

Western Sahara Refugees



**BUILDING THE NATION-STATE
ON “BORROWED” DESERT TERRITORY**

Introduction 2



- a) To provide a brief historical overview of the conflict.
- b) To trace transformations whereby refugees became citizens on “borrowed” territory.
- c) To argue that the unequal relationship that characterizes the relationship between “beneficiary” and “recipient” of aid is challenged in the Sahrawi case.

Introduction 3



- Two factors facilitated self-government in the Sahrawi camps:
 - 1. The policies of the host-state – Algeria.
 - 2. The presence of political leadership with a vision to build a new society.
- The Sahrawi case inspired the work of Barbara Harrell-Bond and her critique of the humanitarian regime.

Historical Overview 4



- Western Sahara lies on the northwest corner of Africa.
- Rich in phosphate, minerals and fisheries.
- Possibly oil and natural gas.
- The people of Western Sahara are a mix of Arab tribes from Yemen (Bani Hassan), Berbers and sub-Saharan Africans.
- Speak *Hassaniyyah* a dialect of Arabic.



Historical Overview 6



- The everyday life of the individual revolved around the *freeg* – a small bedouin camp of around five *khaymas* or tents/families.
- Pastoral nomads (camels, goats)
- Cultivation
- Trade
- Oral tradition.

Oral historian 7



Poet and oral historian 8



Historical Overview 9



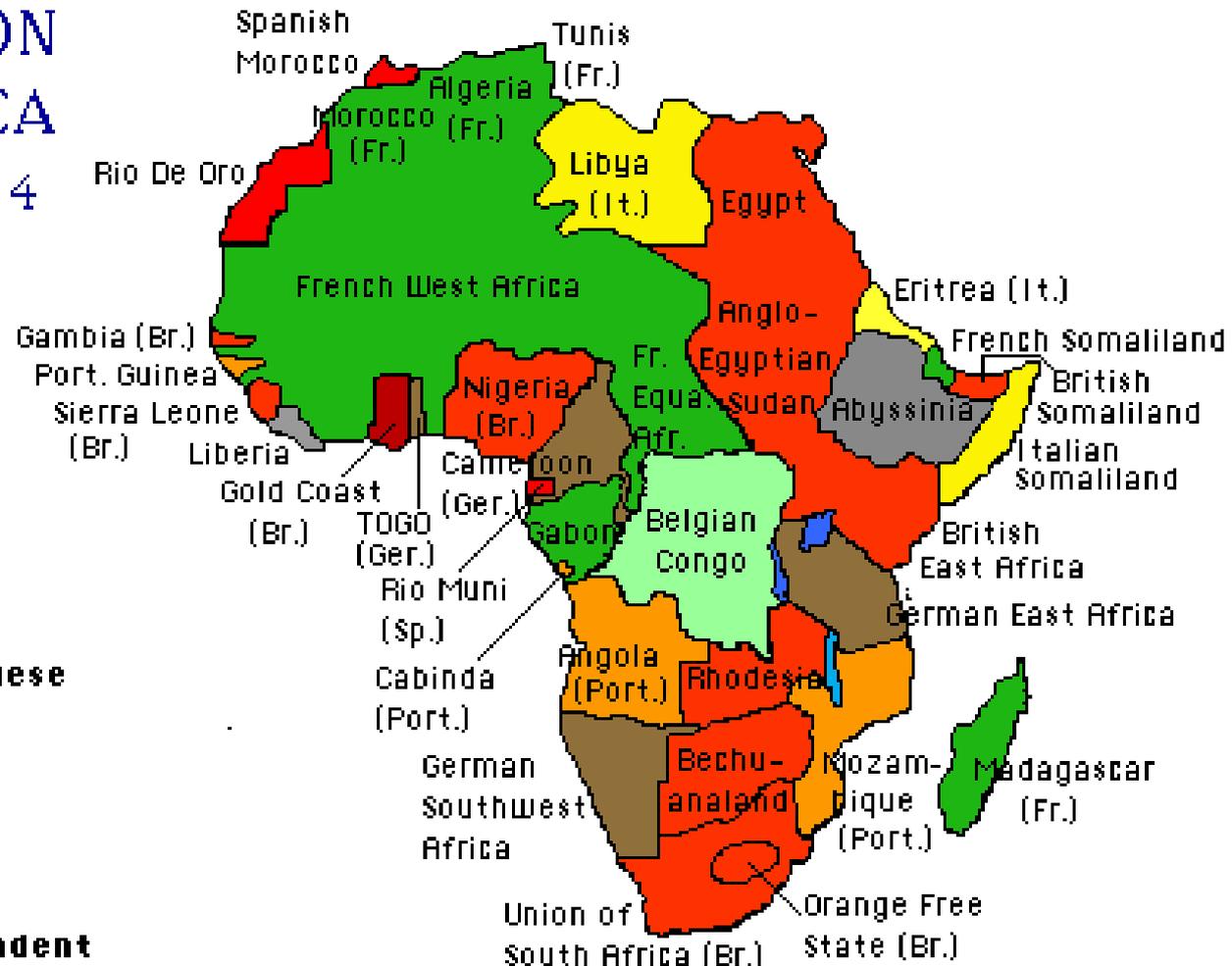
- Politically, the various Sahrawi tribes were represented by *Ait Arb'een* or the Assembly of Forty.
- During the scramble of Africa in 1884 and 1885 Western Sahara became a Spanish protectorate.
- The genesis of contemporary Sahrawi national consciousness may be traced to the latter half of the twentieth century.

