

Fiasco or Status Quo? The UN Peace Operation in Western Sahara

Review of Conflict and Peace in Western Sahara. The Role of the UN's Peacekeeping Mission (MINURSO). Edited by János Besenyő, R. Joseph Huddleston and Yahia H. Zoubir¹²

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Even crises strongly concerning the world's public opinion fade into everyday life over time. This is much more the case with crises that take place behind God's back, in poor countries with small populations. However, the waning of attention can be dangerous, as in our modern world any local conflict can quickly escalate into a regional, continental or even global conflict. The conflict in Western Sahara is typically such a case, many people would have problems even to find on the map the area called "Africa's last colony". The editors of the opus "*Conflict and Peace in Western Sahara*", János Besenyő, R. Joseph Huddleston and Yahia H. Zoubir intended their work not for them, but for those who already have some understanding of this stuck conflict and would like to deepen their knowledge even more, to enrich it with details unknown to them so far and to receive accurate analyses. The editors recruited an excellent group of authors to achieve this goal, from university lecturers to soldiers who served in the field. The result is an excellent summary work, an extremely powerful and comprehensive analysis of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara. The quintessence of the book is given by a statement formulated by János Besenyő in 2009: "MINURSO was meant to be a testing ground for the effectiveness of UN resolutions in settling disputes between a colonial power and its former colony, that is, between two forces with different political and military weight." (p. 308.) The authors of the volume essentially analyse and interpret this question from different points of view.

The introductory chapter, "Introduction: Peacekeeping Operations in Situations of Conflict: The Case of MINURSO" serves also this purpose, providing the guiding thread of the book: "The MINURSO was set up in 1991 and renewed ever since to carry out two main tasks: the monitoring of the ceasefire between the Saharawi National

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Liberation Movement (Frente Popular para la Liberacion de Saguia el-Halma y de Rio de Oro — POLISARIO) and Morocco and the organization of the referendum that would allow people of Western Sahara (WS) to decide between independence and integration with Morocco.” (p. 1.) The overview starts from the 1960s, with the beginning of the decolonization process and gives some theoretical framework of the UN peacekeeping missions ever since. The introduction also shows the complexity of the context in which the MINURSO mission was born and operates, in comparison to other mission where the UN has been or is still involved.

The other 17 chapters of the book, which contains a total of 18 chapters, are divided into four parts. In the four chapters of the first part the history of MINURSO is discussed. Relevant events, the legal aspects of the functioning of the UN mission for the referendum in Western Sahara, the end of the Western Sahara Peace Process and the collapse of the UN ceasefire are discussed. The second part of the book is the most eclectic one, the three chapters are focusing on human rights, with an eloquent title: “MINURSO between a Rock and a Hard Place”. (p.99.) Separate chapters received the topics of participation of women in the MINURSO and also the Saharawi archaeological heritage. It will surprise the average reader the number of protection and rehabilitation sites of high cultural heritage value in this desert-dominated country despite of restricted access to sites and logistical difficulties resulting from the political and security situation. Of great value is the unbiased and fair approach of the two authors of the chapter “MINURSO and the Saharawi Archaeological Heritage”, discussing with high academic standards the threat to archaeological values, not only from natural environment (sun and wind erosion), and the damages caused by the warring parties, or the consequences of the extraction and quarrying activities on the Moroccan side but they also report about vandalism carried out by MINURSO personnel against important archaeological sites in the Polisario-controlled area. Western Sahara’s archaeological record is important for our understanding of past human migrations and adaptations to climatic changes in the Sahara, African prehistory at large. (p. 137.) The third part of the book deals with the military aspects of the mission, from police contingent to integrated logistics support and financial issues. Most of the readers will find those four chapters as the most informative ones. The importance of first-hand information obtained in the field cannot be overemphasized. From problems with food and water supplies demands of the UN to the countries sending soldiers and police officers to the mission, the authors cover essentially all aspects of the Western Sahara crisis. Particularly interesting is the chapter with the title “Military and Police Experiences from Western Sahara: The Case of Hungary” based on János Besenyő's research, during which he conducted interviews with Hungarian policemen and soldiers serving in the Western Sahara, then analysed and evaluated them. Besenyő cannot even deny his military past, as this type of analysis is called “lessons learned” in the ranks of the armed forces. As can be seen from the chapters he wrote, he not only conducted academic research on the region, but also served as a peacekeeper in the MINURSO peacekeeping operation. The chapter on the military contingent written by the two Polish researchers, Błażej Popławski and Cyprian

