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Cycles of crisis, migration and the formation of new political identities in Western Sahara

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Cycles of crisis, migration and the formation of new political identities in Western Sahara

*Alice Wilson**

Abstract

This paper considers how conjunctions of crisis and migration are productive in a Foucauldian sense. More specifically, it examines how cycles of crisis and migration are productive of new political identities. This is explored through the case of Sahrawis from the disputed territory of Western Sahara, many of whom live in exile in refugee camps in Algeria. The paper addresses how the conjunction of the crisis (from a Sahrawi nationalist perspective) of Morocco's partial annexation of Western Sahara with the forced migration to Algeria helped produce the new political identity of Sahrawi citizens of the state-in-exile based in the refugee camps. It further argues that in the Sahrawi case, this is part of a longstanding pattern dating back to pre-colonial times, which sees conjunctions of crisis and migration linked to the formation of new political identities. These cycles continue today: recent developments in the conflict see the opposed parties, Morocco and Western Sahara's liberation movement, Polisario Front, seek to manipulate the relationship between crisis, migration and new identities, sometimes with surprising results. The research is based on fieldwork in the refugee camps in 2007-2009, 2011 and 2012.

Keywords

migration, crisis, identity, refugees, Western Sahara, Polisario Front.

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Introduction

The partial annexation of Western Sahara by Morocco in 1975 led to thousands of Sahrawis fleeing the Moroccan armed forces, eventually going into exile in refugee camps formed near Tindouf, Algeria, where it is estimated these refugees may number some 160,000 today. The moment of annexation, what I shall take to be a crisis from the Sahrawi nationalist point of view, therefore came to be associated with a migration, towards exile. In this paper I shall explore how the conjuncture of crisis and migration that led to the forming of the refugee community is part of an ongoing chain of crisis-cum-migration processes experienced by the Sahrawi people, processes often associated with the formation of new political identities. Having identified this pattern from the pre-colonial period to present times, I shall then explore how the two state authorities implicated in the Western Sahara dispute, on the one hand Morocco, and on the other hand Western Sahara's liberation movement,

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Polisario, the latter working as a (would-be) state authority in conjunction with the state-in-exile it has founded, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), both employ strategies to manipulate the relationship between crisis, migration and the formation of new political identities to serve their interests – although not always with the desired results.

A full discussion of the multiple ways of understanding the term crisis goes beyond what can be addressed in this paper. The standard Arabic term *azma* (“crisis”) is used and understood by Sahrawis, although in my experience working with the refugees the term tended to be used for perceived contemporary problems in the camps: the high costs of marriage for young men was talked of as an *azma*, as was (to be discussed below) the high demand for migration out of the camps to Europe.¹ Common to the refugees’ use of “crisis”, and the different kinds of the events that I shall approach as “crises” in this paper, is actors’ experience that a situation, the continuation of which would ordinarily have been the status quo, has become unsustainable and requires extraordinary action so as to avert negative developments. Something, in other words, has to give way. As we shall see, a common technique in facing such moments of crisis, throughout the history of those now calling themselves Sahrawis, has been to initiate a migration.

This paper draws on research expertise acquired during fieldwork working with Sahrawi refugees for 24 months January 2007–January 2009, and then in shorter trips of a few weeks in August–September 2011 and February 2012.² In the field I lived with local families (four different families across three of the five residential camps). I conducted ethnographic research combining participant observation and interviews with other research methods. The main language of research was the local dialect of Arabic, Hassaniya, which I learnt. The relationships formed through this long-term field presence underpin the research in this paper.

The structure of the paper is as follows. First, I introduce the case of Western Sahara, and its annexed and exiled populations. Second, I address the historical case in pre-colonial and colonial times for there being a recurring pattern in what is now Western Sahara of a relationship between crisis, migration and the formation of new political identities. Third, I consider how the annexation of Western Sahara, leading to the exile of a large civilian population, led to the formation of a new political identity. Fourth, I present an overview of continuing migration movements in period following the 1991 ceasefire, by way of contextualizing the fifth section in which I focus on three of these migratory movements of interest for their intersections with both crisis and the formation of new political identities. I conclude reviewing the main findings and their broader significance for an understanding of crisis and migration.

About Western Sahara

Saharan north-west Africa is home to a hassanophone population which is found in Western Sahara, the Saharan parts of Mauritania, southern Morocco, south-west Algeria and parts of Mali; this hassanophone population shares much in terms of linguistic, cultural, religious, economic and, to an extent, political heritage and practices (see Norris 1986). The region’s late nineteenth-century division

¹ All transliterations in this paper reflect the local pronunciation for speakers of the Hassaniya dialect of Arabic, rather than a classical Arabic pronunciation.

² In 2007–2009, four of an initial period of nine months of language training were spent with Sahrawi refugees studying in Damascus, Syria. This was so as to continue language training in the appropriate dialect away from the fierce summer heat of the camps in Algeria. The remaining twenty months in 2007–2009 were spent in the refugee camps and adjoining Polisario-controlled parts of Western Sahara.

between colonial powers resulted in the delineation of the Spanish colony of Spanish Sahara. Spain “pacified” the territory’s inhabitants in 1934, thereafter intensifying its colonial rule over people who, from at least the 1940s, were coming to be known as Sahrawi (e.g. see Flores Morales 1946). In the 1960s, the UN recognised the right to self-determination of the people of the territory (as it does to this day). Over the course of the 1960s and early 1970s, the UN pressured Spain to decolonise. As Spain faced seemingly inevitable withdrawal, neighbouring Morocco and Mauritania presented claims to prior sovereignty over the territory to the International Court of Justice. The Court’s findings in 1975 rejected these claims and supported the right of the people of the territory to self-determination (International Court of Justice 1975). Nevertheless, following the Court’s decision, Morocco annexed part of the territory in 1975.³ Thus partially annexed, the territory is still on the UN list of non-self-governing territories under the name of Western Sahara.

Morocco’s annexation has been contested by Western Sahara’s liberation movement, Polisario, founded in 1973. Morocco and Polisario initially disputed the territory through armed conflict (1975–1991). From the early 1980s, Morocco constructed a militarised sand wall, often referred to as the “berm”, eventually effectively partitioning the territory between areas under its control (the western and larger portion, with important water and mineral resources) and those under Polisario control (the smaller eastern portion, with no coastal access). On Spain’s final withdrawal from its erstwhile colony, in 1976, Polisario founded the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). Whilst SADR claims sovereignty – like Morocco – over the whole of Western Sahara (with only SADR having achieved any external recognition from other states for such claims), SADR has access to and control over just the portion to the east of the sand wall.⁴ SADR’s governmental structures ordinarily reside, however, not in the areas of Western Sahara under its control, but in refugee camps in Algeria, located near the Algerian town and military base of Tindouf (approximately 50 km from the border with Western Sahara). The camps, founded as Sahrawi civilians fled Morocco’s annexation, are believed to host a large proportion of the pre-1975 population of the territory, estimated by aid agencies working there to number some 160,000 refugees by the 2000s, though accurate figures are not publicly available.⁵ Although the camps are technically in Algerian territory, they – and Polisario-controlled areas of Western Sahara – are run by Polisario.⁶ The exiled population stands in contrast to the annexed population which lives in the areas of Western Sahara under Moroccan control. Again, no

³ At the time of Morocco’s partial annexation in 1975, Mauritania also annexed a southern, smaller portion of the territory, but relinquished its claims to sovereignty over Western Sahara in 1979, going on to recognise the SADR in 1984. Morocco went on to incorporate into its own annexed areas the southern region (west of the militarised sand wall) up to the border with Mauritania.

