

Western Sahara and the United States' geographical imaginings

Konstantina Isidoros

In the post 9/11 global (dis)order, US security presence has steadily increased in the Sahara under various military operations such as the Pan-Sahel Initiative, Trans-Saharan Counter Terrorism Initiative and the US military's Africa Command (AFRICOM). So too have North African-Sahelian governments been branding indigenous Saharan groups as having links to 'armed Islamic groups', 'dissidents' and 'terrorists'.¹ When US officials court these governments, who will not jump onboard the development handout wagon?

Recently, US official commentary has heightened in pitch with allegations linking its imagined 'al-Qaeda' in the Sahara to Western Sahara's Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguía el Hamra y Río de Oro (Frente Polisario), accompanied by the interminable drip-drip of Moroccan official propaganda² to bolster its autonomy plan and, under international law, *illegal* claims to territorial sovereignty of Western Sahara.³

1. For a succinct analysis by several contributors, see Benjamin and Slisli (2007).

2. Maghreb Arab Press (MAP), the Moroccan government's official press agency website produces 'propaganda' par excellence: <http://www.map.ma>.

3. See the International Court of Justice's *Western Sahara. Advisory Opinion of 16 October 1975* (The Hague: ICJ Reports). The

Konstantina Isidoros is a doctoral researcher in anthropology at University of Oxford. Her field of specialisation is the Sahara desert with a particular interest in the hassaniya-speaking populations of the western Sahara. The views expressed in this article are those of the author.

As an anthropologist researching the western region of the Sahara, these problematic discourses raise personal reservations and analytical questions. Most significantly because this US-Moroccan discourse is intertwined in three ways.⁴ Firstly, as a sacred symbol and 'eternal truth' in relation to the United States's own dominant, unchallengeable and sacrosanct perception of an Islamicised 'religious fundamentalism' (subsuming the fashionable terms of terrorism and extremism). Secondly, that this 'eternal truth' sits transparently alongside the very 'hard fact' (or 'fingerprints') of US geo-political-economic interests in North Africa, the Sahara and the Sahel (see Zoubir 2009), which may be interpreted as 'economic fundamentalism'. And thirdly, in the creating and maintaining of a 'fearful void' (see McDougall 2007), this selective US imagining and rewriting of the Saharan human and physical geographical landscape remains rooted in Orientalist representations of the 'Other' (Said 1979). As historian McDougall (2007) has written, '...it is ironic how central the "imaging" of the Sahara ... remains even today as we seek terrorism in the depths of the desert'.

This article is my response as a concerned researcher of Western Sahara to allegations the US and Morocco are constructing to link the Polisario to an imagined 'al-Qaeda entity' (or 'Saharan terrorism'). I do not

ICJ rejected Morocco's claims of sovereignty over the Western Sahara, but Morocco defied international legal opinion and invaded. Jacob Mundy (2008) provides an excellent re-examination of the ICJ court records and opinions.

4. Two analyses of the conflict's origins (Frank 1976 and Mundy 2006), published three decades apart, indicates how little the Western Sahara impasse has changed over 36 years.

dispute incidents such as kidnapping whereby some 'entity' has called itself al-Qaeda, but it appears that the US has picked up its al-Qaeda template and transplanted it over the Sahara. The analytical problematic lies in accurately clarifying when does something become 'al-Qaeda' and why. It is important not to accept universalising claims at face value and to ensure that the less audible and visible aspects of this subject are represented. Anthropologically, we interrogate 'truths' as competing sites of contestation between power and resistance, where differently perceived 'facts' are produced in narratives and counter-narratives.

