

SAHRAWI REFUGEE CONDITION AND CAMPS EXPERIENCE: UNDERSTAND THEIR EXCEPTIONAL NATURE

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Abstract

Today's situation in Western Sahara and its increasing relevance in the international context hide a long-term human displacement condition and a protracted political gridlock. Numerous studies have described the complexity and challenges in refugee camps contexts and a fair number of studies have addressed the Sahrawi's political and humanitarian condition from various perspectives. Nevertheless, it seems necessary to consider Sahrawi's political status and refugee camps experience as exceptional according to different points of view. This paper intends to partially describe why it is possible to distinguish several forms of 'state of exception' while considering Sahrawi people's condition in refugee camps.

L'attuale situazione nel Sahara Occidentale e la sua crescente rilevanza nel contesto internazionale nascondono una condizione di human displacement di lungo termine e un protratto stallo politico. Numerose ricerche hanno descritto la complessità e le sfide nei contesti dei campi profughi e un discreto numero di studi ha affrontato la condizione politica e umanitaria dei Sahrawi da diverse prospettive. Tuttavia, secondo diversi punti di vista, si può considerare lo status politico dei Sahrawi e l'esperienza dei campi profughi come eccezionale. Questo articolo intende descrivere parzialmente perché è possibile distinguere diverse forme di 'stato di eccezione' nel contesto dei campi rifugiati Sahrawi.

Keywords

Western Sahara, Sahrawi, State of Exception, Refugee camps

Introduction

The current geopolitical situation of Western Sahara is characterized by an escalation of tensions between Morocco and Algeria, with a Polisario Front that sees more and more thinning chances of a referendum that legitimizes its claims on the former Spanish colony. The recent declarations of Spain regarding the presumed sovereignty of Morocco over the disputed territory further destabilize the fragile existing balance and complement similar declarations made by the United States and Israel. Since late 1975 most of the Western Sahara territory is *de facto* occupied by Morocco with military forces and it hosts thousands of Moroccan settlers (Mordi, 2015). Since that time, dozens of thousands of Sahrawi inhabitants are forced to live in the refugee camps of Tindouf. This massive displacement occurred under the protection of the Polisario Front. Soon after, the independent Saharan Arab Democratic Republic (Sadr) had been proclaimed and the Polisario Front started to organize itself for

the armed resistance against the occupation backed by Algeria (Zunes & Mundy, 2010). This latter started putting Sahrawi independence amongst the priorities of its relations with the neighbours.

Several authors have spread the discourse about Sahrawi in Tindouf as the ‘*perfect refugees*’ underlying the good practices implemented in the camps. Nevertheless, according to other points of view, it seems quite inappropriate (e.i. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2014). Thus considered, it remains the fact that in Tindouf camps it had been applied a self-management strategy with an exceptional limited control by the host state, Algeria, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (Unhcr) (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Protracted Sahrawi displacement: Challenges and opportunities beyond encampment, 2011). Mainstream camp and refugee studies have stressed the characteristic of a ‘state of exception’ (Agamben, 2005) or the widespread political and legal *terra nullius* status for all refugee situations and camps, often described as a spatial bio-political technology (Minca, Geographies of the camp, 2015). In order to be able to distinguish several forms of ‘state of exception’ in the Sahrawi’s refugee condition and camp life, it is necessary to investigate the power relations existing between the Sahrawi socio-political community and the international system¹.