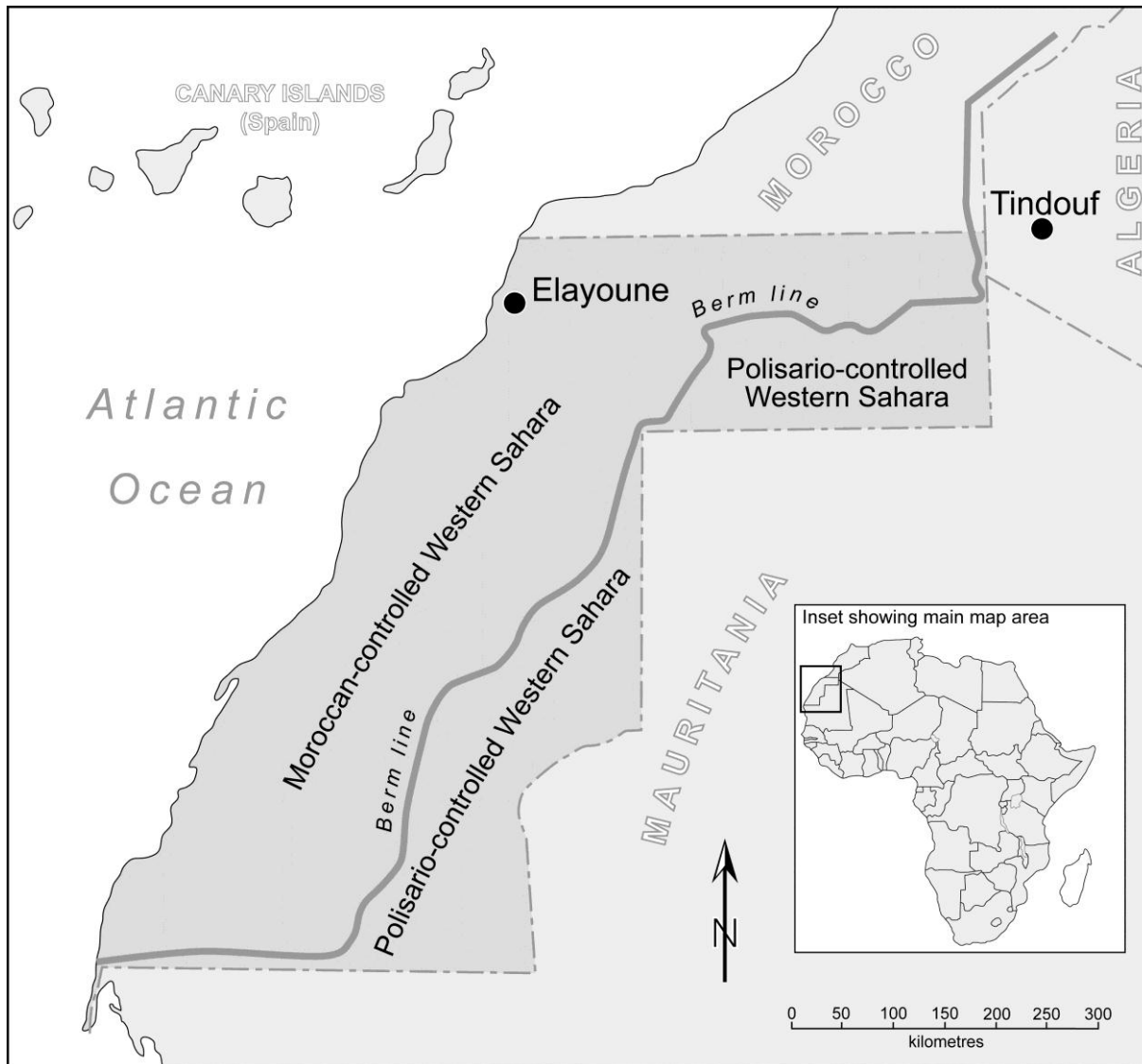
⁴ No state other than Morocco has to date recognised Morocco’s claims to sovereignty over Western Sahara. SADR has been recognised as a state by a number of states, as well as the African Union. There have been over 80 recognitions of the SADR, but some states have cancelled or suspended their recognition. A recent article gives the number of recognitions as 48 (Ahmed 2012). For a list of recognitions as at 2006, see Pazzanita 2006: 376-378. As of 1979, the UN recognises Polisario as “the representative of the people of Western Sahara” (Pazzanita 2006: 425).

⁵ The lack of transparently compiled population figures for Sahrawi in Moroccan-controlled and Polisario-controlled areas is notorious. Zunes and Mundy (2010:214) cite the UN figures for provisional approved adult Sahrawi voters as 41,150 in Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara and 33,998 in the refugee camps (figures for the year 2000). Thus these figures concern only those persons over the age of 18 at that time whom the UN defined as eligible to vote, rather than the whole population, Sahrawi or otherwise, in these areas. For a discussion of population figures for the camps, see Chatty, Fiddian-Qasimiyeh and Crivello (2010:41).

⁶ Again, we do not have transparently compiled population figures for those living ordinarily in the Polisario-controlled parts of Western Sahara as a distinct category from those living ordinarily in the refugee camps. My experience in fieldwork, and in particular during twenty days with a family engaged in camel-herding in the Polisario-controlled areas of Western Sahara, indicates that those who work and pass through this zone are linked to families in the camps. It is therefore likely that they are taken into account in the UN’s compilation of the numbers of adult Sahrawi voters.

transparently compiled population figures are available, but extrapolating from UN voter figures, the annexed population may be larger than the exiled population.⁷

Figure 1. Western Sahara



Source: Alice Wilson. Note: the refugee camps are located near Tindouf, Algeria.

The UN brokered a ceasefire between Morocco and Polisario in 1991. Since then, efforts at conflict resolution have been focused on the activities of the UN mission for a referendum in Western Sahara (Minurso). This referendum, proposed as a means of finally enacting the right to self-determination of the Sahrawi people, has nevertheless eluded implementation. With Polisario insisting that independence be included as an option, Morocco refusing its inclusion, and the UN Security Council applying no effective pressure for a free and fair vote, the Western Sahara conflict is at an impasse (Jensen 2005; Theofilopoulou 2006). From 2005, pro-independence Sahrawis in the Moroccan-controlled areas began to stage political protests opposing Moroccan rule, a movement which Sahrawis have come to call the Intifada (Mundy 2006). In October-November 2010, anti-Moroccan

⁷ On the population figures for the annexed and exiled populations, see note 5 above.

demonstrations reached a peak at the protest camp Gdeim Izik, in which up to 20,000 people vented political and economic frustrations.⁸ The camps were dismantled by Moroccan forces using violence, with claims of casualties on both sides. This has added to UN and NGO requests for inquiries into reports of human rights abuses on the part of Morocco against Sahrawi activities (Human Rights Watch 2008; United Nations Committee against Torture 2011). The refugees, and those Sahrawis in the Moroccan-controlled areas who are pro-independence, hold out for an ever more elusive act of self-determination.