The Scramble of Africa 10

PARTITION OF AFRICA 1885 - 1914

Colonial Powers

-  **British**
-  **French**
-  **German**
-  **Portuguese**
-  **Italian**
-  **Belgian**
-  **Spanish**
-  **Independent**



Historical Overview 11



- The Polisario, the Sahrawi national liberation front, was formed on the 10th of May 1973
- The Spanish finally withdrew their soldiers in 1975/76.
- Instead of celebrating independence Morocco and Mauritania invaded the territory

Historical Overview 12



- Several times, beginning in the 1960s, the UN affirmed the right of Sahrawi self-determination.
- In May 1974, the UN sent a Mission of Inquiry which recommended a referendum.

Historical Overview 13



- In December 1974, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) stated *that .. the court **has not found legal ties of such a nature as might affect the application of resolution 1514 (XV) in the decolonisation of Western Sahara and, in particular, of the principle of self-determination through the free and genuine expression of the will of the peoples of the Territory.***

Historical Overview 14

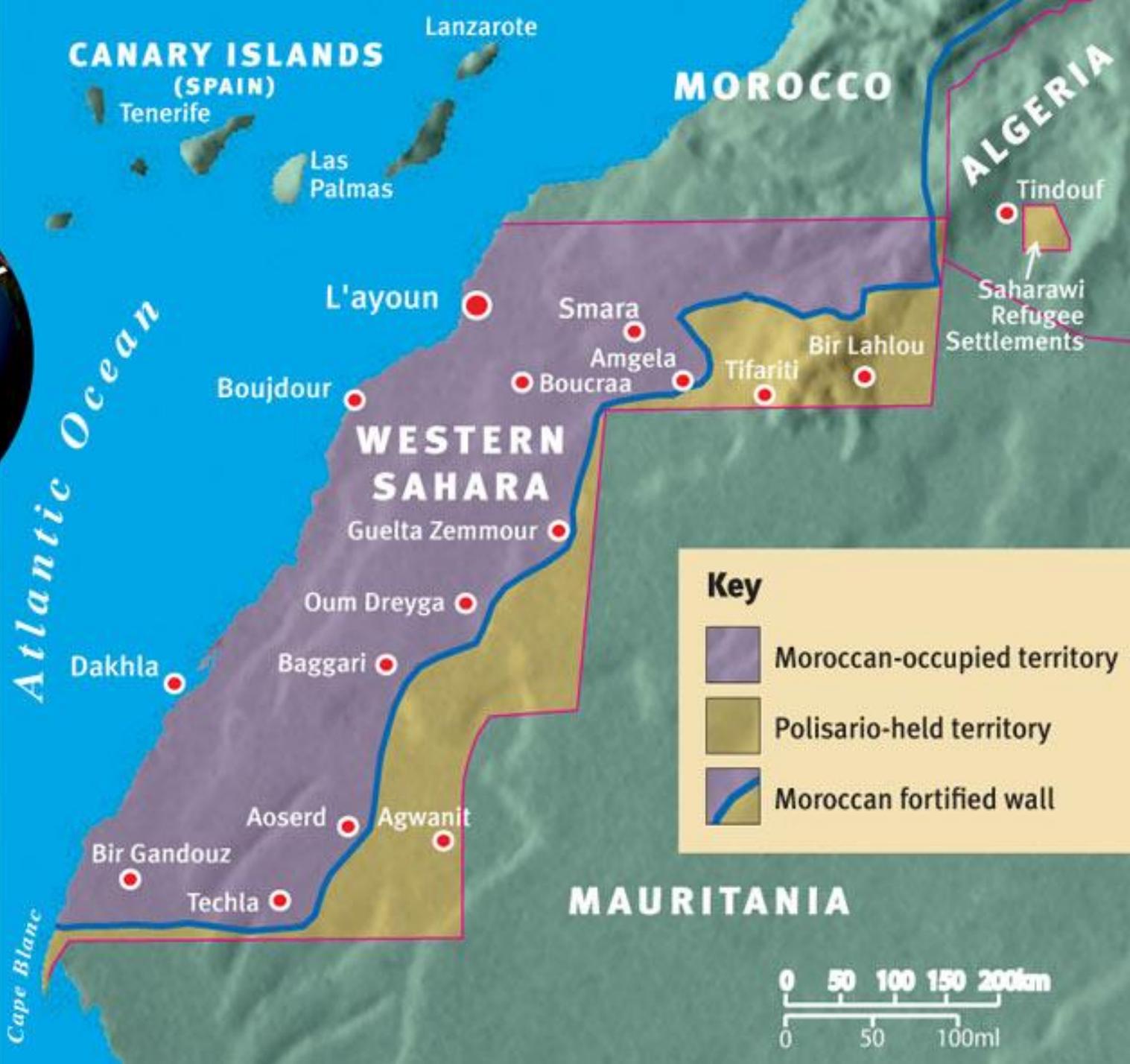


- The invasion led to a protracted war resulting in the displacement of approximately half the Sahrawi population.
- In 1991 a cease-fire was declared and a UN mission (MINURSO) was deployed to oversee and facilitate the referendum.
- The “referendum” has become like a desert mirage.

Historical Overview 15



- Today, approximately a 1/3 of Western Sahara remains under the control of the Polisario.
- A **“Wall of Shame”** , **1,690 mile long barrier separates the “inside” from the “outside”**.
- The wall tore families and communities apart.





- The refugee camps in *Lehmada* near Tindouf a small military town in the southwest corner of Algeria.
- The camps are in a harsh and uninhabitable desert.
- During the war (1975-1976) most of the men were at the front . Women managed the camps with very meagre resources.



From refugees to citizens of a modern “nation-state”



- On the 27th of February 1976, the Polisario declared the establishment of the *Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic* (SADR) – a state-in-exile .
