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# Sahrawi Student Unions in Spain and Algeria: Transnational Political Participation from *Mukhayyam* to the World

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## Résumé

*Cet article examine la participation politique des jeunes réfugiés sahraouis, en mettant l'accent sur leur engagement au sein de l'UESARIO (Union des étudiants de al-Sāqiyah al-Ḥamrā' et Río de Oro), à travers les branches nationales espagnole (LEJSEE) et algérienne (LESAL).*

*Le modèle éducatif transnational développé par la RASD depuis les années 1970, associé à la temporalité de l'exil, a façonné de multiples flux vers et depuis le mukhayyam (camps de réfugiés), les expériences de mobilité et les perspectives d'avenir, conduisant à la création de l'UESARIO. Ainsi, l'Union joue un rôle central dans le processus de construction nationale et la lutte des étudiants et des jeunes à l'étranger pour la libération.*

*S'appuyant sur une recherche ethnographique de longue durée menée en Estrémadure (Espagne) et à Alger (Algérie), cet article analyse la manière dont les étudiants traversent près de cinquante ans d'exil, mettant en lumière l'influence de leurs contextes d'étude sur leur contribution à la cause sahraouie.*

**Mots-clés :** Sahara occidental - Réfugiés - Organisations de jeunesse - Éducation transnationale - UESARIO.

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## ملخص

يتناول هذا المقال المشاركة السياسية للاجئين الصحراويين الشباب، مع التركيز على انخراطهم داخل اتحاد طلاب السّاقية الحمراء ووادي الذهب (UESARIO)، من خلال فروع الوطنيتين الإسبانية (LEJSEE) والجزائرية (LESAL). من خلال النموذج التعليمي العابر للحدود الذي طوّره الجمهورية العربية الصحراوية الديمقراطية منذ سبعينيات القرن العشرين، والمرتبطة بزمينة المنفى، والمتأثر بتدقّقات متعدّدة من وإلى المخيمات، وتجارب التنقل والآفاق المستقبلية للعودة، تمّ إنشاء اتحاد طلاب الجامعات الصحراوية (UESARIO)، الذي يلعب دوراً محورياً في عمليّة بناء الوطن، والنضال من أجل تحرير الطلّاب والشّباب في الخارج.

استناداً إلى أبحاث إثنوغرافية طويلة الأمد، أجريت في إكستريمادورا (إسبانيا) والجزائر، تحلّل هذه المقالة كيفية تعامل الطلّاب مع ما يقرب خمسين عاماً من المنفى، مع تسليط الضوء على تأثير سياقات دراساتهم على إسهامهم في النضال لنصرة القضية الصحراوية، وكذلك كيفية تعاملهم مع تطلّعاتهم الفردانية في مقابل المسؤوليات الجماعية المرتبطة بالنضال من أجل التّحرير الوطني.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الصحراء الغربية - اللاجئون - المنظمات الشبابية - التّعليم

العابر للحدود - اتحاد طلاب السّاقية الحمراء ووادي الذهب (UESARIO).

## Abstract

*This article examines the political participation of Sahrawi refugee youth, focusing on their engagement with UESARIO (Union of Students of al-Sāqiyah al-Ḥamrā' and Río de Oro), through Spanish (LEJSEE) and Algerian (LESAL) national branches. The transnational educational model developed by SADR since the 1970s, alongside the temporality of exile, marked multiple flows to/from mukhayyam (refugee camps), mobility experiences and future perspectives, prompting the creation of UESARIO. As such, the Union plays a pivotal role in the nation-building process and the liberation struggle among students and youth abroad.*

*Based on long-term ethnographic research in Extremadura (Spain) and Algiers (Algeria), this article analyzes how students navigate almost fifty years of exile, highlighting how their study contexts shape their contributions to the Sahrawi cause, as well as*

*how they negotiate individual aspirations within collective responsibilities to the national liberation struggle.*

**Keywords:** Western Sahara - Refugees - Youth organizations - Transnational education - UESARIO.

In 2022, the displacement rate rose to one in seventy-four from one in 167 in 2012 (UNHCR, 2022, 2023), highlighting the ongoing struggles of refugees often confined to camps (Agier, 2008; Milner, 2016). This article examines the political participation of Sahrawi refugee youth, a less-explored group experiencing long-term exile<sup>1</sup>. It focuses specifically on their engagement with UESARIO (Union of Students of al-Sāqiyah al-Ḥamrā' and Río de Oro, Munazzamat Ittiḥād ṭalabat al-Sāqiyah al-Ḥamrā' wa-Wādī al-Dhahab) and two of its national branches: LESAL (League of Sahrawi Students in Algeria, Rābiṭat ṭalabat al-ṣaḥrā' al-Gharbiyah bi-l-Jazā'ir) and LEJSEE (League of Sahrawi Students and Youth in the Spanish State, Liga de Estudiantes y Jóvenes Saharaus en el Estado Español).

