The Veiling of Religious Markers in the Sahrawi Diaspora

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Introduction

States play key roles in promoting and controlling religious symbols, and yet Soares and Osella note that 'insufficient attention is devoted to how the state intervenes to promote, co-opt, thwart, or isolate various forms of Islam and (''good'' or ''bad'') Muslims' (2009: 10–11). In turn, even fewer studies have analysed the ways in which religious symbols have been strategically mobilised by non-state actors. This chapter addresses this lacuna by examining the case of a non-state actor which has de facto control over a specific refugee population. I explore the ways in which Sahrawi refugees' political representatives - the Polisario Front and their related government-in-exile, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) - have engaged in a range of representational strategies which ultimately "veil" religious symbols such as mosques, *madrasas* and the *milhafa*, arguing that the Polisario/SADR does so in order to maximize diverse short- and long-term benefits both inside and outside of the Sahrawi refugee camps. More specifically, I argue that the purposeful distantiation from (or 'veiling' of) Islamic religious symbols has been enacted during interactions with secular humanitarian audiences to demonstrate the 'ideal' nature of the Sahrawi camps in order to ensure the continuation of humanitarian and political support which both keeps refugees alive in their refugee camp homes, and simultaneously maintains international support for the Sahrawi quest for political self-determination (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2014). In addition to engaging with feminist postcolonial debates surrounding the mobilization of religious symbols such as the hijab in discourses of 'good' and 'bad' Muslims, the chapter also complements emerging studies vis-à-vis the multidimensional relationships between religion and faith-based humanitarianism by specifically exploring the role of religious symbols in humanitarian encounters between 'secular' humanitarian actors and one group of Muslim refugees and their political representatives.

Indeed, the relationship between religious identity, belief and practice on the one hand, and processes of forced migration on the other, has received increasing attention since the 2000s (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2011a). Over the past decade, a number of journals have convened Special Issues which focus on particular dimensions of this relationship, including the extent to which state and non-state actors may persecute individuals on the basis of their religious identity (i.e. religion as a potential *cause* of forced migration; see Mayer 2007), but also how state and non-state actors draw on or challenge religious beliefs and practices as they negotiate and respond to forced migration (see Godziak and Shandy, 2002). More recently, attention has turned to the ways in which faith principles have provided the foundations for humanitarian responses to displacement (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2011a; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Ager, 2013), exploring the role of faith traditions in the historical development of concepts and practices of sanctuary and protection (Marfleet, 2011); the secularization of discourses of humanitarianism which had originally developed upon the foundations of particular faiths (Ager and Ager, 2011; Ager and Ager, 2015); and the ways in which contemporary humanitarian institutions may be considered

to have become a form of "religion" in and of themselves (ie. Hopgood's 2006 analysis of Amnesty International).

Despite this increased attention, the ways in which religious symbols have been strategically mobilized by non-state actors such as the Polisario Front/SADR as a means of negotiating interactions between refugees and humanitarian donors have been under-represented within academic and policy-relevant studies alike. This chapter thus draws upon the case-study of the Sahrawi protracted refugee situation to explore the role(s) which religious symbols play during "humanitarian encounters" between Sahrawi refugees in their Algerian-based refugee camps and across the refugee-diaspora in countries including Spain and Cuba, and European and North American humanitarian actors which purport to be secular in nature.[1] In so doing, I identify some of the ways in which purportedly secular humanitarianism is nonetheless deeply implicated in state and non-state discourses and practices pertaining to religious identity and practice, especially in light of contemporary geopolitical concerns regarding 'Islamism' and 'terrorism' in North Africa.

Scripting the Sahrawi Refugee Camps
Whilst almost entirely dependent upon externally provided support, the Sahrawi refugee camps have been managed by the Polisario Front since the camps' establishment in 1975 (for a detailed history of the conflict over the Western Sahara, see Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014). In February 1976, the Polisario established the camp-based 'Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic' (SADR), the Sahrawi 'state-in-exile' which has been recognized by over 70 non-Western states and is a full member of the African Union (formerly the Organization of African Unity). The Polisario/SADR is 'the only authority with which camp residents have regular contact' (Human Rights Watch 2008: 9), and it has developed its own constitution, camp-based ministries, police force (and prisons), army and parallel 'state' and religious legal systems, the latter implementing a Maliki interpretation of Islam.

