

# FiSahara: A Film Festival in Exile

*Written by María Carrión, festival executive director*

## Who We Are

In Arabic, *FiSahara* means “in the Sahara”. Our film festival takes place in the heart of this immense desert, in a region known as the Desert of Deserts or the *Hammada* (Devil’s Garden), where temperatures in the summer can soar to over fifty degrees Celsius. This forgotten corner of the world in Southwestern Algeria is the temporary home of about 150 thousand refugee women, men and children from the Western Sahara who fled their homeland in 1975, when Spain, the former colonial power, was withdrawing, and Morocco and Mauritania invaded it. Sahrawis have lived here for four decades in almost total isolation, the victims of an internationally invisible crisis.

Created in 2003 by both Sahrawis in the camps and Spanish civil society, FiSahara (Western Sahara International Film Festival) is an annual human rights film and cultural festival that seeks to entertain and empower the Sahrawi people through film, as well as to raise international awareness about the Western Sahara’s ignored conflict. As Sahrawis discovered film, they have embraced this new art as a tool for self-expression, cultural resistance and human rights activism, giving birth to Sahrawi cinematography.

FiSahara’s programming combines film screenings with roundtables, workshops, concerts, a traditional Sahrawi cultural fair, children’s entertainment, camel races and, for international visitors, a chance to live with Sahrawi families and visit camp institutions. The winning film at FiSahara is awarded a camel.

FiSahara brings the Sahrawi population together with filmmakers, artists, human rights defenders, journalists and many others from around the world, including, most recently, filmmakers and activists from Morocco who have come in support of the Sahrawi people. Visitors develop strong bonds with their new friends and families, and these experiences often lead to many different forms of collaboration, including the production of films about the Western Sahara.

Spanish actor Javier Bardem visited FiSahara in 2008 and subsequently produced *Sons of the Clouds*, a documentary on the Western Sahara that screened at the United Nations and the US Congress and that is used as an awareness-raising tool by the Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights. Others have initiated health, educational and cultural projects in the camps after their visit. While the festival’s origins and most of the team are in the refugee camps and in Spain, FiSahara is now an international project that attracts filmmakers and visitors from many different

countries, reaching out in particular to the Middle East/ North Africa (MENA) region and the rest of Africa.

An important part of FiSahara's programming is based on the premise that access to leisure, culture and entertainment are basic human rights. For Sahrawis entering their fifth decade of exile, and who face all sorts of scarcities on a daily basis, the festival offers a week of respite from the hardship of everyday life.

In particular, FiSahara focuses on offering entertainment for children and youth. Women, who shoulder family responsibilities and have leadership roles in the community, are also at the center of programming and scheduling. The festival acts as a two-way window through which Sahrawis view and interact with the outside world, and the outside world can learn about Sahrawi reality. It has become the most important annual event in the camps, a date that Sahrawi families look forward to year-round.

In 2011, FiSahara opened the Abidin Kaid Saleh Audio-visual School, a year-round film school in the camps that offers a two-year curriculum and is training the first generation of Sahrawi filmmakers. Screenings of student films at FiSahara have a particularly empowering effect on the Sahrawi audience, portraying an array of stories and characters unique to blossoming Sahrawi cinematography.

In 2013, FiSahara introduced a human rights film section offering a range of human rights-centered films

portraying struggles, stories and characters that Sahrawis can identify with and learn from. The films are accompanied by roundtables with filmmakers and/or protagonists. These screenings and debates, along with FiSahara's human rights video workshops for activists from the occupied territory and from the camps, help bring the Western Sahara's human rights crisis into sharper focus and provide Sahrawis with tools to document, contextualize and share their own reality with the international community.

## **The Western Sahara's Invisible Crisis**

FiSahara's work is both guided and conditioned by the larger context in which it operates: the forty year-old political conflict and humanitarian crisis in the Western Sahara. A land rich in natural resources including phosphates and plentiful fishing, the Western Sahara lies south of Morocco, north of Mauritania and west of Algeria. Its long coastline stretches along the Atlantic Ocean.

