

*The Ideal Refugees: Gender, Islam, and the Sahrawi Politics of Survival*



Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh  
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The Western Sahara refugees have been many things to many people. Some have described the Sahrawi camps as a revolutionary paradise where women have played a profound role in their nation's political struggle for self-determination. For others, the Sahrawi refugees have been living in prison camps run by Marxist revolutionaries supported by Algeria. These camps were formed in the wake of Morocco's 1975 invasion of the Spanish Sahara and today are home to some 100,000 to 160,000 refugees (even the camps' population is highly contested). Even with the Internet and cell phones now available in the camps, as well as a significant international presence of aid workers and activists, the realities of life in the camps remain subject to intensely contested counter-representations. With the rise of armed Islamist groups in the central Sahara and the 2012 conflict in Mali, speculation surrounding these camps has reached an all-time high. Since 9/11, Morocco and its lobbyists in the United States—among the top ten most well funded in Washington—have ceaselessly insinuated connections between the Sahrawi refugees and Al-Qaida's north-west African affiliates. The question of Western Sahara's independence—and thus the fate of the Sahrawi refugees—is now so tangled in the broader question of trans-Saharan security and African “failed states” that the refugees' rights and dignity are being displaced by wild speculation about their religious and political radicalization.

In this context, Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh's *Ideal Refugees: Gender, Islam, and the Sahrawi Politics of Survival* arrives perhaps at just the right time to provide sober observations on the realities of camp life for the Sahrawis. Based upon several visits to the camps and interviews with Sahrawi refugees in a number of other locations (e.g., Syria, Cuba, and South Africa), Fiddian-Qasmiyeh's fundamental conclusion is quite simple: representations of Sahrawi refugees have been over-determined by the politics of those claiming to act on the refugees' behalf or in solidarity with them.

*The Ideal Refugees* rightfully avoids engaging with the most histrionic claims about the refugees, particularly the unfounded claims of Islamist radicalization in the camps. Instead, the book examines other widespread claims about the Sahrawi refugees, particularly reports about the exceptional nature of their political community, gender relations,

and practice of Islam. These “ideal” claims are the subject of Fiddian-Qasmiyeh's book.

Over the course of several decades, the idealness of the Sahrawi refugees has been constructed through comparisons with “bad” African and Arab liberation movements (particularly those that lapsed into terrorism), with stereotypical images of women's repression in Muslim majority societies, and with the rise of armed Islamic fundamentalism across Asia and Africa. The method of analysis used in *The Ideal Refugees* is to marry interview and other observational data with documentary research. In each case, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh questions the origins of these ideal claims. It is little surprise that she finds things are not as ideal as alleged in politics, gender, and Islam in the camps. These findings are then positioned within currents in post-colonial and post-structuralist feminist theory, as well as the practical dilemmas of internationally managing prolonged exile.

Many historical and contingent factors led to the Western Saharan refugees becoming “ideal,” particularly the propaganda war between Morocco and the Sahrawi nationalists. But the most tantalizing element of Fiddian-Qasmiyeh's story are the ways in which Spanish solidarity actors have been part of the refugees' idealization. The refugees' ideal performances are done for the sake of, notably, a kind of solidarity tourist who visits the camps for no more than days or weeks at a time or to help maintain increasing interpersonal connections with specific refugees and host families in Spain. These acts of solidarity are predicated upon, and so artificially perpetuate, those core ideal images of the refugees as politically progressive, religiously moderate, and socially egalitarian. The maintenance of these ideal images, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh argues, ultimately masks questionable relations of power in the camps. Solidarity actors are not only blind to these relations but they are haphazardly complicit with them. The result is solidarity that does much to maintain what is, for Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, a longstanding and problematic regime of power in the camps.