The Sahrawi 'state', law and religion are thus intimately interconnected in the camps, with Islam identified in the Sahrawi Constitution as the explicit fundamental source of the Sahrawi legal system (Art. 2 and Art. 3 of the 2003 and 1976 SADR Constitution respectively), and the Ministry of Justice and Religious Affairs having joint functions. Despite these interconnections, however, the Sahrawi refugee camps have habitually been heralded by European and North American observers as 'ideal' spaces and locales of 'best practice' through explicit reference to the 'secular' and 'democratic' nature of the camps (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2010a, 2014). Indeed, elsewhere I have argued that during encounters with European secular and Christian audiences, the Polisario mobilizes two intersecting strategies: first, it has a tendency to 'silence' and render invisible the multiple, and at times contested, roles of Islam in the camps; second, on those occasions when religion is mentioned, the Polisario systematically projects an image of 'secular Sahrawi Islam' which is resolutely different from any Other Islam (ibid.). The Sahrawi refugee camps can thus be conceptualized as stages from which particular discourses and political campaigns are projected internationally to convince non-Sahrawi audiences of the justifiability and necessity of their support for the Sahrawi 'struggle' for self-determination (ibid). Simultaneously, they emerge as microcosms in which contemporary and shifting debates and dilemmas surrounding the 'acceptable' face of Islam and the desirability of inter-faith relations are enacted (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2011b).

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[1] On interactions with Evangelical donors, see Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2011b and 2012.

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Public declarations made by and on behalf of the Sahrawi people apropos their 'secularism' and 'religious tolerance' must therefore be viewed not only in relation to the current geo-political (in)security context and intensified rejection of Islam in the West, but also more localized concerns about an 'Islamically dominated North Africa', 'Islamic fundamentalism' in the Saharan desert and Maghreb (see Keenan 2004; Zoubir 2002), and the purported emergence of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (see Darbouche 2007: 2; del Pino 2003). Directly opposed to these characterizations of the region as inherently imbued with threats and danger, the Polisario and its supporters explicitly present the Sahrawi as fulfilling all the non-economic priorities associated with contemporary notions of 'good governance' ('peaceful', 'secular' and 'democratic'), and therefore as a prototypical example to be followed by other actors in the international arena (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014). The Polisario have therefore successfully projected the Sahrawi camps as 'ideal' spaces inhabited by 'good' refugees, in part by reflecting mainstream European normative preferences for the development of a 'good' and 'progressive' Islam. In some instances, this has led to the purposeful distancing of the Sahrawi Self from Islam and specific religious symbols, three of which I shall discuss in the remainder of this paper: mosques, *madrasas* and the *milhafa*.

Before turning to the ways in which these symbols have been 'veiled' by the Polisario, it is important to reassert that this representational strategy must be viewed in relation to the Polisario's dependence upon aid provided by external actors, and in particular the material significance of Sahrawi refugees' connections with civil society groups which cannot be understated: the World Food Programme identifies the camps' "very vulnerable households" as those which "had not built any contacts with the civil societies of Spain and of other countries that provide support to refugee families" (WFP 2008, 3 my emphasis). It is this palpable connection and physical proximity to the people who provide them with much needed material and financial assistance, alongside social capital, which leads the Polisario, as well as many Sahrawi families, to recognize the significance of the solidarity network, in contrast with the less visible, and more taken-for-granted humanitarian projects which are, according to my research, marginalized in both the popular and the "national" imagination.

European Visitors and Invisible Mosques and Madrasas in the Sahrawi Refugee Camps
The international celebration of the Sahrawi refugee camps' success is, in many ways and through many means, directly associated with and even dependent upon the concealment, or discursive minimization, of everyday Muslim identity, practice and institutions (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2010a, 2014). For instance, although European and North American humanitarian and political visitors to the camps are typically taken by official Sahrawi guides on a 'tourist route' of 'secular' Sahrawi institutions including the National Parliament and National Hospital, buildings associated with Islam, such as the camps' established mosques, are in fact excluded from such tours.

One of the clearest examples of this policy's success is that many visitors, including journalists and humanitarian visitors Brazier (1997), Ryan (1999), Bryant (2004), and Thorne (2004) have all erroneously declared that there are "no mosques" in the camps. My own interactions with Spanish *solidarios* in the 27 February Camp indicate that the majority of these were unaware that the yellow and green building facing the entrance to the National Women's School was a mosque (see Figure 1).

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Figure 1: The 'Invisible' Mosque in 27 February Refugee Camp, South West Algeria

Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 16/1/2015 21:15
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When I informed them of its purpose, many Spaniards who had visited the camps on numerous occasions were confused by its existence, with one Canary Islander asking me "but... why do they have a mosque here?" (27 February Camp, April 2007).

