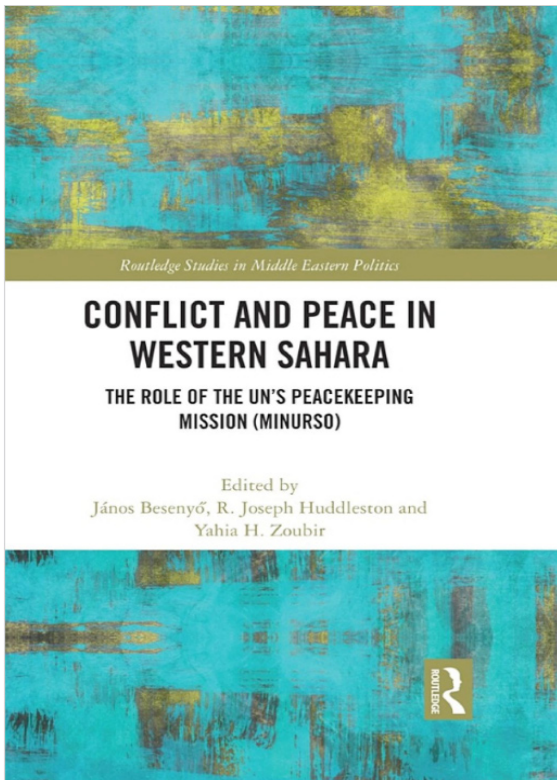




CONFLICT AND PEACE IN WESTERN SAHARA

by *János Besenyő, Joseph Huddleston, and Yahia Zoubir*



Although the energy and raw materials crisis has made the work of authors and publishers of this book significantly more difficult, Routledge is expected to offer its readers a number of interesting and useful books this year as well. The international professional audience interested in security policy could rejoice in one of the first pieces of this year's selection at the beginning of January, which deals with the Western Sahara conflict and the peacekeeping operation known as MINURSO.¹ The joy of the Eastern Central European reader is all the more justified since one of the three editors is Hungarian, and he participated in several missions as a former peacekeeper, thus being able to provide readers with first-hand

information. János Besenyő, formerly the commander of the Scientific Research Centre of the General Staff of the Hungarian Defence Forces in the rank of colonel, is currently a professor at the Doctoral School on Safety and Security Sciences at the Bánki Donát Faculty of Óbuda University (Hungary), director of the Africa Research Institute and guest researcher at the Stellenbosch University (South Africa). Joseph Huddleston is an assistant professor of the Faculty of International Relations at Seton Hall University (USA). Yahia Zoubir, professor of international studies and director of research at KEDGE Business School in France, has been dealing with the Western Sahara issue for decades.

¹ The United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara.



The area of Western Sahara on the northwest coast of Africa bordering Morocco, Mauritania, and Algeria was under Spanish control until 1976. In 1979, Morocco occupied most of the territory, but the annexation was not recognised by the UN and its member states until 2017. Finally, in 2020, the US recognised Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara. The POLISARIO Front, established in 1976, waged the war of independence first against the Spanish, and then the Moroccan colonialists. The government of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), proclaimed by the insurgents, still operates in Algeria. As a result of the liberation struggle, the eastern part of the territory became independent, which is separated from the occupied western part by the technical barrier (BERM) built by Morocco with the help of Israel. Refugees from Western Sahara now live in refugee camps in Algeria. The armed conflict has been on and off since 1991. The United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) was established in 1991 with the task of ensuring the preparation of the referendum on annexation or independence and the implementation of the settlement plan for the transition period. The referendum, however, has not taken place to this day. MINURSO's current activities are mostly limited to monitoring the ceasefire.

The 18 studies included in the volume's four main chapters provide the first comprehensive analysis of the UN peacekeeping operation in Western Sahara, presenting its activities, international composition, and goals, weighing the forecasts for the future of the region. It examines key historical, legal, military, and political aspects of the MINURSO mission from a broader perspective. The authors of the studies are experts in relevant fields, administrative specialists, lawyers, soldiers, and staff of humanitarian aid organisations, who share their theoretical considerations and their experiences on the ground. In the book we find several authors from the ECE region (Mirela Atanasiu, Éva Fábrián, Barnabás Horváth, Marcell György Pintér and Dávid Vogel), which fortunately points to the increasingly intense presence of the EU eastern countries in joint operations and in international scientific life. The authors of the volume reveal the complex interrelationship of the region and the mission, while also interpreting MINURSO action in a global context, which mainly refer to a viewpoint analysis of the United States, China, Russia, France, and African states on the role they play in the region.