Aleksander Kozera, is also interesting, especially in light of the fact that Polish peacekeepers also serve in the peace operation, from whom the authors received first-hand information. The fourth part is devoted to the policies of some selected powers in relation to the conflict and MINURSO, namely the USA, China, Russia and France, as well as African states are listed. The former colonial power, Spain, is absent from this circle, and this is only partly justified by the fact that the ambivalent role of the former motherland in the outbreak and preservation of the crisis was thoroughly analysed in the historical review. Considering that Spanish is still an official language in the Sahrawi Republic and is obligatory in the schools run by the Polisario, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic leadership has not severed the connection, in fact, it is trying to strengthen it. The role of Spain in shaping the position of the European Union, which is becoming more and more actively involved in the settlement of the issue, also testifies to that Madrid is still a major player indeed. Due to the nature of the Western Sahara crisis, it is not only important to which powers the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic leadership does turn for political consultations, but also who is supporting Rabat. Despite the fact that the era of "Françafrique", in which Paris exercised informal guardianship over its former overseas possessions, is now over, the inclusion of France in a separate chapter of this book is entirely appropriate as Morocco was backed by France in many cases. (p. 164.) To some extent surprisingly, the fifth member of the Security Council, Great Britain was left out of the series of chapters dedicated to the role of individual powers. The argumentation that the implementation of relevant principles of international law, including self-determination is why this book pays specific attention to the role of States like China, France, Russia, and the United States," whose approaches seem to range from total disinterest to political bias toward a specific party of the conflict" (p. 3.) somewhat limps in light of the fact that the authors refer several times to the five-member UN "Group of Friends" for Western Sahara. i.e. France, Russia, Spain, the United States, and the United Kingdom. (p. 63., p. 68.) Naturally, the role of "non-interventionist" countries, like China and Russia cannot be overlooked. Their involvement in the MINURSO operation went from initial disinterest and lack of a clear position to a more active role to emerge as a "responsible global power." (pp. 7-8.). Not incidentally, we get a very good summary of China's Africa policy in the relevant chapter. China and Russia are among the top ten contributor countries in MINURSO personnel, along with Bangladesh, Egypt, Ghana, Pakistan, Honduras, Malaysia, Brazil and Nepal. (p. 253.) However, this does not explain why in the book China is mentioned almost five times and Russia three times more often than Spain, while Great Britain is barely mentioned, and even the United States occupies a more modest position. With some exaggeration, the authors of the book seem to view this conflict through the prism of the (possible) future. What has been said is confirmed by the fact that the title of the chapter dealing with Russia is "Russia and MINURSO: This Is Not Our Conflict" (p. 262.), and this phrase is repeated in the text (p.272.), and it is even the very end of the chapter (p. 276.) However, we can be grateful to the author for providing an insight into a closed world where the Russians make fun of Irish officers

who have forgotten even their own Celtic language and can only speak in English, in contrast to the polyglot Russians, who naturally negotiate with the locals in Arabic, as in with Chinese people in their mother tongue. The gem of this is one of the quotes:” How could you, being a Russian, immediately understand everything, and I, being an American, did not understand anything of his (Australian) English?” (p. 262.) In addition to such elements that add colour to what has to be said, it is of course much more relevant that the author gives an excellent summary of the Russian (and Chinese) wait-and-see position on the Western Sahara settlement. (p.269.) Among the five-member UN “Group of Friends” for Western Sahara only Washington had seen a significant turn in the relations 2010 between Morocco and Polisario (p. 63.) In 2017 the American administration announced the decrease of its budget contribution to UN peacekeeping missions and declared a new political guideline for such operations. Since MINURSO was among the smaller missions with a limited military and police strength, no fundamental change was expected. The authors of the chapter explain their position in an easy-to-follow way for the readers, how Morocco's role was evaluated during the escalation of global conflicts, and how this affected American decision-makers. The question was raised in Washington whether the long-standing Western Sahara case, where the relation of the opposing parties stalled since 1991 should be considered as a frozen conflict, which requires revision. This really happened and the American position has changed so much that in 2020 former US President Donald Trump proclaimed that the United States recognizes the sovereignty of Morocco over Western Sahara. The key sentence of the book can also be linked to the chapter devoted to the politics of the United States:” ...the intransigence of the Moroccan government and the Polisario Front has consistently translated into a purported loss of confidence in the peace process and a failure to negotiate in good faith.” (p. 233.) The two authors of the chapter” The United States and MINURSO” point out that” the Trumpian contradiction” still persists, Washington” continues to support the renewal of MINURSO—the Mission of the United Nations for the Referendum in Western Sahara—while diplomatically supporting Morocco’s opposition to any referendum in the territory and directly supporting its military presence therein.” (p. 244.) However, it is true for all parties involved in the conflict that the” self-defeating role” they play to this day prevents the creation of a tangible result, the resolution of the conflict. So, the” Western Sahara stalemate” lives on. The prelast chapter:” The Approach of the African States towards MINURSO” provides an excellent summary how the concerned African countries and the African Union are trying to shape and articulate a more synchronised voice. We still have to wait for a positive outcome, so the solution of African problems within the continent still belongs to the category of desires and noble goals. As African countries provide a good deal of UN peacekeeping personnel, the question of” troop value” which the author raises, is a sensitive, yet an extremely important aspect. Humans in military and police uniforms from different corners of the continent and even the world have their own socialization, cultural, religious, etc. backgrounds, with all its consequences. The title of the last chapter is the most telling:” MINURSO: A Mission for Maintaining the

Status Quo?” Although those who have read this far have already met most of the actors and circumstances in the previous chapters, they will not find boring this excellent summary operating with new points of view. Another strength of this chapter is the presentation of the impact of the conflict on its narrower and wider regional environment.

It is not an easy task to write about an attempt to solve a crisis that has been going on for an extremely long time and has not been resolved to this day. Considering that the chapters often have two authors, it is a great virtue of the book that, despite the many contributors, a unified work was created. It is not only an important academic work, but the first comprehensive scientific work on the mission, which has been in operation for more than 30 years. At the same time a good compass for diplomats, politicians, soldiers and other professionals dealing with the crisis, and it can also be recommended to a wider readership interested in the topic.

Conflict of Interest

The author is a member of the Editorial Board. The manuscript was handled independently to avoid any conflict of interest.

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