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On the margins of the Arab Spring

Alice Wilson

Abstract

This article revisits the margins as a conceptual space from which to illuminate 'the centre', suggesting how the marginal is analogous to, and distinct from, the exception. This is explored through an examination of the Arab Spring from its margins: annexed Western Sahara's uprising that narrowly preceded Tunisia's. Although Sahrawis perceived similarities between their uprising and the Arab Spring, Western Sahara's uprising is overlooked from most commentary on the Arab Spring. The article considers how similarities between Western Sahara's and Arab Spring uprisings are obscured from view by analytical premises that have silencing effects. In the context of the margins, these silencing effects assume spectacular dimensions, the 'disappearance' of an uprising. Silencing effects nevertheless operate, less spectacularly, in ideas about the Arab Spring.

Keywords: marginality, uprisings, Arab Spring, Arab Exceptionalism, Western Sahara

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The time: late 2010.

The place: North Africa.

The scene: thousands of protestors camp out demonstrating against the government.

In the light of the recent wave of demonstrations, protests and uprisings across the Arab world, the above scenario may sound easily recognizable. The particular protest in question, however, is unfamiliar to many, perhaps most, observers of and participants in the events that I shall refer to as the Arab Spring. For this protest took place in the Moroccan-controlled areas of the disputed territory Western Sahara. The demonstrations unfolded from October to November 2010, a few weeks before the immolation of Bou'azizi in Tunisia on 17 December 2010, usually taken to be the starting point of the Arab Spring. Although Sahrawis in annexed Western Sahara had been holding demonstrations against Morocco since 1999, this was their largest protest to date.¹ In the weeks and months that followed, as other Arab countries went on to see their largest demonstrations for decades, many Sahrawis felt that they recognized their own grievances and aspirations in those raised by their compatriots elsewhere. The notion that this protest was connected to the Arab Spring was also raised by Noam Chomsky, who suggested in February 2011 that "the current wave of protests actually began last November in Western Sahara" (Democracy Now! 2011). Nevertheless, very few commentators have included Western Sahara's uprising in discussions of the Arab Spring. Outside contexts where Western Sahara is high profile (e.g. in Spain, the former colonial power), many people have never heard of the uprising at all. The admittedly low levels of international interest in Western Sahara may not suffice to explain the readiness with which this protest has been overlooked. In November 2009, when Morocco deported Sahrawi human rights activist Aminetou Haidar to the Canary Islands, the international media took up

the story of one woman's hunger strike and even US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton intervened. One year later, the demonstrations of an estimated 15,000-20,000 Sahrawis remained unknown to most non-specialists, even when the eyes of the world turned to anti-government demonstrations in North Africa.

Annexed Western Sahara's 2010 uprising took place on the temporal, geographical and, it would seem, conceptual margins of the Arab Spring. Examining this uprising, this article thus explores the Arab Spring from its margins. I ask what might make Sahrawis' claims of similarities between their uprising and Arab Spring uprisings plausible. To clarify, I do not address whether Western Sahara might have 'begun' the Arab Spring. There is no evidence that Tunisians, Egyptians and others took inspiration from Sahrawis, as protestors did from Tunisians and Egyptians. The absence of a causal relationship, though, does not preclude the existence of other sorts of relationships, the possibilities for which I explore below. If other connections can be made (and, it seems, have been by Sahrawis), I go on to ask what might prevent these connections from being noticed, in other words what might make annexed Western Sahara's uprising so readily overlooked from discussions of the Arab Spring. I do not address the question of what makes one outcome of the Arab Spring different from another. This question has been widely and helpfully addressed elsewhere, through attention to the decisive role played by national armies (Hazran 2012), the responses of national governing elites (Matthiesen 2013), external intervention to support or undermine a regime facing protests, the significance of monarchical versus republican government (Yom and Gause III 2012) and the impact of each nation's historical trajectory on appetite and possibilities for reform (Joffé 2013). Rather than asking about different outcomes of protests, such as what factors made an (attempted) uprising short-lived, e.g. for Oman (Worrall 2012),

or what made one uprising fail to bring down a government where others succeeded (cf Bahrain), here I consider the distinct question of inclusion and exclusion. I consider what might explain that a whole uprising comes to be, both for most participants in, and commentators on, the Arab Spring, overlooked altogether.

Addressing these questions is not merely relevant to those concerned with Western Sahara. To examine Western Sahara's 2010 uprising in relation to the Arab Spring is to examine the latter from its margins. The margins and marginality, with their potential for partial visibility, have been studied in multiple senses for their possibilities for illuminating, such as through their presumed resistance to, or creativeness as regards, the centre.² The margins may make "the implicit explicit" (Green 2005: 1). In this sense, engagement with the margin has been analogous to that with the exception, also fruitfully studied to bring more closely into focus that which might otherwise be overlooked about the non-exceptional (Schmitt 1985; Agamben 1998; Navaro-Yashin 2012). If there is a relationship of analogy between them, the margins are, however, not the same as the exception. Whilst the visibility of the exception is often assured, that of the margins is uncertain. Whereas the exception is that which is included by virtue of its exclusion (Agamben 1998), at the margins—where it is "not necessarily clear exactly where you are or where you are from" (Green 2005: 1)—the line between inclusion and exclusion is unclear. It cannot be taken for granted whether the marginal case belongs or not to the broader category on the margins of which it lies. I shall explore how the blurred line between inclusion and exclusion makes the margins of the Arab Spring a setting for the magnification of dynamics at work, more subtly, in the construction of the Arab Spring.

