

The Intimate Faraway (L'Intime Lointain)

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The story of Naama Asfari reads like a perverted fairy tale, one where cruelty and injustice would regularly have the upper hand against the protagonist. A renown Sahrawi Human Rights activist and jurist, Naama was condemned to a thirty-year prison term by a Moroccan military court in 2010, for having organized a peaceful demonstration for the right to self-determination of the indigenous Sahrawi people of Western Sahara (former Spanish Sahara), a territory militarily annexed by Morocco in 1975 and occupied by the Moroccan army ever since.

Naama Asfari is emblematic in his engagement in one of today's most asymmetrical struggles, the fight of the Sahrawi people to obtain the right to self-determination through a referendum organized under the auspices of the United Nations in 1992. The procedure has constantly been put off by the Moroccan monarchy, which illegally controls the territory in violation of the principles of international law with respect to Non-Self-Governing Territories as defined by the United Nations.

France has consistently defended Morocco's invasion, occupation and spoliation of the Sahrawi lands and Paris weighs on other European nations in accepting a status quo situation. Further, as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, France regularly vetoes any propositions towards Human Rights investigations in the occupied territories of Western Sahara; an eloquent contradiction for the host nation of *La Déclaration Universelle des Droits de l'Homme*.

In the mean time, these lands have become Africa's newest colony. The dangerous scenario of the recolonization of the African continent through Morocco's invasion and occupation of Western Sahara with the complicity of France to illegally exploit the territory's natural resources on a world scale has become a sinister reality. But the French wouldn't be the sole accomplices. The entire European community, Russia, the United States and even Australia consolidate Morocco's illegal occupation and spoliation of the natural resources of Western Sahara, by doing business with the monarchy and dealing in stolen goods originating from this zone. Hilary Clinton received 5 million dollars from the *Office Chérifien des Phosphate* (OCP), the Moroccan monarchy's state enterprise that massively exploits phosphates from illegally occupied Western Sahara, making of this company the primary donor for her presidential campaign in the United States. Morocco has signed illegal contracts with world fisheries to exploit the territorial waters of Western Sahara, which are being daily depleted by industrial fishing and the monarchy has also sold illegal oil exploration contracts, licensing blocs in the occupied territories of Western Sahara to international oil companies.

As the Paris-based co-founder of the Committee for the Respect of Freedoms and Human Rights in Western Sahara (CORELSO), Naama regularly travelled to the Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara territory to accompany foreign delegations seeking to learn about the situation of the Sahrawis.

Due to his activities as Human Rights activist, he became the target of permanent retaliation by the Moroccan authorities. Over the past seven years, Naama has been arrested six times for reasons as arbitrary as having in his possession a key chain representing the Sahrawi flag for which he was sentenced to a four month prison term. Or again in april 2008, when he was abducted by the Moroccan police and bound naked to a tree for three days, clubbed and burned with cigarettes, only to be released with no explanation given.

Torture has become a part of Naama's life. During the first week of his current thirty-year condemnation, he was forced to hold a permanent kneeling position, hands flex-cuffed behind his back, incapable of eating, drinking, and humiliated as to natural body functions. He was then blindfolded for the following forty-five

days.

For Naama, it's a family affair: both of his parents were deported for their Human Rights activities when he was only six. His father disappeared for the next sixteen years in secret Moroccan goulags, and his mother miscarried while being tortured by the Moroccan authorities.



Over the years, I have met with Naama and other Sahrawi activists in such improbable places as Bir Lahlou, a Mad Max decor set at the heart of «the desert within the desert» where temperatures can soar to a world record 136°. Along phantom trails known only to the Sahrawis, we would sit in the patchy shade of the rare thorny thickets, surrounded by desert plateau paved from horizon to horizon with the seabed fossils of ancient Gondwana. In preparation of upcoming conferences and political interventions we would discuss geopolitics, international law and their application to Western Sahara, amid wonders such as the marauding chrome ant, its mirror surface reflecting the furnace temperatures, scampering over the incandescent sands like spilling beads of mercury; an ant

that will boldly walk right up to inspect the camp fire where tea is being prepared. Overhead, ribbons of deep purple camel meat strung out like confetti, drying on the thorns of an acacia shrub. These were our bureaux.

