
**A REVIEW OF THE BOOK “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. ZOUBIR”¹**

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When the Spanish colonization ended in 1975, Morocco occupied a meaningful part of the Western Sahara. However, the indigenous Sahrawi population in the territory and their organized movement ‘Saharawi National Liberation Movement’ (*Frente Popular para la Liberacion de Saguia el-Halma y de Rio de Oro* – POLISARIO), which was established to counteract allegedly oppressive Moroccan invasion, have always remained decisive in shaping the debate around self-determination, and in managing the conflict in Western Sahara that went beyond national borders. The support to recognize Western Sahara as a sovereign state is widely contested in the international community, while its autonomy under Moroccan authority is also questioned. The dispute is still unsettled, even though the resolution is in the interest of all states.

As Africa’s last colony and a Non-Self-Governing Territory,² the question of Western Sahara and the ongoing armed conflict that is originally derived from a prolonged and unsettled dispute in the territory between the indigenous Sahrawi population and the Moroccan government is unique in the history of the United Nations (UN). Based on its Charter, the UN can deploy peace operations to stabilize conflict-prone situations. The UN’s presence in Western Sahara dates back to the mid-1970s when Spain, as the former colonizer, Morocco and the Sahrawi population approved deploying a peacekeeping contingent. In 1988, both the Settlement Plan made by the Secretary-General (SG) of the United Nations Javier Pérez de Cuéllar and the Organization of the African Unity’s (OAU) Chairman Kenneth Kaunda and the Implementation Plan were accepted, which became decisive in forming a strategic approach in the conflict and paved the path to resolving the dispute peacefully under UN auspices.

Consequently, the United Nations Security Council’s (UNSC) Resolution 690 approved the establishment of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) in 1991 to carry out the monitoring of the ceasefire between the POLISARIO and Morocco and to build the capacities and the stability in which the Sahrawi are given the right to self-determination by organizing a referendum. The SG’s Special Representative and the SG’s Special Envoy for Western Sahara were officially charged with leading the mission. At the same time, a civil component was tasked with reviewing the 1974 census made by the Spanish and updating it for the referendum on the one hand and releasing political prisoners and detainees on the other.

After many political affairs that hampered the peace process, and numerous unsuccessful attempts to reach a compromised and mutually acceptable solution, the “*arguments for a return to war increasingly gained cred-*

¹ Besenyő, J., Huddleston, R.J., and Zoubir, Y.H. (eds.) (2022). *Conflict and Peace in Western Sahara: The Role of the UN’s Peacekeeping Mission (MINURSO)* (1st ed.). Routledge: London. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003284895>

² Officially, Western Sahara has been on the list of Non-Self-Governing Territories since 1963. See: <https://www.un.org/dppa/decolonization/en/nsgt/western-sahara> (accessed 30 January, 2023)

ibility” among the Sahrawi population.³ The United Nations General Assembly has already called for the parties to cease the conflicts and Rabat to terminate “occupation”;⁴ however, instability and military tensions between the belligerents further increased. The parties to the conflict have formed diverse and mutually incompatible interpretations of the mission. The UN cannot access the Moroccan-controlled territory, and Rabat wants to preserve the status quo. POLISARIO has always insisted on renewing MINURSO’s mandate with the inclusion of human rights issues. As of 2023, there is no political agreement between Rabat and the POLISARIO, nor in the international arena. One of the longest ceasefires ended in November 2021, when armed conflicts reoccurred.

This book offers various issues on the topic by using qualitative and quantitative research methods. It aims at revealing the uniqueness and the whole complexity of the conflict. The authors of this book overwhelmingly present a critical standpoint toward the UN and its peace mission MINURSO. In Part I, Balboni briefly introduces the topic. At the same time, Miguel overviews the historical connections of the conflict in Western Sahara and overviews the referendum, the ceasefire, and other components of MINURSO’s mandate. Naili seeks to explore the legality of the context. Souto explores the challenges and pitfalls of the MINURSO project. Finally, Mundy investigates the last decade of the peace process. In Part II, the authors concern with the political and social developments, the human rights and gender mainstreaming issues, and the archaeological heritage of Western Sahara, to mention a few. In part III, the military, the police and the civilian contingent are being investigated, including logistical aspects. Exciting is the chapter written by János Besenyő, which elaborates on the personal experiences of Hungarian police officers and soldiers who served in the MINURSO operation within the framework of a questionnaire survey.⁵ This topic is fascinating because a few peacekeepers who served in Western Sahara shared their experiences with the broader readership. Incidentally, the author served a year as a peacekeeping soldier in MINURSO. Similarly, the chapter written by two Polish authors (Kozera and Poplawsky) on the activities of the military contingent is interesting. At the same time, Besenyő and Pintér elaborated on the actions of the police. Atanasiu presented the civil component and the logistics system within it.

Given that the Western Sahara conflict is regional and international, Part IV of the book sheds light on the great powers’ stance on the dispute. In this regard, the detailed overview of the leading peace plans delivered during the decades-long peace process is presented to grasp the whole complexity of the topic better.

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