The Western Sahara, a former Spanish colony (1884-1976), has been classified as a “non-self-governing territory” by the United Nations since 1963. In 1975, as Spain planned its withdrawal, Morocco and Mauritania invaded the territory, forcing about half the population to flee to the Algerian desert (San Martín, 2010). Organized under the POLISARIO Front (Al-Jabḥah al-Sha'biyah li-Taḥrīr al-Sāqiyah al-Ḥamrā' wa Wādī al-Dhahab), Sahrawis fought against Mauritania (until, 1979) and Morocco (until, 1991), while simultaneously establishing refugee camps and declaring the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) in 1976.

During the war period (1975-1991), the independence struggle catalyzed profound social transformations. Aiming to construct an egalitarian society (Caratini, 2006; Gimeno & Ali Leman, 2007; Ruiz Miguel, 2022), the population unified under a Sahrawi identity, moving beyond tribal structures (Wilson, 2016; Zunes & Mundy, 2010). Education became central (Farah, 2010; Velloso Santisteban & Vinagrero Ávila, 2016),

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<sup>1</sup> Even though it would be of the utmost pertinence to observe similar routes among Sahrawis from the Occupied Territories of the Western Sahara, that falls outside the scope of this article and of my research.

leading to a transnational educational system through agreements countries supporting the Non-Aligned Movement (e.g., Algeria, Libya, Syria, Cuba) and later through Spanish solidarity networks. Having begun shortly after exile (1976), children and youth transnational mobilities became transgenerational processes (Chatty & al., 2010; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2015).

The transnational educational model developed by SADR since the 1970s created generations of students who studied in different countries, developing varied perspectives on politics and individual and collective future. As these students moved between refugee camps and host countries, they formed distinct generational experiences which led to the adaptation and reconfiguration of the political organization, in a way that included all these experiences, culminating in UESARIO's creation.

The trajectories of my interlocutors demonstrate that forced migration intertwines with voluntary movements as people seek improved living conditions (Schielke, 2015; Vacchiano, 2022), driven by “imaginative geographies, emotional valences, social relations, and obligations” (Carling & Collins, 2018, p. 911). This challenges the notion of refugee camps as spaces “outside the normal juridical order” (Agamben, 1998, pp. 170–171) and highlights how mobility transforms social dynamics within these settings (Chatty, 2016). Consequently, the refugee camps (near Tindouf, Algeria) have become “central margins” (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2015) from which Sahrawis navigate complex transnational processes and which they have been (provisionally) calling home for almost fifty years.

Given the significance of educational mobility, this article examines how youth who have studied abroad perceive and contribute to the liberation struggle. The POLISARIO Front actively promotes participation through mass organizations, including the National Organization of Sahrawi Women (NUSW, *Al-Ittiḥād al-Waṭānī lil-Mar'a al-Ṣaḥrawiyya*), Youth Union of al-Sāqiyah al-Ḥamrā' and Río de Oro (UJSARIO, *Ittiḥād Shabībat al-Sāqiyah al-Ḥamrā' wa-Wādī al-Dhahab*), Trade Union of Workers of al-Sāqiyah al-Ḥamrā' and Río de Oro (UGTSARIO, *al-Ittiḥād al-'Āmm li-'Ummāl al-Sāqiyah al-Ḥamrā' wa-Wādī al-Dhahab*), and most recently, students (UESARIO).

UESARIO emerged in 2011 during the XIII Congress of the POLISARIO Front, responding to the specific needs of university students residing overseas, particularly in Spain (Gómez Martín, 2016b). It was created in a context where the absence of political solutions had bred collective impatience with the prolonged exile. Unlike other mass organizations, UESARIO was formed “from the outside in,” reflecting the growing importance of diaspora communities to the Sahrawi cause. It is a transnational organization, divided into national branches, each one representing a foreign country with its own agenda and engages in activities that align with the interests and characteristics of its student population. These activities may include various approaches to political debates and involvement.

