis enjoy greater material comfort in urban settings, but those who take an activist role in demonstrations and protests against Moroccan rule report high levels of political repression from the Moroccan authorities (Human Rights Watch 2008). Exiled Sahrawis, heavily reliant on international aid in vast camps of mudbrick rooms and tents, enjoy a range of rights of movement, expression, and association (Human Rights Watch 2014) although Polisario only plans to allow political parties to form after independence. In these different settings, mobility is a shared daily experience. Sahrawis' contemporary mobility is not simply a legacy of long-standing practices of mobile herding. As is the case among Tuareg smugglers from Niger, knowledge that facilitates mobility may have been garnered through migration or other activities quite different from pastoral traditions (Brachet 2012, 246). For annexed and exiled Sahrawis, as for North African peers, mobility is (inter alia) a means to access resources in regional or globalized labor markets (Brachet 2012) and to negotiate positions in hierarchies of a social, economic (Crawford 2008) and, we might add, political order.

To take an example, in the family of Māghalāha, my hostess in Auserd refugee camp who had joined the refugees around 1980, relatives circulated in the region and across continents.

When grass and available resources permitted, Māghalāha's elderly parents made trips of several weeks or months to the pasturelands to enjoy the breeze and drink fresh milk.<sup>ix</sup> In 2007 one of Māghalāha's brothers (who had previously studied in Cuba as a beneficiary of one of the study programs proffered by "friendly countries" to Polisario) was residing in Spain, thanks to an Algerian passport and a Spanish residence permit. Over the next few years, a second brother and one son (who had studied in Algeria) followed. The second brother began making trips back to the camps driving through Morocco, Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara, and Mauritania to sell second-hand four wheel drive vehicles that he had purchased in Spain. Meanwhile, Māghalāha's sister acquired a Mauritanian passport and moved first to France and later to Spain. Family friends came from Mauritania, unfurled for a few months their tent stored in the camps, and then went back to Mauritania, inviting Māghalāha to visit them soon. A few years after I met the family, Maimona, the daughter of Māghalāha's patrilineal first cousin, who had married a Sahrawi from the annexed areas, left the camps via a UN-organized family reunion visit and settled in the Moroccan-controlled areas (a move "back" for her husband). The couple took their young children to live near the latter's paternal grandparents.

Varied trajectories are familiar for annexed Sarhawi. While I was not able to meet the relatives of Māghalāha's husband, Tawālu, in the annexed areas (see below), I learned on the telephone with them, and in conversation with Tawālu and his nephew, that these relatives made trips to the pasturelands and to Mauritania. The families I did meet in the annexed areas visited relatives in different cities. Students studied in Moroccan cities and made the rounds of relatives during vacation (with which my visit coincided). In the context of such everyday mobilities in both Sahrawi communities, high political stakes played out.

### **Familiar paradigms: control and escape**

Although the conflict between Morocco and Polisario is most commonly discussed in diplomatic and scholarly forums as a conflict over the *territory* of Western Sahara, it is also a conflict over *people*: to win support, and, to an extent, even to secure the physical presence of people in the territory which each of the state authorities governs. In this context, both Morocco and Polisario have flexed their muscles of control. In turn, Sahrawis have tried to escape such control. These conceptually (and, to an extent as regards Western Sahara, ethnographically) familiar patterns of control and escape nevertheless coincide with directly contrasting strategies of mobility.

Echoing the colonial agenda of Spanish administrators to reduce Sahrawis' mobility (Rabasco 2013), both Morocco and Polisario have introduced restrictions on Sahrawis' movements.<sup>x</sup> Morocco ringfenced some settlements during the war as a defense measure (Simenel 2016). Later, it built the berm. The latter keeps Polisario's army out of the territory west of the wall while also limiting annexed Sahrawis' or Moroccans' access to Polisario-controlled areas. Even since the easing in the early 2000s of border controls for annexed

Sahrawis crossing into Mauritania, annexed Sahrawis who are known by the Moroccan authorities to have visited the refugee camps outside the context of a UN-sponsored family reunification risk imprisonment on their return. This was the case for seven Sahrawis in 2009 (see Amnesty International 2011).