Methodology

Having regard to the inherent difficulties in reaching the area and the conjuncture with the Covid-19 pandemic, this study could not take place directly in the field. Nevertheless, the vantage point of being part of the Italian Embassy in Alger, between January and March 2020, was decisive for data collection of primary sources. The participation in several discussion moments with NGOs and United Nations personnel working in that context and with Algerian scholars was eye-opening for the following investigations rooted in the literature and scholarly debates in the field of camp geography, refugees, and humanitarian assistance. Multiple interviews were conducted, both in semi-structured and free form, with humanitarian stakeholders working in the camps near Tindouf. The set of data thus collected, considered in the light of the existing literature, was interpreted through a theoretical lens, that of the ‘state of exception’. Thanks to the concept of ‘state of exception’, theorized by Carl Schmitt (Schmitt, 2003, c1950) and then revived by Giorgio Agamben (Agamben, 1998-2005), it seems possible to enlighten most of the factors that are at issue, without neglecting both international aspects and placed-based ones. The ‘state of exception’ could be outlined as “*a technical term to define this no-man’s land between the legal order and the political fact and between the law and its*

¹ For a wide collection of the existing knowledge about Western Sahara and Sahrawi population see, for example: (Ojeda-Garcia, Fernández-Molina, & Veguilla, 2017) and (Pazzanita, 1996).

suspension” (Agamben, 2020). Thus, we illustrate that Sahrawi refugee camps are ‘state(s) of exception’ both considering the humanitarian context and the refugee camp's ordinary conditions. This qualitative analysis would reveal why the current Sahrawi condition could be considered a unicum in the international panorama.

According to the author, even if most of the literature on camps' geography has described camps as ‘space of exception’², the Sahrawi's ones could reveal something more, as it has been demonstrated, for example, by Ramadan in the Palestinian camps in Lebanon (Ramadan, 2012). Sahrawi's socio-political context is a key element to understand the reasons why it is possible to affirm that. The aim of this paper is to deconstruct the Sahrawis' universally accepted rhetoric as mere encamped seekers of national recognition, to enrich the current discourse about refugees and the impacts of humanitarian assistance in protracted refugee situations.

Content

Sahrawi socio-political context

The Polisario Front can be described as an in-exile-government³, settled in refugee camps in Algeria and whose population is protected under the umbrella of the refugee status. It is crucial to inscribe the Polisario Front, and consequently the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) government, in the framework of the decolonization process, underlining that the Sahrawi people represented by the Polisario Front are self-determination seekers from several points of view⁴.

This legal backing for self-determination provides the Polisario Front with substantial legitimacy both in the internal and domestic fields. Furthermore, this position is strengthened by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) opinion about Western Sahara (ICJ, 1975). This statement and all the support obtained directly or indirectly by the United Nations resolutions and African Union have helped the Polisario in collecting significant amounts of tacit and explicit support.

² “*The camp is a piece of land placed outside the normal juridical order, but it is nevertheless not simply an external space*” (Agamben, 1998, p. 170).

³ For further investigation about the concept of in exile government see: Shain, Y., *The Frontier of Loyalty: Political Exiles in the Age of the Nation-State* (1989) and Shain, Y., *Governments-in-Exile in Contemporary World Politics* (1991).

⁴ First, since its constitution in 1973, the Polisario has always presented itself as a liberation movement and the legitimate representative of the Sahrawi population living in the former Spanish Sahara and the Algerian camps fighting for the independence of Western Sahara. Secondly, the Polisario Front was included as the Sahrawi population's legitimate representative during all the negotiations' stages to end the conflict and allow the referendum.

The Polisario Front has governed the camps near Tindouf for around 45 years mainly because the host state, Algeria, had in practice ceded its stewardship to this political and military actor. The Polisario Front has erected several institutional buildings and approved the Sadr constitution, which is the source of law to which all the refugees living in the camps are subjected to (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, *Protracted Sahrawi displacement: Challenges and opportunities beyond encampment*, 2011). In a very simplistic way, we can summarize the complexity of Sadr's situation as follows: it is a government only partially recognized, with limited sovereignty over the territory claimed since its declaration of independence, and whose population is mainly settled in refugee camps based in a foreign country.

If we move from the expression of sovereignty in the typical sense, the most evident expression of Sadr sovereignty is the organization and management of the camps, and the complex set of practices linking humanitarian assistance and political authority. Moreover, it is crucial to underline that Sahrawi people living in Tindouf have to be considered in a protracted refugee situation:

Refugees can be regarded as being in a protracted situation when they have lived in exile for more than five years, and when they still have no immediate prospect of finding a durable solution to their plight by means of voluntary repatriation, local integration, or resettlement (Crisp, 2002).