The study series is opened by Marco Balboni, professor of EU and international law at the University of Bologna. In his paper (Introduction: Peacekeeping Operations in Situations of Conflict: The Case of MINURSO), he analyses the possibilities and tools of peacekeeping in international conflict situations, with particular regard to the MINURSO mission. In his summary, he states that the basic measures that constituted MINURSO mandate, established 30 years ago, have not yet been implemented. The mission was successful in only a few socio-political issues, such as women status and the protection of cultural heritage, but mostly in



monitoring ceasefire and easing the fighting. To this day, it is not known when the planned referendum will take place, as Morocco and POLISARIO are unable to agree on the criteria for identifying those who would participate in the referendum. Progress, therefore, can only be expected when the international community clearly determines who the occupier is and what specific punitive measures can be taken against the violation of the right to self-determination.

Meriem Naïli, who is a lawyer and also PhD holder at the University of Exeter, states at the beginning of her in-depth legal explanations that, after the Cold War, UN's peacekeeping operations took on new dimensions under the Capstone doctrine. Military actions aimed at ending the violence between the warring parties were replaced by multidimensional, ambitious political goals and operations that included significant civilian elements (self-determination referendum, democratisation, institutional reforms, community development, capacity building). MINURSO is one of these new types of operations. However, the legal foundation of the mission was hampered by political obstacles, and its political foundation by legal obstacles. In order to carry out the mission, it was necessary to look for dogmatic and legal loopholes related to human rights, and to clarify the relationship between international human rights provisions and humanitarian law (The Legal Aspects of the Functioning of the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara).

Carlos Ruiz Miguel, Yolanda Blanco Souto, and Jacob Mundy's legal-focused studies analyse the work of MINURSO and scrutinise the difficulties, achievements, and failure of the Western Sahara peace process. Miguel, professor of constitutional law at the University of Santiago de Compostela, elaborates the legal historical aspects of the creation and work of MINURSO, relying on a wealth of legal documents, beginning in 1974, when the UN General Assembly established a special committee dealing with the implementation of the declaration on the granting of independence to colonial peoples. After the International Court of Justice stated in an advisory opinion dated October 1975 that neither Morocco nor Mauritania could extend their sovereignty to Western Sahara, the ruler of Morocco launched the "Green March" in order to "reunify" the country. The conflict was not resolved by the then UN Secretary General Kurt von Waldheim's plan, nor the 1983 plan by the Organisation of African Unity. The multinational and multilingual MINURSO mission also only succeeded in maintaining the ceasefire. Miguel deals in detail with ideas regarding refugees' return and the work of NGOs. Finally, he states that the changes in the situation of the area since 2000 make it necessary to reconsider the MINURSO mission: its task should be guaranteeing human rights in the entire region, especially in the refugee camps, to suppress the black economy and to hold a free, fair and democratic referendum on the territory's independence (An Overview of MINURSO: Legal History, Framework, Missions, Structure: A Balance).



According to Yolanda Blanco Souto, a doctoral student at the University of Santiago de Compostela, MINURSO had to face strong political headwinds from the beginning, with both sides trying to put obstacles in the way of its work. The militarily and diplomatically strong Morocco tried to put pressure on the United States and to extract concessions from the UN. These manoeuvres also sparked tensions in the MINURSO staff. Those who sympathised with the Moroccans, for example, witnessed the destruction of the Sahrawis' archaeological heritage. The investigation of MINURSO's disciplinary situation revealed corrupt behaviour, black trading with food, and other illegal business dealings. In 2016, Morocco expelled MINURSO civilian staff from the occupied territory, withdrew its financial contribution to peacekeepers, and then declared that MINURSO could not investigate human rights issues (Relevant Events in the MINURSO History).

Colgate University professor Jacob Mundy states at the beginning of his paper that the long-standing ceasefire in Western Sahara collapsed in November 2020. He looks for the reasons for this mainly in international developments. As a result of the 2008 world crisis and the Arab Spring of 2011, an increasingly risky international environment acted against a peaceful solution to the Western Sahara issue. Amid constantly rising tensions in North Africa, the Middle East, and the Sahara/Sahel region, Moroccan and Sahrawi forces engaged in intense clashes. The escalation of fighting calls into question the ability of the UN Security Council to mediate in territorial disputes in which the council's permanent members are biased (The End of the Western Sahara Peace Process and the Collapse of the UN Ceasefire).