Often referred to as Africa's last colony, the Western Sahara was under Spanish colonial rule until 1975/6, when Madrid withdrew from the territory and allowed Morocco and Mauritania to invade, with the support of the United States and France. Thousands of Sahrawis fled the brutal military invasion and the repression that followed and took to the desert, leaving family members and homes behind. Morocco bombed the fleeing Sahrawis with napalm and white phosphorous using French-built warplanes.



*Concert in the dunes.  
Photo by Carlos Cazorro.*

Sahrawis who fled settled deep in the Sahara Desert of Southwestern Algeria, in an area ceded to them by the Algerian government. While the women built and ran the refugee camps, the men went to war. Mauritania withdrew in 1979. The war ended in 1991 with a UN-brokered cease-fire accord and a promise of a referendum on self-determination for Sahrawis. To this day, the people of the Western Sahara continue to wait for the referendum, which Morocco refuses to allow.

The Sahrawi refugee camps are located near the town of Tindouf, Algeria, and living conditions are harsh: extreme temperatures, arid terrain and lack of basic infrastructure and services such as clean drinking water and sanitation. The population, of which almost half are children, has few employment opportunities and depends on international humanitarian aid for survival. Most refugees have never seen their homeland.

The camps are administered by the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), the Sahrawi government-in-exile created in 1976; its Ministry of Culture is FiSahara's on-the-ground implementing partner. Despite the conditions and severe shortage of resources, Sahrawis have created an organised society in exile complete with Prime Minister, Ministries, Governorships and local administrations, emphasising education and literacy for the population. Women experience a larger degree of empowerment than in many neighbouring societies, in part due to their sixteen years of running the camps single-handedly.

One half of Sahrawis still live in the occupied Western Sahara, where they suffer from severe repression and where all Sahrawi human rights organisations are banned. In 2010, tens of thousands of Sahrawis set up a protest camp called Gdeim Izik outside the occupied city of Laayoune to protest the occupation, an action pre-dating the revolutions in the rest of the region. It was violently dismantled by the Moroccan police. The United Nations has a peacekeeping force in the territory and the camps known as MINURSO whose mandate does not include human rights monitoring—a key demand of Sahrawis and of international human rights organisations, and one of the main reasons why FiSahara is training human rights activists from the territory in video advocacy. The UN Security Council convenes each year to renew MINURSO's mandate, a time when Sahrawis usually take to the streets to demand the adoption of human rights monitoring.

Practically every Sahrawi family suffers from separation, with members on both sides of the Morocco-built wall dividing the occupied territory from an area controlled by the Polisario Front. It is the second longest separation wall in the world, a heavily guarded berm sewn with millions of landmines. Sahrawis call it “the wall of shame” and Fisahara often ends its activities with a short visit to this wall.

Spanish NGOs and associations that work on projects in the camps are constantly reminding the Spanish government of its obligations towards the Sahrawis, whom it abandoned. FiSahara was born

out of this network of solidarity organisations and operates under CEAS-Sáhara, a coordinating platform of associations in Spain.

## Our Origins

FiSahara was founded in 2003 by Sahrawis, along with Spanish solidarity activists and filmmakers from Spain who visited the camps. The aim was to bring entertainment to the Sahrawi people and to raise international awareness on the Western Sahara. FiSahara has since expanded its objectives to include a much wider aim of empowering Sahrawis through film. But the festival's ultimate goal is to disappear once the conflict has been resolved and Sahrawis can return to their homeland—and, hopefully, to reappear in the Western Sahara.

Sahrawis wanted a festival that would attract well-known filmmakers and movie stars as well as journalists whose visits could help to put their neglected crisis on the map. These visits would also connect the Sahrawi people to the outside world and introduce film as a new tool to communicate and to preserve their identity and culture. Sahrawi culture is primarily based on the oral arts such as poetry, music and storytelling, and in the festival's early days, film was practically unknown.

Logistics seemed daunting: the camps lacked basic infrastructure and festival planners had scarce financial means. However, Sahrawis are some of the most

resourceful people in the world. Dozens of Sahrawi electricians, engineers, artists and local leaders in the camps prepared the event on the ground. In Spain, people volunteered to travel to the festival as projectionists, sound technicians, producers and workshop facilitators, many loaning their own equipment. A long list of filmmakers, actors and actresses and other artists also signed up to go, and distributors loaned films for free.