This article analyzes how young Sahrawis navigate their political participation through UESARIO while balancing individual aspirations with collective responsibilities. By examining the Algerian and Spanish branches, I explore how contemporary cohorts of refugees (Chatty, 2016) engage with political movements and contribute to self-determination efforts despite nearly five decades of displacement.

This article draws on 24 months of ethnographic fieldwork (April, 2018-March, 2020) involving 52 semi-structured interviews with Sahrawi students, youth, POLISARIO Front representatives, Spanish solidarity activists, and host families in Algeria and Spain. I primarily employed “immersed participant observation” (Isidoros, 2018, p. 15), emphasizing informal conversations and daily activities over formal interviews. This approach allowed engagement with UESARIO participants across various involvement levels. In Extremadura, I established close ties with Sahrawi youth, their Spanish host families, and the broader Sahrawi community. My fieldwork in Algiers provided insights into college students’ experiences and deepened my understanding of the Sahrawi cause. While some interviews were conducted in English, Spanish dominated formal settings, with daily communication blending Spanish and Hassaniya. I personally transcribed and translated all interviews. This methodological approach enabled a nuanced grasp of the social dimensions underlying students’ mobilities, future aspirations, and the interplay between individual and

collective desires. To ensure the privacy of interlocutors, pseudonyms were assigned, and personal details were altered.

The article is structured into three sections. It begins by contextualizing UESARIO's involvement in fostering political engagement among college students within the broader framework of the mass organizations affiliated with the POLISARIO Front. Subsequently, it examines the daily lives of Sahrawi students in Algeria and their political engagement within the LESAL framework. In parallel, the viewpoints of students in Spain are explored through the LEJSEE. The comparative analysis of the two cases is relevant when considering the importance of these two branches. Finally, the article focuses on the interconnection of young individuals, *al-qadiyya al-ṣaḥrāwīyya* ("the Sahrawi cause" in Arabic), and *al-Rābiṭah/la Liga* (terms in Arabic and Spanish to refer to "the League"), with a particular emphasis on the political mobilization of youth in the diaspora.

### **College Students' Organization Within UESARIO**

The analysis of UESARIO's role among Sahrawi youth requires understanding the POLISARIO Front's organizational structure. Established in 1973 and inspired by African liberation movements, Arab socialism, and the Non-Aligned Movement (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2015; Ruiz Miguel, 2022), POLISARIO positioned itself as the representative of the Sahrawi people in their independence struggle while aiming to implement social revolution after being forced into exile.

Both my research and others (Gómez Justo, 2013; Ruiz Miguel, 2022; Wilson, 2016) have demonstrated that POLISARIO actively promoted social participation through specific mass organizations: the National Organization of Sahrawi Women (NUSW), Sahrawi Youth Union (UJSARIO), and Sahrawi Workers' Union (UGTSARIO, along with armed forces and later, college students (UESARIO). This organizational framework has been fundamental to POLISARIO's actions, with individuals strongly encouraged to join these organizations to support the liberation struggle. Each organization maintains international connections, with NUSW joining the International Democratic Federation of Women, UGTSARIO affiliating with the World Federation of Trade

Unions, and UJSARIO participating in the World Federation of Democratic Youth. UESARIO's distinctive feature is its transnational character that originated from diaspora youth, making it the only mass organization created "from the outside in."

UESARIO came into existence in 2011, during the XIII Congress of POLISARIO Front, initiated by Sahrawi students studying in Spain who sought greater representation than what UJSARIO provided. It emerged in a context where the absence of political solutions had bred collective impatience and a sense of exile becoming routine. Student trajectories were increasingly characterized by what Gómez Martín defined as "circular movements" – constant flows to and from refugee camps that "must consider different kinds of migration, points of origin, trajectories and historicities" (Gómez Martín, 2011, p. 61). These patterns no longer implied permanent return. Additionally, as Gómez Martín (Gómez Martín, 2016a) pointed out, the motivation to build a novel organization was associated with the integration of social encounters firmly embedded in diasporic settings, different from previous generations' experiences. These shifts in student trajectories and participation reflected what Solana (Solana, 2016) calls "the temporality of exile in place". Sidi, a Sahrawi refugee in his early twenties and LESAL board member, explained:

"The [POLISARIO] Front understood our importance. If it did not agree that we should be autonomous, it would never have proposed it... But if the Front accepted it, that's because it realized that we were right and there was a need to have our own union, because UJSARIO did nothing for us".