I contextualize my discussion of Western Sahara's 2010 uprising by drawing on my ethnographic fieldwork with Sahrawis. The geography of the Western Sahara conflict hinges upon a distinction between annexed and exiled spaces and populations. I conducted fieldwork with Sahrawi refugees in Algeria both before and after the 2010 uprising.³ In 2012 I also carried out a short field trip in annexed Western Sahara.⁴ My contact with annexed Sahrawis pre-dates 2012, extending to encounters with annexed Sahrawis who were visiting the refugee camps.

On the margins: Western Sahara

In north-west Africa, between Morocco and Mauritania lies the disputed territory of Western Sahara. Its marginality, like that of north-west Greece, is "continually reconstructed while somehow staying the same" (Green 2005: 1). Inhabited by speakers of the Hassaniya dialect of Arabic, Western Sahara is part of the hassanophone north-west Sahara which forms the westernmost margins of the Arab world. In pre-colonial times, the north-west Sahara fell outside neighbouring centres of state power: the Moroccan sultanate to the north, and the Malian and Songhay empires to the south. Later, what became Western Sahara constituted the margins of European colonialism. Spain established its claim to the territory in 1884. But it was one of the last areas of North Africa to be 'pacified', in 1934. In the post-colonial age, Western Sahara has found itself on the margins of decolonization. The UN called for decolonization for the Spanish Sahara from the 1960s, and the International Court of Justice's Advisory Opinion of 1975 found in favour of the right to self-determination of the people of Western Sahara (International Court of Justice 1975). Nevertheless, instead of decolonizing, in 1975 Spain handed over the territory to be divided between Morocco and Mauritania. The latter jointly annexed the territory; Mauritania's withdrawal in 1979 left Morocco partially

annexing the territory. Western Sahara's liberation movement, Polisario Front, founded in 1973 to contest Spanish colonialism, fought Morocco (and, initially, Mauritania) for the territory. Their clash initially took the form of war, and later, as of 1991, UN negotiations and other diplomatic forums. In the nearly forty years since Spain, the colonial power, left, decolonization has still not been achieved for Western Sahara. The UN yearly renews its mission for a referendum (on self-determination) in Western Sahara (Minurso). But, with Morocco and Polisario in deadlock as to who would have the right to vote, and whether voters would be allowed to choose between options including independence, the Western Sahara conflict is trapped in political stalemate. As the UN's last case of a non self-governing territory in Africa, it finds itself at the margins of the reach of decolonization. The failure, despite a clear mandate, of the implementation of decolonization might even suggest that the territory is at the margins of the enforcement of international law—declared but not applied, an unclear line indeed between inclusion and exclusion.⁵

The conflict has produced a political entity that occupies the margins of ideas about statehood in international law and political theory. After Spain's final withdrawal from the territory, on 27 February 1976 Polisario founded the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). SADR has gone on to be recognized as a state by a number of states and the African Union.⁶ Both SADR and Morocco claim, in theory, all of Western Sahara. In practice, Polisario controls about a quarter of Western Sahara. Morocco controls the rest, and built a military wall in the 1980s to divide the two areas. SADR's institutions are based not in Polisario-controlled Western Sahara, however, but in exile in desert refugee camps in Algeria. From 1975 thousands of Sahrawis fled the annexation, and from early 1976 they were settled in refugee camps near the Algerian military base and town, Tindouf, some 50km from the border with

Western Sahara. A fusion of SADR and Polisario, state authority and liberation movement, governs this exiled population. With Algeria having delegated authority over the camps and the refugees to Polisario, the fusion of SADR and Polisario is able to engage in many of the activities of other state authorities. It has its own constitution, Parliament, law codes and prisons. In sum, SADR is based in exile and, in fusion with Polisario structures, governs only a part of its claimed population and territory. But it enjoys some inter-state and multi-lateral recognition, and engages in a wide range of governance activities. It thus blurs policy and theoretical boundaries between state and non-state.