In the second major chapter of the volume, the three studies written by Toby Shelley, María López Belloso, Elia Quesada, and Nick Brooks focus on human rights aspects and heritage protection. Shelley, paraphrasing the title of an American book, evaluates MINURSO's potential as a trap situation in terms of human rights. Although its key task would be to protect the human rights of the Sahrawis living under Moroccan oppression against the violations of the invaders, its activities in this respect are mostly characterised by passivity (Human Rights: MINURSO between a Rock and a Hard Place).

Belloso's study examines the role of women in the activities of MINURSO. The gender issue has gradually come into focus in UN peacekeeping operations since the mid-1990s. Although gender ratios and (opportunity) equality were not explicitly included in the MINURSO mission's programme, in accordance with other UN resolutions, the mission's documents dealt with the gender problem. Documents from the period 2006-2020 testify that the mission's female contributors performed important tasks, but some countries sent little or no female soldiers to the mission. Some progress was made during the mission towards the balance of gender ratios, but the measures related to gender equality were not sufficiently institutionalised. To overcome these shortcomings, the mandate of the mission needs to be reformulated,



institutionalising certain policies such as gender quotas and gender equality training (Participation of Women in the MINURSO: Scope, Evolution, and Factors for the Contribution to the Mission).

The author duo Quesada and Brooks state that the preservation of the rich archaeological heritage of the Western Sahara, which has been seriously threatened by the 40-year-old military conflict, is not at the forefront of public attention. They say indignantly that some MINURSO soldiers have committed acts of vandalism against archaeological sites in areas controlled by the POLISARIO. In doing so, they seriously hurt the local people's sense of national identity, caused unnecessary costs and, despite the restoration work carried out, seriously undermined the peace mission's authority (MINURSO and the Saharawi Archaeological Heritage).

The opening study of the third chapter of the volume entitled "How to build a sandbox in the desert" is written by two Polish Africanists, Cyprian Kozera and Błażej Popławski, who evaluate the performance of the tasks of the military components of the MINURSO operation based on official reports and interviews with participants. According to their findings, the MINURSO military contingent performs three important conflict prevention functions: they monitor the observance of the ceasefire, they try to ensure the implementation of UN measures aimed at reviving the peace process, and they contribute to maintaining the relative stability of the Western Sahara region, despite the fact that the opposing parties often lack political will, and terrorist and organised criminal groups threaten the personnel of the mission as well. The Moroccans are successfully trying to isolate the peacekeepers from the local population. On the Moroccan-controlled side of BERM, MINURSO vehicles are forced to carry Moroccan diplomatic license plates, which undermines confidence in the mission's impartiality. MINURSO does not have the authority to document human rights abuses either (Building Sandcastles in the Desert? MINURSO Military Component: Tasks, Duties, and Their Fulfilment). Mirela Atanasiu (Carol I National Defence University in Bucharest) examines the logistical and financial base of MINURSO and finds that the volume and scope of MINURSO's support has increased over the years, and the efficiency of the use of resources and logistics systems has improved, but there were financial gaps in ensuring human rights and in terms of resources that can be used to meet the needs of those in need of humanitarian assistance (Integrated Logistics Support and Financial Issues of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO)).

Analysing the work of the MINURSO police contingent, János Besenyő and Marcell György Pintér (Óbuda University) believe that the disciplinary situation of the police unit was impeccable. The task of the police staff assigned to MINURSO would have been to conduct the census. Preparations for this have been made, but since the census will not take place within the foreseeable future, the police contingent is slowly becoming redundant (The MINURSO Police Contingent). Besenyő also



devoted an independent study based on a diverse research methodology to the experiences of the last more than 20 years of the Hungarian participants in the mission in the military and law enforcement field. The recorded interviews show that both the police and the soldiers took the training and equipment of the contingent seriously. Despite this, neither the police nor the Hungarian Defence Forces processed the lessons of the Western Sahara operation thoroughly enough and integrated them into training. Yet this would be all the more important, since Hungary's role is becoming more and more significant on the African continent. Disappointment is also reflected in the fact that several of those returning from operations in Africa are demobilised and continue to operate as civilians. At first, it was difficult for the Defence Forces to adequately supply personnel. However, the security environment has deteriorated over time to such an extent that – although peacekeepers are in principle unarmed observers – it would be worthwhile to equip those serving there with at least self-defence weapons (Military and Police Experiences from Western Sahara: The Case of Hungary).