Crisis, migration and new political identities in the pre-colonial and colonial periods

Until the 1950s most of those now calling themselves Sahrawis lived as mobile pastoralists.⁹ In scholarly discussion of migration and mobility, there is some disagreement as to whether the movements of mobile pastoralists (more commonly called nomads) pertain to “migration”, or to a separate category of “mobility”. A demographer’s perspective might explicitly exclude nomads’ movements from migration (Pressat and Wilson 1985), whereas an anthropological perspective might see their movements as “migratory” (Salzman 1996). Here, as a working definition I take migration to be a particular form of mobility, entailing the movement of a person or a group of persons to a new location in order to “live” there, “living” necessarily being defined in different ways across different social settings. (For example, the work of living as economic survival might be based in the new location, but social and political forms of “living” might remain implicated in another location.) As regards Sahrawi mobile pastoralists (and their peers elsewhere), I see forms of mobility, including but not limited to migration, as having been an important feature of livelihoods and lifestyles. Mobility, for instance, was deployed by Sahrawis as a technique in the politically and economically important arenas of trans-Saharan trade (Lydon 2009), camel raiding (Briggs 1960: 227) and slave raiding (Caro Baroja 1955: 48). More specifically, some forms of mobility can be seen as migration. At the most basic level, these would include the movements, according to the availability of grass and water, of domestic groups with livestock from one set of pasture and water resources to another. In other words, these are what Salzman has called “migratory” trajectories. It is not my claim that these movements are linked to a crisis situation. Whilst these movements arise from a situation of unsustainability (depleting fodder and water resources), such migration could be seen as part of the “status quo”. It was “expected” that some moving of livestock would be necessary; moving on in these circumstances was not an extraordinary action. In other circumstances, however, migration was arguably a response to a crisis situation as I understand the term here. Sophie Caratini, in her historical anthropological study of the Rgaybat tribes in the pre-colonial period, has argued that certain tribes might have peripheral zones of pastoralism that they would only move into in times of duress, whether arising from conflict or drought (Caratini 1989: 63-84). This might be because these lands were remote, and perhaps also because the pasture there was not typically good enough to be attractive in ordinary circumstances. In this case, a link between crisis and migration is apparent. At the same time, such a scenario of “emergency” pasturelands migration is associated with a maintained political identity. In contrast, other forms of migration linked to crisis are associated with the

⁸ *La Croix* estimated the protesters to number 20,000 by the time of the camps being broken up (Verdier 2010). The BBC gives as a figure “more than 12,000” (BBC 2010).

⁹ Flores Morales (1946) notes that there were very few sedentarised Sahrawis in the mid 1940s. A few years later, he writes of the marked increase in sedentarisation in his second, abridged study (Flores Morales 1954).

formation of new political identities, specifically new tribal identities. But before exploring such cases, some words are in order about my use of “tribe”.

“Tribe” is a problematic term in anthropology (Kuper 1988; Sneath 2007). Specifically with regard to “tribes” in the arabophone world, Shelagh Weir observes that *qabila* (pl. *qabā’il*) is in fact used polysemously there, making it necessary to specify ethnographically what is meant by it in any given setting (Weir 2007:78). In the case of Western Sahara, ethnographic accounts of the colonial (Caro Baroja 1955) and pre-colonial periods (Caratini 1989) make clear that *qabila* has been used there to mean political groups into which members can be recruited by birth or pacts, and which are internally stratified and engage in stratified relations with other such groups. Co-members of a *qabila* share rights in common, such as rights to water and pasture resources, as well as obligations in common, such as the payment of blood money (*diya*) dues. Inter-*qabila* stratification may lead to a strong *qabila* enjoying the role of patron in patron-client relations with weak *qabā’il*, the weaker client *qabā’il* paying forms of tribute to the protecting *qabila* in return for enjoying their protection and grazing rights. My use of *qabila* in this paper refers specifically to the social relations in this ethnographic setting (and not to a notion of arabophone “tribes” in general).

Whilst a client *qabila* could come to enjoy – at a price – some privileges of the patron *qabila* with whom it was engaged, members of that *qabila* would still retain a nomenclature identifying them as members of the client *qabila*. In particular circumstances, though, a new political identity of membership in a new *qabila* could be achieved, by individuals or groups. Crisis and migration prove to be features of those circumstances. In order to highlight the relationship between crisis, migration and the formation of new political identities, I shall address the figure of the *dakhil*, an asylum seeker. Agamben has shown how examining a particular figure, in his case the figure of *homo sacer* in Roman law, can exemplify a fundamental political relationship – in his study, the ability of sovereign power to create “bare life”, the life that can be killed with impunity and yet whose death cannot qualify as a sacrifice (Agamben 1998). An examination of the figure of the *dakhil* here lays bare the relationship between crisis, migration and the formation of new political identities, a relationship that can be traced in other scales and settings.

The ethnographer of Western Sahara in the colonial period, Caro Baroja, describes the situation of the *dakhil* (Caro Baroja 1955: 12-22). The background of a *dakhil* is someone who has committed an offence in his own tribe and thereby forfeited the right to the protection of that tribe. He finds himself exposed to the possibility that someone can kill him without incurring the risk of a protecting tribe demanding a compensation payment (*diya*). Thus the *dakhil* is exposed to being killed with what amounts to impunity. Unable to continue living with his own tribe because of this (thus in a situation of unsustainability, a crisis), he must leave it and travel to an area under the domination of an alternative tribe which would be able to take him in as someone pertaining to their own sphere of protection. In order to achieve this, on arrival at the new tribe he must sacrifice an animal (a sheep or a goat) to enter into the new tribe. This arrangement of entering a new tribe by pact is called *‘asaba*. Such a pact is not formed exclusively in situations of someone having committed an offence, but might also occur if someone’s original group is far away or at risk of dying out, Caro Baroja explains (Caro Baroja 1955: 19). But he brings out the distinction that the *dakhil* entering because of having committed an offence may not enjoy treatment as an equal, as might be the entitlement of other persons making an *‘asaba* pact (Caro Baroja 1955: 19; 22).

The figure of the *dakhil* underscores the relationship linking crisis and migration to the formation of new political identities. This very relationship has recurred over centuries in the formation of political identities in what is now Western Sahara (and in the hassanophone Sahara more broadly). Sophie

Caratini recounts how the Rgaybat present themselves as all able to trace their origins back to a single ancestor, but are divided into named sections. In her account, she reserves the term *qabila* for a political grouping extending to all Rgaybat, and calls the named sections “fractions”. (In my fieldwork, people used *qabila* for what she calls a “fraction”, as well as for Rgaybat as a group.) Addressing the question of how “new” Rgaybat “fractions” form, she suggests that due to the pressure to find new grazing lands, the descendants of younger brothers end up pressing on away from their elder brothers’ descendants pasturelands into new areas, ultimately becoming separate enough to become a new named group (although still members of the Rgaybat). Here again, then, an unsustainable situation – a shortage of pastoral resources that cannot be resolved through improved rainfall or the end of a passing conflict – becomes the crisis that triggers a migration and, eventually, the formation of new political identities.