It is possible to affirm that there are several exceptions considering the refugee condition of the Sahrawi population and the political authority expressed by the Polisario Front/Sadr in administering the refugee camps. In order to examine deeply these exceptions, it is fundamental to benefit from the concepts of 'state of exception' and 'bare life' proposed by Giorgio Agamben, but also from his analysis of the camp.

Overview of the 'state of exception', 'bare life' and camp concepts in Agamben's perspective

In Agamben's perspective, the 'state of exception' establishes the principles by which we distinguish law from its application, but also this condition produces a topological relationship between the inside and outside of law such that they become indistinguishable. Indeed, we assist in the production and diffusion of a so-called 'zone of indistinction'.

The exception is a kind of exclusion. (...) But the most proper characteristic of the exception is that what is excluded in it is not, on account of being excluded, absolutely without relation to the rule. On the contrary, what is excluded in the exception maintains itself in relation to the rule in the form of the rule's suspension" (Agamben, 1998, p. 17-18).

The definition of the concept of 'state of exception' in Agamben's perspective - based upon Foucault's works about power and governmentality and Schmitt's statements about sovereignty's capacity to ordering space - is not purely juridical, but it also offers a topological understanding

(Minca & Rowan, 2017). In other terms, sovereignty “*performs a juridical and territorial ordering at the same time as it demarcates a specific spatio-temporal order, the space of the exception*” (Belcher et al., 2008, p. 500).

Furthermore, according to the Italian philosopher, the ‘state of exception’ has become the protagonist of modern sovereignty, and this shift has affected sovereignty subjects. Precisely because the exception has become the norm or rule of contemporary politics, it is common to find subjects abandoned by the law, living in a condition of exception. In this condition, it is possible to detect the ‘bare life’, one of the main concepts presented by Agamben. ‘Bare life’ does not simply refer to natural life, but it is the politicization of this latter. It is the result of the natural life that is subjected to the sovereign power and can be defined as ‘life exposed to death’ (Agamben, 1998). The ‘state of exception’ manifests when, within the political order, ‘bare life’ is at once excluded from it and captured by it.

Figures like the refugees are shreds of evidence of the threshold between political life and bare life. Moreover, they are often trapped in conditions suitable for the materialization of ‘state(s) of exception’ that might persist and shift from a transitory situation to a ‘normalized’ one. Protracted refugee situations and refugee camps are evidence of this process, and we assist to the imposition of the ‘state of exception’ as “*the taken-for-granted structure of dominance, as (normalized) spatial and social ordering*” (Minca, 2005, p. 410).

The philosopher states the camp is the space crafted when the exception becomes the rule or the normal situation: the camp has become “*the hidden matrix and nomos of the political space in which we are still living*” (Agamben, 1998, p. 166). According to him, the concentration camp, better than anything else, holds the capacity to incorporate all the aspects above presented. Even if theoretically the ‘state of exception’ is an essentially temporary suspension of the juridico-political order, “*now becomes a new and stable spatial arrangement inhabited by the bare life that more and more can no longer be inscribed in that order*” (Agamben, 1998, p. 175). There is a shift from “*an order without localization*” [the state of exception in which law is suspended], to “*a localization without order*” [the camp as a permanent space of exception]. The camp represents the territorialization that precedes the normalization of the ‘state of exception’ (Agamben, 1998). Following Agamben’s suggestion, we must learn to recognize the camp's structure in all its metamorphoses into ‘zones d'attentes’.

Seeking the 'state of exception' and 'bare life' concepts in refugee and refugee camps analysis

Before analysing our case study, it is necessary to illustrate two essential issues: the possibility to depict the figure of the refugee as a 'state of exception' in the nation-state system and considering refugee camps as a 'state of exception' in the frame of the humanitarian crisis response.