Indeed, a further example of the Polisario/SADR's apparent success in hiding the Sahrawi's religion includes Cazón's reference to a Spanish host family who had been "in solidarity" with the Sahrawi for over a decade before "discovering" that the Sahrawi are Muslim. After the Spanish host mother was reportedly warned by a Sahrawi man to "remember that we, the Sahrawis, are also *moros*" (2004, 59; my translation), she laments: "That man was right. The religion of the Sahrawis *is* the same as that of the *moros*" (ibid., 95; my translation). Her shock that the man was correct that Sahrawis are, after all, Muslims suggests that in her imagination, as in many other Spaniards' minds, the Sahrawi were until then not truly associated with Muslim identity and practice.

In addition to the "invisible" mosques in the camps, Polisario/SADR and Western accounts have also repeatedly failed to document the existence of "modern religious schools" (*madrasas*) which are attended by students interested in expanding their knowledge of Islam following, or in parallel to, their "national" education in the camps (Gimeno-Martín and Laman 2005, 23). Despite the SADR Ministry of Justice and Religious Affairs having authorized the creation of two Qur'anic schools in Aaiun, Smara and Dakhla, and one in Ausserd (ibid, 32), these schools are not labelled and heralded as "national" institutions by the Polisario/SADR, and are therefore rarely explicitly made visible to Western visitors.[2]

It is admittedly the case that the mosques and religious schools established in each refugee camp are not frequented by the majority of camp inhabitants (as is the case in many if not most MENA countries), and access to institutionalized forms of practicing Islam and learning the Qur'an is mainly limited to those who can afford to pay the relevant fee. Nonetheless, it is common to see Sahrawi refugees praying in their tents or in open spaces, and numerous children attend extracurricular Qur'anic classes. Furthermore, the presence of SADR jeeps outside of the 27 February Camp mosque during Friday Prayer indicates that some such Polisario/SADR offcials attend these same mosques, despite habitually rendering them "invisible" to Western visitors to the camps.

In addition to the 'invisibilisation' of mosques and *madrasas* during official tours of the camps, the *milhafa* is a third major religious symbol which is concealed despite its apparent visibility to external observers. Examining 'the veiling' of 'the Sahrawi veil' will enable us to examine how and why the Polisario has engaged in this particular representational strategy vis-a-vis public and private Sahrawi religious symbols.

Veiling and Unveiling the *Milhafa* in the Sahrawi Diaspora

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[2] It is not my intention to characterize camp life either solely or primarily in religious terms, but rather to briefly note that a heterogeneity of religious practice and belief exists amongst different groups of Sahrawi refugees, varying according to multiple factors, including refugees' generation and an exposure to different approaches to Islam through the study abroad programme. This is a multiplicity which is rendered invisible by the official discourse projected to European *solidarios*, and yet is a highly significant reality in the camps.

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Throughout my research with Sahrawi youth and adults in the Sahrawi refugee camps and further afield in Cuba, Spain, Syria and South Africa, a selection of common claims[3] were systematically made vis-à-vis Sahrawi women's situation in the refugee camps: "not being veiled," having freedom of movement, and not only being able to divorce freely and "unilaterally," but even celebrating this event via a "divorce party". Although I have examined the centrality of this intersecting set of mutually reinforcing images and conceptualizations which re/create Sahrawi refugee women as uniquely liberal, secular and empowered refugee women for particular political purposes during interactions with humanitarian donors elsewhere (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2014), in the remainder of this paper I will focus on the first of these elements: that of Sahrawi women "not being veiled".

In the case under consideration, the Polisario's mainstream representation of Sahrawi refugee women's position and identity in the camps is founded upon the separation of Sahrawi women from Other Muslim women in the "Arab World," with a particular reliance on creating and maintaining a distance from Islam and religious identity for strategic reasons. The portrayal of the long piece of fabric (the *milhafa*) which loosely covers the head and body of Sahrawi women in the camps[4] therefore emerges as a highly politicized one which I consider to be part of the Sahrawi's broader "politics of survival", providing a further example of the ways in which religious symbols are mobilised (or in this case invisibilised) by state and non-state actors to ensure the continuation of humanitarian networks which are explicitly or implicitly based on non-economic conditionalities and geopolitical preferences vis-à-vis 'good' and 'bad' Islam.