The fourth chapter of the volume deals with the geostrategic considerations and the activities of the contingents of the most important countries participating in the peace mission. According to the author pair Huddleston and Zarate (Seton Hall University, USA), the United States' position regarding Western Sahara is based on concern for its regional stability. For this reason, the USA, pretending to support the UN process for a long time, avoided an open resolution, which allows Morocco to exploit the area's resources and disregard human rights while maintaining its favourable position. In doing so, it turns a blind eye to activities deemed illegal by the International Court of Justice and undermines the UN's principles of international conflict resolution (The United States and MINURSO: 31 years).

The thesis of Csaba Horváth, researcher of the Silk Road Research Group at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, is one of the most interesting studies in the volume. With a witty title, the author refers to China's real purpose and role, which shows the image of a responsible global power, in MINURSO and several other African peacekeeping operations (MINUSMA, MONUSCO, UNAMID, etc.). For China, strengthening its economic presence in Africa has become a priority. In the spirit of the new Silk Road concept, it primarily wants to connect the countries of East Africa with the Indian Ocean trade network, but also shows significant economic activity in the countries of the Atlantic coast of Africa. MINURSO is an important milestone in China's UN missions to the extent that in 2007, for the first time, a Chinese commander-in-chief was appointed to head an entire UN peacekeeping mission. The ultimate reason for China's committed participation is not political, however, but a single raw material, phosphate, 70% of which is found in Morocco and Western Sahara, and which is essential in global food production and guarantees Morocco's economic power. China strives for a balancing role between Algeria and Morocco,



but rather favours Morocco in the regional conflict, which can help China build economic positions in the western Mediterranean basin (China and the MINURSO: Eyes on Peak Phosphorus?).

In his viewpoint on Russian participation, Sergej Nyikonov, a professor at St. Petersburg State University, criticises the preparation of the referendum and questions the role of the UN in its implementation. He believes that the task of MINURSO would be to secure the borders valid at the time of Spain's withdrawal (1976). Although the principle of self-determination of peoples is represented by the POLISARIO in the given situation, President Donald Trump recognised Morocco's rights over the territory. Since the government of the Sahrawi Democratic Republic did not turn to Russia for political support, Russia would not have a role to play in settling the conflict (Russia and MINURSO: This Is Not Our Conflict).

On the other hand, the French foreign and security policy in the African territories also in the spirit of great power ambitions, following the path paved by de Gaulle, takes a very active role in the MINURSO mission from the beginning in addition to other peace missions, Éva Fábíán states at the beginning of her study, because the conflict not only poisons the relations between Morocco and Algeria and the work of the Arab Maghreb Union founded in 1989, but it also has a negative effect on French-Algerian relations. According to the French proposal, the territory of Western Sahara should be given its autonomy within Morocco, as they fear that the independence of Western Sahara would destabilise Morocco and threaten significant French investments (France and MINURSO).

Although it is difficult to quantify the contribution of African states to UN peacekeeping operations, they keep a keen eye on regional conflicts and actively participate in their resolution, writes Dávid Vogel, senior research fellow at the Doctoral School on Safety and Security Sciences at the University of Óbuda, who himself previously participated in African peacekeeping operations with the African states, analysing their respective positions concerning and their participation in MINURSO. Countries with adequate resources try to simultaneously ensure African dominance and their own security interests in the architecture of African peace and security, but unlike other participants, they think little about obtaining economic benefits (The Approach of the African States towards MINURSO).

The chapter as well as the volume are closed by a joint study by Souadou Lagdaf (University of Catania) and Yahia Zoubir (KEDGE Business School). They believe that since November 2020, the Moroccan occupiers have grossly violated the ceasefire by using violence against the peaceful Sahrawi demonstrators and by continuing to build the technical barrier, and MINURSO, which is limited in its functions and movements and has been condemned to decades of inactivity, has become useless, only maintaining the status quo, and thus, in fact, serving Morocco's interests (MINURSO: A Mission for Maintaining the Status Quo?).



In the volume, although it might have been more practical listing the authors in alphabetical order by last name, and to arrange the chapters with a main title and possibly according to other priorities, from the perspective of an experienced editor, not only can we not find anything significant to object to, but its critical spirit that collides points of view is also all the more welcome. The book is a landmark, not only because it is the first to deal with the peace operation that has been in operation for more than 30 years, but it is an extremely important read for those working in the fields of international relations, international law, and security studies as well as future peacekeepers and for theoretical and practical experts interested in the problems of the MENA Region and the Western Sahara conflict.

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