In the chapter 'Biopolitics and the Rights of Man' (Agamben, 1998), the Italian philosopher starts with Hanna Arendt's analysis of the refugee's problem in order to understand the links between modern nation-states and human rights' fate (Arendt, 1979). She shows that the refugee figure does not embody men's rights as theoretically should, and by contrast, the refugee loses his quality excepted from the fact that he is human. Thus, according to Agamben, the refugee must be conceived as "*a limit concept that radically calls into question the fundamental categories of the nation-state*" (Agamben, 1998, p.134). It is evident that human rights are completely preserved only for full-fledged citizens (Agamben, 1998).

Refugees are depicted as mere recipients of welfare, condemned to a life of waiting and dependence on others. Refugees represent the 'nomadic excess' that states seek to capture and normalize through panoptic confinement, mainly through their refugee camps' settlement (Diken & Laustsen, 2005). Refugees' condition and the nexus existing between state and citizen, human rights and citizenship, exclusion and inclusion have also been described by scholars like Malkki, Haddad, and Betts⁵, to cite a few.

Considering the international community's response to addressing refugees' situations, several criticisms have been raised. Most of them were directed against the Unhcr's principles of international protection of refugees. In particular, the identified solutions have been rooted in the idea of reinserting refugees within the same state-system that has created them, and despite the intent of providing international protection to refugees on a non-political and humanitarian basis, it has not always been the case.

⁵ See (Malkki, 1995), (Haddad, 2008) and (Betts, 2009). According to them, refugee situations are not only the state system's product, but they took part in the reinforcing and legitimating process of the sovereign states-system, too. Thus, the states-system itself has created precise notions of insider and outsider and has fashioned the refugee as an 'other', which can be offered a form of quasi-citizenship before being reintegrated within the 'normal' logic of the state system.

The core principle of the refugee regime is non-refoulement, and the Unhcr recognizes that refugees' international protection activates with securing their admission to a country of asylum, the grant of asylum and respect for their fundamental human rights, and, finally, it ends only with the attainment of a durable solution (UNHCR, General Overview of the Functions of UNHCR, 2002). However, too often, Unhcr's last duty does not materialize. That is another evidence of the reality of the pervasive production of 'state(s) of exception'. Thus, even if the international refugee's law ensures the right to a durable solution, this latter is *de facto* suspended. The main consequence is that we assist in several cases of 'protracted refugee situations' that, in most cases, materialize the 'state of exception' of their condition in the shape of refugee camps.

It is necessary to consider that refugee camps result from several events concerning displaced people, states, and humanitarian stakeholders. Thus, the forms and outcomes of these spaces could be very variable according to the context. Camps are considered humanitarian spaces and should be managed following humanitarian principles and international procedures. Nevertheless, camps are not always a guarantee for improving the conditions and rights of people living inside, nor a successful means to reduce risks lining at the heart of the phenomena determining the refugees' emergence. The role of the humanitarian sector in the management of camps is crucial. Humanitarian actors do not only intervene to organize and provide assistance, but they participate in the cycle of life of the camp itself.

Refugee situations and mass displacement go often hand in hand; thus, refugee camps are perceived to be the 'solution' to ensure these displaced people's protection and survival. They constitute the materialization of the 'state of exception' embodied by the refugee status and by the failures of the principle of non-refoulment and repatriation procedures, nevertheless, their continued use has led to its legitimation and affirmation as a standard practice (Janmyr, 2014).

The existence of refugee camps is supposed to be exceptional and temporary; nevertheless, year after year it turns into an 'everyday experience' (Agier, 2008). Refugee camps result from a 'necessity' that allows the appearance of unusual practices and activities bending the rules in order to respond to emergencies more quickly (Hailey, 2009). Furthermore, if we consider that camps have never been conceived as an internationally recognized means of managing refugees from the international legal point of view, it seems adequate to affirm that refugee camps are thus 'in-between places'.⁶

⁶ Camps as "in-between spaces, based on land ceded or leased by the host state to the temporary jurisdiction of the international community, generally represented by the UNHCR" and refugees are "subject to the same authority, to rhythms and conditions of life that they have not chosen but were imposed on them" (Agier, 2008, p. 63).