The *Milhafa*: invisible religious symbol or hypervisible traditional dress

> The two most different nations in the Arab world are the Mauritanian and the Sahrawi societies, which are *the only nations where women do not cover their faces or hands*. In *other places in the Arab world, you can only see the woman's eyes, but the Sahrawi women wear the milhafa, and people ask them their opinions and listen to them.*
>
> 29-year-old male Biology student, Havana, November 2006, my translation

The veil has so frequently been centrally positioned in Western analyses (and historically, in Western colonial projects), that it is unsurprising that descriptions of Sahrawi refugee women, qua Muslim women, should also include references to veiling. Fanon's identification and analysis of French colonizers' "precise political doctrine" to "unveil" Algerian women as a means of conquering the colonized society (Fanon 1965, 37-38) have been the foundation of much feminist post-colonial work which has examined Orientalist representations of both the veil (i.e. Lewis 2003; El-Guindi 2003; and Woodhull 2003), and the extent to which unveiling women has frequently become a "convenient instrument for signifying many issues at once, i.e. the construction of modern [national] identity" (Yegenoglu 1998, 132). In certain historical contexts, we are reminded, the veil has "carried connotations of Muslim backwardness" both in the eyes of Western Orientalists and MENA nationalists (ibid). Indeed, as stressed by Kandiyoti

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[3] I use the term "official discourse" to refer to this interconnected body of meanings and images produced by certain social and political actors for a particular non-Sahrawi audience.

[4] The term *milhafa* is derived from the verb *laḥafa*, meaning to cover. A *milḥafa* is literally-speaking a dress/layer that is worn over another dress/layer.

(1991) and Yegenoglu (1998, 135) with reference to Atatürk's reforms in Turkey, processes of unveiling women as a means of demonstrating the "marginalization" or displacement of Islam have historically been central to the development of "secular" modern nationalist discourses. Contemporary popular and political debates concerning the place of veiling in "secular" European states have emerged as a result of many Muslim girls and women, as well as their families and broader communities, demanding that Muslim women should have the right to wear the veil (be this the hijab, chador or niqab) in schools – both as students and as teachers – and other public places. Major disputes have taken place since the late-1980s in European countries including France,[5] Spain[6] and the United Kingdom.[7] The veil in the aforementioned analyses has often been identified as being the most visible (or public) sign of difference between Muslim and Western societies, with such "difference" being negatively evaluated by Western audiences, who have directly equated the veil with the oppression of women, and often claimed that (neo)colonial intervention has been necessary to save "brown women from brown men" (Spivak 1993, 93).

In more recent popular debates in Western and non-Western states, many Muslim women and men have framed "veiling" within a discourse of rights, arguing that the veil can enable and empower women rather than unequivocally "oppress" them (Hoodfar 1991; Zuhur 1992). In these and other historical and contemporary cases, veiling has often become a symbol of personal, communal and national resistance and identity, directly opposing ethnocentric and Orientalist assumptions, stereotypes and "unveiling" desires. Importantly, the personal, religious, social and political significance of the veil for Muslim women and their communities has not been denied or rejected, but rather emphasized, by those who argue that girls and women should have the right to veil, if they so wish.

In a radically divergent approach to the direct confrontation to and rejection of essentialist (mis)understandings of the veil, the mainstream discourse projected by the Polisario/SADR to Western observers with regards to Sahrawi women is permeated with claims that, unlike other Arab/Muslim women, they "did not veil" either during, before or after the colonial era. Hence, in his Sahrawi novel/historiography, the Polisario/SADR representative to the Middle East discusses the position of Sahrawi women during the colonial era, stating that "she does not veil" (Kuttab, 2002, 63) ("*hiya la tatahajjab*," where *hajaba* is the Arabic root of the verb "to conceal" or "to veil", Qasmiyeh's translation). Equally, like other visitors to the camps, Harrell-Bond was told by informants during her visit in the 1980s that "Our women were never veiled and they always worked" (1999, 156), and, following an interview with Zahra Ramdan (executive member of the Polisario's Women's Union and its Spanish-based International Relations representative), Feo also indicates that "the Sahrawi woman is not obliged to veil" (2003, my translation). Such official accounts of Sahrawi women "not veiling" either in the past or in the present appear to be largely incongruous on many levels (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Sahrawi women wearing 'invisible' *malahif* as they wait to attend the 2007 Conference convened by the National Union of Sahrawi Women, 27 February Refugee Camp, South-West Algeria.

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5 Abu-Rabia 2006; Blank 1999; Hamdan 2007; Scott 2007.
6 Vargas-Llosa 2007; EFE 2007
7 Tempest 2006; Sturcke 2006.

Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 16/1/2015 21:52
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First and foremost, it is "unthinkable" for a Sahrawi woman not to wear the *milhafa* in the camps, as young women returning from studying in Cuba have encountered upon their arrival (Fiddian 2002). During their studies in Algeria, on the other hand, young Sahrawi women tend to wear headscarves, rather than the *milhafa*, as demonstrated in photographs shown by many of my female informants in the camps. Further, although many Sahrawi women living in the diaspora in the Canary Islands and other parts of Spain continue to wear the *milhafa*, others decide to either wear headscarves or leave their heads uncovered (personal observations, 2001-2010). In contrast, in the Algerian-based refugee camps, all women wear the *milhafa*, although the way in which it is worn varies throughout women's life-cycles, with older women veiling less strictly than younger, fertile and supposedly more attractive women (also see Mernissi 2003b, 493). The *milhafa* is therefore directly related to curtailing the risk of *fitna* (temptation or its related chaos), with older women seen as being less "tempting" to men than their younger counterparts. This move towards "looser" or more "relaxed" veiling with age is in line with sura 24:60, which indicates that women who are "past the age of bearing children" and "have no hope of marriage" may even "take off their outer garments," although they should remain modestly clothed and "not display their charms."

Clear confirmation that the *milhafa* should be considered to be a veil is derived from one of my research visits to the camps (2007). Given that all Sahrawi women wear the *milhafa* in the camps, upon my arrival I was clearly dressed in a different fashion to the majority of women there, but I still considered myself to be "modestly covered" since I was wearing a headscarf and loose-fitting long-sleeved shirts and trousers. Whilst living, working and conducting research in other countries with majority Muslim populations, this had even been sufficient to enter mosques which required non-Muslims to observe/respect veiling requirements (such as the Al-Azhar mosque in Cairo). Many women and girls in the camps, however, clearly did not consider me to be "covered," with adolescent girls in particular repeatedly asking me "Why aren't you *muhajjaba*?" (veiled, f. sing.). On several occasions during my first weeks in the camps I was confronted quite aggressively by three older women (between their late-50s and early-60s) on this matter. Whilst they, like many older (usually post-menopausal) women in the camps, wore relatively loose-fitting and "revealing" *malahif* (pl. of *milhafa*), frequently with only a "skimpy" top underneath which allowed their arms and shoulders to be seen, they were adamant that I, like all other young women in the camps, should be *muhajjaba*.

After a short time in the camps, I eventually decided to wear the *milhafa* rather than a headscarf, resulting in older women immediately ceasing to challenge me on this matter. Equally, the young girls (who I believe were expressing more widely-held views) instantly stopped asking me why I was not *muhajjaba*. This direct cessation of daily confrontations demonstrated that, for these adult women and female children alike, the *milhafa* is clearly a form of hijab, or veil, and, further, that in their opinion women should be *muhajjabat* (veiled, f. pl.).

It may appear self-evident that the *milhafa* is a traditional item which fulfils common interpretations of the Qur'anic requirements of veiling/covering, and therefore should be understood as a "veil," and yet conventional Sahrawi representations of this item of clothing to Westerners both in the camps and in Spain purport to distance the *milhafa* from religious obligations or connotations, even overtly declaring, as indicated above, that Sahrawi women "do not veil."

In effect, Western observers are often informed by Sahrawi men and women that the *milhafa* is a *traditional* or *national* item of clothing, rather than a religiously-motivated one. This is reflected in the response offered by Khira Mohamed, a young Spanish-educated Sahrawi doctor based in Spain at the time of her interview, when asked by an *El País* journalist if she had ever worn '*el velo*' (the veil):

> I am a Muslim, a believer, but I do not wear it [the veil]. There is no obligation to wear it. In the camps I do wear the traditional Sahrawi clothes and the melfa [sic], which is a long scarf, different from that which other Arab women wear.
>
> Alberola 2003, my translation

The ways in which journalists writing for *El País* (Spain's leading national newspaper) from the 1980s onwards have defined the *milhafa* (variously written *melhfa*, *melhhfa*, or *melfa*) to their readers is of note here: in 1985, Martín refers to "...the traditional melfa (women's clothing);" in 1997, Sanz describes an encounter with "a woman covered in the traditional melhhfa (tunic);" and in 2001, Velázquez-Gaztelu met with a woman who was "wearing a melhfa, the traditional clothing of Sahrawi women" (my translations).

In all of these descriptions, which are based on visits to the camps and interviews with Spanish-speaking Sahrawis there, the *milhafa* appears as a traditional dress,[8] making no reference to which parts of the body it covers, and, in Sanz's case, vaguely describing it to the reader as a "tunic." In other cases, Sahrawi women are described as being "wrapped in colored saris" (AFP, 2004, my emphasis). Such an understanding of the *milhafa* clearly makes no connection to any possible religious motivations or requirements, with references to Sahrawi women's Muslim identity either being entirely absent or marginal in these pieces. This representation fails, for instance, to recognize that Sahrawi women who attend the mosque on Fridays ideally wear a newly washed *milhafa* when they do so, and all women carefully adjust their *malahif* before praying to ensure that their heads and hair are covered accordingly (personal observations, 27 February Camp, March-May 2007). Indeed, not only do Sahrawi refugee women "veil," but the typical assumption in the camps is that all Muslim women are Islamically obliged to wear some sort of veil (despite Khira Mohamed's declaration to the contrary),[9] and that if they are Sahrawi women, they should specifically wear the *milhafa*. Although I have elsewhere explored the diverse ways in which the official discourse creates and maintains a distance from Islam (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2010a, 2011b, 2014), what is of interest in the context of this chapter is the separation which is created by the Polisario, for a Western audience, between "the veil" and the *milhafa*.

