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Moving and Communication  
Monica Magnone



# MOVING AND COMMUNICATION

Moving and communication are both strategies to link two or more geographically distant points with each other. Efficient mobility infrastructure and widely available communication resources bridge the gap between spaces and people. At the same time, they are catalysts for interaction and exchange, which are crucial factors for cultural and economic development.

Given the extremely remote, harsh location of the camps by Tindouf, the distance separating them from the rest of the world is arguably a multiple of the actual distance measured in miles or kilometers. Geographically, the camps are isolated. If for no other reason this fact alone calls for an elaborate network of linkage, embedding the camps in the cultural, political and economic world. The chapter on Moving and Communication focuses on these networks, which facilitate connecting people and spaces, or permit it altogether, both within the camps and between the camps and the rest of the world.



## INTRODUCTION

When first arriving to El Aaiún, the prominent role mobility plays is easily noticeable. What is not seen at first sight is the multitude and complexity of exchanges and what effect the influx of people, goods and information has on the camps. Often the aspect of humanitarian aid and the unilateral relation or dependency it creates becomes the issue of main interest. Meanwhile the paths of exchange and how they take place are much more intricate.

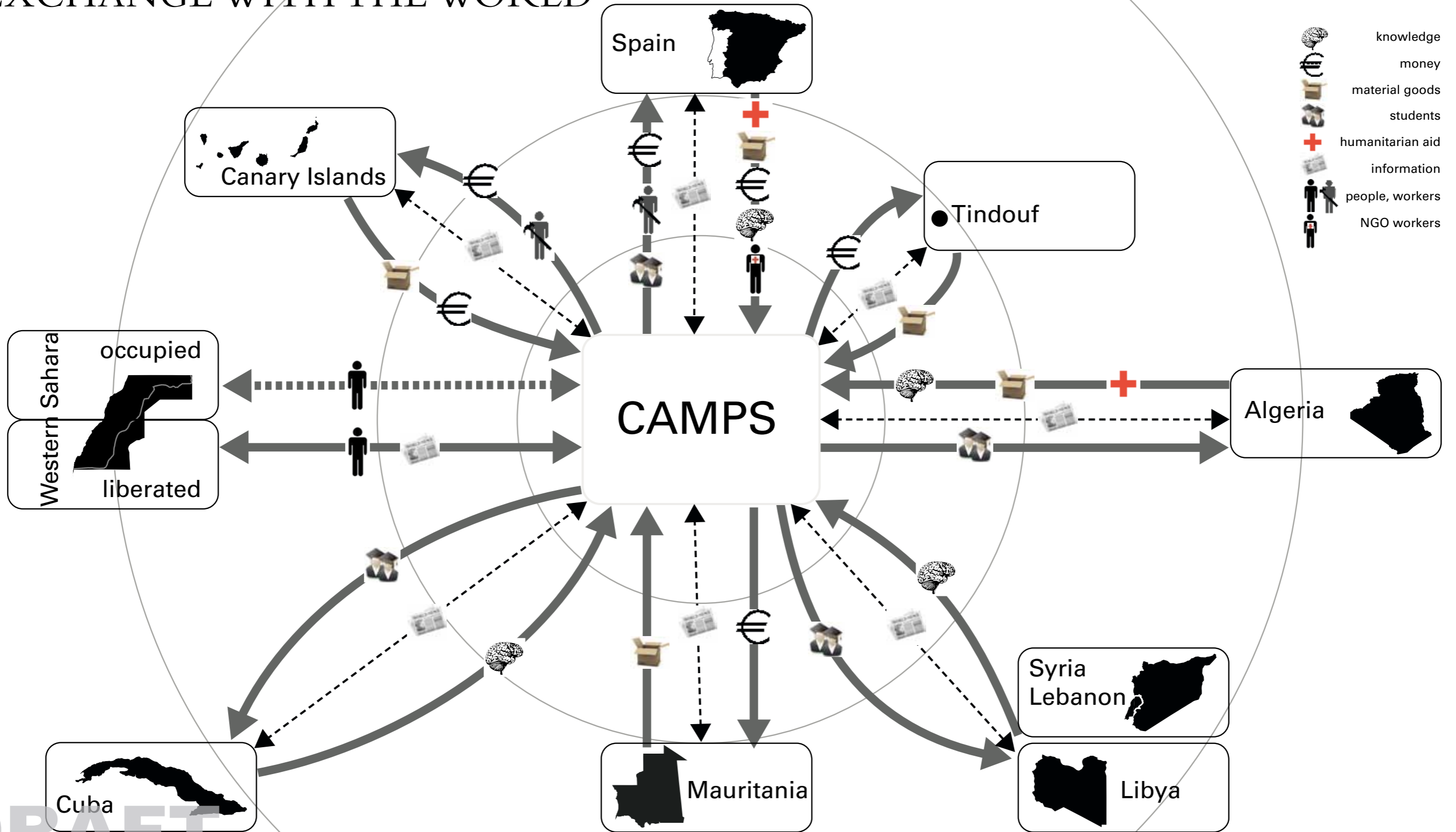
Also, the question arises why this society emphasizes mobility and interaction as much as it does. A nomadic background is most likely an underlying and strong cause, but only explains the present to a certain extent. Political intention is also a key factor, as it dictates most debates on permanence versus the ephemeral.

This introduction provides a brief history of the topic and an overview of the bandwidth of interaction and exchange through moving and communication today.



photo: [www.wanderlust.co.uk](http://www.wanderlust.co.uk)

# EXCHANGE WITH THE WORLD



-  knowledge
-  money
-  material goods
-  students
-  humanitarian aid
-  information
-  people, workers
-  NGO workers



bus stop, shuttle arriving from Rabouni (photo: M. Herz)



repair shop and fuel pump



repair shop



old tyres



spare parts retail



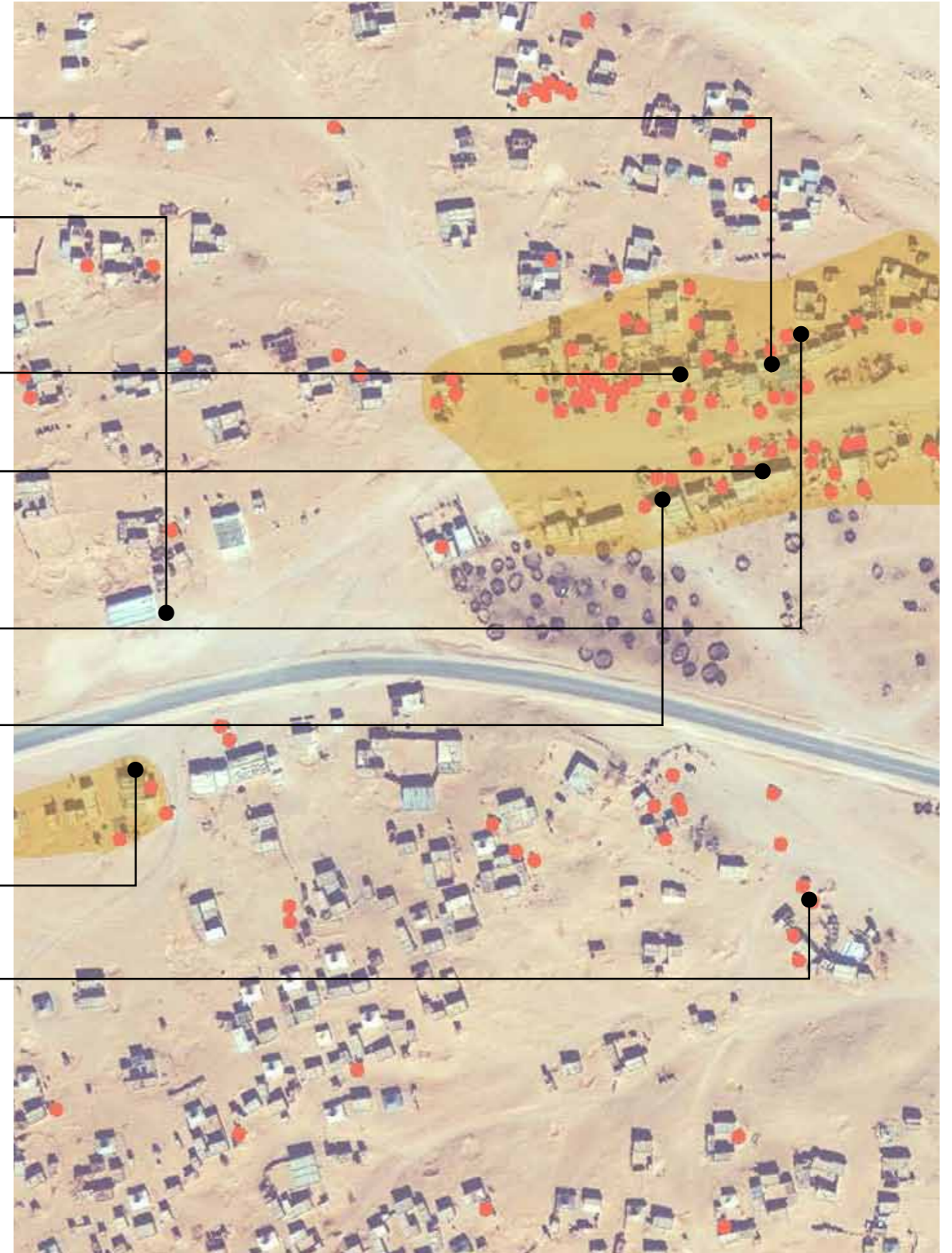
scrap vehicles



privately owned truck



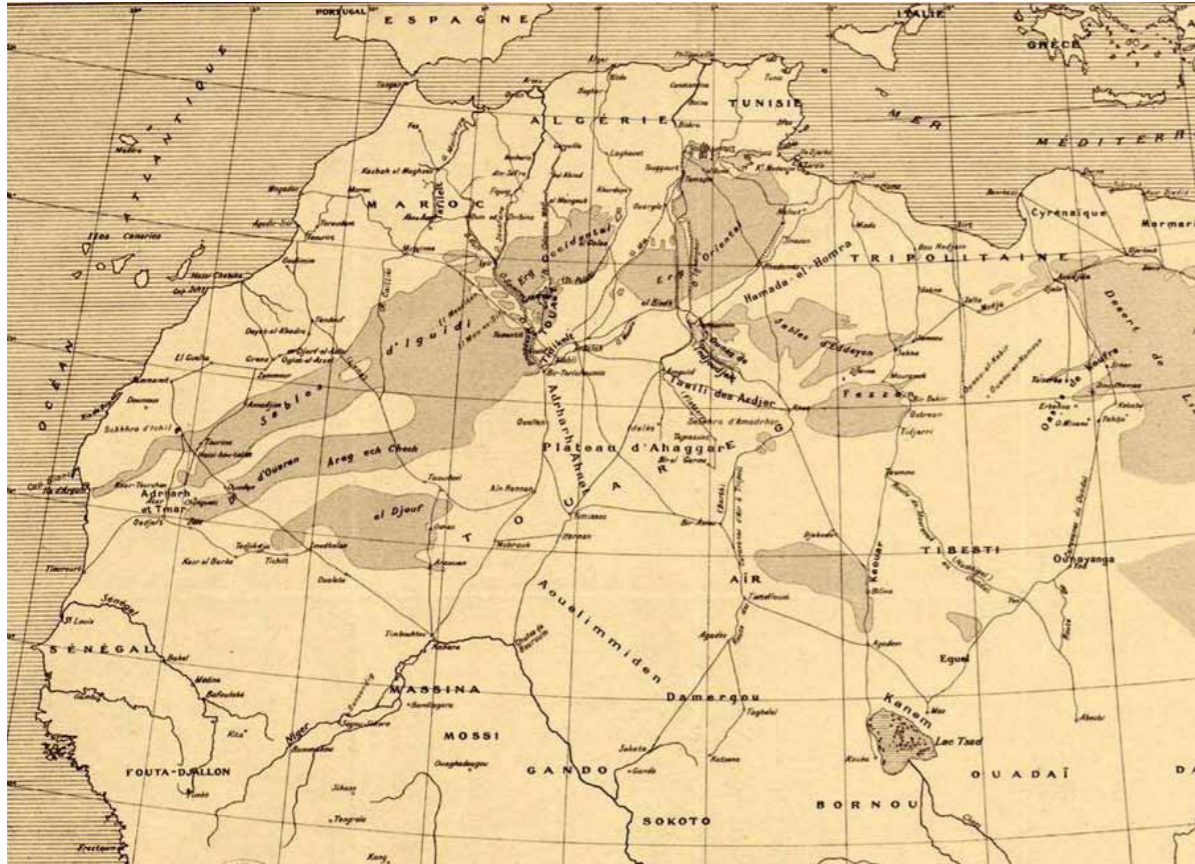
fuel pump



### Signs of Mobility

In any given neighborhood of El Aaiún one finds the traces of mobility and the infrastructure that is needed to maintain the vehicles as well as the spaces created by these elements.