As Green (2005) observes, marginality is constructed and reconstructed in particular contexts. Sahrawis are aware that their annexation and exile are construed as marginal from the perspective of international political agendas in North Africa. But this dual predicament is not of marginal concern for Sahrawis themselves. It has refashioned their lives in both mundane and extraordinary ways. The conflict has produced a refugee case that, after the Palestinians, is the world's longest-running. These refugees, who may have numbered some 165,000 by the 2000s, live in an unforgiving climate in challenging conditions of material shortage in the camps near Tindouf.⁷ Sahrawis living in Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara, who may outnumber the exiles, have recently been described as living in a "state of fear" (Robert F. Kennedy International Delegation 2012). They live side by side with a Moroccan settler population, believed to outnumber the Sahrawi population there, and a heavy Moroccan military presence.⁸ Since 1999, many annexed Sahrawis have participated in demonstrations against Morocco's annexation. Since 2005, this resistance has coalesced into what nationalist Sahrawis call their own Intifada (Mundy 2006). Sahrawi nationalist activism has met with repression from the Moroccan authorities (Human Rights Watch 2008; United

Nations Committee against Torture 2011; Human Rights Watch 2012). In this context of annexed Sahrawis' ongoing resistance to Moroccan rule over Western Sahara, in 2010 annexed Sahrawis demonstrated on an unprecedented scale.

Filling the desert

On 9 October 2010, a small group of Sahrawi protestors in annexed Western Sahara began a demonstration. They did not demonstrate in the capital, El Aaiun, though. They went out into the open desert some 15 kilometres away, and set up tents at a place known as Gdeim Izik. As more demonstrators joined them, the desert began to fill with tents. The UN estimates that the number of tents at Gdeim Izik grew to 6,610, accommodating "over 15,000" demonstrators (United Nations Security Council 2011: 1). Other sources estimate that the number of protestors reached some 20,000 by 8 November (Verdier 2010). Access to the protests for the media and outside observers was highly constrained by the Moroccan authorities (cf The Guardian 2010). Morocco resisted the access to the protest camps of monitors from the UN Mission on the grounds that "the Mission should not interact directly with the population on what was described as a purely internal and social matter" (United Nations Security Council 2011: 1). There was therefore scant opportunity for monitoring or reporting on the protests. Media coverage from the time emphasized the protestors' concerns about economic issues, such as "living conditions" (BBC 2010). When, on 24 October, Moroccan security forces shot and killed a 14 year old boy who was trying to join the encampment, one account in the French media reported on the killing under a title focusing not on the boy's death, but on the perceived underlying economic cause of the demonstration—namely that annexed Sahrawis were jealous of the subsidies that Morocco

offered to refugees who left the refugee camps in Algeria to come and live under Moroccan rule (Radio France Internationale 2010).

Things came to a head on the morning of 8 November. Claiming that the camps had been taken over by political activists, Moroccan security forces moved in to break up the protest camps: "Moroccan auxiliary forces and police officers forcefully dispersed the protesters and destroyed the camp using tear gas, water cannons, batons and loudspeakers mounted on vehicles and helicopters. There is no evidence that live ammunition or other lethal means were used" (United Nations Security Council 2011). In the clash, both sides claimed fatal casualties, eleven on the side of the Moroccans, and four on the side of the Sahrawis. After the dismantling of Gdeim Izik, further violence ensued in the city of El Aaiun, where it was reported that Sahrawis attacked public and private property, and Moroccan settlers attacked Sahrawi private property (United Nations Security Council 2011). When I visited El Aaiun in April 2012, Sahrawis pointed out to me a building that had been gutted by fire in the riots, and as yet remained unrenovated. Sahrawi protestors also tore down Moroccan flags and images of the king, and displayed SADR flags (Sahara Thawra 2012).

In the light of the lack of an independent inquiry, and the paucity of international press access, many unanswered questions remain about Gdeim Izik and its ending. From various quarters, including the European press (BBC 2010; Radio France Internationale 2010), the Moroccan press (Bennani 2011), and the accounts of Sahrawis narrated to a BBC journalist (Lewis 2011), a narrative has converged that the protests focused on economic demands for housing and jobs. This view was endorsed by the Moroccan authorities in its claims to UN monitors that the protest was a "purely internal and social matter". There is reportedly cause

for Sahrawis to harbour perceptions that they suffer from economic wrongs in annexed Western Sahara. Whilst Morocco claims to have brought prosperity to the areas of Western Sahara which it controls, Sahrawis are reportedly discriminated against in their access to jobs, housing and even education (Shelley 2004). In fieldwork with exiled Sahrawis in Algeria between 2007 and 2012, I met Sahrawis, usually young men, who had arrived in recent months from the Moroccan-controlled areas of Western Sahara. They sought better educational or even work opportunities than those available to them in the annexed areas. They complained of having suffered discrimination there, such as not being allowed to speak Hassaniya in schools. Some sought to study abroad through the SADR Ministry of Education programmes for high school and university study abroad. Others settled in the refugee camps and began working there, either for the Polisario administration or in the informal private sector. At the same time as annexed Sahrawis report perceptions and experiences of inadequate economic opportunities in the annexed areas, one of the policies of Moroccan annexation has been to encourage thousands of Moroccan settlers to move into the region, encouraged by higher salaries and tax breaks (Shelley 2004). Thus the benefits of Morocco's claimed era of prosperity in Western Sahara may not necessarily reach Sahrawis—a matter to which I return below.