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8 It appears probable that Khira Mohamed does not personally consider the *milhafa* to be a religious item, since, while she may wear "traditional" clothes in the refugee camps, she does not wear the *milhafa* whilst in Spain, nor (given the journalist's question) does she wear the *hijab*. Veiling has been common amongst Christian, Jewish and Muslim women in the Arab world (El-Guindi 2003, 595) and elsewhere (Küng 2007, 620-621), thereby highlighting the cultural and religious significance of the veil beyond Islam.

9 Both before and after donning the *milhafa* I discussed different forms of veiling practices and interpretations of the Qur'an with the women and girls who were determined that I should veil. Referring to my experiences of working in Egypt and Syria, I indicated that some Muslim women and men in the Middle East and Europe believe that, while Muslim women should dress modestly, they were under no obligation to wear the veil. The response to my proposal was categorical: I was told that all Muslim women are obliged to veil, and that it is haram not to do so.

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Veiling or Unveiling in the Public Sphere?

The identifiers "veil," "veiling" and "unveiling" are omnipresent throughout analyses of women in the Middle East, and yet these terms' meanings often remain unexplored or undefined, despite authors referring to the heterogeneity of practice and significance given to veiling by women themselves and by the communities they live in.[10] Lewis and Mills' anthology (2003) contains a section specifically dedicated to the "Harem and the Veil," composed of six articles by Mernissi, Graham-Brown, Lewis, Yegenoglu, Woodhull and El-Guindi. In this collection it is only El-Guindi who explicitly differentiates between "veiling in two feminisms" (referring to the experiences and politics of Sha'rawi and Nasif), thereby exploring alternative forms of both veiling and unveiling. In the remaining pieces, the authors all make reference to "the veil," "veiling" and/or "unveiling" without defining precisely what it is that they are describing. In so doing, it appears that the authors assume that their readers will a priori know what "the veil" is, understand its multifaceted purposes, interpretations, justifications and regulations, as well as its physical nature, including what it covers or leaves exposed. The Sahrawi claims that "they do not veil" whilst wearing the *milhafa* lead us to explore precisely these questions in greater detail.

The same suras (24:30, 31 and 33:53 and 59) and examples from the hadith are habitually drawn upon by members of contemporary Islamic movements when they defend the Islamic bases for specific dress and behavioural codes (El-Guindi 2003, 588-589; Küng 2007, 621ff), and yet the religious requirement to veil remains a debated issue within Muslim communities, in part explaining the variety of veiling practices around the world. In the Qur'an, the terms hijab (mentioned seven times), jilbab (33:59) and khimar (24:31), respectively refer to an item/piece of cloth which broadly conceals or separates (in this case) women from men; "an outer garment" used by decent women "[when in public];" and, lastly, a long head covering (Küng 2007, 621ff). Whilst not included specifically in the Qur'an, many other types of veils are worn by Muslim women, including the burqa, chador, haïk and niqab, all of which cover different parts of women's heads (including their necks and faces) and are worn in combination with modest clothing, often with gloves and socks (El-Guindi 2003).

Only one of the Qur'anic terms, khimar, specifies that the woman's head in particular should be covered, since hijab was initially used to refer to a curtain or barrier separating men's from women's spaces (Küng 2007, 622). Indeed, it is perhaps this notion of spatial segregation from men, rather than covering women's heads and faces, which travellers such as (the fourteenth century) Ibn Batuta may have referred to when stating that "Maure" women in North West Africa "[did] not veil themselves" at the time (in El-Hamel 1999, 74). The reflexive nature of this term ("veiling themselves" rather than "veiling") could lead to such a reading. It was only later that the hijab became associated with a woman's head-covering more specifically (Küng 2007, 622), and in some accounts both the hijab and "the headscarf, which covers head and neck", are now in practice used interchangeably as synonyms for "the veil" (such as Heng 1997; Küng 2007, 622; Scott 2007). When Khira Mohamed indicated that she has never worn "it," with specific reference to "the veil," whilst admitting that she does wear the traditional *milhafa*, it appears clear that she is directly equating the hijab or headscarf with "the veil."[11] In the five

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10 Lindisfarne-Tapper and Ingham provide a detailed examination of the diversity of clothing and veiling in the Middle East (1997).