- SADR’s aims: to liberate Western Sahara *and* build a new society based on modern conceptions of citizenship.
- It reinforced national belonging and worked to erase tribal allegiances.

2002 celebrating the founding of the Polisario 20



From refugees to citizens of a modern “nation-state” 21



- This transformation was enacted through a Program of National Action.
- Polisario/SADR took over functions previously carried by the nomadic *freeg* (families, camp, group).
- Camps became incubators or the virtual territory to build a nation-state that could function as such upon repatriation to Western Sahara.

Women's Union 22



Women's Training Center 23



From refugees to citizens of a modern “nation-state” 24



- Camps were administered as the territory of a sovereign nation-state.
- Each camps is a *wilaya* or province, divided into *dawa'er* or districts and then *ahya'* municipalities, all named after urban centers in Western Sahara.
- Collective mobilization at its highest during the war years.

From refugees to citizens of a modern “nation-state” 25



- Neighbourhoods mirrored the *freeg* if not in its economic and ideological basis, in spatial arrangements and social relationships based on cooperation.
- Sahrawis also invoke *al-hasra* the term that was used by tribes, when all gathered to fight against an external aggressor.
- Popular participation, local and popular committees represented at the highest levels.

From refugees to citizens of a modern “nation-state” 26



- *Education*: mandatory for males and females.
- SADR's role does not end when students graduate from elementary camp schools.
- It sends guides (*mushrifin*) with the younger students, who substitute for coach, parent, etc.
- Students abroad forge a substitute family that transcends tribal and kinship boundaries and enhances a collective Sahrawi identity.

Grade six – in camps 27



From refugees to citizens of a modern “nation-state” 28



- Education was vital not only to reinforce national consciousness, but also to develop as rapidly as possible its human resources.
- The Sahrawi leadership had prematurely hoped or believed that the referendum would be taking place in a short period of time.