The US terrorism idiolect

Given US National Intelligence Council estimates, that 25% of US oil will come from Africa by 2015, it is interesting to note examples of US security operations such as 'Joint Task Force Aztec Silence' in the Sahara-Sahel, the 'Combined Joint Task Force' in the Horn of Africa, and operations in the Gulf of Guinea, whose oil resources are also of importance to the United States. As AFRICOM states of itself, 'United States Africa Command, in concert with other U.S. government agencies and international partners, conducts sustained security engagement through *military-to-military* programs, *military-sponsored* activities, and *other military operations* as directed to promote a *stable and secure African environment in support of U.S. foreign policy*' (my emphases).⁵ This vocabulary transmits a war-making, militarising, 'economic fundamentalism' form of foreign policy (Zoubir 2009: 995), and follows the same linguistic style of its parallel vocabulary-making about the terrorist religious fundamentalist Other.

Following this statement on AFRICOM's website is another (my emphases):

'U.S. Africa Command's *theater* strategic objectives:

- *Defeat the Al-Qaeda terrorist organizations and its associated networks;*
- *Ensure peace operations capacity exists to respond to emerging crises, and continental peace support operations are effectively fulfilling mission requirements;*

- *Cooperate with identified African states in the creation of an environment inhospitable to the unsanctioned possession and proliferation on WMD;*
- *Improve security sector governance and increased stability through military support to comprehensive, holistic and enduring USG efforts in designated states;*
- *Protect populations from deadly contagions'.*

I draw attention to these two AFRICOM statements because they set the scene — or 'theater' as AFRICOM likes to see it — that smacks of a Hollywood cowboys 'n injuns script whereby American save-the-world characters charge across the Sahara to eliminate the Bad Guys. Perhaps the bizarre and abrupt final bullet point on 'deadly contagions' is an old Hollywood-Bush administration collaboration that AFRICOM forgot to delete.⁶ If this seems very unacademic of me, I recommend readers to the publications Jack G. Shaheen (2001) and Mahmood Mamdani (2004).

Distorted scripts on an imagined theatre

Thus, underlying US foreign policy and security practice in the Sahara are accusations that the Western Saharan liberation movement, the Frente Polisario, is 'vulnerable' to al-Qaeda. Morocco actively plays its part with US security anxieties to propagate accusations that the Sahrawi populations, refugee camps and Polisario's government in exile, the República Árabe Saharaui Democrática (RASD), could become a 'hotbed' and 'safe haven' for terrorism.⁷

To name but a few examples. In 2007, the US Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs David Welch told the US congress that the Western Sahara conflict needed swift resolution because the Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria represent 'a potentially attractive

6. In the Hollywood film *Sahara* (2005), filmed largely in Morocco, Matthew McConaughey and Penélope Cruz save the scorching deserts of West Africa from a raging epidemic by relying on daring heroics to outsmart dangerous warlords.

7. See Moroccan government press accounts on MAP website: e.g., 'Autonomy project "a factor for peace and security in the region", official' (23 March 2010), 'Algeria strikes Polisario convoy' (13 August 2009).

5. <http://www.africom.mil/getArticle.asp?art=1644>

safe haven for terrorist planning or activity' (Agence France Presse 11 April 2007). Also in 2007, the US ambassador to Morocco produced more distorted truths, such as that the Sahrawi refugee camps were '...prey for recruitment by Al Qaeda and local terrorist groups' (quoted in Zunes 2007). In both 2005 and 2008, the European Strategic Intelligence and Security Center (ESISC) issued two near-identical reports proclaiming distorted truths that Polisario is 'evolving ... [to give rise] to new fears ... terrorism, radical Islamism or international crime. This development would threaten the stability of the whole of Sub-Saharan Africa ... and, in the long run, of Europe as well'.⁸ A prime example of Moroccan propagandising comes from the Moroccan American Center for Policy (MACP), a team of well-paid former US diplomats who now lobby for

Moroccan interests in Washington, DC.⁹ Their recent press releases demonstrate the peacock shrill of Moroccan hysteria, also evidenced in official government statements found on the website of Moroccan government's official mouthpiece, Maghreb Arab Presse (MAP). In one, MAP conveniently use the idea of a 'breeding ground to new al-Qaeda threat' to keep up the hard-sell on Morocco's autonomy plan as the

8. ESISC, *The Polisario Front* (November 2005) and *Front Polisario: une force de déstabilisation toujours active* (October 2008). The report alludes to distortion of facts, such as in section VI.5, regarding accusation of misuse of humanitarian aid, the authors 'take note' that two quoted 'top notch NGO's ... affirmed "having been deliberately misquoted in a lying manner"'. Lies appear to play some peculiar importance in this report.