[11] In the Spanish context, the term "*velo*" is commonly used to refer to both "the veil" in abstract, and the hijab qua veil more specifically. Hence, Vargas-Llosa directly equates the hijab with what he refers to as the "Islamic veil" (2007).

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articles mentioned above, by simply using the term "veil" rather than explaining whether the author is referring to a chador, niqab, jilbab or hijab, not only are the various types of "veils" worn by different Muslim women elided, but so too is the significance of the terms "veiled" and "unveiled."

El-Guindi's discussion of the significance of the veil in two case studies of Muslim feminism is particularly relevant at this point. With reference to a "public political feminist act" in which Sha'rawi "unveiled ceremonially," El-Guindi reminds us that

> The phrase used in the discourse surrounding the context of lifting the 'veil' was *raf' al-higab* (the lifting of the hijab). Ironically, what secular feminists lifted was the traditional face veil (*burqu'*), which is rooted in cultural tradition and history rather than Islamic sources, not the hijab ... When Huda Sha'rawi dramatically cast off the veil in 1923, it was the face veil she removed, not the hijab.
>
> 2003, 596

As this case clearly demonstrates, it is possible to "remove the veil" and yet "remain veiled," since there are different degrees and forms of veiling which Muslim women may don. Such insights appear to be absent from Graham-Brown's usage of the term "unveiled" in the caption which accompanies a late-nineteenth century photograph of three women in Egypt:

> The unveiled woman in the foreground, gazing directly at the camera, is contrasted with the two veiled women in the background... However, she draws her head-veil slightly across her face in the presence of the man behind the camera.
>
> 2003, 507 my emphasis

As indicated in the caption itself, "the unveiled woman" is in fact wearing a "head-veil," and the briefest examination of the photograph demonstrates that the term "unveiled" refers solely to the absence of a face veil, since the three women are all wearing loose cloths which cover their bodies, necks, heads and foreheads.

It is thus precisely through recognizing the different ways in which "veiling" and "unveiling" can be conceptualized, and by asking who and what Sahrawi women and the *milhafa* are being compared with when Spanish *solidarios*, journalists and academics declare that they "did not [or do not] veil," that we can best understand the official Sahrawi representation apropos veiling in the camps. Hence, if compared with certain groups of Bedouin women who wear face-veils, or Muslim women who wear the niqab or burqa, it might be valid to note that Sahrawi women did not, and do not, cover their faces (major exceptions being when women protect their faces from the sun or the sand). Such an understanding is offered by the Cuban-based MA student quoted above, who claimed that the only Arab women who "do not cover their faces or hands" are Mauritanian and Sahrawi women who wear the *milhafa*. During our interview, he continued by (equally unfoundedly) stating that "in other places in the Arab world, you can only see the woman's eyes," leading us to recognize that, if one considers face-veiling to be "veiling" per se, one might in fact reach the conclusion that Sahrawi women "did not veil" in the past or "do not veil" in the present.

The above discussion does not purport to claim that all analysts or visitors to the camps consider Sahrawi women to be "unveiled." Yet many observers who accept that Sahrawi women

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"use the veil as ordered in the Qur'an" often rely on interviews with women who report that even if do they veil, they do so "with a great deal of tenderness" and as a sign "of identity and pride" (Petrich 2005, my translation). Claims to this effect were made during several of my interviews with Spanish solidarity workers and visitors in the camps. By including these quotations and references, the Western observer is immediately led to contrast the Sahrawi *milhafa* with the ways that Other Muslim women veil: if Sahrawi women unequivocally embrace their identity-enforcing *milhafa* with "tenderness," we are led to understand that non-Sahrawi Muslim women are violently forced to wear the veil against their will.[12] Accordingly, "other Muslim women" must experience this practice as a violent curtailment of their rights, and have their identity and pride subjugated as a result.

In conclusion, while the *milhafa* may, as a matter of fact, be a traditional item of clothing, and whilst it is admittedly neither a hijab (qua headscarf) nor a niqab or burqa, the *milhafa* is nevertheless a "veil" in religious terms. As indicated earlier, nationalist movements have often promoted the "unveiling" of women in an attempt to both distance themselves from Islam and to create a "secular" (and therefore "modern") national identity. This leads us to question the determination with which Polisario/SADR spokespeople have distanced themselves from the veil as a visible sign of Muslim identity in their portrayals of Sahrawi womanhood both in the camps and in Spain, just as they have rendered mosques and *madrasas* invisible in the camps. I would suggest that by doing so, the Polisario's official discourse not only fails to confront ethnocentric understandings of both the veil and Islam, but is rather simultaneously based on, and in fact reproduces and solidifies such rhetoric for strategic reasons which are intimately related to the Sahrawi politics of survival, and the politics of humanitarianism in this protracted refugee context.