From refugees to citizens of a modern “nation-state” 29



- The Polisario and SADR introduced a Sahrawi historical and cultural narrative in the curriculum.
- All nationalisms ‘invent’ or ‘reinvent’ tradition.
- A coherent narrative of the past was important to counter Moroccan claims that the people of Western Sahara are not a “nation”.

From refugees to citizens of a modern “nation-state” 30



- *The Returning Students:* Upon their return to the camps, students volunteer. There is no formal economy or salaried jobs.
- Many educated youths have nothing to do.
- Neither SADR nor the refugees had expected their exile to last that long.

From refugees to citizens of a modern “nation-state” 31



- Why do students return to the camps?
- To abandon elders in the harsh desert and in poverty brings shame to the person.
- A sense of responsibility to the refugees at large and the national cause.
- Practical considerations: host states subsidizing their education do not permit them to remain; visa issues.

From refugees to citizens of a modern “nation-state” 32



- However, today more Sahrawis have been seeking to leave the camps.
- Purpose of migration: to improve their socioeconomic status and send remittances to their families in the camps.
- Sahrawi refugee-migrants almost always see their status in countries like Spain, as temporary.
- Characterized by a high level of mobility in the region.

From refugees to citizens of a modern “nation-state” 33



- The Program of National Action induced transformations in other areas, such as in the field of jurisdiction and health.
- However, the Polisario do not dismiss “traditional” medicine, but local approaches to health coexist with the “modern”.

Traditional medicines exhibited during national celebrations 34



Donors and Recipients 35



- The Polisario took the lead in organizing camps long before thousands of humanitarian agencies and representatives descended on the camps.
- Organizations like the UNHCR were unable to map the camps as humanitarian spaces.
- Local Sahrawi committees distribute ration.
- The Polisario is politically sovereign, but economically dependent acts as buffer and mediator.

Neighbourhood distribution of aid 36



Donors and Recipients 37



- SADR requires that all visitors or aid representatives to “check in” and get permission from the appropriate ministry or department.
- This process underscores the political identity of the refugees and their agency.
- International aid practitioners and representatives working with refugees are not used to such a relationship.

Donors and Recipients 38



- It also ruffles their moral sensibility emanating from an attitude of charity:
- NGO rep: “They are the refugees and they make us feel like we are”.
- Sahrawis maintain that SADR is the legitimate representative: any program originating from outside its area of sovereignty must pass through the appropriate governmental channels.

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- The debate over *Vacaciones en Paz*.
- Spanish families ‘adopt’ a Sahrawi child to spend the summer months with them.
- Thousands of children between the ages of 8 – 13 leave the camps and live with families in the various provinces of Spain.

Getting ready: Vacaciones en Paz 40



Donors and Recipients 41



- For Sahrawis the program has four objectives:
- 1. Learning experience (Spanish and outside world).
- 2. Health: keeps them away during the merciless desert heat in the summer months and allows them to get a medical check-up.
- 3. Sahrawi children as “ambassadors” of the Sahrawi cause.
- 4. Economic benefit, the program is a source of material support for many families.

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- Each child returns to his or her family from Spain with parcels containing presents, and since the 1990s bring back money.
- Spanish NGO representatives and some scholars criticize the program:
 - It is unfair to expose children to the world of comfort in Europe, knowing they will return to the harsh conditions in the refugee camps.
 - The program generates differentiation – some children bring back more than others.
 - Many express shock and discomfort: children and families have become ‘bold’ and sometimes ask for specific items and for money.

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- They propose that gifts and money reinforce dependency.
- Some even question the ‘morality’ behind such a program, and whether children are being instrumentalised in the political struggle.

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- Children are not passive victims of adult manipulation.
- They are not apolitical. Their participation is because they are part of their communities.
- War or displacement do not exclude children, and they become rapidly politicized and aware of the consequences of oppression on their families and communities.

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- The underlying assumption: Beggars can't be choosers, or can they?
- Aid organizations catering to refugees are established on ideological and structural frameworks that reinforce their role as donors, distributors, managers and 'moralists.'
- Refugee participation destabilizes the unequal relationship and challenges the ideological and ethical premises upon which they are based.