Another dimension to Sahrawis' complaints about access to housing and jobs in Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara has elicited concern in both the Moroccan and French press (Bennani 2010; Radio France Internationale 2010; Bennani 2011). In addition to there being Sahrawis in the Moroccan-controlled areas who have been there since before the annexation, there are Sahrawis who moved there after annexation. They fall into two groups, both receiving housing and maintenance payments from the Moroccan state. There are persons

brought by Morocco into the territory in the early 1990s in order to be registered for a UN referendum on self-determination. They are known by the term *Al Wahda* (the union). Many of them were not recognized by the UN as Sahrawis eligible to vote in a self-determination referendum (Zunes and Mundy 2010: 214). Initially brought in temporarily, they have remained to the present. They still receive monthly maintenance and food rations from the state. Most, it would seem, have now been moved from makeshift tents into houses given by the state (Bennani 2011). The second group are those who have been welcomed as 'returners' from the Tindouf refugee camps. These '*aidīn* (Arabic) [returners] or *ralliés* (French) [those won over] also receive a house and monthly maintenance allowance, to the tune of 1250 dirhams (115 euros) in the late 2000s (Bennani 2010; Soudan 2010). For the Moroccan and French press, it is 'indigenous' Sahrawis' jealousy of these subsidies that caused them to go out on protest at Gdeim Izik (Radio France Internationale 2010; Bennani 2011).

There is a widespread willingness, then, not absent from Sahrawi protesters (cf Lewis 2011), to present the Gdeim Izik protest as focusing on economic demands for jobs and housing. There is furthermore evidence that annexed Sahrawis perceive themselves to be marginalized from Morocco's claims to have brought prosperity to Western Sahara. Nevertheless, neither the narrative that Gdeim Izik was about 'economic' concerns, nor supporting evidence that Sahrawis perceive themselves to be economically marginalized in annexed Western Sahara, necessarily suffices to sustain a thesis that 'economic issues' alone underpinned Gdeim Izik in particular, or protests raising economic demands more broadly. Such a thesis must be interrogated empirically and conceptually. Let us first assess empirically the specific thesis that annexed Sahrawis' jealousy of *rallies'* subsidies caused the Gdeim Izik protests. This thesis would seem to draw strength from the fact that a boom in *ralliés* numbers was reported

in early 2010 (Bennani 2010; Filali-Ansary 2010; Soudan 2010). In 2011, Sahrawi refugees also recalled this period as a time when *ralliés* numbers grew. They were able to name more cases to me of *ralliés* from amongst their own connections. They also recalled seeing more *ralliés*—sometimes personal acquaintances—on Moroccan television, which can be watched from the refugee camps. Had annexed Sahrawis been disturbed by *ralliés*' access to Moroccan subsidies, then a boom in *ralliés* might indeed have fuelled tension in the annexed areas. Yet, despite claims in the Moroccan and European media to that effect, it is not clear from Sahrawi accounts that *ralliés*' subsidies cause jealousy amongst other Sahrawis. None of the annexed Sahrawis whom I met in either the camps or Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara professed to such envy. Interlocutors from both exiled and annexed populations indicated to me that there are other subsidies from the Moroccan state available for annexed Sahrawis and Moroccan settlers. The existence of these subsidies reportedly dates back to the period before Gdeim Izik. This problematizes the notion that economic tensions arising from subsidy jealousy could explain the outbreak of the uprising. The abundance of subsidies in annexed Western Sahara, for both Sahrawis and Moroccans, also raises the possibility that the effects of the global economic crisis on livelihoods may have been less severe here than elsewhere in the Arab world. This may make a general worsening of economic conditions less likely a trigger for the Gdeim Izik protests than has been suggested may be the case for other protests in the Arab world (and elsewhere) in 2010 and 2011. An alternative explanation for the trigger of Gdeim Izik at that particular historical moment was offered by exiled Sahrawis. They believed that the intensified influx of *ralliés*, many of whom were jobless youths, contributed to Gdeim Izik, but for another reason. These youths, refugees claimed, were accustomed to being able to express dissent in exile to Polisario. Once in Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara, exiled Sahrawis opined, the youths' willingness to

voice dissent took them to the forefront of opposition to the Moroccan state and to Gdeim Izik. Exiled and annexed Sahrawis jointly reported that after Gdeim Izik, the Moroccan authorities discontinued granting a house to an unaccompanied *rallié*, reserving houses only for family groups. Following this change in policy, the numbers of new *ralliés* dropped back from the high levels of early 2010.⁹ The extent to which *ralliés* played a part in either provoking or organizing Gdeim Izik needs further research. Nevertheless, given the range of subsidies available to Sahrawis and Moroccans in annexed Western Sahara, it is questionable that Gdeim Izik can be attributed to subsidy jealousy amongst Sahrawis.