The pattern of crisis, migration and the formation of new political identities, here so relevant in the workings of tribes, has played a significant role in the constitution of the power (claims) of state authorities in the region in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Sahrawi nationalism and Sahrawi citizens

In the context of the advent, from the 1934 “pacification” of tribes, of an effective colonial state power in Spanish Sahara, a number of migratory movements affected Sahrawis. These include the intensification of sedentarisation from the 1950s and the dispersion of Sahrawis into southern Morocco after defeat in the 1956-1958 uprising against Spanish rule (with some of these Sahrawis then going on to study in Moroccan universities). These migratory movements, along with other factors, played a part in the emergence of arguably the most significant new political identity to have arisen in Western Sahara in the twentieth century: that of Sahrawi nationalism.¹⁰

Projects of nationalism have been shown to emerge in particular historical circumstances (Anderson 1983; Gellner 1983), and Sahrawi nationalism is no exception. Again, in common with other nationalist projects it has enjoyed a very successful popular uptake. Sahrawi nationalism predates the Moroccan annexation of Western Sahara. For Hodges, incipient Sahrawi nationalism can be traced to the 1960s (Hodges 1983). Whilst there has been a long history of anti-European colonial resistance in Spanish Sahara, as late as 1956-1958, Sahrawis had taken up the call of Morocco’s Army of Liberation to oppose French and Spanish colonial rule, and risen up against Spanish rule in Spanish Sahara – without, Hodges contends, there being a Sahrawi nationalist dimension to this rebellion (nor, he adds, an identification with Moroccan nationalism) (Hodges 1983: 150). From the 1960s, various factors contributed to the development of Sahrawi nationalism: the increasing Spanish colonial presence, which gave a common identity to an increasingly urbanised Sahrawi population as colonised; this colonised identity becoming more distinctive in the region as neighbouring countries gained independence; UN recognition from 1963 of Sahrawis as the people of a non self-governing territory who therefore had the right to self-determination; increasing Sahrawi popular awareness of these changes through the rising uptake of radios; and the emergence of an educated political leadership

¹⁰ Gómez Martín has further argued how other migratory movements, such as the movement of Sahrawi students to European universities in the 1960s, and the movement of Sahrawis fighting against Spanish rule in the late 1960s and early 1970s into southern Morocco and northern Mauritania, also contributed to the rise of Sahrawi nationalism (Gómez Martín 2011). Whilst recognising the importance of migratory movements both within and out of Spanish Sahara in contributing to the rise of Sahrawi nationalism, I follow Hodges (1983) in arguing that these are some of the factors, along with others not involving migration, which fostered Sahrawi nationalism.

(some of whom had studied in Moroccan universities) which set about organising anti-colonial resistance and politicising public opinion (Hodges 1983: 151-153). After the Spanish repression in 1970 of an earlier Sahrawi nationalist-inspired resistance movement, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Wadi Dhahab, Polisario, was formally constituted in 1973. It continued and expanded nationalist-inspired resistance to Spanish rule and demands for independence. By the time of the UN exploratory mission to Spanish Sahara in May 1975, it found evidence of overwhelming popular support for independence (Hodges 1983: 201).

The annexation of 1975, which led to thousands of Sahrawi refugees taking exile in Algeria, cannot be said to have created Sahrawi national identity. Nevertheless, it vastly extended the scope in which a Sahrawi nationalist identity could be played out; for San Martín (2010), it allowed for the “sedimentation” of Sahrawi nationalism. I suggest that exile not only strengthened Sahrawi nationalism but also added a new dimension to it. It is interesting in this respect to consider the nomenclature chosen by the Sahrawi nationalist leadership. When the liberation movement was formed in 1973, it was named after the two geographical regions which constituted Spanish Sahara (Saguia al-Hamra and Wadi Dhahab). It was not named after “Western Sahara” – a term which makes sense in the later context of Spain’s abandonment in 1976 of its erstwhile colony Spanish Sahara. By the time of this abandonment, on February 26th 1976, the Polisario leadership was facing not only a liberation war but also the care and protection of a civilian population displaced by the conflict.¹¹ As Spain withdrew, Polisario declared the foundation of the *Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic* (emphasis added) on 27th February 1976. What the crisis of annexation, and the ensuing migration of refugees into exile in Algeria created was the space for the new political identity which incorporated that of Sahrawi nationalism even as it extended its horizons: it created the Sahrawi citizen.

Early on as refugees – safer, once over the border, from the threat of Moroccan attack – clustered around Tindouf, Polisario set about organising the political structures of a state-like authority to govern over this population in exile. In this it was supported by Algeria, which has delegated authority over the territory in which the camps are located to Polisario. Over 37 years in exile, the construction of Sahrawi citizenship has necessarily altered and developed, although some themes, such as an attempted commitment to political structures aiming at participatory democracy, have endured. Here, a brief overview of some of the relevant political structures must suffice to give an idea of this citizenship in exile.¹² In the wartime period of 1975-1991, when most men were away fighting, the refugee camps’ population was composed mainly of women and children. Women at the grassroots voted to elect popular committees in areas such as rations distribution, health, education, crafts and social affairs (the latter having some legal competencies for dispute resolution). This system of committees was meant to ensure that public services were run by the very people who used them. The committees were reformed in 1995, and re-named councils, and in this guise still operate to this day. The most important event in Polisario’s political structures is the Polisario Popular General Congress (PGC), held every three or four years and last held in December 2011 (the 13th to date). In the lead-up to a PGC, Sahrawi citizens are invited to attend discussion meetings leading to the election of Congress participants, who will go on to attend the Congress. There they vote on the most pressing policy issues facing the Sahrawis and elect the Polisario’s top political leadership, its Secretary General (SG) and its National Secretariat (NS). The SG by default holds the position of President of the SADR. Thus the PGC is also a key moment for producing and populating some SADR structures. By the 2000s, in part because of some of the migration movements to be discussed shortly, the political

¹¹ Hodges discusses the presence of large refugee groups as early as February 1976 (Hodges 1983: 232-233).

¹² For further accounts of political structures in the camps see Lippert 1992, Bäschlin 2004 and Wilson 2010.

community feeding into the PGC has come to include Congress delegates from Sahrawi communities beyond the camps and Polisario-controlled Western Sahara, such as Mauritania, Spain, France and even, when they are able to attend, Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara.