*The Ideal Refugees* unfortunately stops well short of connecting its examination—failed Spanish solidarity and Polisario's questionable refugee management—with the broader geopolitics of the issue. The bulk of

Fiddian-Qasmiyeh's critique is aimed at Polisario and solidarity activists for failing the refugees as refugees. Little is said about the international community's failure to respect Western Sahara's fundamental right to self-determination, which was upheld by the International Court of Justice in 1975 and is the basis for UN Security Council engagement with the issue since 1991. A more powerful critique would have extended the initial conclusions in *The Ideal Refugees* to examine how transnational refugee solidarity and support networks actually help maintain prolonged exile by collaborating unwittingly with geopolitical power. For example, one of the strangest features of the Western Sahara conflict has been the ambivalence of Spain. Though Spanish civil society overwhelmingly supports the rights and independence of its former colony (and shows that support through refugee support), Spanish government policy on the issue has been largely unaffected. Madrid has simply followed France and the United States. Their support for Morocco's illegal occupation of the Sahrawi homeland is largely for the sake of the Moroccan monarchy's stability, which is now tied to the conquest and annexation of Western Sahara. No one has yet sufficiently explained this paradox of massive Spanish solidarity with the Sahrawis while the state continues to back Morocco.

That *The Ideal Refugees* does not make these connections is surprising, given the intellectual tradition of feminist anti-imperialism it claims to follow. The power of gendered analysis was never simply its ability to re-describe quotidian realities. The power of such analysis rested in its ability to elucidate the simultaneous operations of power at multiple levels of analysis in ways largely invisible to mainstream forms of implicitly masculinist and deterministic top-down analysis. The great tradition of post-colonial feminist understandings has always demonstrated the ways in which geopolitical power operates upon and through gendered relations at the most intimate levels of subjective human experience. Towering figures like Cynthia Enloe, Lila Abu-Lughod, Liisa Malkki, and Marnia Lazreg revolutionized international relations, refugee studies, and Middle East studies by doing exactly this; that is, by transforming ethnographic thick description into a tool that could account for the manifold local, regional, and global forces that constrain and enable particular manifestations of gendered relations, including resistance to those forces.

*The Ideal Refugees* claims to make gender visible in the politics of Sahrawi refugee survival, but it does so at the expense of making the geopolitical conditions of the Sahrawis' dispossession, exile, and brute refugeeeness invisible. In *The Ideal Refugees*, the invisibility of the larger forces acting upon the Sahrawi refugees is evidenced in the fact that France and the United States, the two states that have

done the most to determine the lives of Sahrawis through their support of Morocco on the UN Security Council, are mentioned so rarely as to be omitted from the book's index. The connections between the conflict's "high" politics of international diplomacy and the "low" politics of refugee survival are plainly obvious to most dedicated observers of the conflict. But all we get in *The Ideal Refugees* is the low politics of camp life vis-à-vis the entrenched rule of Polisario and the naiveté of solidarity activists.

The ironic fact of *The Ideal Refugees* is that, for all its effort to position itself within post-structural and post-colonial feminist theory, it is difficult not to see it as a refugee expert explaining how brown men use and abuse brown women. As Spivak's much-cited critique of British colonialism noted, the civilizing mission of imperialism was often predicated on a need to save black and brown women from black and brown men. *The Ideal Refugees* oddly reconfigures this colonial politics of representation and salvation for the post-imperial, post-ideological world. Thus the theoretical irony of *The Ideal Refugees* is matched by an ethical one as well. Though *The Ideal Refugees* claims to use ethnographic methods, it fails to apply the hard-won lessons of post-colonial ethnography. Having been deeply complicit in European colonialism, critical anthropologists recognized the need for ethnography to disavow and disassociate itself from colonial governmentality's efforts to scientifically manage the Other.

Much of the research behind *The Ideal Refugees* stems from prior research projects aimed at improving the scientific management of refugees, one of the contemporary world's most important bio-political Others. The argument and conclusion of *The Ideal Refugees* is thus an intellectual defence of the *mission civilisatrice behind today's* international regime of refugee science and refugee management. *The Ideal Refugees* not only fails to account for the actual politics of Sahrawi survival, it fails to recognize its embeddedness within the anti-politics of neo-liberal governmentality. The result is a study that is neither enlightening nor emancipatory.