As for Polisario, its emplacement of the refugees in the camps favored defense, the provision of services, and the fostering of nationalist sentiment while also constraining movement.<sup>xi</sup> In the 1980s when there were transport shortages in the camps (Zunes 1988), Polisario reportedly restricted travel between camps (Hernández 2001). After the cease-fire, Polisario relaxed restrictions. Since then Sahrawi refugees have become increasingly mobile within and around the camps. They circulate in North Africa, Europe, and beyond. Yet many refugees suspect that Polisario discourages migration to Europe (and a feared brain drain) by making it difficult for them to receive an Algerian passport. Refugees submit applications for an Algerian passport to the SADR Ministry of the Interior, which is then responsible for presenting refugees' requests to the Algerian government. There is no transparency regarding the application procedure, making it unclear where responsibility for long delays lies between Polisario, Algeria or even a migration-wary EU.

Meanwhile, although Polisario does not physically prevent refugees from leaving the camps for Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara, it likens such departures to national betrayal. In practice, refugees distinguished between honorable and dishonorable moves to the annexed areas. In Maimona's case, her cousins justified her departure because "her husband's parents are old and weak." In a contrasting case, one man was widely believed to have been to the Moroccan-controlled areas because he had been given money to promote Morocco's proposal for autonomy (rather than independence) in Western Sahara. After his return to the refugee camps, relatives of his told me: "No one visits him, no one will go to him to have tea with him". In their view, acquaintances avoided him because they disapproved of his suspected political orientation.

If "[w]here there is power, there is resistance" (Foucault 1978, 95), then where there is control over mobility, we may expect to find mobility deployed for escape. For the many Sahrawis who idealize unrestricted movement as a feature of an imagined mobile pastoralist heritage, and who perceive European colonialism and its aftermath to have imposed artificial borders restricting such movement, being mobile to thwart interference from state authorities has a powerful appeal. (In practice, however, tribal hierarchies restricted the movements of pre-colonial pastoralists (Caratini 1989) and the end of raiding under colonialism facilitated new forms of circulation (Molina Campuzano 1954).)

For nationalist annexed Sahrawis, the pasturelands are a space into which those who fear arrest can escape the reach of the police. The Sahrawi demonstrations that took place in

October-November 2010, a few weeks before Tunisia's Arab Spring, are the most poignant illustration. The original protestors, who were dissatisfied with the distribution of plots of land in the (would-be) capital Elayoune, set up camps in the nearby desert in order to avoid immediate shutdown by the authorities in the closely-monitored city (Fernández Molina 2015). By the time that the Moroccan authorities forcibly closed the camps, "over 15,000" (United Nations Security Council 2011, 1) demonstrators had gathered. More commonly, the pasturelands represent a potential space of escape on a smaller scale. Sahrawi young men interviewed by Tara Deubel (2010) describe feeling freedom from Moroccan repression when they escape to the pasturelands.

My own visit to the annexed areas revealed how family groups, including women, can seek safety in the pasturelands. Although the children of Māghalāha and Tawālu had arranged for me to stay with paternal cousins of theirs in Elayoune, when I tried to call the family a few days before travelling, I could not get through to several phone numbers. When I eventually reached one female relative, she told me "we're not there [in the city]. We went far, far away." She explained that the family had not felt safe, and had left the city for the pasturelands. After further explaining that she could hardly hear me, because the signal was weak in the pasturelands, the conversation (and my prospects of staying with them in Elayoune) ended. When I later raised this with the family with whom I eventually stayed in Smara, no one was surprised. The family explained to me that this was what people did if they were afraid: they took off for the pasturelands. In a context in which annexed Sahrawis who host foreign visitors can come under surveillance from Moroccan security services (as became the case during my visit), my Sahrawi hosts did not comment on the extent to which my impending visit may have precipitated this family's decision to leave for the pasturelands. Such departures have since become more difficult, however. After the 2010 protests, the Moroccan authorities forbade tents from being mounted near towns (Boulay 2015).