Through such electoral, discussion and participation forums as these, Sahrawi citizens make claims and demands on Polisario and SADR political structures, even as they depend on them in order to receive food rations, shelter in the form of tents, health care and education. Where in the wartime years the resolution of disputes centred on the activities of the popular committee for social affairs (mentioned above), from the mid 1990s the SADR has developed its own professionalised legal institutions, such as its own criminal court which administers the SADR penal code, and sentences those guilty to serve time in Sahrawi prisons within the camps complex. As yet, Sahrawi citizens do not pay taxes, although registration fees for some private businesses and border customs payments (e.g. at the “border” for vehicles coming in from Mauritania to Polisario-controlled areas) mean Polisario can benefit from some private sector economic activities. Sahrawi men are subject to military service in the Sahrawi People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) (not universally imposed, it would seem).

This sketch indicates how Sahrawi citizens of a Sahrawi nationalist state authority emerged in the refugee camps in the wake of a conjuncture of crisis and migration. This identity has in turn been challenged by new conjunctions of crisis and migration, to which I now turn.

The return of migration

Since the ceasefire in 1991, political and social détente in the Tindouf refugee camps has nurtured growing economic entrepreneurialism, all of these factors contributing to greater freedom of movement of people and things in, from and through the camps. Mobile pastoralist in heritage, the people in the camps are once again, very often, on the move. As before, this mobility extends beyond, but also includes migration. Mobility might be the appropriate term for someone whose regular trade involves driving trucks back and forth between the camps and Mauritania (on such trade, see Cozza 2004; Cozza 2010). It might also apply to various “visiting” practices. Since the easing of land border restrictions between Mauritania and Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara, from the early 2000s refugees increasingly took advantage of the possibility of travelling to Mauritania to meet relatives who had in turn travelled from Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara. In the last few years, refugees even make such visits to Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara, typically using Mauritanian or Algerian passports in order to disguise their association with SADR and to distinguish such visits from “defections” to Morocco (see below). In fieldwork trips in 2011 and 2012, the camps buzzed with the departures, discussed absences of, and expected or actual arrivals of such persons on the move. In contrast to these cases, migration might be the more appropriate term for the movement of persons who reside and work in Spain, visiting the camps for a few weeks or months once a year, or once every few years. Migratory trajectories away from the camps co-exist with migratory trajectories back to the camps, or for some, to the camps for the first time. I review the range of these trajectories in order to contextualise the focus of the next section: three cases where the form of migration bears a strong relationship to crisis, and to the formation of new political identities.

The camps have attracted in-migration throughout the ceasefire period. In the late 2000s this fell into two main groups: Sahrawis coming from the Moroccan-controlled areas of Western Sahara, and

Mauritanians, some – but not all – of whom join relatives in the camps.¹³ As is so often the case for Western Sahara, it is very difficult to estimate the numbers of persons involved. During my fieldwork, the most common profile I encountered for Sahrawis who had come from Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara since the ceasefire was that of single young men who had been active in the pro-independence movement, and met with political repression. More occasionally I met the wife and children of a political migrant, the former having travelled separately to join a husband/father. Persons described by Sahrawis in the camps as Mauritanians who had come to the camps usually fitted the profile of economic migrants, engaged in the wage labour market. They were remarked upon for undertaking paid jobs in which Sahrawis were unwilling to engage, such as waged domestic labour or baking bread to sell loaves. Thus, both political and economic factors can be seen to influence in-migration to the camps.

As concerns out-migration, those leaving the camps are constrained (like migrants elsewhere) by bureaucratic, economic and political factors as to their choice of destination. The most desirable destination is typically the Schengen area of Europe – one of the three cases I shall deal with in more detail below. Another desirable “migration” strategy for some families is to use the fact that an ancestor registered with the French authorities in Tindouf in the colonial period in order to acquire Algerian nationality, and then apply to the Algerian state, which has policies supporting housing projects in rural locations, for a house in nearby Tindouf (which remains “Algerian”, only some land near it with the camps being in the hands of Polisario).¹⁴ Such families typically go back and forth between the house in Tindouf, where they can enjoy electricity and running water, and the tent and mud-brick home of the camps, where they can enjoy contact with neighbours and friends and, for some, be involved in the running of the camps. One might even see this as akin to rural-urban migration.

Other destinations are desirable, but present challenges for economic survival. Some refugees have left the camps to resettle in Mauritania, where there are significant Sahrawi communities in Zouerate and Nouādhbou. The challenge of moving to Mauritania is how one will survive there, though, as the prospects for work are poor, and there are no rations or free housing there. For households involved in lucrative trade to and from the camps, though, a re-location of residence away from the camps to Mauritania may be possible. For other families with funds, renting a house in Mauritania for the summer is preferable to spending those months in the scorching Tindouf climate. Another possible destination is the pasturelands in Polisario-controlled Western Sahara, known as the *badia*. This is typically an option that a household in the camps will employ for a season, when the grass is good, and with only a portion of the household members – such as old people who enjoy a return to the *badia* lifestyle in which they grew up, and other adults and children not required to work or study in the camps. Usually a household can only stay as long as the grass is good, and as long as they have livestock supplying milk.

Migratory trajectories away from the camps, which often enough combine with return-migration trajectories, are both common and varied. In three further particular cases, forms of out-migration intersect with experiences of crisis. In line with the pattern identified above, they also become the cases which are ripest for the forging of new political identities. As such, they have attracted the

¹³ In 2007-2008 I also came across two instances of Algerian migrant labourers working in the camps’ construction trade, but in the shorter fieldwork trips in 2011 and 2012 I did not come across any further cases.

¹⁴ Note that whilst some families lived in the Tindouf area even before exile, other families have ancestors who passed through in the context of mobile pastoralist activities and registered with the French colonial authorities, only to move on in due course. Caratini has noted that in the colonial period mobile pastoralists might acquire the identity papers of multiple state authorities, and use this to their advantage (Caratini 2003: 43-52).

attention of the rival state authorities in the Western Sahara conflict, which seek to manipulate the relationship between crisis, migration and new political identities according to their interests.

Crisis, migration and state authorities: the manipulation of political identities

Going north

By the late 2000s, the most desirable destination for out-migration from the camps was the Schengen zone of Europe, and most often Spain. Gómez and Omet describe how migration to Spain became significant in the mid 1990s, but reached even greater proportions in the mid 2000s, in the wake of political disappointment at the lack of progress in achieving self-determination, such as the collapse of the second Baker plan in 2004 (Gómez Martín and Omet 2009).¹⁵ By 2009, Gómez and Omet estimate, Sahrawis in Spain numbered 10,000, although they do not surmise how many are from the camps, and how many may be from the annexed population (*ibid*).¹⁶ The community of Sahrawis in Spain is diverse, including students, short-term and long-term migrant labourers, and families with children born in Spain. Some of these Sahrawis have acquired Spanish citizenship, there being a number of ways through which Sahrawis may become eligible for becoming Spanish nationals (see San Martín 2010: 162; 202 note 112). Such holders of Spanish passports typically continue their involvement with the Sahrawi nationalist political movement, and – where applicable – their connections with the refugee camps. Indeed, holding a Spanish passport can facilitate their travelling back and forth between Spain and the refugee camps.