By segregating their inhabitants, camps serve both humanitarian and political goals. Even if, at first glance, they are perceived as spaces of humanitarian protection and empathy, they might serve the political goal of keeping foreign populations outside ‘normal’ social spaces (Agier, 2008) and under control (McConnachie, 2016). Refugees in the camps do not participate in the common political arena and are ‘normalized’ as part of the margin in which rules and life do not follow the same paths as the outside (Ek, 2006). Turner defines this situation as a ‘limbo’; refugees “*live in a time pocket in relation to lives that are lived outside the camps*”, and this limbo has “*no promise of an ending*” (Turner, 2016, p. 4).

For our research purpose, it is necessary to show the international principles adopted in camp management, the responsibilities, and the actors involved so as to have the necessary tools for comparing the hypothetical good practices with the reality of our case study.

Based on national and international laws and standards, camp coordination and management activities and approaches require the camp community's involvement. The standards in this field have been frequently updated in the last years. Today it is possible to affirm that the approaches are more people-centred and less top-down oriented. Camp coordination and camp management (Cccm) is the name given to standardized coordination mechanisms applied to refugee operations. The crucial objective is to ensure that displaced people's needs are met and that there are no gaps or overlaps in responsibility or response (UNHCR, 2021). According to Cccm, several functions take part in camp management and coordination. Regardless of whether it is a national or international Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) or national authority that takes responsibility for the camp management, the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and operational independence represent the ethical foundation for stakeholders carrying out humanitarian work in emergencies (OCHA, 2012), avoiding every political commitment or military support.

Furthermore, the main role of coordination and monitoring should be provided by the hosting state which is the exclusive actor in charge of what happens in the camps. In some exceptional cases, when the hosting state cannot fully comply with its duties, the Unhcr sustains its efforts. Effective host states’ response to a refugee crisis spreading from a conflict should include the separation of militants from refugees, the protection of aid supplies from theft, the securitization of the borders, and the disarming and reintegration of willing militants into the civilian population.

This theoretical control over the camp and the effort of maintaining the humanitarian scope of refugee camps is a complex task, especially when the camps are a space where political and military groups

have settled and/or where they carry on their activities of recruitment, propaganda, supply and feeding of their components. Too often, the ideal-type camp presented above and promoted by the Unhcr and partners is far from being reproduced in reality.

The above-presented perspectives explain why it is possible to conceive the refugee camp as a sovereign power device, organizing humanitarian assistance and trying to overcome the state system's weaknesses. The camps embody a territorialized condition that simultaneously expresses a dynamic of transit and rest, but also a change in the juridical status and everyday life practices of their inhabitants. This mixture of political and humanitarian elements reinforces the condition of the exceptionality of refugee camps. Nevertheless, it is necessary to offer a more complex vision of the exception, and the Sahrawi camps offer a fertile field for the analysis of these dynamics.⁷

The Sahrawi camps as 'state(s) of exception'

Located in a desert area far from most of the hosting society's social heart, the refugee camps of Tindouf are the crucial hub for the Sahrawi population's socio-political and humanitarian activities. Although these camps are formally a temporary and humanitarian space, they are organized with due respect for social relations and urban/administrative divisions, and they host not only residential units but also administrative structures of Polisario/Sadr and cultural spaces.

The refugee camps of Tindouf are also called Wilayas⁸: Laayoune, Awserd, Smara, Boujdour, and Dakhla. Each Wilaya is divided into Dairas (districts) for a total of 29 Dairas. In Laayoune and Awserd camps there are six Dairas for each; in Smara and Dakhla they are seven for each; finally, in Boujdour there are only three Dairas. Each Daira is subdivided into barrios (quarters) with an almost equal population, for a total number of 116 barrios. Four Wilayas have a hospital, and each Daira has a primary health center (29 in total). A Central Hospital is based in Rabouni where Sadr has its administration headquarters (UNHCR, CISP, WFP, 2019).