*The Ideal Refugees'* lack of reflexivity, apart from some caveats on field research and ethics, can therefore be attributed to the dominance of its managerial impulses over its ethnographic ones. Here the problematization of the refugee begins not with the geopolitical fact of the refugee or the camp but with the bio-political imperative to understand and manage them only as refugees. Thus questions are never directed at (1) the broader conditions of the refugees' possibility; (2) the processes that have led to their reification as a consistent thing and as a persistent problem; or (3) the role of the refugee expert in these conditions and processes.

This suggests that the contemporary problem of the refugee and the camp cannot be sufficiently understood through

either a paternalistic analysis of camp life or an emancipatory critique of the geopolitical conditions of exile. The contemporary problem of the refugee can be understood only if we also examine those stakeholders who have the most invested in the maintenance of refugees and refugee camps—that is, the refugee expert. In much the same way that we can today use colonial ethnography to shed light on the logic and operations of European imperial power in the past, *The Ideal Refugees* sheds much light on the contemporary discourse of refugee expertise and its articulation

within the logics and operations of post-imperial power in the present.

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*Jacob Mundy is an assistant professor of peace and conflict studies at Colgate University, where he also contributes to African and Middle Eastern studies. His monograph Imaginative Geographies of Algerian Violence: Conflict Science, Conflict Management, Antipolitics will be published by Stanford University Press later this year. The author may be contacted at [jmundy@colgate.edu](mailto:jmundy@colgate.edu).*

***Belonging in Oceania: Movement, Place-making and Multiple Identifications.*  
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This absorbing collection of essays focuses on how immigrants make efforts to define who they are, or where and to whom they belong, through plural claims of relationships to both home and host societies. As such, it is part of the “mobility turn” in recent social theory according to which any presumed or intrinsic relationship between moral order and identity, on the one hand, and place or territory, on the other is called into question and thus shifts our attention to such phenomena as airports, travel, vehicles, virtual communities, diasporas, and so forth.<sup>1</sup>

Set in the insular Pacific, the book begins with an introductory chapter by its three editors that sets out a useful (but then largely ignored) theoretical framework. It presents a concept of moral belonging that is dispersed and diluted by global forces and transnational movement but is then reasserted through ties to “place,” ties that are made primarily, although not exclusively, through claims to land tenure back home, church-related activities, as well as participation in festivals and other recreational activities.

Each chapter is a case study of immigrant experience in a different part of the region. Australian Aborigines and Papua New Guineans are included, but at least half of the book is taken up with Polynesians living in urban New Zealand, such as Nieuans, Cook Islanders, as well as of course Maori people.

Apart from Rollason’s fascinating case study from Papua New Guinea that discusses shifting concepts of place that arose after a big colonial development initiative ended, several themes preoccupy the volume.

Perhaps the first one is spatial but also moral displacement and disconnection and the consequent longing and nostalgia for, or perhaps one could simply call it alienation from, the “paradise” where diaspora people view themselves as authentically belonging. This ongoing experience of loss/attachment appears in Garond’s account of descendants of mainland Australian Aborigines living on Palm Island, where their ancestors were “removed” to prison-like reserves by the state. It is discussed in Thode-Arora’s chapter on Nieu Islanders who left their small island state to find work in Auckland. It is prominent in Brandt’s chapter on urban Maori. Lastly, it appears in Kempf and Hermann’s peculiar epilogue, which does not really address the important issues the volume raises in any comprehensive way but rather focuses on the projected effects of climate change and rising sea levels on the future of place and society in the island state of Kiribati.

The second theme, which is the book’s main one, is how diaspora peoples try to construct themselves in networks and in terms of “multiple belonging” both to the places they have lost and the places where they have come to reside. One important modality of this project is, as I say, through land claims. A couple of startling images caught my attention in this regard. Nieuian healers use ingredients imported from their island, but pastors and church elders possess power (*mana*) not from the land, as they would at home, but from the offices they occupy. Land, say urban Cook Islanders in New Zealand, is “the mother of identity,” but they have no moral connection with, and gain no agency from, land in the diaspora. Meanwhile, absentee landowners, who make