

“Free Speech except for Palestine,” a phrase that circulates among progressive students and academics, and in legal circles, is here on full display and should resonate as a warning about the possible futures where speech is monitored and punished, part of a larger war on the academy mounted by right-wing politicians and commentators. The experiences of MENA anthropologists stand as a sort of bellwether, a warning about what deviating from dominant narratives can entail. The present atmosphere does not bode well for the academy as a place for the exchange of ideas or even at its most basic the formulation and sharing of facts. In the era of the neoliberal university and its growing dependence on donors as state-funding shrinks, there are increasing calls to dilute tenure. The Middle East will be an interesting test site for the diminution of “free speech.” In a region already so heavily freighted by censorship in the academy, how will it fare in the face of new attempts to control speech?

ALICE WILSON, *Sovereignty in Exile: A Saharan Liberation Movement Governs*, The Ethnography of Political Violence (Philadelphia, Pa.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016). Pp. 312. \$59.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780812248494

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Research on the Western Sahara dispute in the English-speaking world appears to be inversely correlated with the intensity of the conflict. During the peak years of military and diplomatic activity between Morocco and the Sahrawi nationalist movement (1975–2004), only two research-based monographs (both in 1983) and two edited collections were published in English. In 2004, the UN Security Council effectively abandoned its fifteen-year effort to hold a referendum on independence in Western Sahara, a territory that has been largely under Moroccan control since Rabat seized it from Spain in 1975. Since 2004, the Western Sahara peace process has done little except to justify the presence of UN peacekeepers in the contested territory. Meanwhile, Moroccan efforts to create “facts on the ground”—settlers and infrastructure—have continued unabated while some two-fifths of Western Sahara’s indigenous Sahrawi population have been exiled in refugee camps in neighboring Algeria since the 1975 outbreak of war between Morocco and the Sahrawi independence movement, the *Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguía el Hamra y Río de Oro* (Polisario). Yet despite the increasingly marginalized status of the Western Sahara conflict globally, Anglophone interest in Western Sahara has surprisingly picked up in recent years. Since 2010, seven scholarly books on the dispute have been published. Alice Wilson’s *Sovereignty in Exile: A Saharan Liberation Movement Governs* is a welcomed and vital contribution to this growing body of literature.

Wilson, a sociocultural anthropologist now at the University of Sussex, spent over two years in the Sahrawi camps conducting her study. Her primary research stint took place over the course of two years (2007–8), when a confluence of electoral reforms and foreign aid restrictions serendipitously elucidated many of the dynamics that she painstakingly documents. A remarkably insightful yet sympathetic account, *Sovereignty in Exile* challenges the tendency to examine sovereignty’s power only within the context of territorial nation-states. Wilson uses the case of Polisario’s state in exile (officially, *La República Árabe Saharaui Democrática*, or RASD) to examine sovereignty in an extraterritorial context. Through an analysis of evolving social, economic, and political practices in the Sahrawi refugee camps since the mid-1970s, Wilson not only finds contested operations of sovereignty (e.g., quotidian practices such as food aid distribution and bride gifts), but also makes rich ethnographic observations about the nature of democracy and revolution. Essentially, Wilson examines several sites where Sahrawi state power,

as exercised through the Polisario-RASD administrative apparatus, has enacted itself upon refugees as a sovereign authority. Wilson's thesis is that the original goal of the Polisario-RASD—to create a posttribal revolutionary Sahrawi polity in the 1970s and 1980s—has been steadily eroded by the increasing social, economic, and political demands of a population in search of some semblance of normalcy since the war ended in 1991. In their efforts to survive the imposed austerity of refugee life, there has been a steady resurgence of Sahrawi tribal influence. How state power and the resurgent power of Sahrawi tribes intersect, coordinate, oppose, and evade each other is what Wilson traces throughout her highly convincing study.

At one level, *Sovereignty in Exile* is a potent antidote to the misinformation and propaganda that have obfuscated the realities of life in the Sahrawi refugee camps for over four decades. That it sheds much-needed light, and objectively so, on a frequently misunderstood aspect of an agonizingly protracted case of decolonization makes it well worth the effort. *Sovereignty in Exile* is certainly required reading for anyone—scholars, politicians, officials, and so forth—seeking to understand the phenomenon of Sahrawi nationalism and the forgotten conflict of Western Sahara. Anthropologists, sociologists, and historians of Maghribi, Saharan, and Sahelian societies will find it compelling, meticulous, and erudite. Area experts, refugee studies scholars, scholars of (armed) revolutionary movements, and political scientists who use ethnographic methods will all find it worth their while as well, particularly given the lengths to which Wilson attempts to draw comparative insights.

Where *Sovereignty in Exile* does not go far enough is in the way Wilson limits the methodological scope of her research and the theoretical impact of her findings. One of the more frustrating elements is how, on the one hand, Wilson exquisitely details the lived experience and agency of actual refugees interacting with the Sahrawi “state-movement”; yet, on the other hand, she too often places this state-movement in a black box from which mandates, administrative procedures, and institutions emanate. The reader gets little sense of the personalities, rationalizations, and processes driving it forward. Though Wilson appears to be writing against the tendency among academic observers to present top-down narratives of the Sahrawi polity (a tendency that I am surely guilty of), in many cases it would have been more insightful to close the loop by including in her ethnography more voices from those responsible for instituting and defending policies within the state-movement. Whose initiative or influence, for example, brought ideas from Mu'ammār al-Qadhafi's ill-fated *jamāhīriyya* system of governance in Polisario's imperfect attempt to detribalize Sahrawi refugee society? What makes this methodological approach frustrating is the geographical and social proximity of the very informants who could have explained the other side of the differential. In other words, *Sovereignty in Exile* is an anthropological effort to understand how state power works but it is not an anthropology of the state per se.

Theoretically, the impact of *Sovereignty in Exile* seems somewhat blunted by the extent to which Wilson concerns herself with matters of sovereignty, democracy, and political economy only as concepts to be tested against discrete cases rather than as global processes circulating through a disregarded corner of the planet. For example, Wilson's research more than justifies her critique of the Schmittian notions of sovereignty and the state of exception; at the same time, *Sovereignty in Exile* provides ample evidence for the kind of globalizing and totalizing sovereignty Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have theorized as the true locus of power in the world today. A theoretical reframing of this sort would have accounted for the transnational forces that have affected the operations of state power in the camps and for the ways in which these forces have helped condition the recent elaboration of parallel modes of power within the camps in the form of a resurgent Sahrawi “nativism” (to borrow from Mahmood Mamdani). Though *Sovereignty in Exile* is to be celebrated for giving voice to a long misunderstood and marginalized population, it does so at the expense of elucidating the actual drivers of their multiple dispossessions.