The first edition, held in November of 2003, is remembered by all who experienced it as nothing short of a miracle—a truly magical event that at times came close to disaster. A chartered plane from Madrid landed in Tindouf and unloaded the team as well as hundreds of filmmakers, journalists and other festival attendees, 35mm reels and projectors, sound and other technical equipment. They were met by Sahrawis on Jeeps and old donated city buses and driven to Smara, one of the largest of the camps. There, local planners had erected a giant movie screen on the side of a truck, conditioned small adobe buildings and pitched desert tents for festival activities. Families opened their Haimas and welcomed perfect strangers into their homes.

Logistically, the festival constantly seemed on the verge of collapse. Electrical blackouts darkened screens and silenced microphones. Equipment overheated or broke down. There were no cell phones or walkie-talkies for team members to communicate, leading to mad races under the scorching sun. Most

of the Spanish team became ill; at one point all the projectionists were out sick on the same day. At an evening screening, a scene involving a bed offended a local filmgoer, who blocked the projector with his hand. Chaos ensued.

Still, it worked. When FiSahara's outdoor Desert Screen first lit up, the vast majority of the audience sitting under the stars had never seen a movie before. Before them appeared *Winged Migration*, a spectacular French documentary that lifted the audience to the heights of migrating birds flying over oceans, forests and deserts. That first edition also included Charlie Chaplin shorts, Michel Ocelot's animated film *Kirikou et la Sorciere*, films on the Western Sahara and a roster of Spanish and Latin American films. The crowning event was a concert at sundown, nestled in the sand dunes. Press coverage was extensive, particularly in Spain.

FiSahara also held roundtables with visiting filmmakers and Sahrawi artists, as well as filmmaking workshops and concerts. The overall response in the camps was overwhelming, and the festival has grown with each passing year, obtaining grants from the Spanish international aid agency and Ministry of Culture.

Since its first edition, FiSahara offered film workshops dealing with all aspects of film creation. Films made at the workshops screened on the last night of the festival. Offered by renowned filmmakers of every specialty, the workshop sessions were packed with

young Sahrawis, many of them women, who wanted to tell their own stories. These young people began to request year-round training. With a Spanish government grant and private donations, FiSahara built a film school in the Bojador camp. Created in 2011, the Abidin Kaid Saleh Audiovisual School graduated its first group of students in the summer of 2013. Each year FiSahara screens a selection of student films, which are also distributed to other film festivals.

For the first few years, FiSahara was an itinerant film festival, popping up in a different camp each year, until in 2007 it arrived in Dakhla, the most remote camp. Separated by about 200 kilometres of desert from the other camps, Dakhla had the least infrastructure and the most pressing needs. Its population had fled the furthest from Moroccan warplanes because they were most heavily bombed; they settled in this area because nomads identified it as an oasis with underground water. Although logistics for FiSahara were by far the most challenging here—a long ride through the desert, lack of basic electricity and poor communications—in 2007 FiSahara sprang up from Dakhla's sandy ground like a mirage. FiSahara brought Dakhla's population out of its extreme isolation, and after that the team decided to stay put. FiSahara is now held in Dakhla each year.

## Growing Pains

Film programming for FiSahara has been and remains a challenge, and because of this the festival

has experienced growing pains. While Spanish programmers were both filmmakers and cinephiles, in the early years they were experimenting with their audience. Few, if any, Sahrawis knew enough about film to participate in this critical selection process. In addition, in order to reach a key objective of attracting media attention to the festival—and thus the Sahrawi cause—both Sahrawi and Spanish team members prioritised films that had won awards and were able to bring its film stars.