Many migrants send remittances to family members in the camps, which are not only important in refugees' survival, but also contribute to the locally controversial increase in socioeconomic differences between refugee families. In the 1990s, the profile of migrants was often that of Sahrawi university graduates from abroad who took professional skills with them away from the camps (Gómez and Omet 2009). Whilst in the last 2000s I also knew of many migrants who had left with no such skills, the local perception of an exodus of trained Sahrawis, such as doctors, nurses, teachers and administrators, was strong, and had reached a point that alarmed Sahrawis remaining in the camps. This out-migration led some to talk of there being a crisis ("*azma*") in the camps of schools and medical centres losing personnel; I heard this view expressed in public, to widespread approval from the floor, at discussion meetings before the 2007 Congress.

There are surely factors other than migration that must be considered for an analysis of the problematic areas of the growth of socioeconomic inequalities in the camps and the personnel retention difficulties of the public sector. Disparities in wealth have also occurred through factors such as trade, access to Spanish pensions for former colonial employees, NGO sector programmes, and even access to resources from family members who never became refugees. I also met many former employees of Polisario public services who had indeed left their jobs in schools etc, but to work in the

¹⁵ During fieldwork, refugees also saw the disappointments of 2004 as a key trigger for a boom in demand for out-migration to Europe.

¹⁶ According to Gómez Martín, the proportion of Sahrawis in Spain from the camps is much larger than those from Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara, although she suggests that it is too difficult to estimate what those proportions are (personal communication). For a discussion of migration from Moroccan-controlled areas of Western Sahara to Europe, especially Spain, see Gómez Martín 2011: 55.

private sector in the camps. (It is, of course, hard to judge how many of these would have migrated if they had had the chance.) Recognising that migration cannot be the only factor affecting social issues in the camp, there are nevertheless strong indications that not only the refugees, but also Polisario, found the scale of actual and desired movement away from the camps to be cause for consternation. Migration to Europe requires the possession of a passport from a state authority recognised by the European host country. As European countries do not recognise SADR, this migration is only open to Sahrawis able to obtain a passport other than a SADR passport. (Note that Europe is the only destination of those from which migrants from the camps commonly choose which *requires* the possession of non-SADR paperwork.) Most commonly, refugees first attempt this migration with an Algerian passport. Sahrawi refugees can apply for Algerian passports from the SADR Ministry of Interior, which then submits dossiers to the Algerian authorities. In the late 2000s, there was enormous tension and frustration amongst refugees surrounding the issuance of Algerian passports, as some refugees could wait for months or years without a response. Transparency surrounding the role of Polisario in influencing the result of an application for an Algerian passport was lacking, and fuelled tensions. Refugees suspected that Polisario was limiting their access to Algerian passports in order to curb migration to Europe. Rumours circulated in 2007 and 2008 that there would be “no more passports” for an unspecified period. The extent to which these rumours reflected an actual policy of slowing down access to passports, or merely a popular conviction that such action was being taken, is unclear. Neither my own inquiries about the criteria on which Algerian passports were issued, nor those of UNHCR personnel (at least by the time of my leaving the field in January 2009) were rewarded with a clear response from relevant Polisario authorities. As far as I could tell, the refugees also lacked authoritative, transparent information on the role played by Polisario in refugees’ access to what, in the end, amounted to identity papers of another state authority.

Whatever the truth of the issuance of Algerian passports in 2007-2008, out-migration to Europe was a tense issue in the camps in the late 2000s. Several dimensions of “crisis”, as defined in this paper, are at play. The boom in demand for out-migration from the camps to Spain (and other European destinations) seems not only to have arisen from what we might call a crisis of political morale in the camps, but also to have contributed to the making of a perceived or actual crisis of staffing of public services in the camps, and perhaps even to have acquired the proportions of a crisis for Polisario, if indeed it took the extraordinary action of intervening in the issuance of passports. This instance of the complex inter-relationship of crisis and migration seems to have been particularly fertile in fostering a novel political identity – a feature which distinguishes this out-migration from the others discussed above, which evince no equivalent relationship to multiple notions of crisis and a new political identity. Spain in particular, as the destination of so many Sahrawi migrants, has seen the formation of Sahrawi political associations which both engage with and contest Polisario, even as they accept that they share and supports its ultimate aims of self-determination. One of these groups came to prominence under the name *khatt a-shaheed* (“the line of the martyr”), its political programme comprising both a call for a return to war, and criticism of failures in the governance of Polisario, such as corruption and nepotism (see Campbell 2010). This movement nevertheless lost respect amongst many Sahrawis when one of its leaders began to support the Moroccan plans for autonomy in Western Sahara. Beyond *khatt a-shaheed*, Gómez and Omet report that various political associations in Spain, founded by and for Sahrawi migrants or Sahrawi students, promote a political activism that, they claim, refuses to allow itself to be taken over by Polisario (Gómez and Omet 2009). These associations interact with Polisario, indeed engaged with its invitation to Sahrawis abroad to take part in the 2007 Congress, and repeat that they are not against Polisario nor do they seek its downfall. Yet at the same time they criticise and resist its dominance of Sahrawi nationalist politicisation. They

constitute what Gómez and Omet call “*les dissidences non-dissidentes*” (“non-dissident dissidence”) (Gómez and Omet 2009), a curious political dynamic in which the political opposition, because of the over-riding context of the self-determination case and the need to remain ultimately united around it, simultaneously supports and opposes the movement against which it directs its criticism. The new political identity fostered and nurtured through this migration, then, is the public foregrounding of a Sahrawi nationalism which both recognises and partially distances itself from the direction of Polisario.¹⁷

Morocco in mind

In contrast to the case of migrants’ nationalism beyond Polisario stands the case of those who have left the camps to go to the Moroccan-controlled areas of Western Sahara, aligning themselves with Moroccan nationalism: one term commonly used for them is the French term *ralliés*, meaning those who have been won over or rejoined a group. These *ralliés* are reported to receive a house and monthly maintenance allowance from the Moroccan authorities, to the tune of 1250 dirhams (115 euros) in the late 2000s (Bennani 2010; Soudan 2010). The number of *ralliés* was reportedly 1,294 by 1997, according to the sources from the Moroccan Ministry of Interior (Hernández 2001: 47). By 2010, Francophone and Moroccan press sources estimate that the *ralliés* numbered some 8,000 (Bennani 2010; Filali-Ansary 2010; Soudan 2010). One report adds the qualification that 5,200 of these *ralliés* have been “officially registered by census” (“*officiellement recensés*”) (Soudan 2010). *Recensé* is not defined in that text, but it is often used within the context of Western Sahara to refer to whether persons have been recognised by the UN as eligible to vote in a referendum on self-determination. Another article laments that a much publicised *ralliement* at the time of the 2007 Congress eventually proved to contain a number of Mauritians, who sold the houses they had been given and returned thus enriched to Mauritania (Bennani 2010). If we cannot be sure of the numbers of *ralliés*, we can be certain that Sahrawis do leave the camps for Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara. Like out-migration to Europe, this migration can also be seen to spring from an experience of crisis – losing hope and faith in what the camps and Polisario have to offer – and to have led to the espousing of a new political identity of alignment with Moroccan nationalism and its claims on Western Sahara.