9. MACP: 'Foreign Policy Experts Urge US and International Community Focus on Realistic Solution, Not Ideology, to Break W. Sahara Deadlock' (12 March 2010); 'Obama Counterterrorism Official says al-Qaeda Poses "Immediate Threat" in North Africa to American and Western Nationals' (19 February 2010).

'best practical way forward' for stability and security. In another, 'Obama Counterterrorism Official says al-Qaeda Poses "Immediate Threat" in North Africa to American and Western Nationals', again to promote Morocco's autonomy plan as the only solution.¹⁰ Most recently, Morocco, on 25 March 2010, at a security conference in its capital Rabat, issued a press release that 'insecurity in the Sahel is main threat' pointing to the '... separatist movements, such as the Polisario Front, which has been challenging the Moroccan [illegal territorial claim of] sovereignty over Sahara since 1975'.

On the other side of this discourse, are those of us who do not accept that the Polisario are 'terrorists' nor vulnerable to it: they are a liberation movement, a nation-state in exile and refugees from their homeland, Western Sa-

hara, invaded by Morocco in 1975. As Zunes (2007) emphasises, and those of us with long-term, close-up experience of the Polisario and refugees camps agree, Polisario is a secular nationalist organisation who scrupulously honoured its 1991 ceasefire agreement with Morocco even when Morocco refused to honour their reciprocal commitments. The Sahrawi are notable for observing a peaceful Islam and a millennia-old literary tradition. They are the least likely group to want to become involved in an 'al-Qaeda entity' because their primary goal is to achieve their internationally accepted legal rights to self-determination and sovereign independence to Western Sahara, a country *illegally* invaded by Morocco *with* US and French backing. Any involvement with 'extremist fundamentalism' and 'terrorism' would devastate their chances to achieve their international legal right to a return to homeland. Ad-

10. See Zunes (2007) and Mundy (2009) on why Morocco's autonomy plan is *not* the best way forward.



US soldier at a shooting range, Niger, 12 March 2006 (Source: US military)

ditionally, as refugees inhabiting refugee camps, they are under an extremely public scrutiny by hundreds of foreign visitors such as humanitarian staff, politicians and academics all year round. The viciousness of Morocco's propaganda machine can best be seen in its glossy websites that fraudulently misappropriate text and photographs to falsely portray the refugee camps as violently suppressed sites of torture and forced imprisonment of its inhabitants. These websites are evidence of pure lies in Morocco's war of distorted truths — as evidenced by those of us who live in the camps.

Nevertheless, these allegations are precisely what the US wants to achieve with its heightened discourse and transplantation of its 'al-Qaeda template' onto the Sahara. If only the Polisario and its Saharawi population would just dissolve into thin air, then the US, France and Morocco could continue misappropriating and exploiting Western Sahara's territory and natural resources unhindered.¹¹

Because the Polisario — and importantly, the Saharawi population split apart on both sides of the Moroccan *Berm*¹² — refuse to give in to the US-French-Morocco bullying, the US reconstructs them into terrorists and weaves another story of fear about al-Qaeda conveniently popping up like a jack-in-the-box in the Sahara. Yet one more 'hard fact' never appears in the US 'eternal truth' discourse: the outstanding matter that Morocco has violated the sacred tenets of modern political theory and international law by invading a neighbouring nation-state's territorial boundaries ... *with* US and French backing (Zunes 2007).

Distortions of truth: in/security and in/stability

How might this US 'terrorism discourse', with its own intertwining of sacred symbols and politics (that is, its perceived threats of an imagined monster complementing its on-the-ground geopolitical interests), be discussed anthropologically?