Concluding Remarks

As the Polisario/SADR is acutely aware, the potential to alienate Western solidarity groups, upon whom Sahrawi refugees physically and politically depend, is an ever-present possibility. In a context where the negative representation of Islam (and the position of women within Islam) by the media and politicians throughout the West prevails, distancing the Sahrawi Self from Islam appears to be strategic in nature, and intimately related to the Polisario/SADR's politics of survival. Whilst historically characterizing many nationalist movements in the past, separating the Sahrawi Self from Islam becomes increasingly urgent given the current geo-political setting and related rejection of Islam in the West.[13] Indeed, global events such as the First Gulf War (1990), invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq (2001 and 2003 respectively), attacks on/in the United States (2001), and the Madrid and London Bombings (2004 and 2005 respectively) have further solidified Western conceptualizations (i.e. "rejection") of Islam. This may explain the particular urgency with which non-state actors such as the Polisario/SADR have attempted to distance themselves from Islamic identity and practice during interactions with Western observers, including through what I have referred to as the 'veiling' of religious symbols such as mosques, *madrasas* and the *milhafa* itself.

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12 Any recognition of (for instance) Tunisian laws passed since 1981 against Muslim women wearing the veil in public institutions (including universities) is absent from the official discourse.

13 On representations of Islam in the Western media, see Said (1997). "Islamophobia" is a longstanding phenomenon, despite having been used as a printed term only since 1991 and included in the OED since 1997; on Islamophobia before and after September 2001, see Sheridan 2006.

Combined with more localized concerns about an "Islamically dominated North Africa," and "Islamic fundamentalism" in the Saharan desert and Maghreb, the prospect of creating a secular, modern state is an attractive one actively offered by proponents of Sahrawi self-determination to non-Sahrawi audiences (also see Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011a). Importantly, public declarations made by and on behalf of the Polisario must be viewed in relation not only to global shifts in the 1990s and 2000s, but also more specifically vis-a-vis high-profile (and thus far unsubstantiated) accusations made by Moroccan officials that the Polisario Front is a terrorist organisation tied to Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb (Darbouche 2007:2; del Pino 2003). The kidnapping of Spanish and Italian NGO workers from the administrative capital of the Sahrawi refugee camps (Rabouni) in October 2011, purportedly by members of Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb, reignited such accusations, which have in turn been vehemently opposed by the Polisario and Sahrawi refugees in the camps and across Spain.

Such public declarations include that of a Spanish *solidario* who addressed the UN General Assembly in 2007, declaring that a free Western Sahara "could be an example for the world," "peaceful, respectful of women, freedom-loving, and allied in the struggle against terrorism" (UNGA 2007).[14] Zunes has also suggested that "having such a progressive and democratic model [in the form of an independent SADR] in the Arab-Islamic world may constitute what Noam Chomsky has called 'the threat of a good example'" (Mundy and Zunes 2002, n.p.). In this way, the SADR directly posits itself as an example to be followed by other nations, fulfilling all of the non-economic priorities associated with contemporary notions of "good governance": "peaceful" = "democratic" = "secular."

In such a context, the term "secular" is both explicitly and implicitly invoked throughout Polisario and Spanish accounts of life in the camps. Such claims may be made indirectly by the Polisario and by Sahrawi individuals through distancing Sahrawi women from a range of Muslim identities and practices which are considered in the West to be oppressive. Indeed, as indicated above, the "unveiling" of women and officially distancing the national Self from the "Islamic veil" has frequently been interpreted as one of the clearest symbols of secularism (Gökanksel and Mitchell 2005; Kandiyoti 1991; Yegenoglu 1998, 135). Furthermore, these claims have also been made explicitly by declaring that "our women do not veil" (op cit) and implicitly by 'veiling' the existence of mosques and *madrasas* in the camps, thereby portraying the camps as 'ideal' humanitarian spaces inhabited by 'ideal refugees' worthy of humanitarian and political support by 'secular' NGOs and civil society networks alike.

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14 If the Taliban and al-Qaeda have been associated with "terrorist misogyny" (Ayotte and Husain 2005, 124), the official discourse appears to directly equate the Polisario/SADR with feminism and/or women's empowerment.

12

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16

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