It might be argued that the wider question remains of whether Sahrawis' general economic marginalization under Moroccan rule was the cause of Gdeim Izik. This thesis is likewise problematic. Drawing on an intellectual tradition embracing Karl Marx, Rosa Luxembour and Karl Polanyi, Maha Abdelrahman (2012: 615) asserts that the opposition between economic and political struggles is "falsely conceived". Rather, "the economic and the political are inseparable without necessarily being fixed in a static, causal relationship" (Abdelrahman 2012: 621). She proposes that in the Egyptian revolution, an anti-revolutionary coalition is seeking to promote the notion of a distinction between economic and political demands, in order to suggest that the former are extraneous, and even threatening to, the revolution. In so doing, she suggests, the anti-revolutionaries hope to reduce the revolution in Egypt to a question of transition to liberal democracy, leaving unaddressed questions of redistribution and social justice. In other words, the attempted separation of the 'political' from the 'economic' so as to reduce protests to one or the other is, in itself, a politicized and politicizing agenda. Accounts of protests in Western Sahara that stress their 'merely' economic content are doubly problematic, then. They gloss over not only the connections

between the economic and political, but also the political agenda advanced by this omission. As concerns annexed Western Sahara, the Moroccan government presents protests there as economic in order to depoliticize them (Shelley 2004: 102, 110). Morocco thereby seeks to disassociate protests from the question of the unresolved self-determination of the people of Western Sahara.

Video footage of Gdeim Izik gatherings indicates that the dimensions of the protest included, but were not limited to, demands made of the Moroccan government for jobs and homes. (Sahara Thawra 2010; Sahara Thawra 2012). The footage emphasizes the political dimensions of the protests, and the links between their economic and political dimensions. Protesters can be seen and heard chanting slogans such as "Ahel essahra daau daau welkhairāt illa yenbā'u" [The Sahrawi people suffers whilst its wealth is looted] (Sahara Thawra 2010).¹⁰ Sahrawi nationalists have long raised objections that annexed Western Sahara's natural resources, especially phosphate and fish, are exploited to the greater benefit of Moroccans, and not sufficiently to that of Sahrawis. Protesters are also depicted using pro self-determination slogans used in the Tindouf camps, such as "Sahrawi sahraia aidi fi aidak lil huria" [Sahrawi men and women join hands for freedom]. The riots in El Aaiun seem to have taken on an overtly political character, with the Moroccan flag being torn down and the SADR flag raised (Sahara Thawra 2012). It is not only Sahrawis' accounts of Gdeim Izik that stress its political aspects. The very manner of Morocco's closing the protest down indicates its conviction, despite its claims to the contrary, that more than 'social' issues were at stake.

In questioning the helpfulness of seeing Gdeim Izik as 'economic', I do not seek its 'over-politicization', as if it were 'purely' a political uprising against Morocco. Rather, I suggest re-asserting the links between the political and economic in the demands raised at Gdeim Izik. These links, once recognized, may help us understand why, once protests spread across the Arab world in the following weeks and months, Sahrawis voiced convictions that their own protests resonated with those of their compatriots.

Seen and unseen

In phone calls and emails with Sahrawis as the Arab Spring progressed, and then in meetings with annexed and exiled Sahrawis in 2011 and 2012, Sahrawi interlocutors were anxious to press upon me that they too had had their Arab Spring protest—in fact, some held, "the first". The authors of the online documentary film about Gdeim Izik even claimed the latter as the "detonator of the Arab Spring" (Sahara Thawra 2012). The attractions of this narrative for Sahrawis, seeking visibility for their unresolved case of self-determination, are clear. Yet, beyond such attractions, and eschewing the question of a causal relationship between Gdeim Izik and the uprisings that followed, might there be plausible grounds for connections between Gdeim Izik and Arab Spring uprisings? The content and local context of Gdeim Izik suggest striking similarities with Arab Spring protests. First, the protest expressed popular conviction of both economic and political injustices, with protestors aware of the links between them. This resonates with other Arab Spring uprisings (cf Abdelrahman 2012). Secondly, Gdeim Izik followed on from a history of protests in the annexed areas, going back to at least 1999 (Shelley 2004: 82), even as it transcended them in scale and urgency. The uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt also drew on longstanding protest movements that preceded them (Ayeb 2011; Joya 2011). Third, the protestors expressed demands for political values

and ideals such as freedom and *karāma* [dignity]. In the online documentary, a protestor from Gdeim Izik talks of how the protest gave the Sahrawi people a sense of their dignity (Sahara Thawra 2012). The Sahrawi self-determination movement dubbed Gdeim Izik the camps of *karāma* [dignity], as quickly as 7 December 2010, *before* events in Tunisia in December 2010 (Cherkaoui 2010). Freedom and dignity are amongst the values that Arab Spring protestors across the region have been demanding and celebrating. Fourth, the demonstrators, in aligning themselves with the self-determination movement, were subscribing to a political movement demanding the use of democratic means, a referendum, to appoint an alternative political system to one perceived to be illegitimate and oppressive. Thus, like Arab Spring uprisings driven by a popular demand for an alternative, elected government, Gdeim Izik protestors endorsed demands for democratic participation. The demonstrations began in non-violent form, in line with the non-violent means employed throughout the 'Sahrawi Intifada' (Mundy 2006). The first casualty, the 14 year old boy killed on 24 October 2010, died at the hands of the Moroccan security forces. Only after Morocco forcefully broke up the camps did the protest turn violent, with claims of casualties on both sides. Fifth, the manner in which the outbreak was dealt with confirms the authoritarian character of the state authority in question.