11. See Western Sahara Resource Watch for monitoring of Morocco's plunder of Western Sahara: <http://www.wsrw.org>.

12. The Moroccan 'berm' is a heavily militarised, fortified and mined series of barriers, constructed in the 1980s to secure Moroccan control over roughly 80% of Western Sahara. See official UN map available at: <http://www.un.org/Depts/Cartographic/map/dpko/minurso.pdf>.

References to and the vocabulary about an imagined entity called 'Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb' becomes a sacred text and 'eternal truth' involving constructed discourses about religious-political identity which can conveniently be transplanted into new socio-cultural contexts — most recently, the Sahara.

Primarily embedded in US 'militarised' discourse, and trickling down through Western popular media and commentators (including Morocco's fervent propagandising), this 'Saharan terrorist entity' is depicted as the antithesis to modernity, science and rationality, and as uncontrollable violent extremism threatening Western values and freedoms (i.e., US geo-political-economic interests, and Morocco's own peacock shrills that it too is 'modern' and 'democratic').

Although, in anthropology, we acknowledge that there are a myriad of voices involved in the production of different knowledge/truths that each seek to reveal, it is with some tiredness of certain Washington 'truths' that I turn my anthropological lens to the shiny new US-perceived threat, the 'Saharan terrorist'. This abstract entity can be deconstructed in anthropology and human geography theory using the concepts of 'imagined community' (Anderson 1983) within an 'imagined geography' (Gregory 1994, Ó Tuathail 1996).

While the American spotlight has been creating the political-religious dimension of the heavily-loaded popular term 'Islamic fundamentalism' (which has piloted these latest stories of an 'Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb'), the underlying socio-religious identity holds crucial sources of alternative ethnographic understandings to illuminate an entirely different representation to that which the US would have us believe. Ethnographically speaking, it is inconceivable that a Hollywood-type 'Mr Al-Qaeda Bad Guy' could suddenly jack-in-the-box into the Sahara from a far off land and be immediately accepted and 'followed' by local, indigenous Saharan populations. The US 'al-Qaeda template' creates an artificial Saharan frontier and a western epistemological order which writes new 'eternal truths' to ignore and overwrite 'hard facts' that these desert territories are united by common histories and marked by continuous historical exchanges wherein trust and reputation are paramount. The Saharan 'economy of affection' is tied by close kinship ties, connected by long-distance networks of solidarity, and governed by both

Islamic and customary norms of behaviour. Faith and mutual trust, trustworthy partnerships, 'the fraternity' (*al-ikhā*), the act of entrusting (*al-waḍī'a*) and the closeness (*al-aqrāba*) (Lydon 2008; 2005), the family, the pride of 'people' (identities of both/either tribe and citizen) — such socio-culturally rooted characteristics preclude foreign strangers from transplanting within these communities with ease or speed. For an al-Qaeda to operate in communities such as these, its main artery would have to be US dollars, not local currency so to speak.

Herein lies the Hollywood-style portrayal of an 'Arab world' as unstable, insecure, and full of threatening shadows, and therefore an 'imagined geography' of the Sahara. 'Economies of affection' are deeply rooted in indigenous Saharan social systems and cultural heritage to create and maintain stability and security. Not the instability and insecurity as the US-styled discourse wants to portray. For a 'Mr Al-Qaeda Bad Guy' to successfully supplant himself in these environments suggests other, external, factors that have interfered with the indigenous system of propinquity, stability and security. When the US interferes in the Sahara, it is creating its own instability and insecurity, systematically destroying the culturally rooted systems of indigenous stability and security. Entrenched in these US actions is 'economic fundamentalism': by investing in the creation and maintenance of 'instability', thereby creating 'insecurity' to scaffold a vast profit-making 'security' industry and secure economic-political dominance and control of the region. It is therefore in US interests to script-write a mythology of terror onto a Saharan landscape.