The emergence of UESARIO within the "revolutionary socialist tradition" (Wilson, 2016, p. 72) of mass organizations is significant considering that youth associations elsewhere were declining (Fuchs, 2017), with entities like the General Union of Palestinian Students already collapsed (Salih & al., 2017). According to Gómez Martín, UESARIO engaged university students in Spain who were physically removed from the "main meaning-producing territories" (Gómez Martín, 2016b, p. 133). Unlike the Palestinian Youth Movement, which formed independently because diaspora youth felt inadequately represented by existing organizations, UESARIO was created

within the national liberation framework, integrating young people's political actions within POLISARIO's formal participation structure (Abdou & Skalli, 2018; Singerman, 1995). My interlocutors emphasized this organizational approach as crucial for preventing the political "fragmentation" seen in similar contexts (Bishara, 2016).

As in other Middle East and North African contexts (Abdou & Skalli, 2018; Salih & *al.*, 2017), UESARIO's establishment was particularly significant in Spain where non-political civil society organizations (including youth, migrants, and professionals) were increasingly prominent (Gómez Martín, 2016b). UESARIO was conceived specifically to bring together youth and student movements across key locations: the refugee camps, Occupied Territories, and the diaspora (primarily Spain). This structure illustrates "how a diasporic standpoint can be politically productive" (Salih & *al.*, 2017, p. 3), challenging assumptions that "Spanish" Sahrawi youth was "disengaged from political and civic action as had been assumed by many" (Abdou & Skalli, 2018, p. 76).

Like other POLISARIO mass organizations, UESARIO functions as a political entity representing the Front's goals and agenda, similar to a youth union within a political party (Fuchs, 2017; Gonzalez & McCarthy, 2004). While sharing certain characteristics with political parties, the POLISARIO Front remains fundamentally a liberation movement (acting "like" a political party while in exile), whose primary objective is independence. Consequently, UESARIO aims to unite Sahrawi students - and in Spain's case, youth more broadly - under the banner of the national cause. Due to its *raison d'être*, UESARIO also incorporates cultural, recreational, and educational activities typical of youth associations (Fuchs, 2017; Salih & *al.*, 2017).

Structurally, UESARIO maintains headquarters in the refugee camps with a national board overseeing six national branches representing Algeria, Algerian-nationality Sahrawis, France, Cuba, Spain, and graduates. The Algerian branch (LESAL) follows a hierarchical model with regional chapters, while LEJSEE (Spain) is regionally divided and includes non-university youth. UESARIO generally imposes a three-year post-graduation membership limit, with exceptions for the Spanish context.

## From the *Mukhyyam* to the World: Sahrawi Youth in Algeria and Spain

### *Political Participation and Student Mobilization in Algeria*

“Talk to Munir, he’s in charge in Oran.” Zeinebu, a female college student, told me in a WhatsApp audio when I expressed my desire to attend the celebration of the 27th of February (SADR’s proclamation date) in Tlemcen. I had just settled in Algiers, and it was a national event. “Of course! It will be an honor to have you,” Munir replied. I left Algiers at dawn, and upon arrival, I waited outside the congress center, observing the final preparations. A few minutes later, a young man approached me, asking, “Rita?”

After warm greetings, Munir introduced me to Babah, who stayed with me when Munir had to leave. It was a large-scale event. As Babah explained, “every year, a branch organizes the national celebration, and this year, it’s us [the West branch].” The local committee oversaw all the organization and volunteer recruitment. The celebration would span three days, with participation from members of UESARIO, UJSARIO, the Sahrawi embassy, the city hall, and the University of Tlemcen. Babah led me through the atrium of the congress center, filled with exhibits. The program included a theater competition, music, poetry recitals, speeches by the main leaders of UESARIO and other organizations, and it would culminate with a daytrip to the beach. Accommodation, transportation, and meals were provided, and it was all organized by volunteers.

Hundreds of Sahrawi students enthusiastically participated, with the political message permeating every moment. The event served not only to celebrate the republic but also to affirm Sahrawi identity through various activities. The closing gathering at a beach near Oran marked the pinnacle of this expression, where students formed a circle to deliver impassioned speeches and chant slogans: *Kull al-waṭan aw al-shahādah* (“all the homeland or martyrdom”), *Lā badīl lā badīl ‘an taqrīr al-maṣīr* (“no alternative to self-determination”), or *bil-bunduqīyya nanāl al-ḥurriyya* (“with guns, we attain freedom”).