At other times we would convene in the suburbs of Paris, Madrid, or Rome, to work together on issues as diverse as the spoliation of Sahrawi natural resources through the contracts illegally brokered by Morocco with the international community, or for the preparation of publications, interviews and debates. In 2007 Naama offered his invaluable contribution to the film *Building Oblivion* that I was preparing, focusing on the great repressive wall built by Morocco and the violent repression of the Sahrawis by Moroccan authorities.

It was in Algiers that I last saw Naama, only a few days before he returned to the occupied territories of Western Sahara to establish a city of tents for 20,000 Sahrawis peacefully protesting against Moroccan repression. This was Gdeim Izik, violently attacked and destroyed by Moroccan forces on november 8th 2010, an event held by Ken Loach, Naom Chomsky and myself to be the true starting point of the coming Arab Spring revolution of 2011.

If there is a brighter side, a ray of hope in this story, it would be Naama's French wife Claude Mangin-Asfari, who has been indefatigably and single-handedly lobbying foreign embassies in Rabat, (including the US Embassy) exposing the conditions of her husband's arrest, torture and detention. Ultimately, it is she who could bring the happy ending to her husband's purgatory situation. She has even succeeded, along with ACAT (Christian Association for the Abolition of Torture) in filing a complaint before both French courts and the United Nations Committee against Torture in february 2014, charges brought against Abdellatif Hammouchi, the head of the Moroccan Secret services (DGST), second only to the king of Morocco, and responsible for the torture of Sahrawi civilian prisoners. Morocco reacted by officially interrupting all legal cooperation with France. Since then, Paris has made amends, refusing to pursue the case against Hammouchi and even decorating him with the French Légion d'Honneur, the nation's highest award.

As for Naama, he continues protest actions including a recent 38-day hunger strike from within the overcrowded cell he shares with dozens of fellow Sahrawi Human Rights prisoners, a single bucket serving as toilet for thirty men who are obliged to sleep in shifts, there being so little floor space.



In the territories of Western Sahara occupied by Morocco, Human Rights are nonexistent for the Sahrawi civilians who are daily abducted, arrested, tortured, raped, or made to disappear permanently when they are not tried by the military courts of the Moroccan occupational forces and condemned to staggering prison terms, going from twenty years to life for simply having peacefully demonstrated for their basic rights.

Western Sahara is a territory cut in two by the biggest repressive structure in the history of mankind, a daunting 2700 kilometer military berm strewn with over three million land mines, and manned by 140,000 Moroccan troops. This military wall separates the Sahrawis living under Moroccan occupation from those living in immense refugee camps at the westernmost frontier of Algeria, with a vast inter-

zone of the Liberated Territories, lands reclaimed by the Polisario Front, the armed branch of the Sahrawi nation. In spite of its gigantism this repressive wall remains virtually unknown today. A paradox in the era of internet and social networks where we confidently believe no injustice can go unnoticed.

As to the resolution of the conflict, surprisingly, the international community still has the atavistic reflex of looking to France as being the historical authority for all matters concerning the Maghreb, the nation knowing the ropes through its colonial experience in North Africa. The supreme paradox being that there is no freedom of the press concerning this particular issue in France, for most all owners of the big French dailies as well as the directors of media have their very own riad (private palace) in Morocco. How then would the guest publish an article or air a program going against the interest of the host?

Beyond the review *Mamba*, The only French press to have covered the Western Sahara issue is the independent Paris weekly *Charlie Hebdo*, that published a two-page spread in 2005. If indeed « We Are Charlie » as the slogan goes since the January 7th 2015 terrorist attack that left eleven staff members dead, then we too should be capable of discovering Morocco's oppression of the Sahrawis in Western Sahara, just as Charlie revealed it. What rare journalists do make it to the occupied territories of Western Sahara, are regularly evicted, their equipment confiscated by the Moroccans, (fifty-six journalists were evicted from Western Sahara in 2014 alone). Numerous European parliamentary members investigating Human Rights conditions of the Sahrawis have also been evicted by the authorities. Even the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara, (MINURSO), has suffered the humiliation of having its equipment confiscated by the Moroccan army.