Clearing the 'mythology of terrorism' lens

An anthropological treatment of general US terrorism discourse requires a re-contextualisation in order to 'clear the lens'. If we strip out the 'Islam', what is 'fundamentalism'? Historical research and comparative analysis between different societies shows that fundamentalism is not unique to Islam, but can be evidenced in a diverse array of ethnographic settings. Firstly, 'fundamentalism' describes a wide range of religious and political developments. Using Munson's (1993) definition, many conservative religious movements can be said to share 'fundamentalist' dimensions in their insistence on strict conformity to sacred texts

and the moral codes based on them. They may or may not be or become militant. Marty and Appleby (1991) define fundamentalist groups as having started out as traditionalists, then upon perceiving some threat they react to the crisis and 'fight back'. Marty and Appleby also discuss what it is groups may 'fight back' for, the resources they use to fight, who they fight against and 'fight under' (e.g. the Americans appear to believe this latter point is a fundamentalising Islamic God while the Americans believe they are fighting under the banner of 'democracy', or democratic economic extremism). Secondly, fundamentalism arose in history related to the *Christian* tradition, describing conservative *evangelicals* inside mainline Protestant denominations. There are many examples of 'fundamentalist impulses', such as the Maccabean revolt in the 2nd century B.C. which insisted on strict conformity to the Torah and Jewish religious law; Calvin's 16th century Genevan polity and the 17th century Puritanism, both insisting on strict conformity to the Bible and its moral codes (Munson 1993). Likewise, Asad (2007) reviews how history shows that the notion of martyrdom is an early Christian tradition; and argues that the more recent Islamic martyrdom is not pre-modern or medieval.

It is important to deconstruct these new uses of the labels 'fundamentalism / extremism / terrorism' which are now ascribed fashionably to Islam. These ascriptions are modern constructions, applied beyond the Christian fold and with new negative connotations ascribed to the Muslim world. It has become a metaphor through which Islam is presented by the US to its own western public. Any political resurgence that uses symbols of Islam is reported as manifestations of 'Islamic fundamentalism / extremism / terrorism'. For example, the emergence of the Iranian Islamic clerics, Sadaat's assassination in Egypt, Lebanon's Shi'ite community. So too have new incarnations appeared since 9/11: Al-Qaeda, Pakistan's Taliban, Afghanistan's Taliban, Mali/Niger nomadic Tuareg 'insurgents', and now, this even newer incarnation of 'Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb'.

The 'Columbus construction'

How might we understand the 'Saharan terrorist' as a constructed, 'imagined' phenomenon? Edmund Leach's 1977 Munro lecture, *Custom, law, and terrorist violence*, considered the moral ambiguity of political power's transmigration through identities of 'bad' ter-

rorism and 'good' state terror. His examination of the 'Columbus construction' (in which Columbus' descriptions of natives in the New World as 'two-headed dogs' enabled his European court to legitimate and authorise brutal invasion) sheds light on how an 'out-group' is redefined and reconstructed to legitimate certain notions about and behaviours towards them. Munson illustrates how contemporary 'Islamic fundamentalism' is conveyed as political 'extremists', guerrilla 'insurgents' and religious 'fanatics' who despise US/Western freedoms and values. These reconstructed notions and labels are then arbitrarily pasted from one context to another — something the US is getting good at by building a slow accumulation of respective 'inside-outside' products of prejudicial knowledge. We must also recognise the Bourdieu-Foucaultian agency of those with the dominating monopoly to do this defining of who is 'fundamentalist/terrorist'. There are many different actors involved in producing many different scripts and performances, underlying which are equally as many different 'hidden transcripts', agendas and conflicts of interest. All these aspects create extreme dichotomies, such as the 'democratic enlightened Observer' versus the 'primitive uncontrollable Observed'. These 'Columbus constructions' shed light on notions of dominance, power and political strength, so while one voice is more dominant and powerful, we should more stringently examine the voices that are less heard, for they in turn shed new dimensions of light on the dominant voices.