Cars and trucks are not only a reliable source of income, they are an integrated part of everyday life for most refugees and also a dominating part of the townscape.



Saharan Trade Routes, map of 1859 (source: www.history-map.com)



Traditional saddles (photo: newssourceinfo.blogspot.com)

### Nomadic origins

Although a large part of the present Sahrawi People in exile in the camps fled from the urban context of the Western Saharan cities, the background of their culture is originally nomadic. Before Islam arrived to the region in the 8th century AD, nomadic Berbers populated the region.

The trigger for expansion and greater changes in culture was the introduction of the camel around the year 50 AD. The new mode of moving revolutionized the culture and was the key to controlling the trade routes in Northern

Africa. Not only was it an important factor for wealth and power over the territory, but it was the one thing that could assure survival in the Saharan desert.

Oasis quickly evolved to become tradeposts and cities, new occupations including camel dealers and caravan guides were born.

As the people moved, they brought along their dwellings and their culture causing an intense exchange with every other tribe they encountered. This led to a diverse and heterogeneous culture that developed increasingly with the height of the trans-saharan trade.

Keeping in mind this background and the effect the change in way of moving had on culture and economy, one can find many formative aspects of nomadic culture in today's Sahrawi culture. In many situations a temporary solution prevails over the permanent, putting emphasis on the temporary situation the refugees find themselves in.



Saharan Caravan, 1896, photo: images.rgs.org

# CONNECTING BY MOVING

Moving is the most obvious and direct way to establish a connection between two locations. Different factors like speed, frequency and availability further define the performance of such movement, giving it a characteristic value and purpose. An efficient, quick and easily-accessible infrastructure for moving therefore makes spaces seem closer together, especially due to the shortening of the time necessary for transit.

This chapter first analyzes the topic of moving on the scale of the camps, within one single camp but also between the different camps, then a superordinate scale through which the refugees have a direct relation with places as distant as Cuba.



## MOVING WITHIN THE CAMPS

The easiness and accessibility of transportation within the camps is quite astonishing. It is not uncommon to be asked to jump in the car when walking around in the camp. The drivers are always eager to help and find it unusual to see pedestrians walking while they could be driving in a car. The refugees show no aversion at all to vehicles. The family cars are often parked within the walls of residential compounds, shaded and protected from the sun. Cars are used for everything from visiting family members in a different camp and buying food in Tindouf to going to work in a shop in the main market.

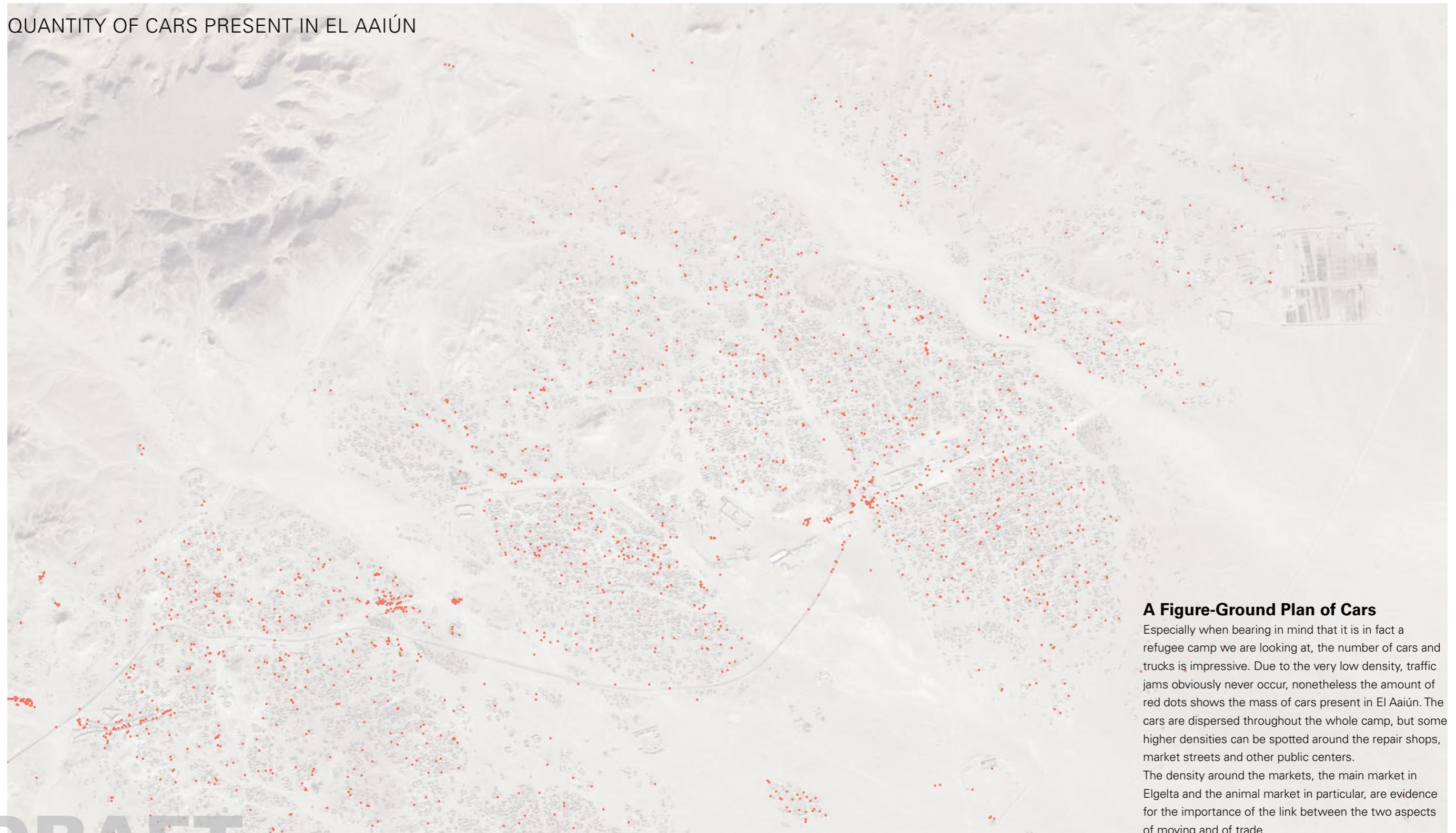
This chapter discusses not only the vehicles themselves but also the interrelated infrastructure and the necessary spaces that evolve around them. Although there are several different means of transportation, the prevalent way of moving is by car, while the others, e.g. bus and cart, undertake specific tasks and are applied selectively.







## QUANTITY OF CARS PRESENT IN EL AAIÚN



### A Figure-Ground Plan of Cars

Especially when bearing in mind that it is in fact a refugee camp we are looking at, the number of cars and trucks is impressive. Due to the very low density, traffic jams obviously never occur, nonetheless the amount of red dots shows the mass of cars present in El Aaiún. The cars are dispersed throughout the whole camp, but some higher densities can be spotted around the repair shops, market streets and other public centers.

The density around the markets, the main market in Elgelta and the animal market in particular, are evidence for the importance of the link between the two aspects of moving and of trade.

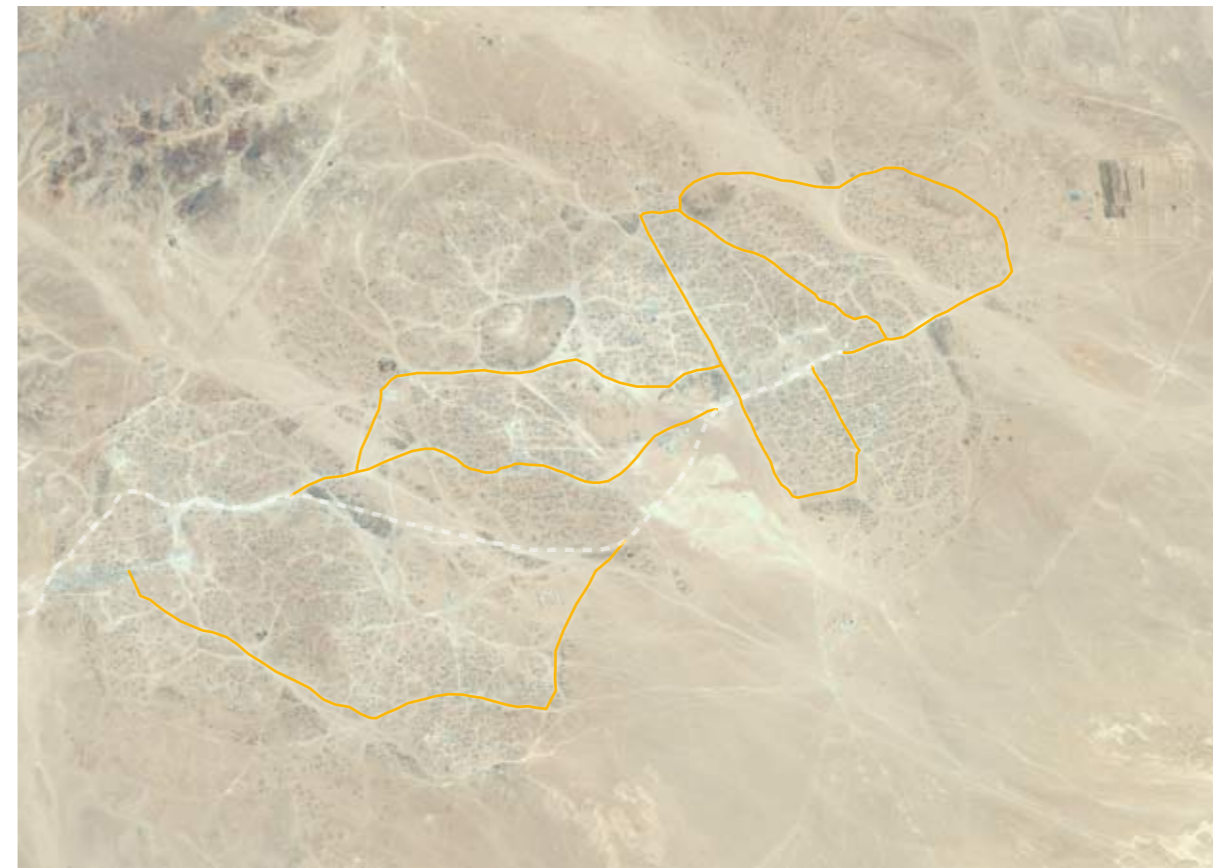
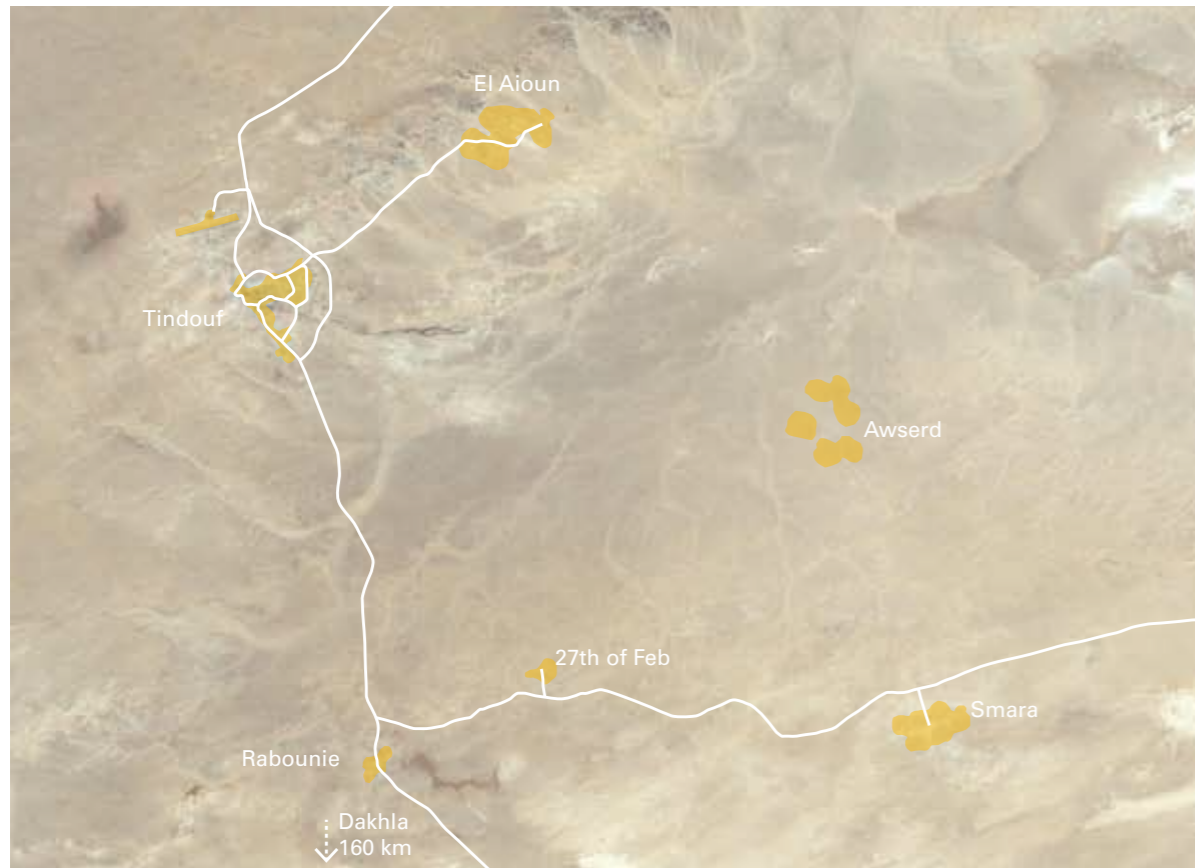
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Cars in El Aaiún, every red dot marks a car (source: maps.google.com)



## SPACES

Where buildings are destroyed by rain every few years and all forms of infrastructure are to remain ephemeral by political choice, the negative space gains more importance. Although in constant movement and bluntly defined as a void, it is the permanent element, that in its flexibility is always present. The spaces evoked by movement may very well be changing and moving themselves, but exactly by doing so, they represent the central idea of a temporary living situation.