It is less widely acknowledged that the pasturelands also attract refugees wishing to avoid restrictions from Polisario, rather than political persecution. Such tendencies are an intimate aspect of life in the camps not readily displayed to external observers. In 2008-2009, when Polisario was trying to restrict conspicuous consumption at marriage ceremonies (Wilson 2016), several refugees explained to me that families who wanted to continue with a camel slaughtering and live music could do so in the pasturelands, away from the sight of Polisario and other refugees, without being subject to the rumored punishment (the withholding of rations for two years). Sexual activity outside marriage, on the part of either men or women (both being punishable under the SADR penal code), could likewise be the occasion of escapes to the pasturelands. I heard some such cases discussed in hushed voices in the privacy of a tent. Those sharing confidences would lean in toward each other to tell of a young man believed to have gone to the pasturelands because he had impregnated a young woman, or of a young woman who had hidden her pregnancy by staying in the pasturelands.

On the question of slavery (which is prohibited by SADR), Human Rights Watch (2014, 63) “did not find evidence of widespread practices of slavery in the Tindouf refugee camps or the areas of Western Sahara under SADR jurisdiction” nor “find evidence or hear claims that SADR authorities practice, profit from, or encourage slavery.” At the same time, its researchers highlighted the pasturelands as the space in which “a small minority of the refugees” persisted with abuses, such as a family of herders reported to have abducted two children from the camps and forced them to work without pay in the pasturelands (Human Rights Watch 2014, 4, 65–70). To varying degrees, the pasturelands are potential spaces for evading state authorities.

### **Investing in mobility**

At the same time as they have attempted to control Sahrawis’ movements, both Morocco and Polisario have invested in the mobility of claimed subjects. Their strategies go beyond techniques of settler colonialism (Rabinowitz 1997), roads as a means of penetration (Masquelier 2002), or mobility as a weapon of conquest (Ibn Khaldūn 1377 [1958]). Both state authorities have encouraged claimed citizens to move through the disputed territory as a means of embodying respective claims to rule over people and territory.

Polisario has encouraged refugees to make trips, or even to go and live, in the Polisario-controlled areas of Western Sahara. This offers several attractions: experiencing the claimed homeland first hand; exploiting Sahrawi-owned resources (instead of rations); and challenging Moroccan representations of Polisario-controlled Western Sahara as an uninhabited “no man’s land.” One very literal form of Polisario’s investment in mobility is its management of public camel herds owned by ministries, sections of the army, or municipalities in the refugee camps (see Figure 2). My host in April-May 2008 in the pasturelands near Bir Lehlou, Mahjoub, had been tending the herd belonging to Auserd refugee camp for eight years. He explained how refugees benefited from these herds: “...when there is lots of milk, we take the camels to [a spring east of the camps] and from there we send milk to Auserd. We work from row to row of tents, the milk is distributed to residential groups in turn.” Polisario-sponsored connections between the refugee camps and the pasturelands are long-standing. Mahjoub’s sister Tekbir explained that “in the 1980s [Polisario] did not distribute milk and meat, but it organized *riḥalāt* [trips] for old, sick people for a month or two so that they could go and drink the milk [from camels]” (Fieldnotes, April 24 2008).



Figure 2. Camels owned by the municipality of Auserd refugee camp gather outside a tent, home to a Sahrawi family, near Afraijat Albashir, Western Sahara, April 23, 2008. Photo by Alice Wilson.

A few days later, a visitor to Mahjoub's encampment told me more about the Polisario-owned herds. I wrote: "Lahbib... is one of the people who looks after the camels for [the SADR ministry of development]. He tells me that each ministry and each military region has its own camels. He also writes down for me, or rather draws, the camel symbols for each of them" (Fieldnotes, May 1 2008). In the local context of tribes each having their own camel brand (and sometimes being nicknamed after their brand), branding camels with the design of a ministry and army unit is a powerful symbol of Polisario as a governing authority that can produce, own, and place its stamp on resources. For Tekbir and her niece and daughter, whom I joined in watching a herd owned by a department for supplies (*imdād*) coming to be watered at a newly drilled well in the pasturelands near Bir Lehlu in May 2008, the site of what I estimated to be some 200 camels arriving over the horizon, congregating and jostling to reach the trough, each displaying the brand of the ministry in question, was a source of excitement, joy, and pride (see Figures 3 and 4).