While Sahrawi audiences enjoyed most of the movies, some of the earlier films were not suitable for new audiences who were unaccustomed to watching foreign films that portrayed vastly different realities in another language. The festival made an effort to subtitle in Arabic, but most people in the audience could not simultaneously watch movies and read. Some scenes depicting partial nudity or lovemaking were inappropriate for large, multi-generational, mixed audiences, and made viewers uncomfortable. FiSahara tried to remedy this by screening films containing these scenes in an indoor club and restricting audiences (young men were particularly enthusiastic to watch them), but this choice led to the almost complete exclusion of women from this audience, as well as criticism from more conservative members of the community.

With each passing year, FiSahara has adapted its film programming to local tastes and customs, prioritising Arabic-language films that speak most clearly to Sah-

rawi people. Films depicting nudity and erotic scenes, even if only briefly, are no longer screened, and the indoor club is now used for thematic screenings with targeted audiences, often accompanied by debates. Sahrawis are now active in the selection process and Sahrawi-themed films are a clear favourite.

## **FiSahara Today**

The festival and its film school base their activities on the needs identified by Sahrawi actors in the field, including the Ministry of Culture of the SADR, collectives run by women, youth and war victims, as well as local leaders.

## **Access to Entertainment, Culture and Leisure**

Screenings and activities at FiSahara include:

- Family films (animation, comedy, adventure, action—features and shorts) on FiSahara’s large outdoor Desert Screen
- Sahrawi-themed films, some made by Sahrawis (mostly but not exclusively by film school students) and others made by international filmmakers and collectives
- LeFrig cultural fair, parade, thematic Haimas (traditional desert tents) and camel races showcasing traditional Sahrawi culture and customs with hundreds of participants and that give the festival a rich cultural identity



Clown performance.  
Photo by Mikel Oibar.



- Clown and circus shows by our partner Pallasos en Rebeldía, an international circus group based in Galicia working in communities affected by conflict, poverty and exclusion
- Filmmaking workshops where schoolchildren participate in the making of a short film that is screened the following year at FiSahara
- Videogame workshop in which Zaytougang, a group of Palestinian artists from Yarmouk (Syria), create an interactive videogame on displacement. Sahrawi kids and youth participate in the creation of Sahrawi characters and stories based on their own lives.
- Concerts featuring Sahrawi and international groups
- Football matches pitting locals against visitors
- Opening and closing ceremonies: these festive events include dance, music and presentation of workshop certificates and film awards. The makers of the winning film receive a camel, and trophies are made by a women's ceramics cooperative.

## **Empowerment, Human Rights and Self-expression Through Filmmaking**

- The main festival theme guides some of the film programming and discussions. In 2013, it was "Revolutions and Human Rights in the MENA Region"; in 2014, it was a tribute to Nelson Mandela; in 2015, it is Universal Justice.
- Human rights film screenings are carefully chosen films that connect Sahrawis with similar human rights struggles and that have the potential to empower viewers. Particular care is taken not to select films that portray excessive human suffering, which may add to the suffering of the Sahrawis. The films must also appeal to international audiences. Films that have worked in the past include *5 Broken Cameras*, *The Lemon Tree*, *Dirty Wars*, *The Source*, *When I Saw You*, *Invictus* and *The Square*.
- Women's films: these are thematic screenings on gender-related issues for mixed audiences, with an emphasis on women's participation.
- Human rights roundtables are organised around a screening or a theme addressed in the films or at the festival. These roundtables bring Sahrawi filmmakers, human rights activists and many others together with international filmmakers and/or protagonists of the screenings. Recently, Moroccan filmmakers and journalists have participated in the festival, sharing films and strategies with Sahrawi counterparts.
- A human rights video advocacy workshop is offered by video activists and filmmakers. These sessions, which use the WITNESS methodology, centre on how to film, edit, narrate, archive and share human rights videos so that Sahrawis can improve the quality and impact of their human rights filmmaking. The goal is also to connect Sahrawi video activists from the occupied Western Sahara with international and regional video/human rights networks. In particular, organisations such as the RFK Center for Justice and Human Rights have specifically mentioned these trainings as a priority to help

improve their advocacy work on the Western Sahara. FiSahara brings about a dozen activists from the occupied Western Sahara to participate in this workshop. The images filmed by this collective provide the only footage available to the outside world depicting what is happening in the territory, including the torture, ill treatment and arbitrary imprisonment of Sahrawis by Moroccan security forces.