### Main Access to Camps

Smara, 27th of February, Dakhla and El Aaiún camps are all accessible by an asphalted road that usually leads right to the middle of the camp, often stopping in front of a *protocolo* building in a dead end.

Of course these roads are much more comfortable to drive on and are therefore preferred when choosing a route in the camp but especially when driving from one camp to another. For example the preferred route from El Aaiún to Smara follows the detour along the asphalted route, passing Tindouf.



### Primary Access Network

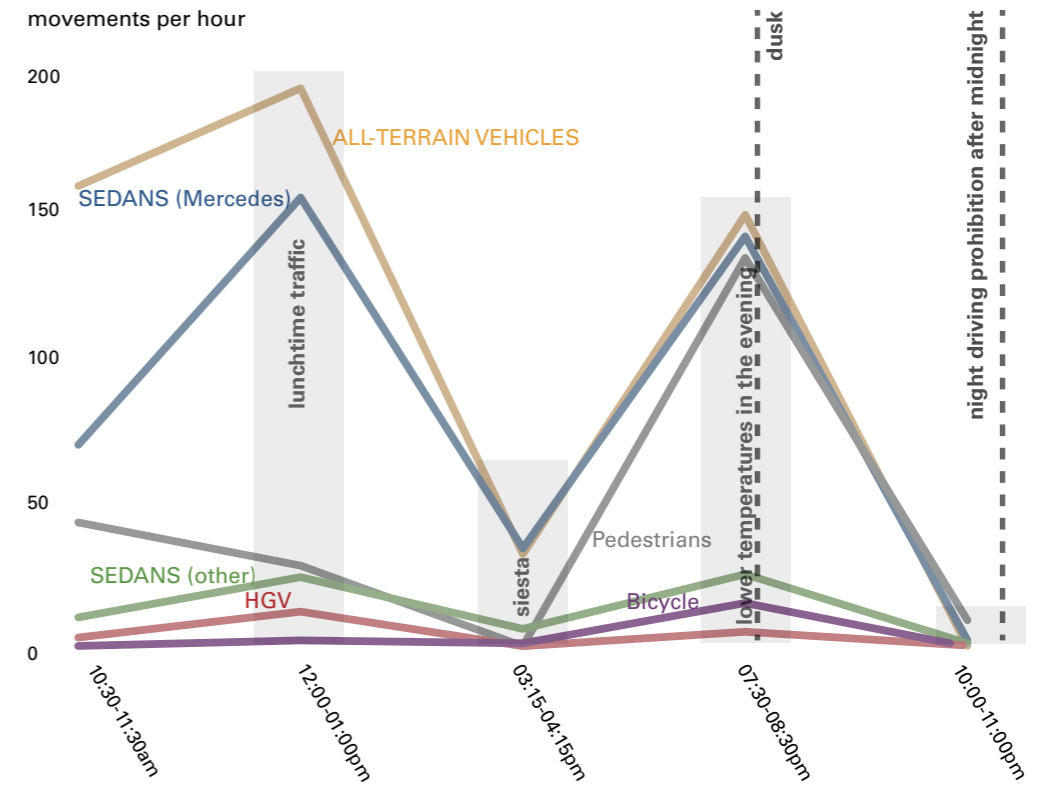
Some of the primary roads are still located on the original grid of the camp and therefore disclose a trace of the structure of the camps when they were first built. They are broad paths that easily readable, both in situ and on satellite images. They divide barrios from one another simply by inserting a gap between them. As a pedestrian, there is no obstacle in crossing these roads besides the distance itself.





### Secondary Access Network

This secondary network infiltrates the neighborhoods, and reaches out to every house. The proportions of the houses to the street make the space inviting for different activities. Often children play on these roads and pedestrians use them for walking: the ground is much harder and one does not sink into the sand, making it easier to walk.



### Volume of Traffic

Generally speaking, the quantity of passing cars on the main road in El Aaiún is by all means comparable with the traffic in a main street of a residential area in Basel. The number of passing cars during the day is far from constant though, dipping during the afternoon siesta period and at night to nearly no movement. At all other times, there is a restless and busy coming and going of traffic flows.



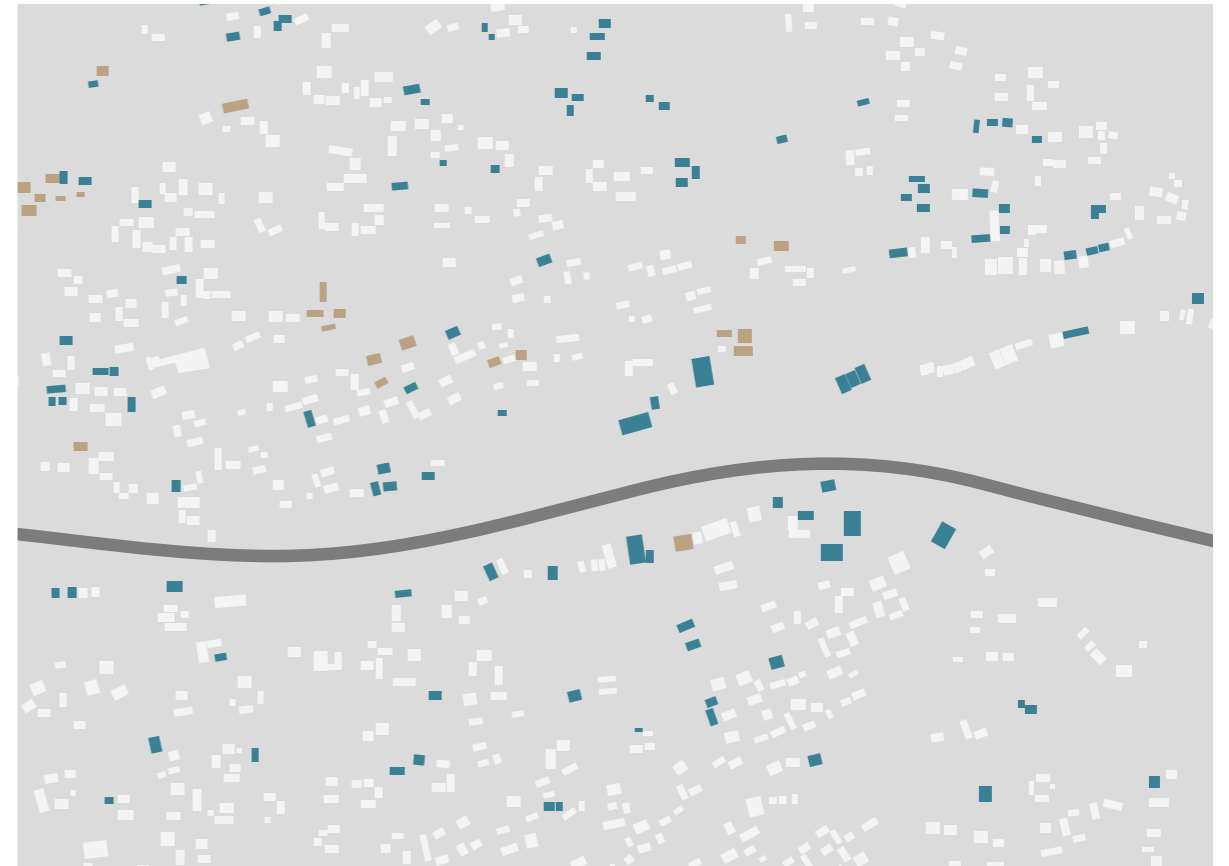
Asphalted road, El Aaiún

### Evolving along an axis?

The asphalted road in El Aaiún was realized in 2007 by the Algerian government. It follows one of the existing main sand paths, so it is basically the fixation of an ephemeral, volatile space.

A comparison of an excerpt of the figure-ground-plan before and after the realization of the asphalted road in El Aaiún shows where new buildings have emerged and where some buildings have been demolished. The fact that the density of the new buildings is not higher in direct proximity of the asphalted road shows that in this

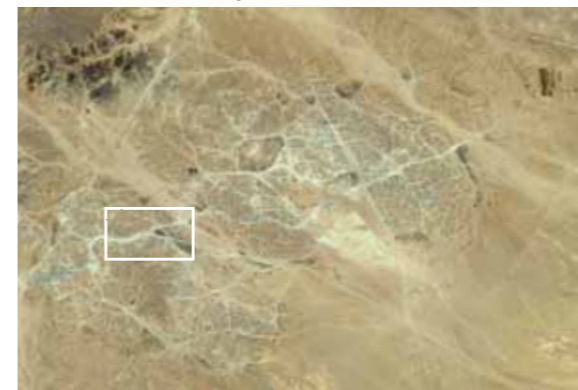
case, it does not play the role of a catalyst. This is most likely due to the informal and impermanent nature of the road network as a whole: The paths chosen by car drivers are volatile and move according to the soil conditions, paths develop according to where the drivers pass. Therefore the road is not seen as a permanent backbone, along which it is favorable to build and develop new urban spaces, but rather it accentuates the road network as an inconstant, continuous space flowing in the vacant spaces between the buildings.