When Munson, Esposito and Asad undertook analyses to examine the contemporary 'groundings for "Islamic fundamentalism" animosity' (i.e. the roots of Muslim hostility), they found that this hostility has less to do with values, cultural and religious differences with the US, and more to do with *US foreign policies* in the Arab world (Munson 2004). These kinds of critical analyses illuminate how the US itself may be seen as engaging in 'fundamentalist' impulses. In so doing, its 'Columbus construction' of the 'Muslim Other' — and for the purposes of this article, the 'Saharan terrorist' — is a Western construction which presents the roots of hostility as threatening Western/Christian values, freedoms, democracy, rational thought etc., in order to gain its own public appeal. This American condition is now also invoking a new vocabulary that demonises a new 'Other' as the 'Saharan terrorist', thus enabling the US to legitimate its own hostility to its imagined and constructed 'Other' in order to gain public sup-

port, and finally legitimate its underlying self-interests and objectives. As Mundy (2007) argues, 'When pressing its case for Western Sahara to foreign patrons, the Moroccan regime has also attempted to de-legitimize Polisario in various ways. The most common tactic is Rabat's frequent attempts to highlight Polisario's links — real, ideological and imaginary — to groups, persons and countries at odds with U.S. foreign policy'.

Constructing a 'fearful void'

This brings me to a final aspect, that of the clash of notions about legitimate and illegitimate warfare. I raise this point because the US sees itself as being engaged in a global 'war on terror'. Across both this global stage and the Saharan stage, it is defining itself as a legitimate actor engaged in legitimate warfare, whereas the 'Others' are illegitimately engaging in illegitimate actions. And yet comparative analyses of world-wide contexts illuminate the differentiation between the context of war and the context of peace, in which lie further constructed dichotomies. Contextualising the Sahara illustrates an indigenous preference for security, stability and peaceful existence. The Polisario is a response to several complex historical contexts: the origins of Polisario grew out of frustration with both colonial rule and messy colonial withdrawal, to become a nationalistic movement seeking liberation from the subsequent illegal Moroccan invasion and occupation of Western Sahara.

Human society creates rules about when and how to transgress moral boundaries. But the project of war is designed by different sets of actors who do not read the map in the same way. Thus the rules of law and the rules of war can lead to the legitimation to kill in one case but not the other. Leach (1977) found culturally specific differences between right and wrong, as too did Asad (2007) who asks what kinds of violence are legitimated and what role do notions of 'civilised' versus 'uncivilised' play in various discourses. He also especially notes the dichotomy between Western notions of their legal sanction of war as against 'unlicensed' militants, versus the latter's unsanctioned rights of war against the former.

Asad joins numerous other authors in criticism of the oddity of the American phrase 'war on terror' that has so quickly dominated public discourse in recent years. These critics argue that war can only be a formal re-

lation of hostilities between sovereign states, not between a state and an abstract notion of diffuse international networks of militants. The assumption is that because there is legal definition of war, there is also a moral distinction between warfare (a state function) and terrorism (a so-called disruptive activity of ruthless individuals). This assumption then underlines traditional thought about the concept of 'just war'. In contrast, the term 'just terrorism' appears to be an impossible contradiction. And yet, emerging from many, more compassionate, analyses of 'terrorism', is a very different picture: a person's engagement in political action cannot be reduced to just 'religious outrage', instead there often exists non-religious national-social protest, whereby their actions are expressions of social protest and reform (see for example, Munson 1993; Wardenburg 1985). Thus the US-centred 'Columbus construction' of its so-called 'Islamic fundamentalism' often ignores the very modern nationalistic and social grievances that are attempting to mobilise positive and peaceful change.

Examining arguments about moral constraints of violence (and echoing Leach's 'Columbus construction'), Asad notes the brutality of the state army where even if state armies are subject to international humanitarian law, that law has never prevented their deliberate cruelties. The difference lies in the power and authority of who is more powerful to sanction their own crimes. Thus, we can see how different types of war receive different types of justification (i.e. the US legitimates its wars as 'necessary'). 'Necessity' enables justification of it. Even though 'terrorists' too claim justification through necessity, terrorism remains perceived as evil. Interpreting motives of fighters is tricky but it remains central to arguments about the distinction between

the conduct of state armies and non-state ones. Asad notes another impossible 'western' contradiction: he cites modern political law on the use of nuclear weapons — a suicidal war existing in the liberal imagination as a legitimate form of self-defence. Recognising moral absolutes and at same time agreeing to set them aside is a well-known contradiction central to liberalism, something that can be attributed to recent US trouble making.