- Filmmaking classes are offered on topics including film narrative, directing non-professional actors and production of short films using a “guerrilla” style technique that teaches each person all aspects of the filmmaking process. FiSahara also offers women’s film workshops that focus on gender-specific content and use.
- Abidin Kaid Saleh Film school offers a two-year curriculum for a maximum of twenty students and is branching out into film production. The best students earn scholarships to study in international film schools such as San Antonio de los Baños (Cuba).

## Raising International Awareness

FiSahara is raising international awareness of the festival and the Sahrawi people through:

- Invitation of filmmakers, actors/actresses, human rights activists, journalists and cultural artists and human rights organisations to the festival
- Outreach to the above collectives to obtain their collaboration and support in press and media events and in the creation of communication mate-

rials (videos, brochures, interviews, etc.)

- Media and communication outreach through website and social media, press conferences and events, FiSahara videos (trailers, making of, public service announcements, etc.)
- Organised visits for media, guests and international visitors to camp institutions including hospital, schools, community orchards, film school
- Outreach to/partnership with film festivals, media collectives (particularly human rights-based) and foundations working on human rights, and integration into international and regional groups and institutions that use film as a means for social change

## Capacity Building

One of Fisahara’s most important goals is for the international team to transfer festival production, programming and directorship to Sahrawis in the camps. From the very first day, Sahrawis have been at the core of the team, with the Minister of Culture, Khadija Hamdi (and her predecessor, also a woman), at the centre. During the festival, the Spain team trains projectionists, sound technicians, producers, etc. There are skills that still need to be transferred so that Sahrawis can also conduct key activities like fundraising, international outreach, film curating and programming.

## Our Challenges

Many of FiSahara’s early challenges remain today, mostly due to the precariousness of conditions on



*Desert Filmmakers workshop.  
Photo by Carlos Cazorro.*

the ground. The festival relies on generators that often break down; the team is seeking renewable energies such as solar panels. Transportation is scarce and often complicates mobility within Dakhla. Cell phone communications and Internet access are shaky. The festival is also impacted by weather conditions such as high winds, extreme cold and heat, as well as rain; in 2014 a sirocco downed all festival Haimas. Risk mitigation, including health and security for hundreds of visitors, remains an important part of festival planning and execution due to the complex situation in the region.

Due to its small budget, FiSahara also continues to rely too heavily on volunteers and donated equipment, which sometimes limits the quality and effectiveness of its work.

## Evaluating Our Impact

In 2013 and as a result of an external evaluation, FiSahara began to implement a series of changes to internationalise its efforts, improve its impact and become financially sustainable.

Based on the recommendations, FiSahara's team has identified priority needs and objectives, and its programming is tailored to meet them.

The impact of an event like FiSahara is extremely complex to measure, and our team is still working on improving our methods. In the evaluation chapter of this manual we have noted down some of the tools

that are most useful to identify intended and unintended impact, both positive and negative.

## Filmography:

*Sounds of the Clouds* (dir. Alvaro Longoria, 2012).  
*Winged Migration* (dir. Jacques Perrin, Jacques Cluzaud and Michel Debats, 2001).  
*Kirikou and the Sorceress* (dir. Michel Ocelot, 1998).  
*5 Broken Cameras* (dir. Emad Burnat and Guy Davidi, 2013).  
*The Lemon Tree* (dir. Eran Riklis, 2008).  
*Dirty Wars* (dir. Richard Rowley, 2013).  
*The Source* (dir. Radu Mihaileanu, 2011).  
*When I Saw You* (dir. AnneMarie Jacir, 2014).  
*Invictus* (dir. Clint Eastwood, 2009).  
*The Square* (dir. Jehane Noujaim, 2014).

## For more on the Western Sahara conflict see:

Profile:

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-14115273>

Background:

<http://goo.gl/CkKOMn>

Timeline:

<http://films.culturesofresistance.org/ws-timeline>

## Human Rights reports:

<http://goo.gl/DohZdr>

<http://goo.gl/Nu22zK>