The intervention of the Moroccan state to offer subsidies to *ralliés* seems to indicate that it has understood well the relationship between crisis, migration and the formation of new political identities, and uses its policy of subsidies to manipulate that relationship to serve its own goals of undermining Sahrawi dissent to Morocco’s presence in Western Sahara. Nevertheless, just as out-migration from the camps to Spain seems to have triggered a crisis in its own right for Polisario, so out-migration from the camps to Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara seems to have a sting in its tale for Morocco, calling into question whether *ralliement* corresponds in all cases to Sahrawis switching political allegiance towards support for Morocco’s claims to Western Sahara. Whilst it is hard to judge the rate at which the migration of *ralliés* has taken place, several sources agree on an unprecedented rise in the number of *ralliés* in 2010. Moroccan and francophone press articles give figures such as: 233 *ralliés* between January and April 2010 (Bennani 2010); 650 *ralliés* between January and June 2010 (Soudan 2010); 80 people in less than two weeks in March-April 2010 (Filali-Ansary 2010); some sixty

¹⁷ Note, though, Gómez and Omet’s important argument that a political stance critical of Polisario is shared by not only Sahrawi migrants in Spain but also by Sahrawis within the camps, and in the Moroccan-controlled areas. Nevertheless, their work on Sahrawi political associations in Spain suggests the important role of the migrant community there in the public foregrounding of a Sahrawi nationalism which seeks to distinguish itself from a nationalism sponsored and promoted by Polisario in its role as a state authority.

youths in less than two months in 2010 (Bennani 2010). In fieldwork in 2011 and 2012, Sahrawis in the camps also recalled the increase in numbers of people leaving the camps for the Moroccan-controlled territories in 2010. Such cases are known of in the camps not only through one's own circle of acquaintance, but also because *ralliés* are often shown on Moroccan TV, which is watched in the camps. "We used to watch new names every night at one point", interlocutors told me. Like some of the Moroccan sources (Bennani 2010), the refugees noted that the 2010 migrations were remarkable for the high presence of young men who were leaving the camps for Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara. This relatively unusual profile for *ralliés* caused some consternation amongst the Moroccan authorities, raising questions about the interplay of political and economic factors motivating these migrants; it has been suggested that one effect of recent tighter border restrictions in Mauritania may have been to push border traders out of work, making migration towards a free house and monthly stipend an attractive option for them (Bennani 2010; Soudan 2010).¹⁸ Absent from these press sources, but much talked of in the refugee camps, is the allegation that some of these migrants, once the goal of a house and stipend are achieved, sell the house, take the money and effect a return-migration to the camps. (The reader will call, mentioned above, that the Moroccan press has reported that Mauritians have pursued a similar strategy, posing as *ralliés* in order to acquire and sell property before returning – somewhat richer – to Mauritania.) Typically, interlocutors explained, young men would go from the camps eventually to return with a four-wheel drive car. The phenomenon grew, it was explained to me, as young men copied each other, wanting their car too. "Some families did not even know their son had gone until they saw him on TV", an interlocutor told me. Young men apparently defended their "defection" to Morocco on the grounds that they too wanted to get their chance of "*hayawani*" ("my animal", an expression used to mean wealth). I myself met one person who had "defected", received a house, sold it and returned to the camps; my interlocutors in the camps were able to name more cases. When I enquired about the attitude Polisario took to such cases, refugees expressed beliefs such as that Polisario did not mind, and would be glad to see the Moroccan state lose some property anyway.

By my fieldtrips of 2011 and 2012, however, this profile of migration had stopped, according to refugees' accounts. The nightly television parades were no more. In October 2010, Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara saw the largest scale protest of Sahrawis since annexation, staged in makeshift camps in the desert outside Elayoune, at Gdeim Izik. The protesters are believed to have numbered 20,000 by the time the Moroccan authorities broke up the protest on November 8th 2010, leading to claims of casualties on both sides (BBC 2010; Verdier 2010). Moroccan and French press articles suggest a relationship between Gdeim Izik and the 2010 boom in *ralliés*, alleging that annexed Sahrawis' jealousy of the *ralliés*' subsidies caused them to go out on protest at Gdeim Izik (Radio France Internationale 2010; Bennani 2011). Video footage of Gdeim Izik, and of the ensuing riots in Elayoune where Sahrawis tore down and destroyed Moroccan flags, raising those of SADR, nevertheless suggests a political content to the Gdeim Izik protests (Sahara Thawra 2010; Sahara Thawra 2012). Analyses which see the protests as economic depoliticise them of that political content; indeed, depoliticisation of Sahrawi dissent in the Moroccan-controlled areas has been noted to be a longstanding feature of Moroccan rule there (Shelley 2004). The refugees offer an alternative analysis

¹⁸ It seems to me also worth considering how the financial crisis in Europe may have contributed to the emergence of this new form of migration. As discussed above, migration from the refugee camps to Europe has long been difficult for Sahrawi refugees because of the scarcity of access to the necessary travel documentation. Nevertheless, by 2010 migration to Europe had become less desirable in the camps, for so many Sahrawis there were unable to find work. Where in the mid 2000s a single young man from the camps might have hoped to earn money by migrating to Europe, by 2010, with migrants' job prospects in Europe, and especially Spain, being so meagre, other options for accessing resources may have become more appealing.

of the link between 2010 *ralliés* numbers and Gdeim Izik, in that they claim that the young, recently arrived *ralliés*, accustomed to being able to speak their minds in the camps, were key agents in staging the Gdeim Izik protests. Since Gdeim Izik, refugees report, only *ralliés* travelling as a family group are being offered housing and subsidies. The young men, they claim, have ceased to go to the Moroccan-controlled areas to get their “animal”. Public debate continues in Morocco around the problems that may have been created, in the present and for the future, through policies towards the *ralliés* (Bennani 2011).

Fantasies of Western Sahara

A third case of out-migration from the camps to consider with regard to crisis and new political identities is a migration to (or within) Polisario-controlled Western Sahara that has been infused with a new political meaning. As in the case of the *ralliés*, here a state authority is intervening in an attempt to manipulate the relationship between crisis, migration and the formation of new political identities for its own interests – but this time the state authority is Polisario. At the 2007 Congress, the decision was taken to promote the use of land in Polisario-controlled Western Sahara. Since then, new projects have been launched with the aim of encouraging civilian populations to settle there. These projects comprise the building of schools, medical centres and water resources for irrigating cultivated land. They are typically funded by NGOs supported by popular committees for solidarity with the Sahrawi people based in European countries such as Spain and Italy. In some sites, these aid-funded projects comprise an “urbanisation” element, whereby a Sahrawi can apply for a free assignment of land, the only requirement being that he or she build a dwelling there within a specified amount of time – a dwelling that must be “*en dur*” (made of solid building materials) rather than a tent.¹⁹ A SADR television documentary made in 2010 about one of these settlements, in Mahrees, stated that some 700 families had now moved to live there (RASD TV 2010). Not all of these families are necessarily from the camps though – families could also be from the population that has never settled in the camps, but remained in the pasturelands. As mentioned above, families from the camps also make ad hoc visits to the *badīa* pasturelands independently of these new settlement schemes.