According to several scholars, the Sahrawi camps cannot be conceived only as provisional settlements; instead, they are more similar to cities than other humanitarian and temporary spaces (Rossi, 2014). Nevertheless, the constraints due to the persistent lack of services and material resources, alongside the dependence on external humanitarian aid and the precarious living

⁷ Herz states that “Maybe more so than any other contemporary refugee situation, the Sahrawi camps expose the dilemmas and tensions between the original notion of the camp, intended as a temporary setup, and the reality on the ground, which has developed into a quasi-permanent situation.” (Herz, 2013, p. 387).

⁸ The camps were named after the towns located in Moroccan occupied territory to express that Sahrawi refugees do not lose the hope of the return (Besenyő, 2009).

conditions, resize these spaces into an unusual form of refugee camps extremely well-organized and almost autonomously administered (Campos-Serrano & Rodríguez-Esteban, 2017) (Ojeda-Garcia, Fernández-Molina, & Veguilla, 2017).

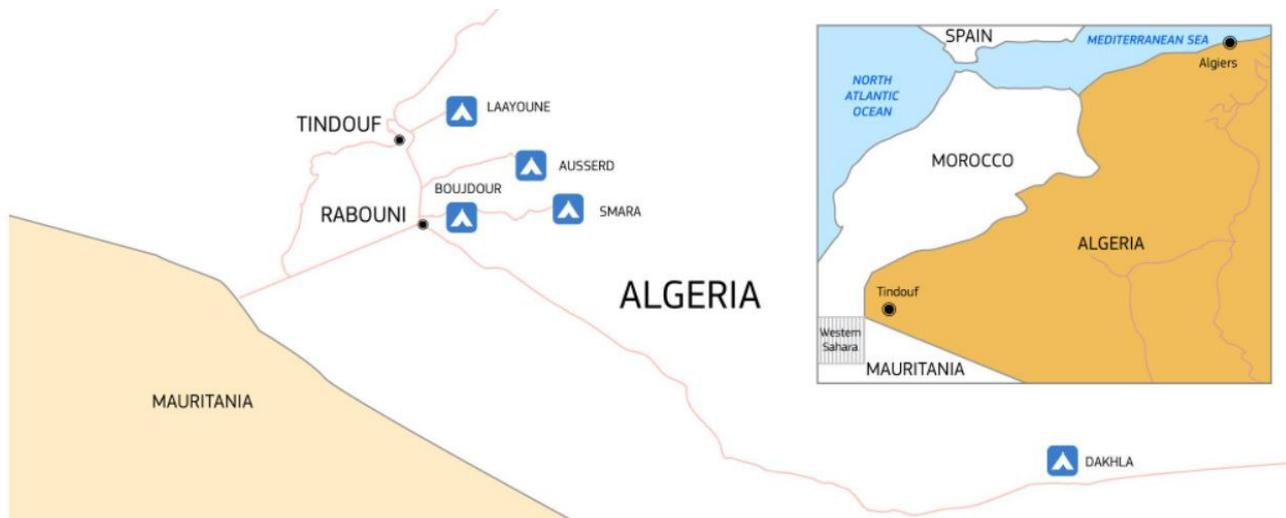


Figure 1. Saharawi Camps in Algeria - European Union/ECHO (https://ec.europa.eu/echo/where/africa/algeria_en)

As it has been explained, it is impossible to dissociate camps' life from the political project of the Sadr. In fact, the camps' aim was not only to provide temporary shelter to the displaced civilians but also logistical support to the Sahrawi Liberation Army (Sla) and the basis for the construction of the new Sahrawi subjectivity shaped under the political scheme promoted by the Polisario Front since 1973. The Sahrawi population in the camps was able to establish itself as a political community, exactly when, in theory, it was losing all rights of citizenship to join the indistinct mass of displaced people (Farah, 2009) (Rossi, 2014).