Figure 3. Preparations have been made to test out a new well recently drilled near Afraijat Albashir, Western Sahara, May 3, 2008. Photo by Alice Wilson



Figure 4. Camels owned by the Department of Supplies of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic drink from a newly-built well near Afraijat Albashir, Western Sahara, May 3, 2008. Photo by Alice Wilson.



From 2007, to counter Moroccan discourses that the pasturelands were “uninhabited,” Polisario began actively encouraging refugees to relocate to new towns in what Polisario nationalists refer to as “the liberated territories” (*al-arādhi al-muḥarrara*) or “the national rural areas” (*al-rīf al-waṭanī*). An entire ministry of SADR (located in the refugee camps, alongside the other ministries) is dedicated to economic and demographic development in these areas. Through this ministry, Polisario has opened additional schools and healthcare centers and coordinated the drilling of new wells (which is reliant on outside funding). For existing water sources, such as the two wells at Bir Lehlou, Polisario tops up water levels when necessary. On my visit to Bir Lehlu, one shopkeeper explained “Polisario sends a [water tank] to fill up the wells. The water here is free, you queue up to get some... Sheep and goats get to drink before camels. After that you wait your turn in the line” (Fieldnotes, April 26 2008).

Families who relocate to these areas may no longer claim rations (as they will not have crossed an international border and thus cannot be classified as refugees under current definitions). This is widely perceived to be why relatively few families choose to relocate. Around the time when the UNHCR estimated some 160,000 refugees in the camps (Chatty et al. 2010, 41), one new town hosted approximately 700 families in 2010 (RASD TV 2010). Greater numbers take advantage of Polisario’s encouragement of families to make trips back and forth to the Polisario-controlled areas in support of official political events held in these territories, such as the anniversary celebrations for the foundation of SADR (held on February 27 each year), an arts festival and, on occasions, the Polisario General Congress.<sup>xiii</sup> For such events, small family groups, usually consisting of an adult woman and one or two teenage or young adult relatives, are sponsored by Polisario to go out with a tent to host foreign journalists, aid workers, political activists, and researchers who are accommodated in the tents. Polisario covers transport costs and provides extra rations provided for the refugee hosts. For refugees who would otherwise lack resources to go to the pasturelands, these Polisario-sponsored trips provide an affordable means of spending time in the claimed homeland.

For its part, Morocco gives tax breaks, as well as subsidized wages (Oudada 2012), to encourage Moroccan settler colonialism in Moroccan-controlled areas of Western Sahara. In parallel, Morocco foregrounds a narrative of heavy investment in the urban infrastructure and economic development of Western Sahara under its control (e.g., Thobhani 2002). There is nevertheless a Moroccan parallel to Polisario’s investments in mobility as a means of making claims over people and territory. Claiming Western Sahara as an integral part of the national territory and Sahrawis as Moroccan citizens, the Moroccan authorities extend to annexed Sahrawis the rights to graze in common pasturelands (*agdal*) that are accorded to all Moroccan citizens. When pasturelands are depleted in annexed Western Sahara, Sahrawi pastoralists may transport their herds in trucks to fresher pasturelands in internationally recognized Moroccan territory. Such livestock migration can lead to tensions with Moroccans living near the *agdal* pasturelands, who resent the depletion of “their” resources by Sahrawis

(Bertram Turner, personal communication). While their mobility within internationally recognized Moroccan territory is doubtless economically beneficial to annexed Sahrawi pastoralists, from the perspective of the Moroccan state such movement enacts in practice Morocco's claims that Sahrawis are Moroccan citizens, integrated into Morocco's perceived national space.

In this conflict over people and territory, long-term histories of the mobility of resources have made the circulation of people and animals a field of competing claims. Camels quite literally bear this out. Polisario is not alone in having elaborated its own camel brands. Morocco has also formulated its own camels brands, Lahbib informed me. When camels which the respective state authorities have branded with their stamp circulate in the territory they become a means of making a claim on territory. If in the north-west Sahara, mobility "helps to make and maintain place elsewhere" (Scheele 2012, 5), the Western Sahara conflict highlights how the sponsorship of mobility can help to make and maintain state power itself.