Considered from the perspective of protestors' actions, and Moroccan and Sahrawi reactions, there are strong similarities between Gdeim Izik and Arab Spring uprisings: the expression of dissent at perceived oppressive economic and authoritarian political conditions; the economic being consciously identified as related to and perpetuated by the political; and political values such as freedom, dignity and—ultimately—democratic deliberation being celebrated or advocated. In addition, the timing of Gdeim Izik was very similar to uprisings elsewhere. In the light of these similarities, Gdeim Izik's under-recognition amongst external observers as a

protest in discussions of the Arab Spring, becomes even more intriguing. What makes—or could *appear* to make—Western Sahara different? Is it only a question of timing, of Gdeim Izik falling a few weeks too early for recognition as part of the Arab Spring, or are other factors at work?

Perhaps what might most readily make Gdeim Izik seem to belong to a category apart from the Arab Spring is that this uprising against a particular state authority (Morocco) took place in a setting that does not fit the conventional nation-state model. Although Morocco considers Western Sahara to be an integral part of its national territory, Western Sahara is technically a non self-governing territory awaiting self-determination. Currently, no other state formally endorses Morocco's claims to the territory. The fact that the protest in Western Sahara is linked to a self-determination case, and not a straightforward nation-state setting, facilitates its 'de-categorization' from Arab Spring protests. In other cases, protestors were perceived to be seeking the downfall or reform of a national government within a national territory.¹¹ The Gdeim Izik protestors were not seeking the fall of the Moroccan regime *per se*. They were, however, expressing views in line with a desire for the Moroccan state to fall from its perceived position (for those demonstrating) as usurper of Sahrawi sovereignty. In other words, this protest demanded an end to oppressive rule, potentially through democratic, and, at least initially, through non-violent means. But the setting cannot be reduced to a nation-state framework of oppressed nation deposing authoritarian regime. The absence of a critical approach to the accident of nation-state boundaries, especially in post-colonial settings, can distort scholarship and policy (cf Ferguson 2007). Such an effect of distortion may be at play in preventing external observers from recognizing the anti-authoritarian and pro-democratic aspects of Western Sahara's 2010 uprising.

Another factor contributing to the overlooking of Gdeim Izik for analysts of the Arab Spring is surely the small absolute numbers of the population in Western Sahara and its biggest ever protest, when compared to other protests and the populations to which protestors belong. A protest of 20,000 people is small compared to Egypt's Tahrir Square. Whilst population figures for Sahrawis are notoriously imprecise, if we take as a guideline the UN figures for the total adult Sahrawi population in annexed Western Sahara in 2000, which was found to be 41,150 (Zunes and Mundy 2010: 214), then a population of 20,000 people some ten years later is, proportionally, perhaps one of the largest protests of the Arab world in recent years.

A third factor might be the unusual setting of this protest: in makeshift camps in the desert. Unlike some of the iconic spaces taken over in Arab Spring uprisings, such as urban centres or the most famous national public space, annexed Sahrawis did not take over El Aaiun's public square, Place du Méchouar. They occupied a non-urban space removed from the centre of Moroccan state power in annexed Western Sahara. Urban spaces have long been associated with state power both in Western and some Middle Eastern and North African traditions of state power. Nonetheless, other forms of state(-like) or state-capturing power in the Middle East and North Africa have been recognized as arising from distinctly non-urban contexts (cf Ibn Khaldūn 1958; Sneath 2007). More specifically, urban spaces have received special attention in the study of the construction of a democratic public sphere, from the Athenian polis to the Habermasian coffee house. In discussing how Yemeni qat chews might provide an alternative sphere for a critical public, however, Wedeen (2007) does not suggest that chews more fully fulfil that in urban rather than rural settings. Middle Eastern and North African qualifications to the notion that urban spaces are privileged in the constitution of state

power and democratic publics have perhaps not gone far, though, to dislodge a predisposition towards the presumption of such links amongst the media, policy and intellectual circles that have sought to define the Arab Spring. In a context of presumed connections between urban space, state power and democratic publics, the annexed Sahrawis' desert protest may seem an unlikely candidate as a regime-challenging uprising. Nevertheless, from a Sahrawi nationalist perspective, there is symbolic and practical reason to stage resistance in a non-urban desert space. Sahrawi nationalism draws its very *raison d'être* from the claim that Moroccan state power in the form of the urban-based *makhzan* (tax-extracting state power) was not sovereign in what is now Western Sahara. Sahrawi nationalists' self-perception is that they have resisted both Spanish colonialism and perceived Moroccan colonialism. These are the two powers which respectively introduced and developed urban spaces in Western Sahara. The rejection of urban space, in local context, therefore resonates with resistance towards (perceived) colonial power. This connection is particularly strong as concerns Morocco, which, for over thirty years, has developed urban space in Western Sahara as a sign of its rule there. The local symbolic potency of a non-urban desert environment for staging protests is reinforced by the fact that Sahrawi nationalists' associate the desert with their perceived mobile pastoralist heritage. In other words, the desert is a 'Sahrawi' space. Finally, the desert offered practical advantages for staging a protest, so as to avoid Moroccan reprisals for as long as possible. In this specific context, then, a desert protest may have been more effective and locally inspiring than an urban protest.