Zoom-in of figure-ground plan

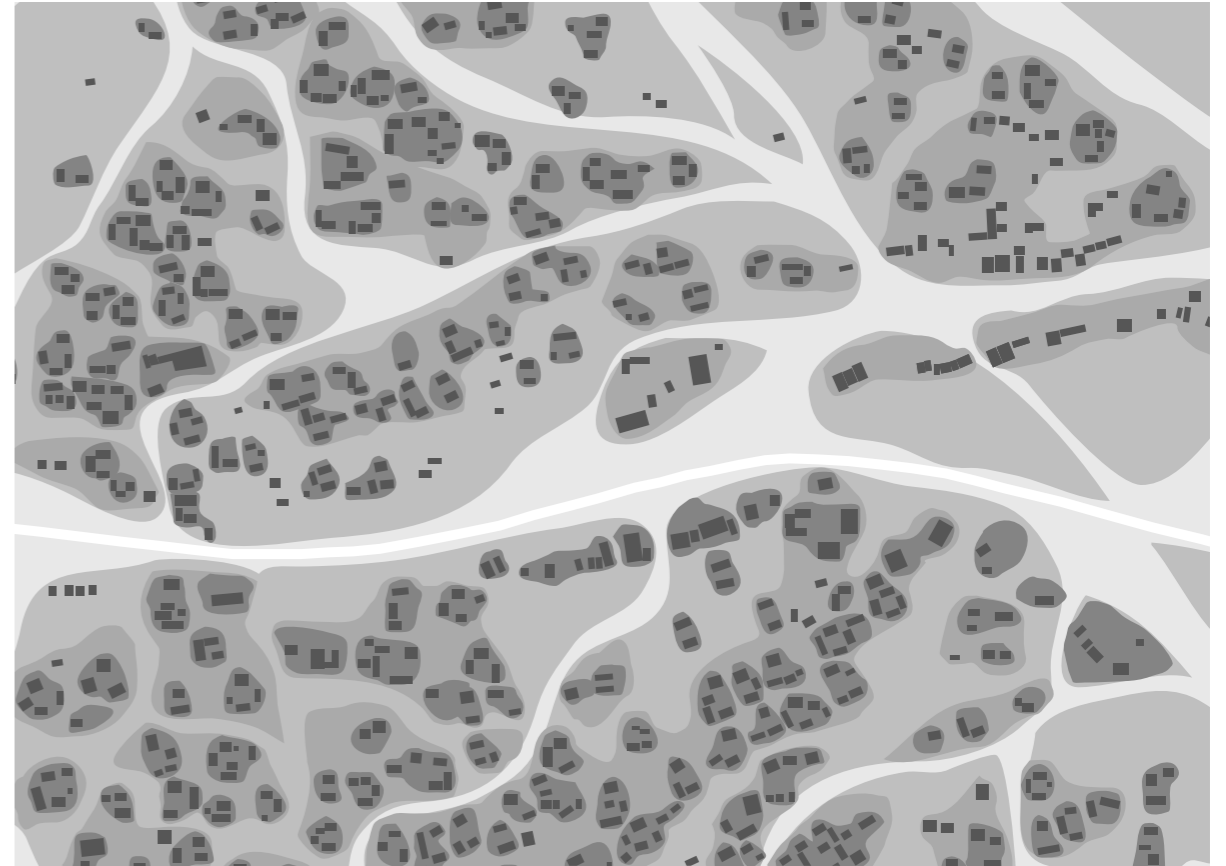
- asphalted road, built 2007
- buildings unchanged between 2005 and 2011
- buildings built after asphalted road
- buildings demolished after asphalted road

El Aaiún, satellite image 2005



El Aaiún, satellite image 2011





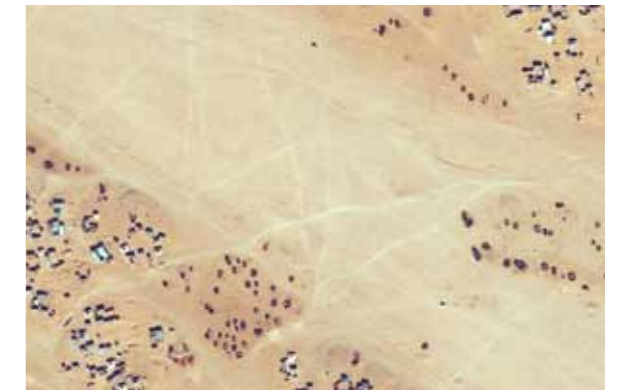
Zoom-in illustrating „islands“ and traffic permeability

### All Access for Vehicles

The building cluster that forms a family living unit is virtually inaccessible to the public. Although the boundaries of these units are not always visible at first sight, the inhabitants of the wilaya respect these distinct spaces, weaving around them to get from one place to another. The same can be said about all forms of transportation and on larger scales: a cluster of family living units forms a small neighborhood, a cluster of neighborhoods forms a block etc. Each of these hierarchic structure levels has a decreasing resistance to traffic permeability, channeling

traffic movements. This structure produces islands in the continuous space of traffic movement, where only small numbers of cars pass. With shifting building structures or soil conditions, the traffic flows and their paths move as well.

Informal paths in sand, El Aaiún





Costs for Transportation by Private Taxi from Smara:

to Awserd	0.50€
to 27th of Feb.	0.50€
to Rabouni	0.50€
to Tindouf	1.00€
to El Aaiún	1.00€
to Dakhla	10.00€



Vendor by meeting point, Smara

### Meeting Points

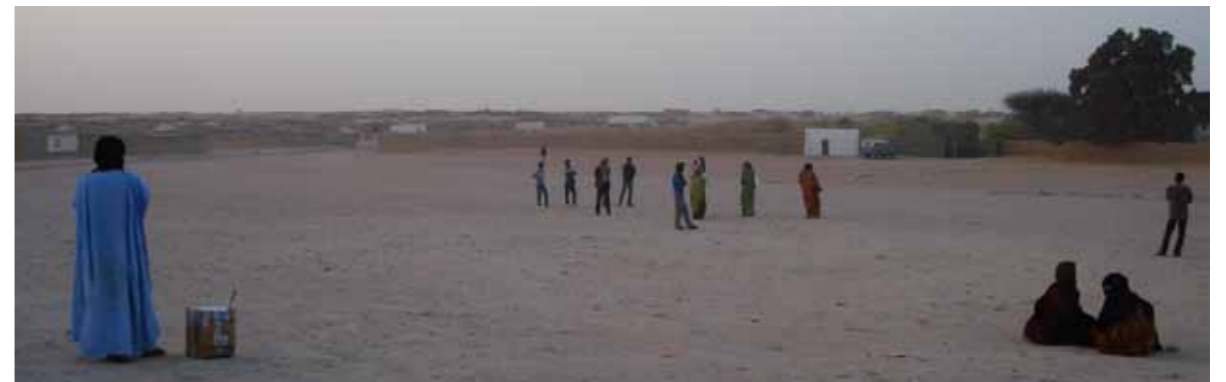
Private taxis and car-pooling are very popular ways of moving from one place to another. Commuters working in Rabouni prefer taking a private taxi to waiting for the shuttle bus in the evening and families hop into a passing car on the way to Tindouf. It is a symbiotic business, one party needing a vehicle and the other thankful for some additional money to subsidise the car expenses.

The spaces used as meeting points are the rare places where people meet outdoors and can be very crowded at peak hours like in the evening around 7pm.

People approach each other to clarify who else intends

to go to the same destination. This often sparks an entire conversation on the reason of their travel to any other thinkable topic. In Smara occasionally vendors even seize the opportunity of the waiting crowd and install themselves in the middle of the open space with their merchandise, selling clothing and sometimes beverages.

In a small scale, the meeting points are an alternative to busy markets for exchanging small talk, general thoughts and the latest news. In these spaces, communication and transportation overlap and create a dynamic point of the map of both El Aaiún and Smara.



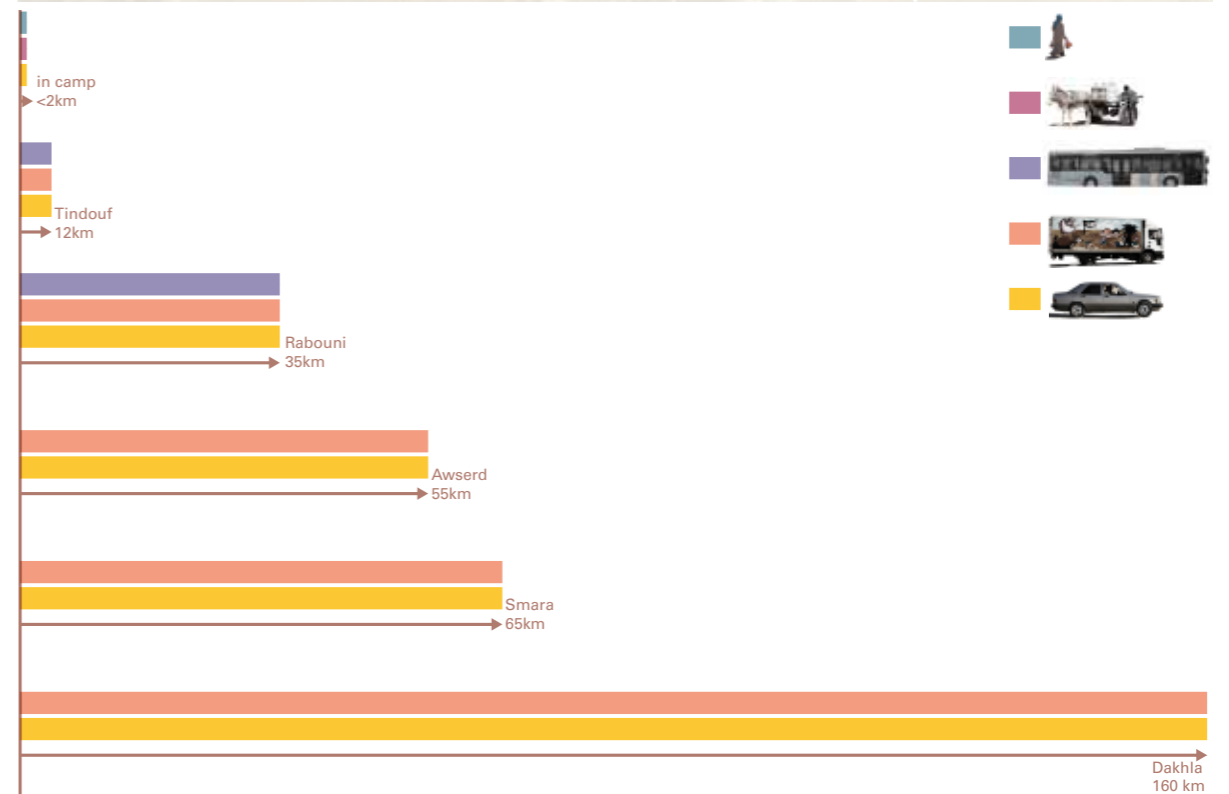
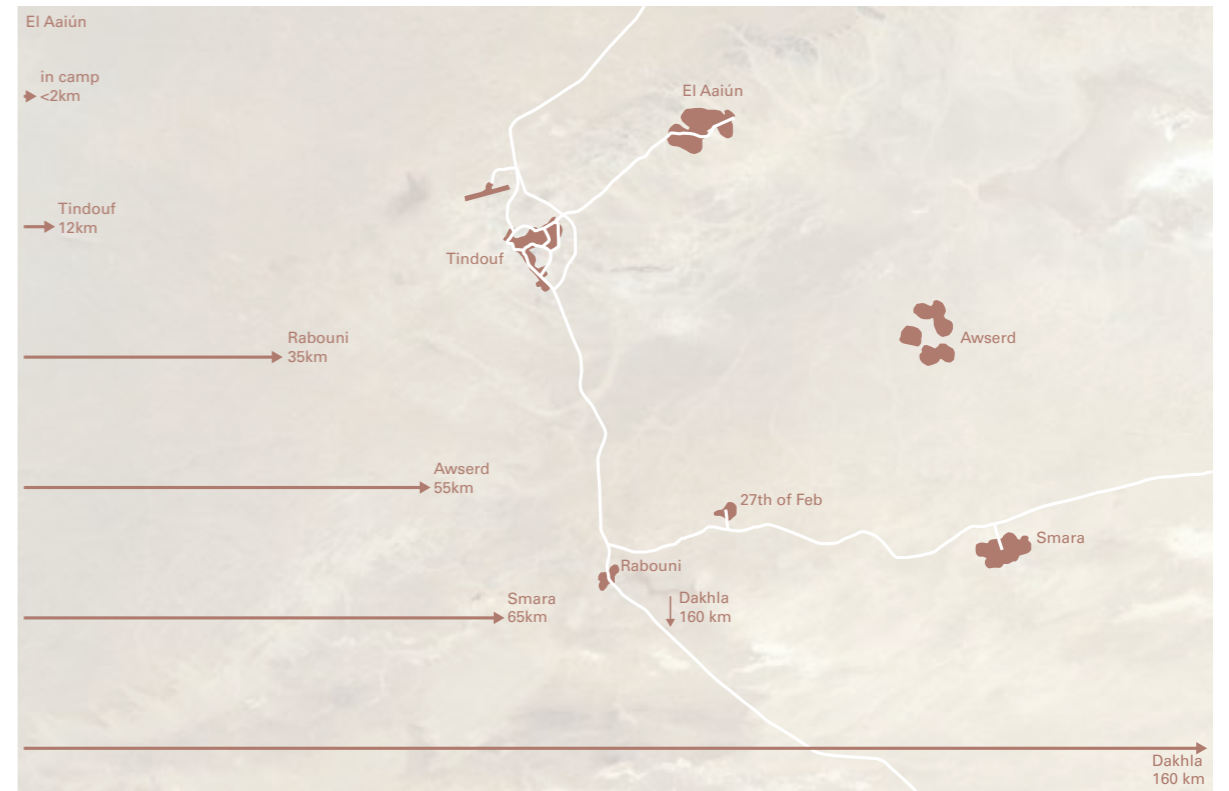






### Vehicles

Although there are several different modes of transportation within the camps and to other destinations, cars are the preferred way of moving in everyday life, being the most versatile and common vehicle. Nonetheless - the diversity allows for independence, getting from one place to another is hardly ever a problem in the camps.