US & Moroccan troops, 'African Lion' Exercise, 20 April 2007 (Source: US military)

Conclusion

A clear theme has emerged that questions assumptions about notions of 'fundamentalism/extremism/terrorism' as an Islamic political movement. Anthropological analyses have instead illuminated how these are often social movements in Moslem societies. Strip away the assumed aggressive militant character-

istics, and one can find civic engagements expressed through the language of faith, whereby the symbols of faith are used for both social movement and political mobilisation. This civic engagement may grow into militant action (in any society, including the US itself), in which the expression of sacred script and symbols might be heightened with moral outrage, just as I argued at the beginning of this article that the US has its own sacred scripts and 'eternal truths'.

My point here is that strong states are more able to protect their own, and convict others as violators of humanitarian law. In so doing, they reconstruct an image of that 'Other' as violator, precisely in order to legitimate violent action against them. Thus the more the 'Other' fights back (in *defence*), the more this fuels the stronger party's persistent 'Columbus constructions'.

The more the US defines and constructs the abstract monster of a 'Saharan terrorist', the more likely it

might become a self-fulfilling prophecy. This raises the frightening thought — does the US want its prophecy to come true? Certainly, the US has every conceivable reason and use for creating such a monster in order to authenticate its claims, legitimate its actions, and fulfil its economic self-interests across the Sahara, North Africa and Sahel. However much the US insists it has only concerns for regional and global 'political security' at heart, there remains the fact that political security is linked to economic security under which lie economic interests. And the US, with Europe, is most definitely engaged in economic interests in the Sahara (Zoubir 2009). If the US had no economic interests, then it would not be sticking its political-military fingers in the Saharan pie (Barth 2003).

To conclude, a growing body of Sahara observers are becoming increasingly uneasy with the notion that these incarnations are truly what we are encouraged to believe they are. In Mali and Niger, the central-eastern Saharan Tuareg 'insurgents' are differently described by sceptical observers as, instead, desert nomads with no option but to fight with their backs against the wall to recuperate their indigenous land — land that they are denied access to by corrupt governments in receipt of US development aid; land upon which US-contracted uranium extraction now occurs (Keenan 2006a/b).

The US requires the Columbus construction of a 'monster' with which to legitimate the coercion and manipulation of an existing human and physical geographical landscape to make way for US interests and policies. Who, then, are the real troublemakers? So too is there a secondary aspect, that of the North African-Saharan-Sahelian governments that the US courts. In becoming US allies, these governments become 'exporters' of the US 'war on terror' (Mundy 2007) and 'African surrogates' (Zoubir 2009: 990-991). As Mundy notes: 'Not only is Morocco an ally in the "War on Terror", it is a major site and exporter of it. The coordinated suicide bombings of 2003 and the botched ones of 2007, along with the number of Moroccan "jihadists" participating in the Iraqi and Algerian insurgencies, not to mention the 2004 Madrid bombings and other European al-Qaida cells, suggest that something ominous is lurking behind Morocco's peaceful façade' (Mundy 2007). Echoing these concerns, McDougall also notes that 'The manipulation of the Sahara as a hotbed of terrorism is not the

achievement of the West alone, but has required the complicity of the Sahara's sedentary neighbours'.