A fourth factor that cannot be overlooked is the general condition of Western Sahara being under-reported as a conflict zone and scene of alleged human rights abuses committed by Moroccan authorities against self-determination activists. Whilst NGOs publish reports on

the situation of human rights in both Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara and the Tindouf refugee camps (Human Rights Watch 2008; Human Rights Watch 2012), the report on Western Sahara of the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) (2006) was not published by that office. Alleged to have recommended "adequate and continuous" human rights monitoring in Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara and the Tindouf refugee camps, the report was only made available to Morocco, Algeria and Polisario. The Office's subsequent failure to proceed to general publication is believed by some to be the result of Moroccan pressure opposing such publication. Despite the fact that the UN mission to Western Sahara is one of the few UN missions with peace-keeping duties to exclude human rights monitoring, and despite the OHCHR recommendation in favour of human rights monitoring there, such monitoring has as yet never been included in the Minurso mandate. Its proposed inclusion is opposed at each renewal of the Minurso mandate by members of the Security Council (for instance by France in April 2012). What is more, a pre-released version of the Secretary General's 2012 report to the Security Council on Western Sahara was later edited to produce a final report that was less critical of Morocco (What's in Blue 2012). The tendency to overlook Moroccan violations of international norms with regards to Western Sahara, including human rights, is reproduced at the highest levels of the UN. This background, whereby the full weight of human rights monitoring is consistently withheld from Western Sahara, only makes it all the more likely that the uprising in Gdeim Izik be overlooked.

If Gdeim Izik has similarities and differences compared to Arab Spring uprisings elsewhere, this in itself does not distinguish it from other protests. What may prove distinguishing in the case of Gdeim Izik are the circumstances under which those similarities and differences

become either visible or invisible. The content and local context of the Gdeim Izik brings to light similarities with the Arab Spring. Yet expectations of a nation-state unit, attention to absolute rather than relative numbers, a reluctance to recognize the non-sedentary as a political space, and a willingness to overlook human rights violations committed by a state authority with powerful international allies, obscure the similarities from sight. The validity of these expectations and assumptions is questionable. They rest on naturalization (of the nation-state), ahistorical conceptions (of politically significant spaces and populations), and complicity in perpetuating violations. Unquestioned, these premises make Gdeim Izik's connections to Arab Spring uprisings invisible. More than Moroccan repression, the world's indifference to Western Sahara, and the timing of falling a few weeks before Tunisia's uprising, such premises have surely been the most effective in silencing Gdeim Izik. On the margins of the Arab Spring, the silencing effects of naturalization, ahistoricism and complicity make a whole uprising seemingly disappear.

Silencing effects

After analyzing the construction of Western Sahara's marginality, I discussed how annexed Western Sahara's largest uprising to date, Gdeim Izik, which took place just weeks before Tunisia's revolution, has both similarities and differences with Arab Spring uprisings elsewhere. Asking not whether Gdeim Izik 'launched' the Arab Spring, but whether it bore similarities to uprisings elsewhere in terms of longings for liberation from government perceived as politically and economically oppressive, and demands for freedom, dignity and democratic participation, I argued that attention to the Gdeim Izik protest itself, and its local context, highlighted similarities in these very areas. If anything may justify a notion of an 'Arab Spring', despite the divergent histories and outcomes from protest to protest, it is

surely common concerns for liberation from oppression, and longings for freedom and dignity—concerns embraced by Sahrawis and Arab Spring protestors. If very few commentators have considered Gdeim Izik as part of the Arab Spring, and most people (outside circles concerned with Western Sahara) have not heard of Gdeim Izik at all, I suggested that this was most fully explained not by the few weeks that separate Gdeim Izik from Tunisia's uprising, but through the silencing effects of naturalization (of the nation-state), ahistoricism (in conceptualizing politically significant populations and spaces), and complicity (in the perpetuation of violations). The silencing effects of these premises made Gdeim Izik the uprising that 'disappeared'. This predicament may bring to mind that of other Arab Spring uprisings that were short-lived or repressed forcefully. Yet the predicament of annexed Western Sahara's uprising is an extreme case. The uprising became 'unseeable' altogether. Here lies the wider interest of analyzing Western Sahara's relationship to the Arab Spring. Marginal with regard to the Arab Spring, and situated on the unclear line between inclusion and exclusion, Gdeim Izik is an extreme case where the silencing effects of naturalization, ahistoricism and complicity manifest themselves at their most dramatic: the 'disappearance' of an uprising. At the margins, silencing effects are thrown into relief. Yet these effects may operate, albeit with less spectacle, beyond the margins, in the very conceptualization of the 'Arab Spring'.

