

## Culture as Resistance in Western Sahara

In March 2016, I organised six events around the UK on *Culture as Resistance: the Role of the Arts in the Saharawi Struggle*. I was lucky to receive PGR Public Engagement funding, which helped to cover the costs of bringing Saharawi poet and political activist [Hamza Lakhal](#) to the UK from Moroccan occupied Western Sahara.

Our events, at Bertha Dochose, London, VAMOS Social, Newcastle, Morpeth Town Hall and the University of Leeds, involved a screening of the award-winning documentary [Life is Waiting, Referendum and Resistance in Western Sahara](#), followed by a talk by Hamza.

In our event at Bertha Dochose, London, we also had a panel discussion chaired by Dr Lindiwe Dovey of SOAS with myself (my thesis focuses on resistance movements in Western Sahara and Equatorial Guinea), Hamza and Brahim Buhaia, a filmmaker from the Saharawi refugee camps. Hamza took part in poetry readings at Transforming with Poetry, Chapel Allerton, Leeds, and Café 1001, London, where another panel discussion was held, this time chaired by poet Sam Berkson.

Hamza's talk touched on his personal experiences of culture as resistance. Born in 1983, eight years after the Moroccan invasion of Western Sahara, three of Hamza's brothers suffered forced disappearance at the hands of Moroccan authorities. Indeed, the [NGO Freedom House](#) regularly lists the territory as amongst the "worst of the worst" in terms of civil liberties and political repression. Hamza's response to the hard situation has always been the arts.

Hamza told audiences how he set up Saharawi arts organization *The Last Wave*, which has been shut down by the Moroccan authorities, and told us of his underground poetry readings during the second Saharawi pro-independence intifada in 2005. Hamza was also responsible for organizing, in 2002, the first Saharawi campaign for a university in Western Sahara. Because of this, he was barred from all secondary schools in the country for 12 years.

During our programme of events in the UK, Morocco expelled 84 UN peacekeepers from Western Sahara, resulting in a deterioration in the human rights (and indeed diplomatic) situation. Given that he was harassed by police at the airport before flying to the UK, we were worried for Hamza's return. Fortunately, he got home safely. His first poetry collection, in Arabic, is available to purchase from Paris-based publishers [L'Harmattan](#).

*By Joanna Allan*



For details on a further article written by Joanna Allan, please see [here](#)