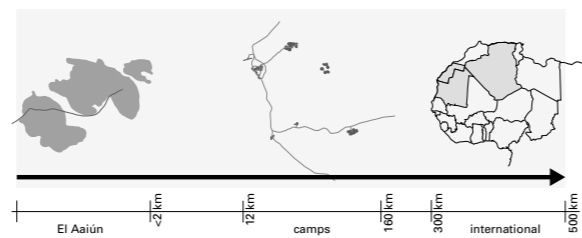


Range of different vehicles



### Cars

Cars are the most well-adapted and therefore most versatile vehicles available to the Sahrawi refugees in the camps. They are used for everything from buying food in Tindouf to driving to a wedding in a different neighborhood.



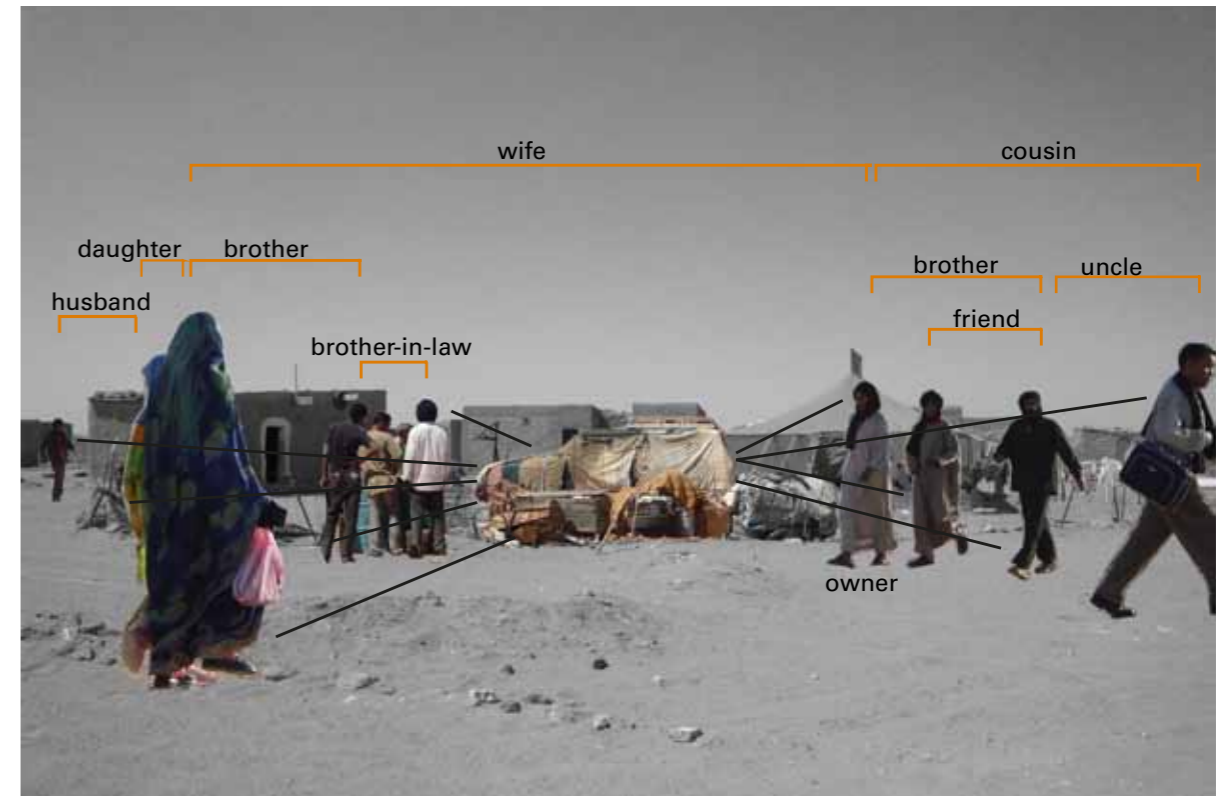
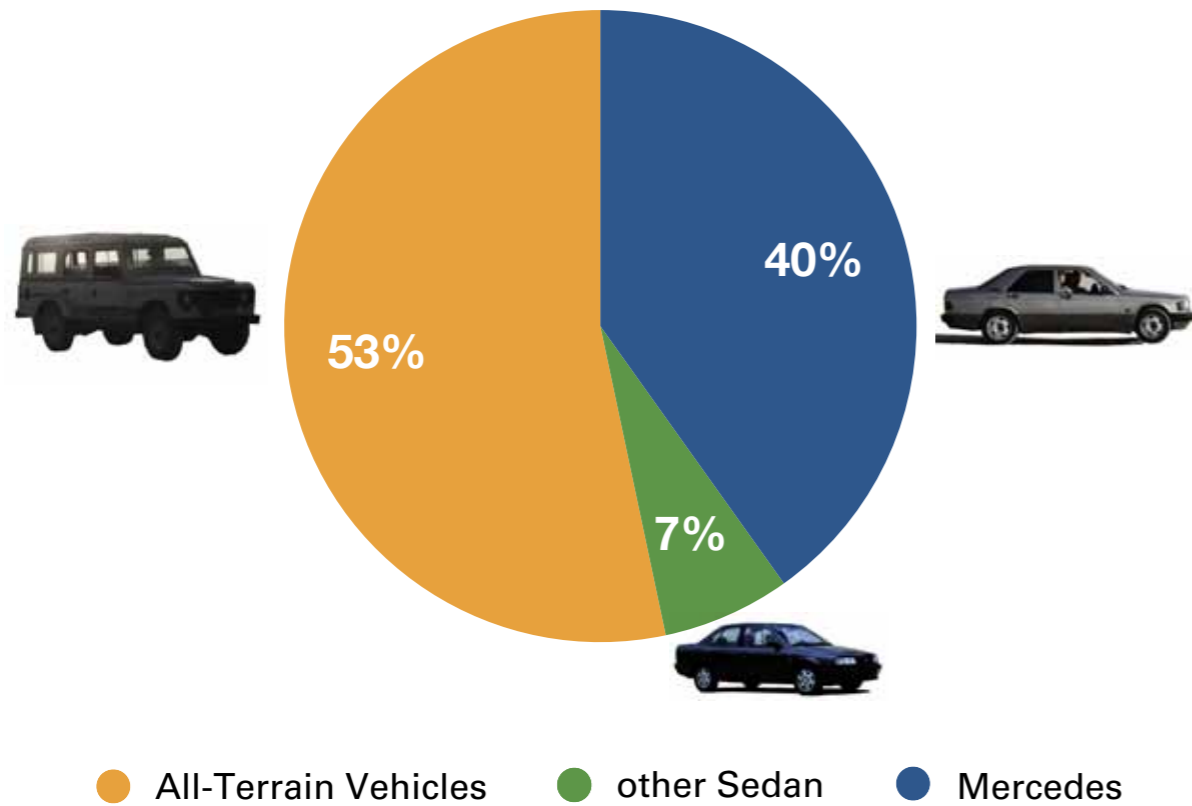
### Import Modality

Cars are imported primarily from Spain and the Canary Islands by single people who have either saved enough money themselves or have borrowed the necessary sum from family members and friends. A son who studies in Spain or a brother working on the Canary Islands obviously facilitates the process.

The cost for a used car in Spain is stated to be between 1500 and 3000€, an amount that is nearly impossible to set aside within the camp without outside help.

There is hardly any market for used cars within the camps, seen as they are repaired and reused until they no longer can be repaired, in this case the car is broken down into its pieces, which then are reused, serving a different purpose.

Many of the cars have survived over three decades in the camps, usually these cars have never changed owner during this period of time or have at least stayed in the same family, for example being passed on from a father to his son.



### Limited Diversity

The percentage of Mercedes in El Aaiún - approximately 85% of all sedan type cars - is striking and hard to remain unnoticed. Mercedes owners claim they chose this model because they are sold at relatively cheap prices in Spain and because they are adequate for the desert roads. Further, the assortment of spare parts can be narrowed down to those necessary for only a few car models, reducing the total amount of parts that have to be bought and stored as frozen capital.



### Car Ownership Mirrors Family Structure

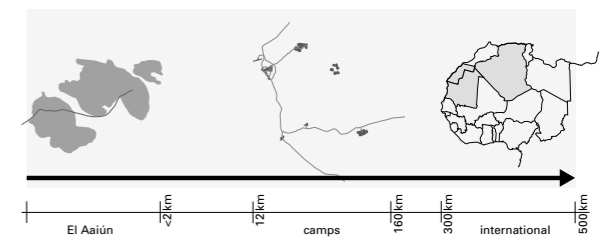
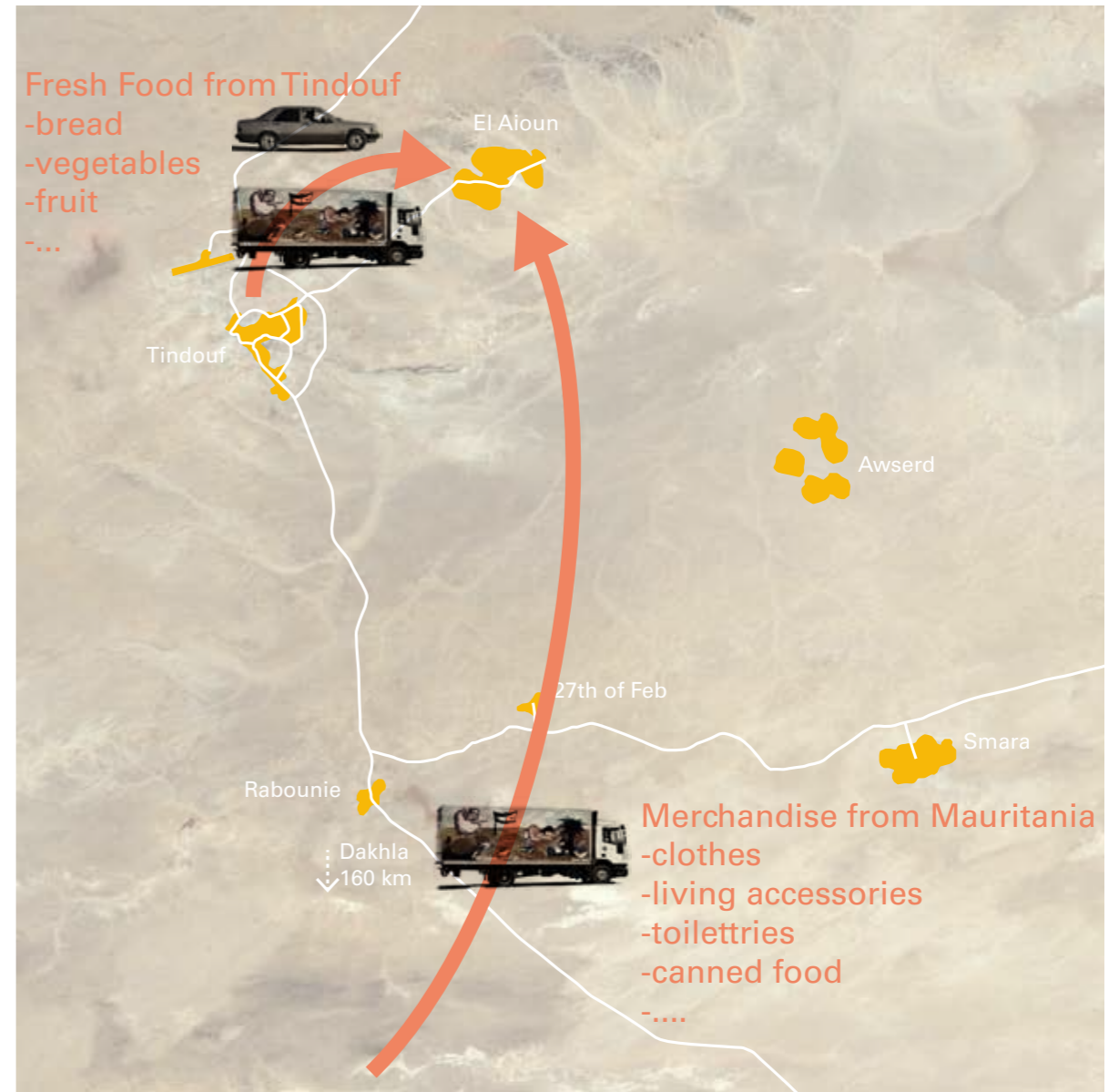
Not everybody can afford to own a car, in fact many borrow money from friends and family to purchase it. In return, the cars are used by a greater amount of people. Emphasizing the structure of the extended family, the car is shared amongst siblings, cousins and also family friends. This means that even if not everyone possesses a car himself, nearly everybody has access to a car when needed.



### Trucks

Trucks are often privately owned and used primarily to bring merchandise to the camps. They represent a possible form of income for the owners, who are paid by several shop owners to bring goods from Tindouf or as far as Mauritania on a as-needed basis.