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- The notion that Sahrawi refugees should not be sent to the land of plenty with its materialistic lure, only to send them back to face the barren desert camps, my research shows the contrary.
- Sahrawi children are eager to return to their families and the camps. They miss the autonomy and spatial freedom they enjoy in the camps.
- Children move in and out of huts and tents where they converse, sleep and eat with different generations.
- In Spanish society, generally, the boundaries between children, adults and the outer space is more clearly demarcated.

Donors and Recipients 47



- Although by no means an ideal society, the Sahrawi refugee camps do in fact provide us with a model that shows that one may indeed receive a gift, but if the gift is not beneficial or even desirable, one can place constraints on both the gift giver and the gift, and be able to reciprocate the gift.

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- The ability of the Sahrawis to freely organize and build a new society in the camps, hinged:
 - Foremost on the full support of the Algerian host-state, and
 - on the presence of political leadership with a strategic vision for the future and an ‘action plan’.

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- A unique relationship between the host state and a national liberation movement based on its territory.
- Algeria granted the Sahrawis a piece of land, upon which they could establish a sovereign state.
- SADR issues a Sahrawi passport, symbolically it reinforces the idea of sovereignty.

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- Sahrawi passports, nonetheless, concurrently expose the vulnerability of a territoria-less or deterritorialized state.
- To travel outside Algeria, an Algerian or other passport is needed.
- However, the Sahrawi-Algerian passport acts more like a travel document or laissez passé and does not fulfill the Algerian civil status, or citizenship requirements.

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- In the area where the camps are established, Sahrawi and not Algerian laws apply, although the land is Algerian.
- If there is a crime committed in the camps, Sahrawi laws and procedures apply.
- In the camps Sahrawis feel they are living in a Sahrawi society.
- The “borrowed” land area is where sovereignty is embodied or embedded.

Donors and Recipients 52



- The government makes its decisions as a sovereign state.
- Algerians visiting the camps need permission as if they are crossing state boundaries into the Sahrawi Republic symbolized by national flags and checkpoints.

Donors and Recipients 53



- This state of affairs, allowed the Sahrawis to experience what citizenship in their own state is like in concrete terms. It also enabled a sense of self-achievement in a sovereign entity.
- New traditions of citizenship developed, interacting and dealing with governmental and social administrative bodies and institutions.
- Citizenship is learned in the course of everyday life.

Conclusion 54



- In 1991 when the cease fire was declared refugees began packing their suitcases to leave *lehmada*.
- Until today all peace efforts failed.
- SADR does not have the means to meet the needs of a growing population.

Conclusion 55



- Since the 1991 cease-fire, the informal market grew exponentially, and inequalities have sharpened, inciting criticism of the leadership.
- During my recent visit, I noted that television sets, mobile phones, and second-hand vehicles were everywhere, harbingers of what Sahrawis call, usually as a cynical remark, “perestroika.”

Conclusion 56



- The war years now take on the glow of a golden age, a time of communal sharing and a tight collective ethos.
- The Polisario adapted to these changes by relaxing some of the policies it had strictly imposed and by allowing the informal economy to grow in order to help ease the economic strain.
- Meanwhile, a new, educated, and unemployed generation is growing restless;

Conclusion 57



- Many wish for the return of war as a more viable solution than slow death while waiting in the camps.
- Others seek to emigrate, or have left school to start a small mercantile enterprise.
- Carrying mobile phones and listening to Algerian rai music while riding in a four wheel drive between camps, is a sign that global markets have long reached the desert camps.
- But Sahrawis see a positive side: they use the internet and mobile phones to spread the news about their struggle, and to talk to one another across walls and camps.

Conclusion 58



- The internet and cell phones have been crucial in getting news out of Morocco where the Sahrawi intifada and Moroccan repression is concealed from mainstream media.
- But this is not what the older generation of stoic cadres had imagined for their children. They call them *jeel al-infitah*, or “the generation of openness.”

Conclusion 59



- However, the Polisario is not too worried, refugees who have focused on improving their lives in the camps are less likely to compromise politically, as Mundy opined.
- Younger generations of Sahrawis have come to differentiate between their efforts to improve their livelihood and their firm political stances .

Conclusion 60



- The challenge of reconciling the needs of a growing refugee population with collective political mobilization in the context of the current stalemate remains.
- But the Polisario succeeded in transforming camps into preparatory social and political spaces to generate changes in the present so as to achieve liberation and repatriation in the future.