Naturalization and ahistoricism played a part in setting the scene for the Arab Spring. There has been a tendency to naturalize the Middle East and North Africa as a region immune to democratization. This naturalization has rested on the thesis of 'Arab Exceptionalism', the notion that Arab countries were allegedly able to experience economic modernization and liberalization without pursuing political liberalization and democratization. There have been

many criticisms of this thesis (e.g. Diamond 2010), and its underlying implications of an assumed connection between political and economic liberalization (e.g. Elyachar 2005). In particular, the thesis that there is a propensity in the Arab world towards authoritarianism rests on an ahistorical view that ignores the extent to which the appetite and possibilities for political change are historically situated (Joffé 2013). The naturalization of the Middle East and North Africa as a region predisposed towards authoritarianism, and the ahistoricism thereby entailed, has had its own silencing effects. It discounted historical context from analyses of contemporary political circumstances. It hid from attention the extent to which Arab publics were not exceptional, but expressed in polls an appetite for democracy (Diamond 2010: 95), and found an 'appetite' for restricting freedoms when fearing political insecurity. The principle of the latter trade-off is by no means unfamiliar to the citizens of 'liberal' regimes. The naturalization of an ahistoricized Arab world as authoritarian was compounded through a situation of complicity: that of the external regimes that were content to uphold authoritarian Arab governments. The latter survived and flourished with considerable help from external allies. This help included political backing and technical support for security agencies, and extended to, in the case of non oil-rich states, aid supplies which functioned, like oil for rich authoritarian regimes, to minimize the government's accountability to its populace (Diamond 2010). This complicity had its own silencing effect. It deflected attention from the responsibility for 'Arab Exceptionalism' beyond the Arab world. Naturalization, ahistoricism, complicity and their silencing effects permeate the context underpinning, and thus the construction of, the Arab Spring. On its margins, a place of partial visibility where the line between inclusion and exclusion is blurred, the silencing effects of these premises were thrown into relief. They could assume their most spectacular

proportions, a 'disappearance'. Somewhat ironically, this made acutely visible forms of silencing that have sometimes resisted exposure at the centre.

Beyond questions of Western Sahara and the Arab Spring, my argument revisits the importance of the margins as a conceptual space. I suggested that the margins are analogous to, yet distinct from, the exception, in that where the exception is included by virtue of exclusion, at the margins the line between inclusion and exclusion is blurred. This quality makes the margins vulnerable to invisibility. Yet the very spectacle of disappearance can foreground visibility, and an illuminating relationship to the categories through which the marginal is generated.

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¹ 'Sahrawi' is a contested term (cf Zunes and Mundy 2010: 92-95); I shall follow the common usage of people from Western Sahara in referring to them as Sahrawis.

² For a critical review of marginality, see Green 2005.

³ From January 2007 to January 2009 I conducted two years of fieldwork with Sahrawi refugees. I also conducted fieldwork with Sahrawi refugees in shorter trips of a few weeks in 2006, 2011 and 2012.

⁴ Political circumstances in the annexed areas explain the short length of my fieldwork in Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara.

⁵ On the history of and conflict in Western Sahara, see Hodges 1983, Shelley 2004 and Zunes and Mundy 2010.

⁶ For a list, as at 2006, of 80 recognitions of SADR by other states, including 22 cancellations or suspensions, see Pazzanita, 2006: 376-378.

⁷ There are no transparently compiled population figures for any Sahrawi population. Controversy surrounds the size of the Sahrawi population in the various locations where a Sahrawi community can be found. As regards the exiled population in the camps, UNHCR estimates of the refugee population in the 2000s suggested some 165,000 refugees. As Chatty et al. (2010: 41) discuss, this figure can only be taken as an estimate.

⁸ Extrapolating from the UN list from 2000 of approved Sahrawi adult voters for a potential referendum on self-determination (Zunes and Mundy 2010: 214), the annexed Sahrawi population may be bigger than the exiled Sahrawi population (41,150 and 33,998 voters found respectively). The Moroccan settled population in Western Sahara is estimated at some 300,000, and the number of members of the Moroccan armed forces stationed in Western Sahara estimated at 100,000 (Arieff 2012: 7).

⁹ The boom in *ralliés* may have been related to the economic crisis in Europe, as the low prospects for refugees of finding a job in Europe may have encouraged young men to look elsewhere for lucrative migration strategies.

¹⁰ All transliterations reflect pronunciation in Hassaniya rather than classical Arabic. All translations are mine, unless otherwise stated.

¹¹ Although perceived as national uprisings addressing national governments, some Arab Spring uprisings occurred in contexts where there is a history of a region questioning the legitimacy of the rule of national government there—cf Oman and Dhofar (see Worrall 2012)

and Yemen and southern Yemen (on the Southern Movement in Yemen, see Dahlgren 2008).

Western Sahara's situation is at least formally distinct from these cases in that it has the status of a non self-governing territory, and is not currently recognized as part of Morocco by any state other than Morocco.