Algeria's pivotal role in supporting the Sahrawi cause naturally led to LESAL becoming the most active branch of UESARIO. Since the late 1970s, Algeria has been the main destination for Sahrawi students, particularly those over 11 years old. In 2019, approximately 3,700 Sahrawi college students (mostly female) resided on Algerian campuses. Though UESARIO initially formed in response to "Spanish" Sahrawi youth needs, LESAL quickly emerged as the Union's most robust national branch, establishing delegations at most Algerian universities, and serving as both student union and political organization.

As I observed in multiple occasions during fieldwork, local LESAL delegations function as multifaceted entities that address academic needs while promoting the SADR's political agenda through holiday celebrations. These events create spaces where Sahrawis experience the *mukhayyam* (the refugee camps) – a term evoking cultural familiarity and belonging. However, understanding student participation requires looking beyond formal structures. As Sabah, an undergraduate student in her early twenties in Tlemcen, candidly expressed one day: "Yesterday, there was a meeting, and almost nobody showed up. They only attend the big gatherings because of the party!" This comment underscores the importance of socialization even within political contexts.

The formation of UESARIO addressed specific bureaucratic challenges. Sidi reflected on previous difficulties: "Having an issue at the university, like transferring courses, everything had to go through them [UESARIO]." College students didn't feel adequately represented within the Youth Union, as their opinions were frequently disregarded, and their proposed activities met with reluctance.

Mahfoud, an undergraduate student in Algiers and LESAL member, told to a Sahrawi youth audience gathered in Madrid that "organizing an event in Algeria is very easy." He continued explaining that it took only weeks of preparation due to substantial institutional support (transportation, food, accommodation) and the significant Sahrawi student population. LESAL events routinely attract hundreds of participants, with university officials, mayors, and refugee camp representatives attending major celebrations like the February 27th national day. The limited participation of foreigners –

Algerians included –, typically through personal connections and invitations, indicates a degree of separation between Sahrawi students and broader Algerian society.

### **Political Engagement Amidst Challenges: Sahrawi Youth in Spain**

“Have you seen this?” Amal asked me one day, showing me her cellphone as soon as we met. It was about a youth meeting for Sahrawi youngsters that would take place in Madrid, Spain. “Do you think I can go?” I asked. “I think so, talk to Najem – he’s in charge,” she replied. Amal, one of my closest interlocutors, had been living in Badajoz, Extremadura, since she was thirteen. Like many other Sahrawi youngsters, she had spent several summers in Spain under the *Vacaciones en Paz* (Holidays in Peace Program),<sup>2</sup> and when she reached the age limit of the program, her Spanish host family fostered her permanently to continue her studies. At the time of my research, Amal had already graduated and was working near the city. She was no longer a refugee-student but a working permanent resident.

From “our” group, besides Amal, Mali and Bakina, signed up promptly. It was a meeting for young people about the POLISARIO Front, organized by LEJSEE. Amal, a member of *la Liga* from Extremadura community, Mali, and Bakina were excited to participate, recognizing the importance of learning more about the liberation movement and how they could further engage in *al-qadīyya al-ṣaḥrāwiyya*. On our way, Amal noticed that there were no scheduled breaks in the program, “if I go to a Sahrawi event and there’s no tea...” - she said in a threatening

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<sup>2</sup> Solidarity program organized by the SADR’s Ministry of Youth and Sports and, in the Spanish case, Amigos del Pueblo Saharaui associations. It is a solidarity program that aims to receive Sahrawi children, aged from 8 to 12, from the refugee camps to spend the summer abroad. Lasting for two months, the main goals of the program are: children’s access to a medical examination; varied food diet; and a break from the extreme temperatures of the refugee camps. While most of the children go to Spain, similar programs exist in other countries such as France, Italy, Belgium, Germany, and Algeria. According to my interlocutors, there had been similar programs in Greece and USA. Differently from all the other contexts, where children stay together in holiday camps, in Spain, children are hosted by families. For more information regarding the topic: Bonilla Pérez (Bonilla Pérez, 2021) ; Chatty & al. (Chatty & al., 2010); Crivello & al. (Crivello & al., 2005); Reis (2020).

tone - "... I'll leave!!!" she concluded, laughing. Her comment demonstrates how, like their peers in Algeria, socializing plays a fundamental role. Furthermore, among my interlocutors in Spain, the tea ceremony was essential in experiencing the *mukhayyam* - more so than for their peers in Algeria who lived together and could regularly reproduce social practices that weren't always possible in Extremadura.