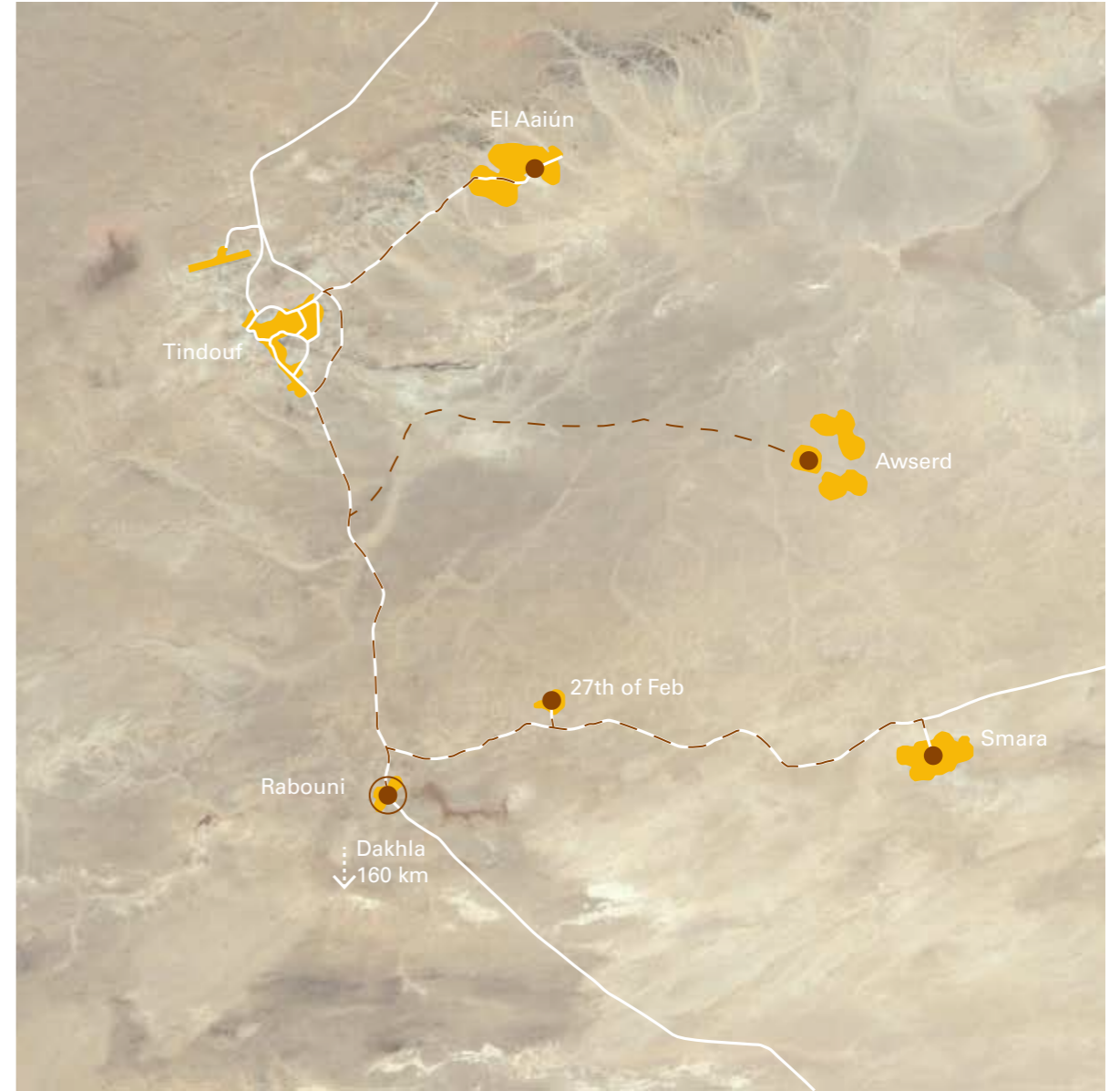
A rather large investment of 6000-8000€ is needed to buy a truck, the money comes from a Spanish pension or from family member who work abroad.





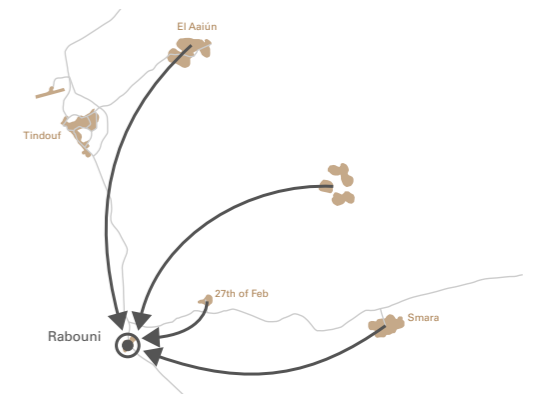
### Bus

Mostly because Rabouni does not offer any permanent living space, practically all the workers commute daily. Mainly for this purpose the government offers a daily shuttle bus to Rabouni in the morning and back to the camps in the evening free of cost for the passengers. Other users include people needing to visit the regional hospital or people going to administrative offices in Rabouni.



### Monofunctional and Centralist

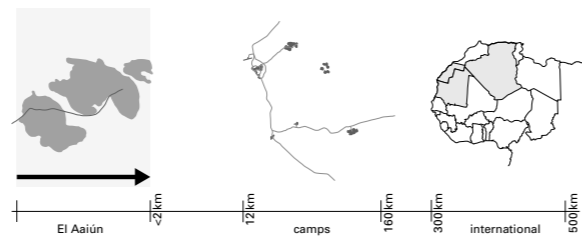
Although hopping on and off on request is allowed, the bus service shuttles passengers only to and from Rabouni. It has the specific purpose of helping commuters with better linkage of the camps with Rabouni, where there are no permanent inhabitants. It is arguably not a coincidence that Rabouni is connected this efficiently: the intent is to make the administration and its offices as transparent and accessible to the public as possible.





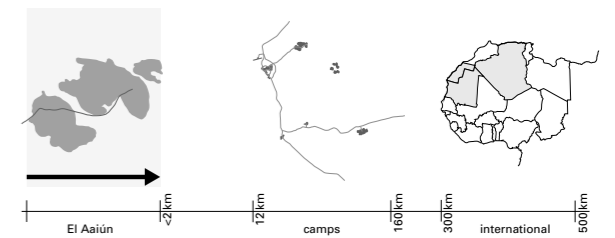
### Donkey-drawn cart

Although one would expect camels in the Saharan camps, donkeys are a more common sight, especially as pack animals. The donkeys are a rather economic and uncomplicated means of transportation when the matter is to disperse humanitarian aid goods in the neighborhoods from a central distribution point. Another very common use is for the transportation of clay bricks from where they are produced to the houses being built.



### Bicycles

Bicycles are often brought to the camps by NGO workers as gifts for children. The sandy uneven terrain keeps bicycles from being used for more than leisure and fun. Many children wish to have bicycles after having used them in Spain during their summer vacations.

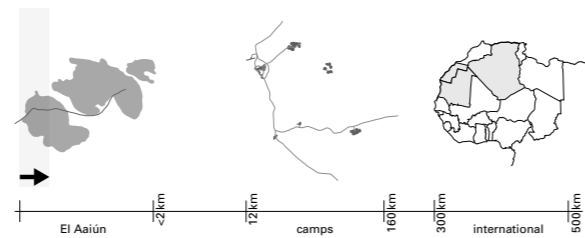




### Pedestrians

It is not common to walk much further than a few minutes, the time it takes to go to a shop very near by or to a neighbor's house. Most of the year high temperatures makes it uneasy to walk during early afternoon hours, in the summer it is best to stay indoors completely.

At the same time, the availability of other transportation, primarily cars, makes the other options much more attractive.











### Repair Shops

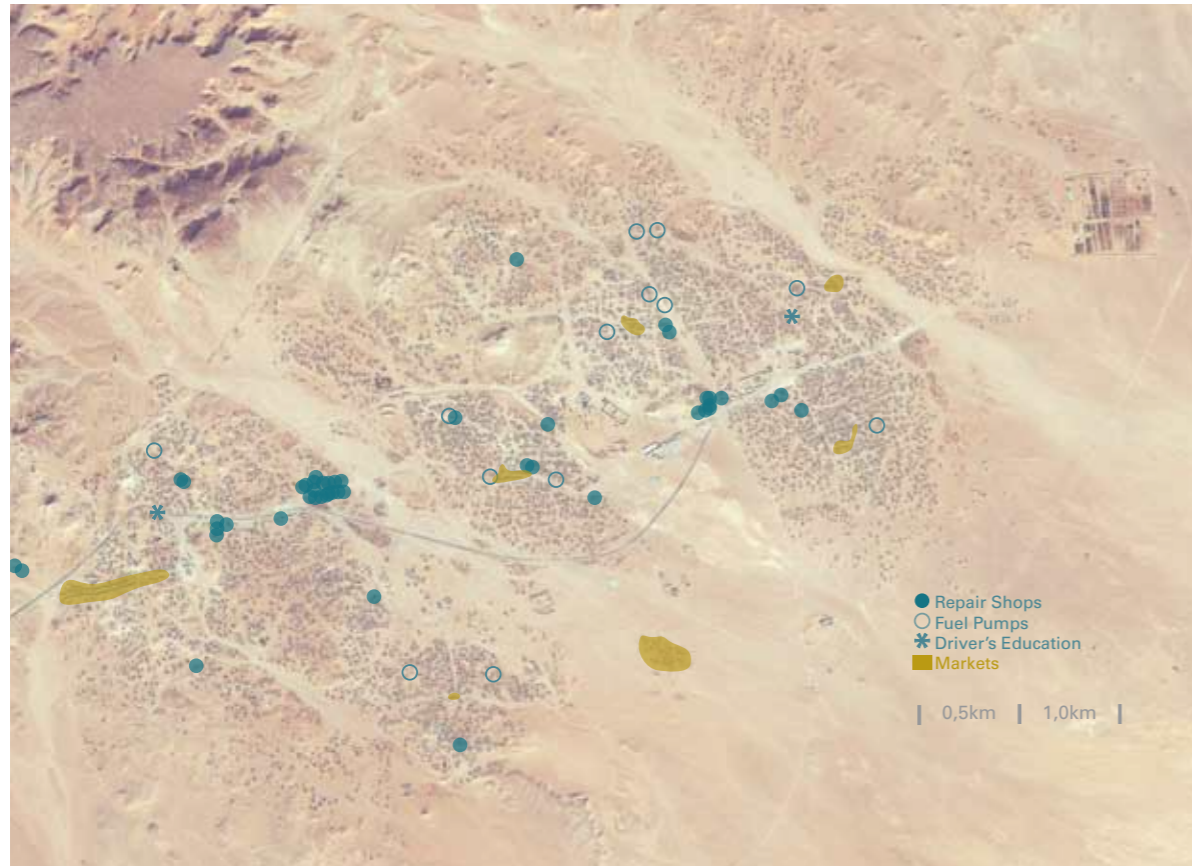
Repair shops or garages represent a flourishing business as there is a constant need of maintenance for the large amount of vehicles in the camps. Needless to say, even rugged Range Rovers and Mercedes are quite strained by the sand and the rough paths and potholes.

Mechanics working in repair shops are usually self-employed but organize themselves in cooperational ensembles, helping each other out with everything from workloads, to tools and spare parts. For this reason, in both El Aaiún and Smara there are several areas in which

garage clusters form, also making it easier for them to be localized in the camp. Although the mechanics do not have any formal education, they are very skilled and well acquainted with their car models and parts and are capable of fixing any defect.

Although the building typology does not vary drastically, the spectrum of repair shops is very wide, some being fascinatingly organized, others seemingly chaotic or even abandoned. Some are benefitted with a large and well-stocked front yard, others are specialized in selling parts.





### Repair Shops in El Aaiún

Fuel pumps in El Aaiún can be found almost anywhere, tucked away in the midst of residential compounds, similarly, repair shops are scattered throughout the entire camp.

However there are areas in which over 20 garages form clusters and are gathered around a large open space, exclusively framed by fuel pumps, repair shops and car parts retail. Notably, the areas of trade are also more spread out in El Aaiún than in Smara, showing a different organisation principle.



### Repair Shops in Smara

Unlike the repair shops in El Aaiún, the ones in Smara are all located centrally, without any exceptions. The two major areas of grouped repair shops are both located south of the two main markets.