The refugee camps have reached a high level of education (literacy rate reportedly at 90 %), primary school is mandatory, and it has to be understood as the Polisario/Sadr strategy to boost youth's sense of belonging and compliance with the national Sahrawi identity, despite the distinction between tribes (Metelits, 2018). These cultural, political, and organizational elements reflect the necessity of the Polisario Front to exploit the 'blank space' represented by the refugee camps to "write a new historical narrative based on the desire of an independent nation-state" (San Martin, 2005, p. 569). Even if it is possible to perceive positive elements in the condition reached in these camps, it is necessary to moderate the enthusiasm, several grey zones still exist (Freedom House, 2020).

As of 31 December 2017, 173,600 Sahrawi refugees reside in camps in Tindouf (UNHCR, 2018). The figure only captures those residing in the refugee camps. The Sahrawi refugee population is almost equally divided between males and females, with 49% female and 51% male. A little over one-third of the population (38%) are under 17. According to the data of the most relevant UN agencies involved (UNHCR, CISP, WFP), only 58% of their combined overall needs for their 2020 regular programs were financed, this permanent and chronic lack of resources is a matter of concern for the whole UN System (United Nations, 2020).

According to the United Nations' perspective, the Sahrawi refugee community has managed the five camps near Tindouf for more than four decades, implementing their own activities, managing their own partnerships, and advocating for resources domestically and internationally (no references to the relations between Sahrawi leadership and Polisario representants or the Sadr government). It would be more correct to suggest that, departing from the UN position, the camp's management has been the Sadr government's space of action. This latter has always collaborated with the humanitarian actors involved in the camps⁹, albeit maintaining a high degree of independence.

The Polisario/Sadr has reinforced its position as the Sahrawi representative and camps management responsible through the development of its own constitution, religious and legal systems¹⁰, a camp-based police force and its army (Human Rights Watch, 2008). Several ministries have been appointed with specific operational competencies and they play a fundamental role in managing all the funds received by the camp community. This is almost a 'unicum' in the international system of governing humanitarian camps.

The in-exile community's strategies and efforts have contributed to the camps' representation as to the materialization of a sense of normal condition within an immense abnormality: the denied self-determination of the Sahrawi people and the in-exile status (Herz, 2013). This process of 'normalization' could be described as a dynamic of sedimentation and routinization of what is determined by the in-exile condition, alongside the consciousness of a Sahrawi political identity fostered by the desire to overcome the current restrictive circumstances (San Martin, 2005).

⁹ Humanitarian actors coordinate all programs with the Sahrawi leadership, the refugee community, and the Sahrawi Red Crescent at all levels. The management of the camps and humanitarian resources is based on a consolidated participatory approach where communities in the camp manage the camp themselves. There are sectoral working groups in the Health, WASH, Protection, Livelihoods, Food and Education sectors, led or co-led by UN agencies and/or the relevant Sahrawi refugee community departments. Furthermore, the activities are closely planned with the support of the Government of Algeria and the Algerian Red Crescent (GCR-UNHCR, 2020).

¹⁰ Islam is the state religion.

As presented above, several forms of ‘state(s) of exception’ could materialize in the refugee camp as a humanitarian space separated from the rest. While considering the Sahrawi context, it is necessary to take into account that refugee camps are run directly by the Polisario/Sadr, while the usual practices presented under the label of Cccm require the supervision and direct management of the hosting state or an international/non-governmental organization, according to hierarchical roles and duties. In the Sahrawi case, Algeria and the entire humanitarian sector involved have almost totally derogated those principles. Thus the Polisario/Sadr is the only authority with which camp residents have regular contact and it is almost independent with regard to camps' population management and organization of social systems. Such a high degree of self-management and the Polisario/Sadr's *de facto* control over the Algerian territory upon which the camps have been built distinguish the Sahrawi camps from most refugee camp contexts worldwide (Human Rights Watch, 2008) (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2011).