It was already night when we finally arrived in Madrid. The meeting had already begun, and we burst into an ongoing session. There would be two days of plenary sessions, roundtable discussions, and debates, with various leaders from the POLISARIO Front, UJSARIO, and UESARIO, including Mahfoud who had traveled from Algeria specifically for the meeting. Like the events in Algeria, food and accommodation were provided through support from the solidarity movement. Spain, as a former colonial power and annual destination for thousands of Sahrawi children, hosts numerous Sahrawi associations involved in "sustained campaigns" (Craney, 2017, p. 138) and serves as the hub for solidarity organizations crucial to the cause and refugee camps' maintenance (Reis, 2020b, 2022). However, the existence of various movements to/from Spain and the creation of UESARIO doesn't always translate to high participation.

Unlike LESAL, LEJSEE includes all students and youth. In theory, each region should have a representative responsible for setting local activities, but the number of events depends on the Sahrawi community's size and solidarity associations' agendas. Activities in regions like Andalusia, the Basque Country, or Catalonia differ significantly from those in Extremadura, which faces limited activities and funding. *La Liga*'s event organization follows LESAL's structure, but while Algerian events have institutional support, Spanish events rely on solidarity organization sponsorship.

*La Liga* plays a "training role" (Fuchs, 2017, p. 109) by promoting political meetings, yet participation is typically low. Between October 2019 and February 2020, aside from the annual national demonstration, only two "national" meetings occurred: one by *la Liga* (20 - 30 participants) and another by the Women's Union (NUSW) with just one female student attendee. Regarding this low participation, Amal commented: "I felt so bad for her [the girl who attended], she was the only

[youngster] present. If I hadn't to work, I would have gone with her!"

LEJSEE organizes summer camps encouraging youth to visit refugee camps and foster connections between UESARIO branches. These meetings aim to "connect" "Spanish" youth with exiled Sahrawi society, highlighting identity differences that can lead to feelings of inadequacy among some "Spanish" Sahrawi interlocutors within exiled society. The words of 18-year-old Saleh capture these feelings: "You know that in the camps people take it badly if you don't speak Hassaniya!<sup>3</sup> And tell you 'speak in Hassaniya!'"

Saleh's words illustrate a prevalent frustration among many young Sahrawis in Spain: the difficulty or inability to speak Hassaniya. This affects both familial connections, as Bachir from Extremadura explained: "I used to get very frustrated because I couldn't speak with my mother... eventually, I stopped calling because I simply couldn't communicate with her," and participation in political spaces. During the Madrid meeting, I overheard Saleh telling another young man about people who had stopped attending events in the refugee camps because older generations associated their limited Hassaniya fluency with disinterest in the cause or questioned their "Sahrawiness" (Almenara-Niebla & Ascanio-Sánchez, 2019; Reis, 2022). Saleh continued, "during the summer camps, there are youngsters who don't even say '*as-salāmu 'alaykum*,' and that's not accepted in the camps." He described how this would be met with comments like "You were in Spain; you're Spanish." When this topic emerged in the next session, a POLISARIO representative emphasized patience with such attitudes and the importance of youth visiting the camps and maintaining connection with the cause.

### **Youth, the Cause, and *Al-Rabiṭah/la Liga*: Diaspora and Political Organization**

The participation of Sahrawi youth in political organizations reflects both generational and geographical divisions. My interlocutors in Spain and Algeria revealed different levels of engagement shaped by their educational experiences, language abilities, and relationships to the home-camps. While their

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<sup>3</sup> Dialect of Arabic spoken in the northwest Sahara.

situations varied considerably, all navigated the complex balance between individual aspirations and collective responsibilities.

It was late afternoon when Sidi and I sat down to have a drink in downtown Algiers. For him, the lack of youth participation in Spain was a significant concern. “There are so many of them,” he remarked, emphasizing that their numbers should naturally lead to increased participation. “We need to find more ways to involve them,” he concluded, echoing the sentiments of others who believed that UESARIO should make greater efforts in this regard (Alava, 2018). Nevertheless, Sidi acknowledged that living with host families might disconnect youth from “their Sahrawi roots” – he continued – “We can’t let that happen.” Like many, he recognized that youth in Spain were “exposed to (...) alternative (...) venues of socialization” (Gonzalez & McCarthy, 2004, p. 37), though attitudes toward them often took on a “moralizing tone” (Alava, 2018, p. 174), as Saleh’s comments illustrated.