Here lies a major cause, fundamental in its symbolism, a barometer of international law. The invasion and unilateral forceful annexation of the coveted neighboring territory of Western Sahara by the expansionist Moroccan regime in 1975, left unsanctioned by the international community, gave Saddam the green light for similarly invading Kuwait. Illegal actions are thus, left unpunished, they encourage others to do likewise.

Paradoxically, some of the worst warrens of torture are those perceived as tourist-friendly countries, passing for champions of International Justice. Cynically, Morocco's king Mohamed VI, organized a Human Rights Forum in Marrakech in november 2014, all the while brutally repressing the Sahrawis. The self proclaimed « king of the poor », was fingered by *Le Monde*, february 2015 as one of the protagonists of the HSBC SwissLeaks for the fraud of millions of euros.

France holds the key in that Paris is the accomplice to the crime. In flagrant violation of the United Nations Charter, and specifically Article 24, France abuses of its role as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, systematically vetoing any motion to investigate the Human Rights issues in these territories illegally occupied by its partner Morocco. Yet the resolution of the conflict could be simple: if France were to refrain from interfering and adopt the impartial position legally required of any permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, the conflict would stand a better chance of being resolved. But Paris stubbornly plays its card in the Maghreb, systematically favoring Morocco, and opposing itself to Algeria and the vast majority of those African nations favorable to self-determination for the Sahrawis. Beyond the fact that France has strong commercial and political ties with Morocco, it is tempting to consider that this reflexive opposition to anything Algerian would be due to the fact that France has never digested the hard-won independence of its former colony; a sort of psycho/political grudge handed down to successive generations of French decision makers ever since Algeria obtained its independence in 1962.



Ironically, the Saharawi nation constitutes just the kind of refulgent example of liberty we should urgently be seeking to discover in these times when Middle-Eastern and North African matters often appear corrupt and rife with terrorism. Here is a young nation where democracy has come intrinsically, where freedom fighters put down the arms to choose the route of diplomacy and international law without ever having had recourse to any form of terrorism. A country where women's rights are respected with sexual parity, (women Minsters have always been a part of the Sahrawi governing forces). The young nation, home to a moderate form of Islam, holds the record for alphabetization on the African continent with 100% of the population reading and writing.

Above all in my opinion, is the fundamental fact that this new nation is recognized by a majority of African nations, countries such as Algeria, Angola, Nigeria and South Africa. Having acquired their very own rights following recent and harsh struggles, their vision of such questions as emancipation and independence is far more perspicacious than is ours.

At times, it has been possible for me to communicate with Naama from within his prison. « This is my place, it is here that I belong for now» he tells me, and I

discover that he spends his time helping fellow prisoners from sub-Saharan Africa, illegal immigrants caught traversing Morocco by the police and submitted to the worst conditions in detention for having made the mistake of passing through the monarchy on their way to better lands.

Getting Naama out is a priority. The sheer dimension of the condemnation handed down by a military court to a civilian protestor, is in itself a flashing red light as to the violation of Human Rights. Naama has now done five years and is facing twenty-five more of his thirty-year prison term. As long as he and his co-detainees remain incarcerated under such deplorable conditions, daily subjected to abuse and torture, the concept of Human Rights will progressively evaporate as would water left unprotected in these zones of extreme heat.

T.E. Lawrence once wrote in *The Iraq Letters* « Freedom is enjoyed when you are so well armed, or so turbulent, or inhabit a country so thorny that the expense of your neighbour's occupying you is greater than the profit. » The Sahrawis are well-armed, they are turbulent, and no thornier a land can be found than theirs. Their cause will prevail.

Finally we have here the perfect example of what I qualify as being a case of « Political Pedophilia », in that a senescent monarchy, Morocco, is raping a young nation, SADR, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic. Rabat and Paris must be reigned in, the tourist-friendly mask stripped from the ogre's visage.

Jean Lamore: author and co-producer of the documentary film *Building Oblivion*, covering the obliteration of the Western Sahara cause (premiered BBC World News, 2007), co-founder and chief editor of the independent Paris-based cultural review *Mamba*, author of *The Polisario Diaries*, *Construzione del Oblio*, *The Sahrawis and the Polisario Front an Absolute Modernism*, AKA *Book of Fever* and *UQ11 Dawn's Improbability*.

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