Last thoughts should be left with the persistent human rights violations on Morocco's side of the *Berm* — namely those indigenous Sahrawi populations in the Moroccan Occupied Territory of Western Sahara.¹³ At time of writing, there are currently five Sahrawi human rights advocates, Ali Salem Tamek, Brahim Dahane, Yehdih Ettarrouzi, Ahmed Naciri and Rachid Sghayer, who are in Morocco's Salé prison and approach one month of sustained hunger strike. Numerous other human rights advocates who are political prisoners in Moroccan jails have also joined them in hunger strikes. Please see Amnesty International's detailed archived records of Morocco's persistent human rights violations over many years.¹⁴

References

- Anderson, B. 1983. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London/New York: Verso.
- Asad, T. 2007. *On Suicide Bombing*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Barth, M. 2003. Sand Castles in the Sahara: US military basing in Algeria. *Review of African Political Economy* No. 98 (December): 679–84.
- Benjamin, J. and Slisli, F (eds). 2007. North Africa and the Horn in the Vortex of the US War on Terror. *Concerned Africa Scholars Bulletin*, No. 77, Summer.
- Franck, T.M. 1976. The Stealing of the Sahara. *American Journal of International Law*. 70(4): 694-721.
- Gregory, D. 1994. *Geographical Imaginations*. Cambridge, MA/Oxford: Blackwell.
- Keenan, J. 2006a. Military bases, construction contracts and hydrocarbons in North Africa. *Review of African Political Economy* No. 109 (September):
13. I refer to the difference between indigenous Sahrawi populations, and the 'Moroccan Sahrawi' comprised of Moroccan settlers through whom Morocco attempts to confuse and stall the UN led self-determination referendum.
14. <http://www.amnesty.org>

601–8.

Keenan, J. 2006b. Security and Insecurity in North Africa. *Review of African Political Economy* No. 108 (June): 269-296.

Keenan, J. Terror in the Sahara: the Implications of US Imperialism for North and West Africa. *Review of African Political Economy* No. 101 (September): 475-496

Leach, E. 1977. *Custom, Law, and Terrorist Violence*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Lydon, G. 2008. Contracting caravans: partnership and profit in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century trans-Saharan trade. *Journal of Global History* 3: 89-113.

Lydon, G. 2005. Writing Trans-Saharan History: Methods, Sources and Interpretations Across the African Divide. *Journal of North African Studies* 10(3-4): 293-324.

Mamdani, M. 2004. *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Marty, M.E. and Appleby, R.S. 1991. Foreword. In James Piscatori (ed.), *Islamic Fundamentalisms and the Gulf Crisis*. Chicago: American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

McDougall, A. 2007. Constructing Emptiness: Islam, Violence and Terror in the Historical Making of the Sahara. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 25(1): 17-30.

Mundy, J. 2009. Unlocking the Conflict in Western Sahara. *Foreign Policy in Focus* (21 April): http://www.fpif.org/articles/unlocking_the_conflict_in_western_sahara.

Mundy, J. 2008. The Question of Sovereignty in the Western Sahara Conflict. Paper for La Cuestión del Sáhara Occidental en El Marco Jurídico Internacional, Las Palmas, Canary Islands (27-28 June).

Mundy, J. 2007. How the 'War on Terror' Undermined Peace in Northwest Africa: The Western Sahara Conflict After 9/11. *Concerned Africa Scholars Bulletin* No.77 (August): 14-19.

Mundy, J. 2006. How the US and Morocco seized the Spanish Sahara. *Le Monde diplomatique* (January): <http://mondediplo.com/2006/01/12asahara>.

Munson, H. Jr. 2004. Lifting the Veil: Understanding the Roots of Islamic Militancy. *Harvard International Review* 25(4): 20-23.

Munson, H. Jr. 1993. *Religion and Power in Morocco*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Ó Tuathail, G. 1996. *Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Global Space*. London: Routledge.

Said, E. 1979. *Orientalism*. New York: Random.

Shaheen, J.G. 2001. *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*. London: Roundhouse Publishing.

Waardenburg, J. 1985. Islam as a Vehicle of Protest. In Ernest Gellner (ed), *Islamic Dilemmas — Reformers, Nationalists and Industrialization: The Southern Shore of the Mediterranean*. Berlin: Mouton Publishers.

Zoubir, Y.H. 2009. The United States and Maghreb-Sahel Security. *International Affairs* 85(5): 977-995.

Zunes, S. 2007. The Future of Western Sahara. *Foreign Policy in Focus*, 20 July: http://www.fpif.org/articles/the_future_of_western_sahara.