The lack of participation among young Sahrawis in the diaspora was a “burden” that my “Spanish” Sahrawi interlocutors carried. While meetings in Algeria called for increasing youth participation, the Madrid meeting highlighted the absence of involvement among Spain’s youth community. Yet these youth also demanded more opportunities: “How come we [*la Liga*] were not informed of the presence of a UJSARIO’s representative in Spain?!” a participant asked during the meeting, specifically referring to a previous event.

Discussing youth-POLISARIO relations, a Sahrawi representative argued that young people should independently seek ways to engage with the cause. Conversely, youngsters believed POLISARIO should provide more support, including bureaucratic assistance. Among my interlocutors, Amal was particularly participative, questioning how she should act on the behalf of the cause. When the representative responded that the Front was responsible for all Sahrawis, Amal pointedly concluded, “you just said otherwise, that we are responsible for ourselves.” This debate resonated with most youth present, who nodded in agreement, exchanged comments, and expressed similar perspectives.

The opinions of my interlocutors in Spain, as well as political representatives, reflect both generational and geographical gaps (Reis, 2022). This marks the growing distance between youth and POLISARIO, as in other contexts (Alava, 2018; Barbosa, 2022; Gonzalez & McCarthy, 2004; Salih & *al.*, 2017). While social expectations fall on educated youth (Craney, 2017), some interlocutors expressed difficulty dealing “with the enduring presence of the old guard” (Larson & Coburn, 2014, p. 5). The previous exchange exemplifies this gap – senior representatives urging youth to “move forward!” in pursuing diplomatic positions while youngsters demanded greater clarity and proximity.

Sahrawi youth in Spain played a “catalyzing role” (Greenfield, 2013, p. 2) in effecting changes within POLISARIO and UJSARIO. However, once joining UESARIO, they must adhere to Front principles. While not constraining for Sidi in Algeria, this proved “restrictive” for Hamza in Spain: “there are many youngsters willing to participate, but you want to do this, they say no; you want to do that, also no... and people get tired.” Despite limited “space for unaligned political discussion” (Larson & Coburn, 2014, p. 11), all my interlocutors aspired to integrate into the national liberation movement.

In Algeria, despite hundreds attending events, thousands of Sahrawis study there, living together with coming-of-age occurring among peers rather than intergenerationally (Gimeno Martín, 2007). While their “Sahrawiness” isn’t questioned like their “Westernized” Spanish counterparts (Almenara-Niebla, 2020; Bloch, 2014), this doesn’t guarantee either unconditional acceptance upon returning to camps (Chatty & *al.*, 2010) or stronger political commitment.

During a meeting in Oran, Amina, a geology undergraduate in her early twenties, sat beside me. As a POLISARIO representative emphasized youth’s role in liberation, Amina whispered, “he’s talking about Western Sahara’s history, as always, repeating the same song...” Amina remained committed to the independence, however, it was not part of her ordinary concerns, as she was born a refugee and did not quite foresee the independence as something happening “tomorrow.” Her attitude, not uncommon among my interlocutors, shouldn’t be interpreted as disinterest but relates to repositioning

independence as a “grand scheme” – what Schielke defines as “persons, ideas, and powers understood to be greater than one’s ordinary life, located on a higher plan, distinct from everyday life, yet relevant as models of living” (Schielke, 2015, p. 13). For Amina and some of her peers, this abstract ideal – or grand scheme – gives way to immediate life strategies as trajectories are “continuously adjusted to and modulated by circumstance” (Jackson, 1996, p. 26).

Some students occasionally claimed political disinterest, saying “I don’t know anything about politics.” Even though their “Sahrawiness” wasn’t questioned, and their education destination faced less criticism upon return (Chatty & *al.*, 2010), Sahrawi students in Algeria reconfigured SADR’s educational model through their expectations and practices. Many sought alternatives to the “supposed” return for nation-building process, such as good marriages for women or economic migration for men, integrating them into circular flows to/from refugee camps (Gómez Martín, 2011, 2016a).