According to this analysis, the first of many ‘state(s) of exception’ that could be found in Sahrawi camps is the ‘typical’ one already presented, referring to the dynamic of a protracted situation that has become the rule, despite the intended temporary and emergency character. The Sahrawi camps were already built 45 years ago and, because of the political impasse, no sustainable and acceptable durable solutions have been already found. Nevertheless, the camps' population living conditions are always precarious, and the transitory shape of these camps has not changed.

The second form of ‘state of exception’ that has been here described in Sahrawi camps is the one concerning the fact that the Polisario/Sadr has taken the office of camp management instead of humanitarian actors and the hosting state, reducing the external interferences, including the UN agencies and NGOs. The Polisario/Sadr, and its relief organization, the Sahrawi Red Crescent, are the only organizations operating in the camps without restriction. Thus, project implementation has been possible only once foreign organizations have obtained the Polisario/Sadr permission to access the camps. This derogation to the international norms about camp management and international responsibility for refugee populations represents a substantial ‘state of exception’: the international rule is suspended and normalized in time, allowing the *de facto* Polisario/Sadr full control of the camps.

The Sahrawi condition, just described, might be perceived, in some way, as a challenge to Agamben's vision of the refugee and the camps as mere shreds of evidence of ‘state of exception’ conditions. In fact, Sahrawi refugee camps, like some Palestinian camps, are spaces of agency and struggle, not only areas of complete disempowerment and bare life (Ramadan, 2012).

Conclusion

Common Agambian perspectives about refugee camps as a ‘space of exception’ in which political life is suspended and ‘bare life’ manifests itself at its highest level must be softened when considering the Sahrawi context. Sahrawi people have been able to shape their own political space in the refugee camp context. The hosting state does not fully realise the suspension of the law in Tindouf camps as, instead, it has been usually demonstrated in numerous studies on refugee camps. Indeed, Algeria's absence introduces an empty political space where the Polisario/Sadr political actors have established themselves. This peculiar case study overcomes, in some ways, the usual conception of the refugee camp as the mere materialization of the ‘state of exception’ understood as “*a piece of land placed outside the normal juridical order*” (Agamben, 1998, p. 170), nor the manifestation of one of the most evident ‘bare life’ conditions.

In the Sahrawi case, it is possible to describe the camps as spaces where social formations, traditions, and practices from the homeland are reassembled, sustained, recreated, and performed in exile. In other words, Sahrawi camps are spaces of agency and struggle, not merely tools of international agencies, nor spaces of biopolitical domination or anonymous terrains of conflict and not even spaces of complete disempowerment. Nonetheless, the real problem remains, not the existence of those ‘state(s) of exception’, but rather their persistence and normalization. The Sahrawi case brings to light the constant breach existing between the definition of the law and its application, especially in the international context and in marginal situations.

In the Sahrawi camps, the process leading to overcoming the condition of relegation produced is probably the result of the political organization and the national identity construction established from the very first, and it is also due to the softness and acquiescence of the hosting state politics of control. Nevertheless, in a near future, the political impasse of the conflict with Morocco and the absence of suitable solutions to change their refugee situation may participate in reducing the positive process of overcoming the condition of ‘bare life’ that has been developed to retain the hope to come back to their land.

Despite these apparent successes in ‘living’ the camps, even if the condition of Sahrawi people might be considered better than that of other refugees, according to several points of view (from camps management to health and education), this long-term condition risks becoming unsustainable because of the frustration of more than 30 years of international indifference and not honoured commitments.

In the last years, the absence of political successes and the camps' harsh life conditions have represented a serious matter of concern for the Sahrawi population and authorities; moreover, the deterioration of relations between the stakeholders involved in the dispute, mainly Algeria and Morocco, is a further problematic element.

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