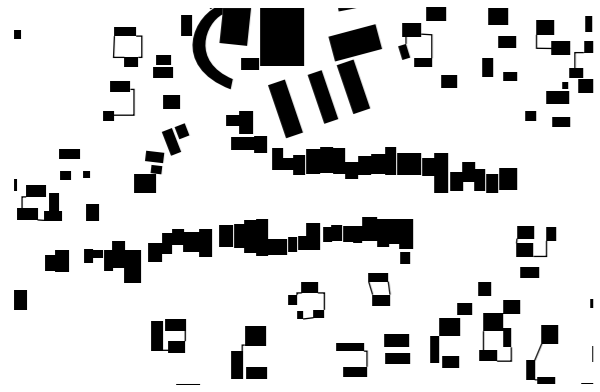
Although the density of the built fabric is the same as that of the market, the market streets are clearly laid out to be accessed by foot, while the garages flank a broad road space basically framing the space inbetween. This typology is unique to the repair shops, where the open space has a direct relation to surrounding buildings.





### The Strip - Repair Shops in Smara

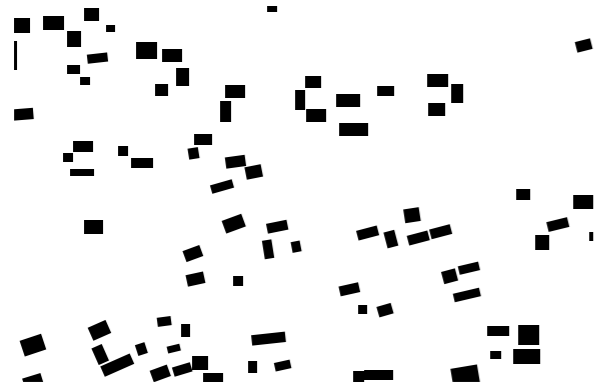
While in El Aaiún repair shops and especially fuel pumps can be found anywhere, even in the middle of a residential area, in Smara they are all centrally located flanking the two main market areas. The broad main road dividing Smara in a northern and a southern half passes right through this car repair area, turning it into a strip, where one could expect far more representative programs. The vast space in between is one of the busiest roads in Smara, especially in the evening, shortly before dusk.



Market, El Aaiún



Repair shops, El Aaiún



Residential area, El Aaiún



Repair shops, Smara  
Market area, Smara



Residential area, Smara

### Comparison of Urban Density

In comparison to residential areas, spaces for public life and cultural exchange tend to have a higher density. On satellite images, the markets of the camps are easily spotted by their unique proximity. The only other areas of comparable density are the ones related to mobility infrastructure i.e. clusters of fuel pumps and repair shops. In Smara, where the repair shop area flanks the market streets, there is no difference in density of the buildings. This shows the importance of these facilities and their role as key elements in central areas in the camps.

Interestingly, the repairs shops in Smara are located on the busiest main road that runs through the whole camp from east to west, a very prominent situation, where one could expect far more representative programs.

**DRAFT**  
© ETH Studio Basel



### Fuel Pumps

Fuel can be bought at almost any repair shop but there are numerous smaller, specialized fuel pumps that only sell diesel and gas. The fuel can either be bought in plastic bottles or can be filled directly into the car from elevated oil barrels with more or less makeshift pipes.

Price comparison:

1 litre gas: 0.30€  
 1 kg rice: 0.80€  
 1 bread: 0.10€

Fuel Cost from El Aaiún to Smara:

example:  
 12 l / 100km  
 65 km distance  $0.65 \times 12l \times 0.30€ = 2.34€$   
 0.30€ / litre



### Car Wash

The important role the car plays in the Sahrawi culture is arguably best represented by the car wash. Although unpaved sand roads make it impossible for the car to remain clean for any longer than a kilometer, quite a few proud car owners decide to have their cars washed. About 7 to 10 customers arrive a day, each paying 5€, something that the fewest can afford, especially not on a regular basis. The water consumption of this facility in the desert is also striking, seen as hardly any households even have running water, let alone this quantity.



### Driver's Education

To be permitted to drive, young Sahrawis above 18 years of age must attend driver's education classes and pass a driving test. Where one might expect more informality, Polisario makes sure to provide a laws to create the necessary order a nation requires.





## OMNIPRESENCE AND IMPORTANCE OF MOBILITY

Mobility is an aspect that is so omnipresent in the every day life, that it inevitably leaves considerable traces in the landscape. A part from the continuous business of the traffic itself, everything around the actual mobility is also very visible. There is an abundance of car parts and car wrecks, skeletons so to speak, that are so ubiquitous that they are inseparable from the image of the landscape itself. There is no need for searching for the remains of cars, they are scattered throughout the camps, sometimes seemingly left behind, placed rather haphazardly but sometimes carefully staged and put together as a decorative, creative ensemble of objets trouvés.





### Dead End for Car Parts

All vehicles are used until there is no more hope for them, even then all the single car parts are taken out, sorted and almost everything is re-used. Very often parts that have reached the end of their lives still can be put to use by marking the border of a residential compound, although far different in appearance, not completely unlike fences we might associate with North American suburbs.

### Silent Monuments

For the chassis there are not many new purposes, except as a shady resting place for goats or to mark the border of a piece of property. The skeletons of these cars remain as monuments scattered everywhere in the camps, mysterious remains of stranded ships of the past.



### Purchase

Cars are brought to the refugee camps by the refugees themselves and by NGOs, who later sell or donate them to the government or to refugees.



### Maintenance

The flourishing repair shop business shows that once a person owns a car, they will continue to invest into it until it is impossible to repair. Most car drivers and owners know how to fix the easier problems and prefer to do it themselves.



### Disposal

It is a closed circuit, in which cars come in but have nowhere to go when they have lost their purpose and value.



### Oldtimers

An astonishing percentage of the vehicles is over 30 years old - an age that in Europe would classify them as „oldtimers“. Parts and entire motors are replaced to keep the cars in use, especially because a new car is hardly ever an option. Many of the car owners are capable of fixing small problems by themselves, avoiding sometimes costly repairs they could maybe not afford.



### Re-use of vehicles

The cycle of the use of cars, buses and other vehicles seemingly never ends. Each part is replaced and re-used, but never loses a minimal value, always too valuable to be thrown away.



### Re-use of single parts

When a vehicle eventually can no longer be repaired it is dismantled in to its parts, which are then reused in numerous - and creative - ways. Nothing is lost or wasted in this process, even if the parts are used to replace rocks marking the border of a property.



Autonomous registration and administration in Rabounie: Saharawi licence plates - not Algerian

First two digits indicate camp - e.g. 30 means the vehicle is from Smara



Green licence plates are reserved for government vehicles, also something that was regulated this way in Western Sahara.

### Autonomous Administration

Demonstrating the high level of administrative sovereignty given to the Sahrawi people by the state of Algeria, the registration of vehicles is located in Rabouni, where all vehicles receive a unique Western Saharan licence plate number. These licence plates not only allow them to circulate freely in their own territory, but also to Algeria and to pass the border into Mauritania.



### Motor for Trade

Only through an uncomplicated and highly accessible network of mobility can trade be made possible in the isolated context of a refugee camp.

In fact the highest density of cars besides the repairs shop areas is noticed in market areas, especially in and around the main market in the Elgelta neighborhood. Buyers reach the market by car, and sellers transport all their merchandise either by car or larger volumes by truck. Without the means of transportation, these exchanges could not take place.



Garage protecting the car from weather and damage



### Identity Spark or Status Symbol?

Not everybody can own a car, making those who have had the chance to afford one, proud owners.

The cars are often parked right in front of the home, inside the walls of the living compound, and often protected from the sun.

Possibly an ode to their nomadic roots, the Sahrawi embrace mobility and live very closely to their vehicles.



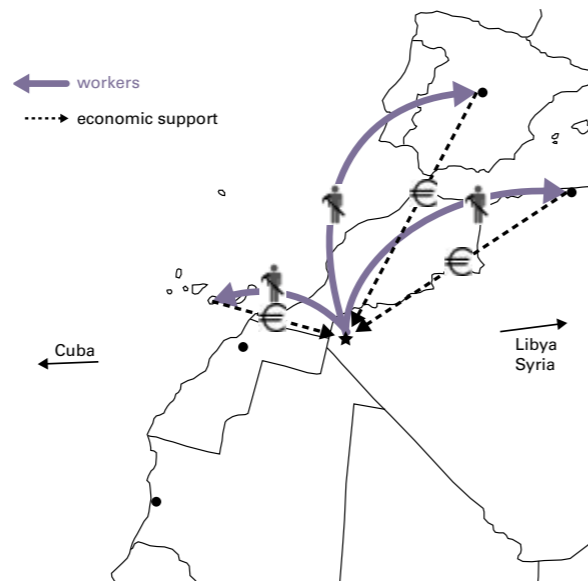
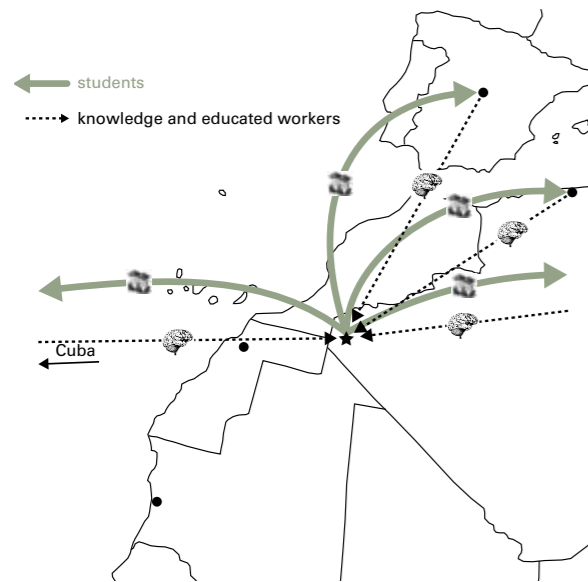
## CONNECTING THE CAMPS WITH THE WORLD

Resembling oasis' in the desert, the camps are small islands in a vast space that is near to dimensionless. The distance between one location and the other is starkly perceptible and this feeling is enforced by the climatic conditions and the distant, endless horizon.

The isolation forces to strengthen the links to other places of interest. More and more the connections to the outside help define the inside, as the two locations start a dialog and exchange information, goods, culture.

The refugee camps are even more so islands because they depend greatly on support from other nations to survive.

**DRAFT**



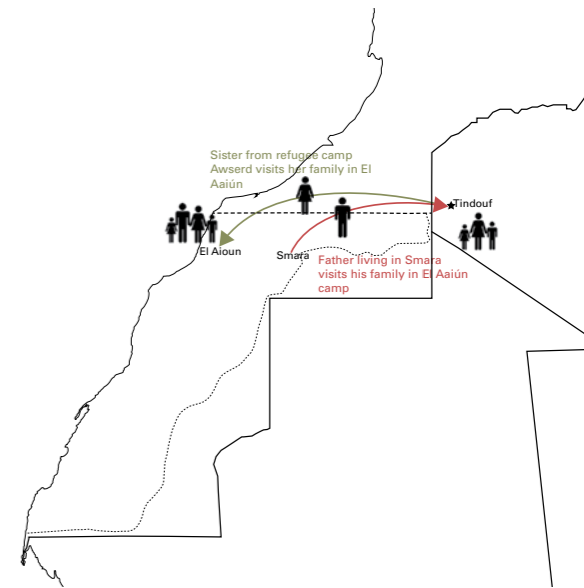
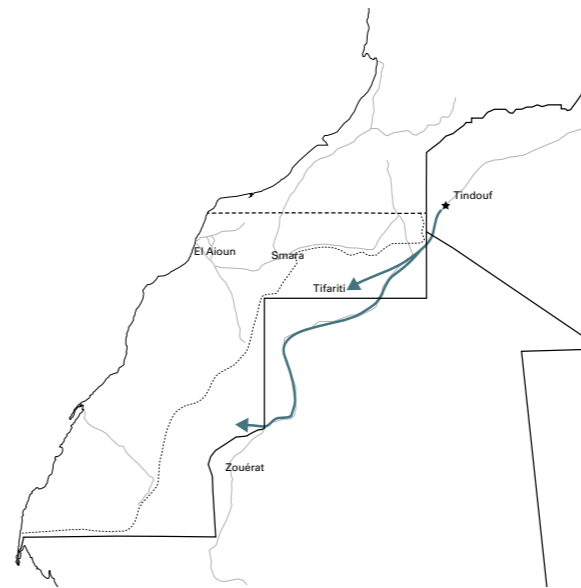
Photographer in Smara who studied in Cuba

### Studying Abroad

The Sahrawi refugee camps have very good rates concerning basic education and literacy, yet secondary education is not available in the camps. Many young students chose to go to SADR-friendly countries, especially Algeria, Libya, Cuba and Syria to attend university. The majority of the students chooses to come back to the camps, although there are not many possibilities to find a job there.