Most interlocutors expressed anxieties about returning to camps, particularly young women concerned about finding employment in a fragile “job market” favoring men. This shared experience reinforces my argument that Sahrawi abroad are united by a generational diasporic experience, deeply embedded in the temporality of exile and future imaginaries (Bryant & Knight, 2019; Jackson, 1996; Koselleck, 2004). While this generation shares certain broad experiences, significant differences emerge based on economic status, gender, and educational background, resulting in varied interpretations of exile and future possibilities. The study destinations attribute specific characteristics to their collective experiences and “shared meanings” (Habermas, 1987, p. 136).

While Algeria’s events emphasized Sahrawi political advocacy, Spanish events were more “educational,” addressing questions about POLISARIO’s ideology and camp structures – contexts many left in childhood. My interlocutors in Extremadura believed they should contribute more precisely because of the “opportunities” afforded by being in Spain, though participation faced obstacles: the political involvement of host family, biological family contact, language barriers, and perceived Westernization. Despite high attendance at Algerian events, the political component wasn’t always primary. Sabah’s

previous comment about poor attendance at local meetings highlights the importance of socialization. The legitimacy of LESAL youth wasn't questioned, unlike their Spanish counterparts who had to demonstrate their "Sahrawiness" alongside integration into the struggle.

As I argued elsewhere (Reis, 2020a, 2022), the transnational trajectories of Sahrawi students in Algeria are no less complex than those undertaken by their peers in Spain. Both intersect at various points, whether through educational programs, namely *Vacaciones en Paz*, or the return to the camps. While students in Algeria are closer to "home," traveling to the camps regularly, this is not possible for their counterparts in Spain, who typically visit annually after regularizing their papers. On the other hand, young people in Spain have the (imagined and/or aspired) "better future" (Carling & Collins, 2018; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2015; Schielke, 2020; Vacchiano, 2022) more accessible, already living in the European Union.

SADR's educational model has shaped perceptions of study destinations. Like other researchers (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2015; San Martín, 2010), I came to understand the specific significance of each study destination in Sahrawi imaginaries. Algeria represents peer living, studying, and returning. Studying in Spain and living with a host family, brings close contact with a different culture and religion, a point my interlocutors frequently emphasized. Several "lost" Hassaniya and went for years without visiting the camps due to bureaucratic issues.

Though both groups face mobility constraints, these varied experiences and disconnections reconfigure youth participation in the liberation movement's official spaces. The political engagement of Sahrawi youth cannot be understood through a single lens of "commitment" or "distance" from the cause. Rather, their participation reflects complex negotiations between generational expectations, practical life strategies, and the ongoing temporality of exile. As students move between educational destinations and the camps, they develop multifaceted approaches to political involvement that ultimately enhance "their ability to speak to each other and as a collective" (Bishara, 2016, p. 306).

## **Conclusion**

As previous generations in exile, Sahrawi youth today demonstrate significant political engagement in their study contexts abroad. The Sahrawi cause permeates everyday life, and the involvement of transnational students has become central to the reconfiguration of the national-building process.

This article examined how youth's aspiration to participate in the political struggle from the standpoint of exile led to the establishment of UESARIO, underscoring the mobilizing power of college students and youth (Gómez Martín, 2016b; Gonzalez & McCarthy, 2004). UESARIO's formation represents an important adaptation of POLISARIO's organizational structure to accommodate the experiences of students who studied in different countries and developed varied perspectives on how to contribute politically to the cause. The organization is closely intertwined with the transnational process of nation-building within the framework of *al-qāḍiyya al-ṣaḥrāwīyya*. However, it's important to note, as mentioned by my interlocutors, that being a member of UESARIO does not necessarily imply future participation in POLISARIO.

While participation in LESAL is temporally linked to college studies, the fact that LEJSEE includes all levels of education and youth in general means that the return to the camps is not always certain, reflecting different generational experiences shaped by study destinations and transnational educational paths. In sum, this article analyzed the functioning of these two branches within UESARIO, showing the diverse ways in which Sahrawi youth navigate their actions and political participation. It also highlights how Sahrawi youth balance individual aspirations with collective responsibilities while contributing to their national cause through formal organizational channels. By examining the subjective experiences of individuals within the context of the programs they engage in, we gain insights into both collective and individual responses to the challenges posed by five decades of exile, demonstrating the complex interplay between youth agency and organizational structures in contexts of protracted displacement (Salih & al., 2017).

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