### **Mobility for consolidation**

Annexed and exiled Sahrawis' uses of mobility to escape the intervention of a state authority coincide with strategic mobility to consolidate positions within (rather than against) a given regime of state power. Rather than deploying social or physical mobility in pursuit of economic or other opportunities (Gaibazzi 2014; Ghannam 2011), Sahrawis engage in mobile lifestyles to make themselves more secure with regard to governing authorities.

Funded through international aid, refugees' rations could fluctuate dramatically—as they did in 2005 when the World Food Program decreased its targeted population from 158,000 (in 2004) to the 90,000 "most vulnerable" refugees (Zunes and Mundy 2010, 128). Mobility is a potential means for refugees to reduce their dependence on rations, and in some cases to become noticeably richer than many peers. Refugee families sought not only to become transnational (by sending migrants to Europe), but also, where assets allowed them to do so, to invest in herds in the pasturelands.

Given the unpredictability of finding paid work in the refugee camps (or in Europe, even before the 2008 financial crisis), young men working in the pasturelands spoke in upbeat terms about the availability of employment there. Several young men who passed through the shop in Bir Lehlou where, along with Tekbir, we whiled away a morning during extended car repairs, spoke of how "the pasturelands are good (*zaina*). There is work here. In the camps there is no work." Wages for herding in the pasturelands were higher than for low-skills paid work in the refugee camps. Mahjoub's co-worker Mokhtar explained: "for being a herder you can earn [115 euros, 120 euros] in a month, or in the summer even [200 euros]" (Fieldnotes April 26 2008). At the time a shop worker in the camps earned the equivalent of 100 euros a

month. One advantage of the pasturelands, in contrast to Spain, was that if the work dried up, one could go back to the camps. A shopkeeper in Bir Lehlou explained: “some shops close when there is no grass, like now—the owners just close up and go to the camps” (Fieldnotes, April 26 2008). In contrast, I heard of many Sahrawis in Spain without residency papers who spent months out of work. They were unwilling to return to the camps so as to avoid starting the visa process again.

The very fact that Polisario invested in the pasturelands created opportunities for refugee families to “piggy back” on that investment. Mahjoub and his co-worker Mokhtar were a case in point. The municipality of Auserd refugee camp employed Mahjoub to tend its camel herd. To my knowledge, the NGO that sponsored the camel herd program for Auserd camp only offered one salary. Because men are the ones who take camels out to pasturelands at some distance from the encampment where women are based, herders prefer to have the labor of more than one male adult. Mahjoub’s colleague (and in fact former brother-in-law) Sidi nevertheless came to an arrangement whereby Sidi, who owned a number of his own camels, entrusted these to Mahjoub to herd with Auserd’s camels, while Sidi paid Mokhtar the same monthly wage as Auserd paid to Mahjoub. Sidi himself occasionally came to the encampment and helped with the work too. The private owner and the public owner thus provided two (equal) salaries, which the two workers shared each month. Public investment in the pasturelands had a knock-on effect of subsidizing private investment in the pasturelands.

Intriguingly, some refugees also adopted a strategy of mobility in order to negotiate a favorable position vis-à-vis not Polisario, but Morocco. For a time, refugees who left the camps for annexed Morocco and swore allegiance to the King were welcomed, and given a monthly stipend and housing. Over 2008-2010, some refugees, who on arrival had declared their loyalty to Morocco, actually later returned to the camps, enriched by having sold the assets that Morocco had given them as a “reward” for their “return” (Wilson 2014). Many (but not all) of those who did so were single young men looking for resources to set up a small business in the camps and to marry. Polisario apparently turned a blind eye, or even tacitly approved of such profiteering at the expense of the Moroccan authorities, some refugees claimed. Refugees (and many annexed Sahrawis) perceive Morocco’s exploitation of fishing and mineral resources in Western Sahara as theft; in this context, refugees talked of the funds that could be gained from Morocco through such temporary “returns” in terms of “rights” (*ḥaqq*) and “wealth” (*ḥayawān*, literally “animals”) owed to them. Following the 2010 protests, however, Morocco announced that it would only give the benefits to families, rather than single young men (thus indicating its suspicion of the politics of single young men hailing from the camps). This particular avenue of refugees using mobility to negotiate a better position vis-à-vis Morocco was cut off.