### Working Abroad

As jobs and all possibilities for earning money are scarce in the camps, many refugees find themselves forced to work abroad, especially in Spain and the Canary Islands, not least because of the language. They seldom choose this as a permanent solution, preferring to eventually return to their families. During this period it is a main goal to support the family members in the camp, often sending large portions of the earned money to them.



Boarding a flight to the Western Sahara, photo:UNHCR



Participants of the CBM programme (photo:UNHCR)

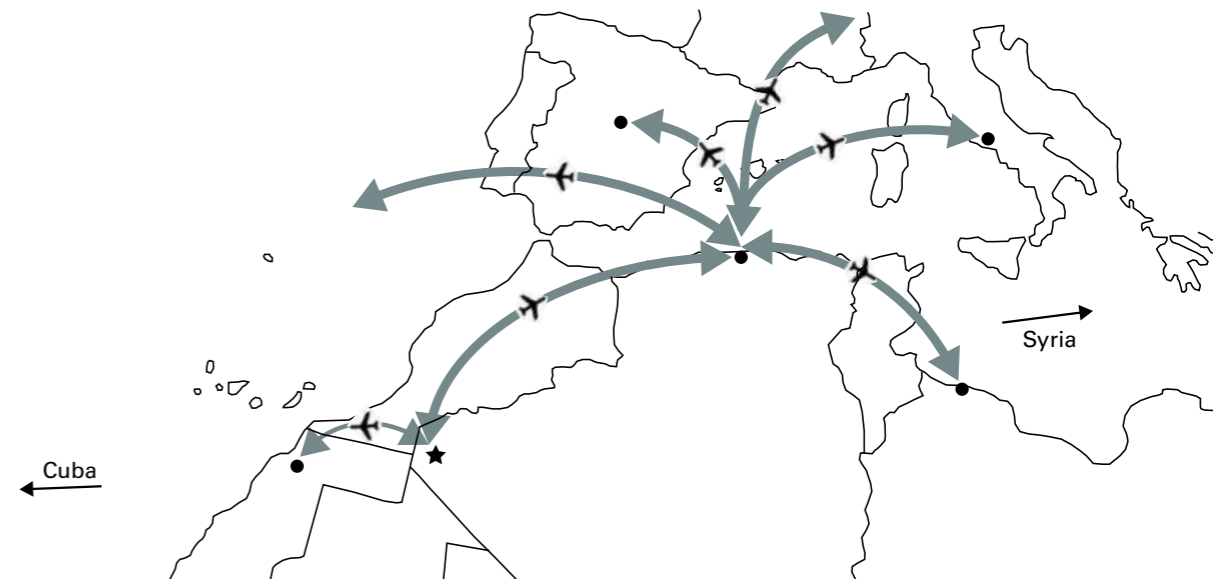
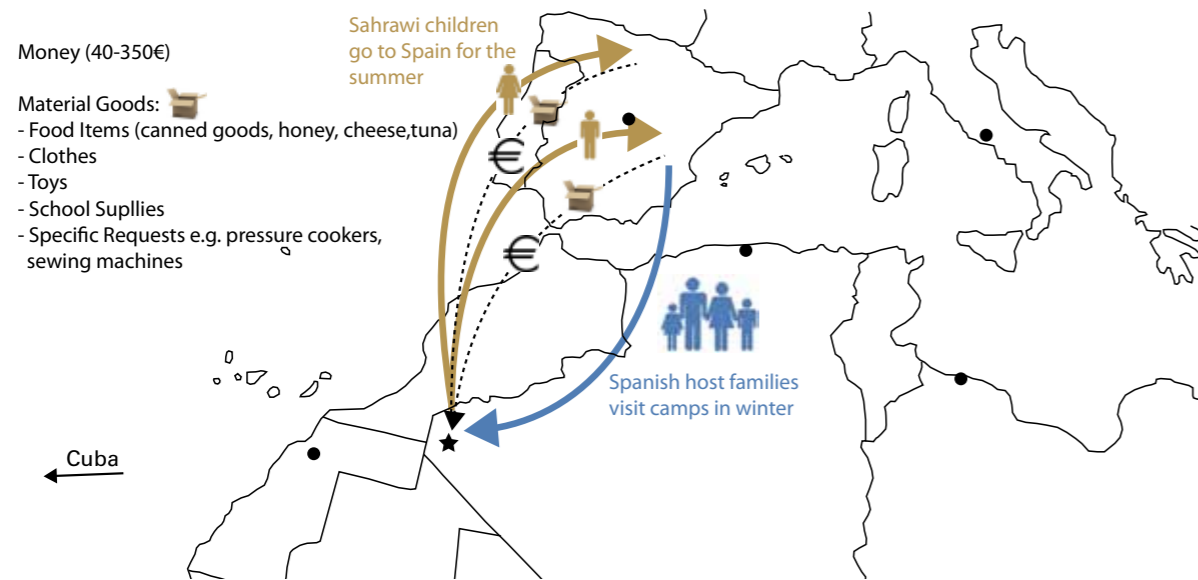
### Family Visits

The UNHCR-organized CBM programme allows refugees living in the camps and family members in the occupied territories to reunite after often more than 30 years. Up to 2011 nearly 13'000 Sahrawis have benefited, another 31'000 are waitlisted. Each flight shuttles 30-35 people both ways between Tindouf and Western Saharan cities, where the participants can spend 5 days in the camps or in the Western Sahara respectively. Proposals have been made to expand the programme through the addition of road transportation, allowing more people to participate.

### Connections to the Western Sahara

As with all people with refugee status, possibilities of going to their homes are limited if not impossible. The liberated territories can be accessed without any major problems but no people live in this region permanently. Often trips and events are organized to underline a political statement, yet remain exceptional and temporary states.





“what I really want is for the camps to be more like Spain”

-Fawzia, age 11



source: www.saharaencolmenar.blogspot.com

the unbearable climatic situation in the summer, but also receive significant support in form of material goods and also money. The children usually return with full suitcases, only limited by the airlines baggage allowance and often responding to specific requests from the Saharawi families. These gifts are often extended to regular economic support even when the children are not with the host families and prolonged after the children are too old to participate. The host families also have the possibility to visit the Saharawi families, where they can experience what the life of their guest children is in situ.



Tindouf airport, source: maps.google.com

### Tindouf Airport

Tindouf airport is the main access portal for all travelers coming to the camps from other countries. Although it is primarily a military airport, the influx of people to the camps has made it one of the airports in Algeria „which receives the largest number of „tourists“ per annum“ (Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2011). Flights from Algiers to Tindouf are filled with NGO workers, people visiting the camps for academic and journalistic reasons or „solidarity tourists“ and - in the summer - children flying to Spain.



# CONNECTING THROUGH COMMUNICATION

Where actual mobility is not possible, connections are established through media. Media replaces missing links and makes it possible to bring spaces much closer than they physically are. Especially in the situation of a refugee camp, where mobility, especially to the homeland is limited, media plays an important role as a tool for exchange. Information is brought immediately from one place to another and interaction becomes much more complex, as it is no longer tied to geographical location.





Mobile phone shop



Soccer game on television, photos: Manuel Herz

### Mobile Phones

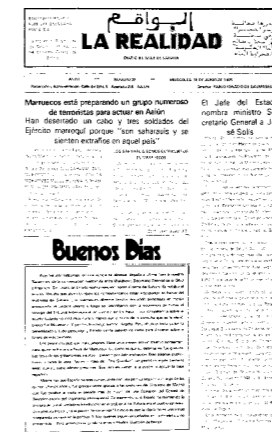
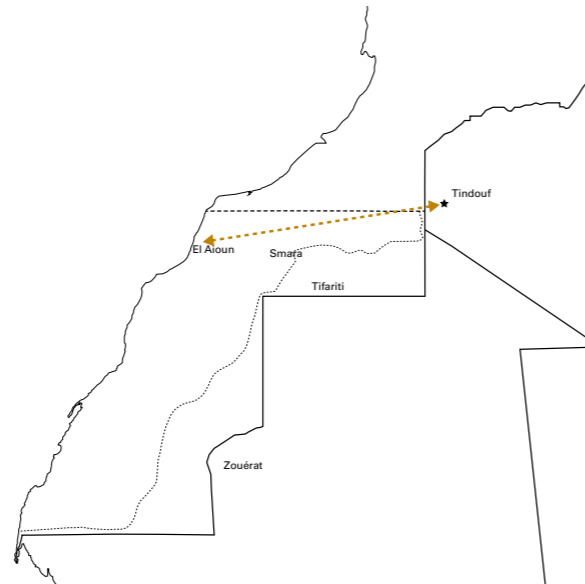
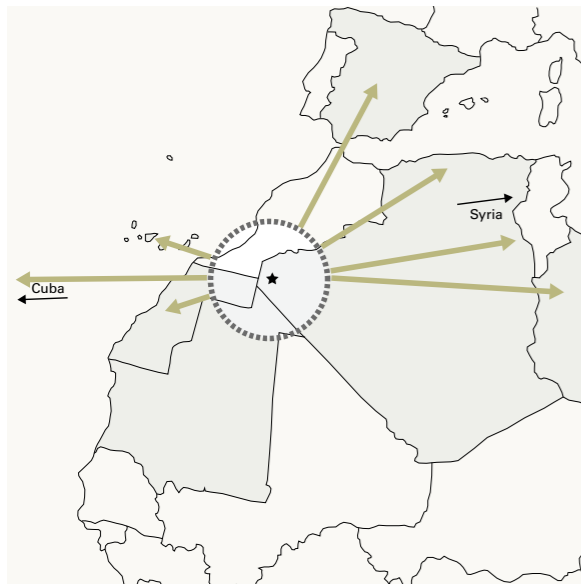
Mobile phones are very widespread, despite rather low network availability. They have come to replace the public phone facilities that were once more common.



### Television

Five different channels bring the worlds news and events right into Sahrawi living rooms. Two of the channels are Algerian and one is an own national channel, also serving as a link of information between the occupied territories and the refugee camps. The sports channel, particularly when showing a soccer game is especially popular. The necessary electricity for powering the television in the evening is collected all day and stored in a car battery unit, the television is a main electricity consumer in regular households.





Internet Café, Smara



UNHCR Call Center (photo: UNHCR)

### Internet

Despite lack of a broad internet access for the public - the only internet café is in Smara - most refugees have an email address and sporadic internet access. Networking services like Facebook and Skype are very popular amongst the younger generation. In most cases, the account is primarily used when studying or working abroad. When the possibility is given in the camp, they use these tools to stay in touch with other refugees and friends outside of the camps, in other countries. The internet in this case is used only for long-range communication.

### UNHCR-organized phone calls

To improve the possibilities to stay in contact with family members in the occupied territory of the Western Sahara, UNHCR organized several centers for phone calls., starting in 2004 with a link from the 27th of February school to the city of El Aaiún. Refugees can place calls here free of cost, 80% of the users are women.

### Print Media

The newspaper published by the SADR is directed to the Sahrawi population but also to people supportive of their nation, therefore it is written mostly in Spanish. La Realidad is a powerful instrument of the Frente Polisario, exporting statements to the outside world, although the paper is obviously not widely available.

### Radio

The local radio program is transmitted in all of the camps in Hassaniya language, also featuring one hour in Spanish in the evening. Especially political topics are covered, broadcasting local news and events within the Sahrawi population.



## CONCLUSION

**Mobility in the context of a refugee camp is not an obvious topic. Refugees usually find themselves in a tenuous situation that forces them to point all their efforts in direction of the future, often not confronted with opportunities to meliorate the present.**

**In El Aaiún and the other Sahrawi refugee camps, a similar mindstate is expressed through the wish for temporary and mobile solutions, refusing to settle in a country that is not theirs and build a permanent framework of infrastructure. Removing the accentuation from the infrastructure itself gives more importance to the use of the space and its flexibility.**

**Within the camp, traffic flows through the negative space set by buildings, which are also only permanent to a certain extent. Roads and main paths are not seen as highlighted backbones for urban development and public centers, but are an integrated part of the network body as a whole, of the negative space as a whole.**

**This omnipresence of moving space is formative for the townscape and its shape, but is further strengthened by the sheer quantity of cars, car parts and infrastructure servicing mobility found throughout the fabric and on all urban layers and scales of the camps.**

**In fact, repair shops seem to be the most dynamic and flourishing businesses in the camps. Also, it is one of the only businesses that can maintain itself to a great extent without support from outside.**

**The links established by moving and communication are of crucial importance for the camps in the search of autonomous administration, cultural exchange, political and economic development and an independance untainted by their momentary need for external support.**