There are several advantages for Polisario in encouraging settlement in the areas of Western Sahara under its control. This draws international attention to the fact that it does control some areas of Western Sahara, and refutes claims, such as have sometimes been put forward by Morocco, that Morocco controls all of Western Sahara, the parts to the east of the wall being only an “uninhabited buffer zone”. Beyond this, the timing of the decision to encourage migration to new settlements in Polisario-controlled Western Sahara may be significant: it comes at the same time as the “crisis” of access to Algerian passports, and at the time of the first Congress since the trough of political morale that befell the camps in 2004 when hopes for the referendum collapsed. We might say that in the face of so many tensions surrounding migration to Europe, Polisario set about facilitating an alternative migration with the crucial difference that this migration was very much in line with Polisario’s leadership of the Sahrawi nationalist cause. The population of new settlements in Polisario-controlled Western Sahara provides (or envisages providing) a settled population for Polisario to govern *within* Western Sahara, rather than in exile. For these newly settled residents, it becomes easier than it is for

¹⁹ In interview, a serving officer in the SADR Ministry for the Liberated Territories explained that there were no particular selection criteria for choosing families for these projects, the only requirement being that a person applying for a plot land, on receiving it, should build “*en dur*” within a specified time period (interview in Rabouni, Polisario refugee camps, Algeria, 15th February 2012). I would suggest that the families applying for this “self-select” in that this option is most likely to attract people who want to spend a significant amount of their time in the pasturelands, either because they have livestock there, or because they have aged family members whose health conditions improve when in the pasturelands as opposed to the refugee camps.

mobile pastoralists to access services provided by Polisario as a state authority, even as it easier for Polisario to provide these services and opportunities for participation in them. For example, in 2012 it was announced that in the next legislative elections, polling stations would be rolled out for the civilian population in Polisario-controlled areas of Western Sahara (where previously polling for legislative elections has taken place in the camps, with voting in the Polisario-controlled areas of Western Sahara being limited to military personnel stationed there). This Polisario-encouraged migration to sedentary settlements in the areas of Western Sahara under its control therefore extends and strengthens the sphere of the Sahrawi citizen beyond the camps, even as it adds new dimensions: that these citizens are in their own land, and can rely on their own work to survive rather than rations (which would not be available to persons registered with Polisario as living in these settlements, since they would no longer comply with the conditions of becoming a refugee, that is crossing an international border).²⁰ The documentary about Mahrees, directed in large part at the Sahrawi audience in the refugee camps who watch SADR TV (although SADR television broadcasts are also available online, and can be viewed from the Moroccan-controlled areas of Western Sahara) stresses these elements in its presentation of life there. Interviews with local administrative officials demonstrate the extension of Polisario local government structures. In parallel, an interview with a worker in the irrigation-fed food-growing projects showcases pride in inhabiting the land of one's own nation that is not under "occupation" (term used in interview), and in becoming self-sufficient.

It might be said that only a few hundred families are affected by this migration towards sedentarised settlements in the Polisario-controlled areas of Western Sahara, whereas thousands more remain in the camps. In fact, when I watched the documentary on Mahrees with host family members as it was broadcast on SADR television in September 2011, their reactions demonstrated the emotional appeal of this migration *even for those who have not taken part in it*. They exclaimed over how beautiful and impressive the scenes of land, vegetables and buildings were. Particularly interesting was their reaction when images were shown of the marketplace in Mahrees, its *marsa*. Marketplaces in the camps are often much criticised for being untidy, unorganised in their haphazard layout, litter-strewn and dirty. The shot of the marketplace of Mahrees showed uniform buildings in a straight line in a clean setting. "*Ma andham marsat-hum*", several voices around me exclaimed ("How tidy/organised their *marsa* is"). Western Sahara at that moment appeared as the place in which frustrations and longings of life in exile could be satisfied. For a moment, my companions could imagine themselves living in a place where the marketplace was so organised and clean. The beauty of migration to sedentarised settlements in the Polisario-controlled areas of Western Sahara is that its effects are experienced not only by those who undertake that migration personally, but also by those for whom media insights into that migration permit them to fantasise about the brighter future that awaits them once they can live in a Western Sahara governed by a Sahrawi nationalist-inspired government.

Conclusion

Mobility, and within its range of activities, multiple and contrasting migratory trajectories, both in-migration and out-migration, have now become a regular feature of life in the Sahrawi refugee camps. Whilst some people and families have left the camps for good, many leave only to return or keep returning. For a Sahrawi diaspora that spans not only north-west Africa but also Europe, the Americas

²⁰ According to the serving officer in the SADR Ministry for the Liberated Territories with whom I spoke, it is indeed the case that, in line with international refugee practice, those registered as living in sedentarised settlements in Polisario-controlled Western Sahara do not receive rations (interview in Rabouni, Polisario refugee camps, Algeria, 15th February 2012).

and Asia, the camps appear to take on the role of a beating heart, or an anemone. People leave, most often to be drawn back again and again, in repeated cycles.

In this paper I have attempted to show how these cycles relate both to instances of crisis – breakdowns into the extraordinary and the untenable – and to the forging of new political identities. I have also suggested that this relationship has been at the core of the formation of new political identities in the region for centuries. Where it is difficult for us to reconstruct for the historical material how different political authorities at the level of groups and individuals may have sought to manipulate that relationship for their own interests, for the contemporary material concerning post-ceasefire migration away from the camps, we see how both state authorities and individuals manipulate the relationship between migration, crisis and political identity, not always with the intended results.

My analysis hints at a number of concluding reflections of broader significance than the case in hand. Whilst scholarship may be keen to conceptualise distinct categories of “migration” and “mobility”, such distinctions may not be meaningful for actors in particular contexts who deploy a range of temporal and spatial movements, blurring the boundaries between abstract categories.²¹ The movements I have studied here even blur the boundary that I have sought to pursue in this paper between the ordinary and extraordinary. Another issue is the extent to which the Sahrawi heritage of mobile pastoralism can explain how readily migration has continued to be a response to (and, at times, trigger of) crisis, and incubator of new political identities, or whether a more general phenomenon might be at stake. Whilst it is important not to over-emphasise and romanticise a presumed influence of Sahrawi nomadic heritage on contemporary practices, the people whose lives are at issue here may indeed find it easier (emotionally if not bureaucratically) than long-term sedentary counterparts to respond to crisis through migration, and use migration to produce new political identities. But this readiness, rather than diminishing the interest of this case for broader reflection, may be the key to its very relevance. The exaggerated inter-twining of crisis and migration with the formation of new political identities in the case of Sahrawis encourages us to consider how conjunctures of crisis and migration are *productive* in the sense that Foucault (1979) uses the term. Here, the production of new political identities, if to be successful at all, must entail some prominence. But the productivity of crisis-cum-migration processes may be more subtle elsewhere, such as in cases of the producing of new subjectivities (Peteet 2005) or new affects (Navaro-Yashin 2003). Scholars of migration, especially when linked to crisis, may find some inspiration to recognise further productive dimensions in their studies. There may even be some twists in these tales.

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²¹ I thank Sébastien Boulay for encouraging me to consider the limitations of scholarly distinctions between different kinds of movements of persons.

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