In the Moroccan-controlled areas, mobility may sometimes prove a means less of resistance to delegitimize Moroccan rule than of resilience. For annexed Sahrawis and Moroccan settlers alike, the Moroccan state is the main purveyor of livelihoods, ranging from

employment in public services to subsidies. For nationalist annexed Sahrawis who fear discrimination, this engenders anxieties of being dismissed from their job for political reasons. When, during my visit to Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara, I moved from Smara to visit a relative of the same family in Elayoune, my hostess in Elayoune reproached me. “Why did you stay with them?” she asked me, referring to her relatives in Smara. “Don’t you realize that he [the father of the family] could lose his job because you stayed with him?” She added that he had a large family to support.

My hostess in Elayoune spoke apparently without feeling such vulnerability herself. She was single, without dependents, and a high-earning civil servant working in education and training programs. She was also the daughter of a “mixed marriage”, her father a Sahrawi and her mother a Moroccan. In subtle ways, such as by lending me a book of recent facts and statistics about Morocco, she perhaps conveyed to me a political positioning that was not threatening to Morocco’s claims over Western Sahara. I later observed that she kept some distance from her Sahrawi relatives. These factors may have contributed to her feeling a greater sense of security for herself vis-à-vis the Moroccan government, but she was clearly pained at the possibility of risk for her relatives.

In fact, while staying in Smara, I had learned that the family’s father, Salek, owned a herd of over two hundred sheep, tended to by paid shepherds in the pasturelands. Salek had explained to me that, as a Sahrawi, one never knew what might happen when one worked for the Moroccan administration (as he did), and the animals were another form of income. Thus engagement with mobility, in the form of investing in livestock kept in the pasturelands, was not deployed here as a means of resistance, but as a means of consolidating a more secure place within a given regime of state power.

### **Ambivalences of mobility**

Even while neoliberal state authorities encourage certain forms of mobility, state authorities in the global north seek to constrain unwanted forms of mobility in increasingly spectacular ways. Concurrently, persons use mobility to evade the unwanted restrictions of a state authority. These tendencies of state authorities to control mobility, and of persons to use mobility to facilitate escape, have long histories. It is by no means surprising, then, that in disputed Western Sahara rivals Morocco and Polisario reiterate the familiar paradigms of states controlling mobility while Sahrawis on the ground reproduce traditions of using mobility to evade a state authority. More surprising, however, is the fact that all these parties have simultaneously deployed contrasting strategies. Endorsing a greater level of mobility than is usually found in settler colonialism, both state authorities have encouraged claimed subjects to move through space as a means of reinforcing claims to disputed people and territory. Both annexed and exiled Sahrawis have used mobility strategically to negotiate

more favorable positions within, and not necessarily against, a given regime of state power. The familiar tropes of control and escape coincide with opposite strategies. Mobility, then, is profoundly ambivalent; it represents a “dense transfer point for relations of power” (Foucault 1978, 103).

That control over mobility and escape via mobility, even in contexts where each held great appeal, might coincide with their apparent opposites is arresting both ethnographically and conceptually. At the broadest level, the ambivalence of mobility offers possibilities to transform not only “bodies and identities” (Ghannam 2011, 792) but also relations of power, especially those playing out between governing authorities and governed constituencies. If opposing strategies of mobility may coincide, it transpires that although states may constrain movement as a common means of claiming power over people and territory, they may also expand power over people and territory by encouraging governed subjects to move *through* territory. The extensive technologies that states employ to control movement through walls and deportation regimes must be contrasted with the techniques through which state power may expand claims over people and territory by investing in mobility—just as attention to popular resistance against state power has been contrasted with recognition of fantasies and desires *for* certain forms of state power (Navaro-Yashin 2002; Taussig 1992). Conversely, the ambivalence of mobility and its consequent potential to transform relationships of power means that mobility is not only a means of avoiding detection as a civil or fiscal subject (Roitman 2005, 136). (Putative) governed subjects may also deploy mobility to solidify positions in a given regime of power so as to *appear* knowable as a *certain kind* of civil subject.

The ambivalent strategies of mobility on the part of state authorities and putative subjects in Western Sahara are a reminder that state authorities do not necessarily try to constrain the mobility of populations nor do putative subjects necessarily resort to mobility to shirk such interventions. More specifically, the case in hand qualifies the prevailing wisdom that mobile pastoralism—long disliked by both colonial and postcolonial governments—is vastly, and perhaps irrevocably, on the decline in the Middle East and North Africa (and beyond) (e.g. Cole 2003). Context is crucial. As rival state authorities stake claims over a disputed people and territory where pastoralists have been mobile for centuries, state authorities and their putative subjects adopt strategies to constrain, or to pursue, mobility according to their different purposes.

Finally, disputed sovereignty in a case such as Western Sahara invites reflection on the relationship between sovereignty over people and over territory. The status of Western Sahara in an international order premised on sovereignty over territory is currently unclear. To complicate matters further, according to the international legal protocol of decolonization, that status is to be determined by the *people* of Western Sahara: “it is for the people to determine the destiny of the territory and not the territory the destiny of the people” (International Court of Justice 1975, 122). Approaches to sovereignty often given priority to

either sovereignty over territory (e.g. in international law, in the “fiction” of absolute sovereignty over a fixed territory) or sovereignty over people (e.g. Hansen and Stepputat 2005; Roitman 2005). The ambivalent strategies of mobility on the part of state authorities and putative subjects, as highlighted in this case of disputed sovereignty, suggest the interweaving of sovereignty over people with sovereignty over territory. Mobility—whether glorified, feared, or both—helps constitute relations of power, including those of state power and sovereignty, in historically specific forms.

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i

Following Humphrey and Sneath (1999), I use "mobile pastoralists" to underscore mobility in steppeland pastoralism as a strategy, and to eschew connotations of "wandering" nomads.

ii I employ "state power" to refer to power constellations associated with state authorities. In order to accommodate the asymmetry in international recognition of the two state authorities discussed below, Morocco and Polisario Front, I prefer to use "state authority" rather than "the state."

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iii Torpey (1998, 240) clarifies the limits of state authorities' claims and capacities: "I am *not* claiming that states and the state system *effectively* control all movements of persons, only that they have monopolized the *authority* to restrict movement vis-à-vis other potential claimants." Relations between governing authorities and governed constituencies manifest themselves in specific forms, at times without a clear delineation of where "the state" begins and ends (e.g. Gupta 1995; Reeves 2013).

iv All names of interlocutors are pseudonyms.

v As I gave preference to observing and taking part in Sahrawis' activities and conversations, I rarely used a tape recorder but instead wrote up conversations (mostly in the Hassaniya dialect of Arabic, which I learnt) from memory. Direct citations from interlocutors are thus usually brief.

vi The mobility of things and ideas falls beyond the scope of this essay, which focuses on the mobility of persons and livelihoods especially in the context of the negotiation of state power.

vii For a list of 80 recognitions of SADR by other states, including 22 cancellations or suspensions, see Pazzanita (2006, 376–378). SADR has been a member of the African Union since 1984.

viii Algeria's formal endorsement of Polisario/SADR as a ruling authority goes further than the autonomy granted to the Palestinian Liberation Organization to run refugee camps in Lebanon in the 1970s.

ix Shortages of resources commonly constrained refugees' mobility. The wider the range of a journey, the greater the financial burden (and the administrative obstacles, discussed below).

x Morocco and Polisario both restrict the movement of foreigners into their respective areas. Morocco is wary of foreign visitors to annexed Western Sahara suspected of promoting independence for Sahrawis. Polisario requires all foreigners, including Algerians, wishing to enter the camps to be formally invited by Polisario.

xi As Lisa Malkki (1995) has explored, refugees who stay closely connected to refugee camps are especially susceptible to projects to solidify national identity.

xii On the arts festival, see Artifariti's website, accessed September 2 2016, <http://www.artifariti.org/en/>.