Review – Western Sahara

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Western Sahara: War, Nationalism, and Conflict Irresolution
By Stephen Zunes and Jacob Mundy
Syracuse University Press, 2022, Second Edition

The story of Western Sahara, both the territory and the conflict, is a difficult one to tell. As with many conflicts, the history itself is contested, because of what it implies about the legitimacy of Sahrawi nationalism, the legality of Morocco's claims, and the prescribed roles for intervening third parties. Stephen Zunes and Jacob Mundy trace the unique constellation of geopolitical factors that has given rise to this arid stalemate. To situate the reader, the authors point to the established legal facts of the case: Western Sahara is non-self-governing. This was ruled by the International Court of Justice in 1975, and is enshrined in its UN status. It is also implied by the establishment of the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), and is obvious from the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic's (SADR) membership in the African Union (AU, formerly the Organization for African Unity OAU). Zunes and Mundy then frame the rest of the work as a full-length account of the neocolonial policies of the USA and France, whose geopolitical, economic, and military goals in the Maghreb have led them to prioritize the short-lived stability of the Moroccan monarchy over possible longer-term stability brought about by supporting conflict resolution and the possible liberalization of Moroccan political society.

This is where this work shines the brightest. They illuminate the extent to which the legitimacy—and survival—of the Moroccan monarchy rides on its annexation of Western Sahara. This is why Morocco was willing to dismember itself from the OAU when it admitted the Sahrawi Republic as a member, why it spent as much as 40% of its state budget on occupation (p.44), and why it engages in ploys like threatening to close all Ikea stores in Morocco if the Swedish parliament were to vote on Western Sahara's status. Morocco's motives in the conflict flow not from self-evident historical claims (as shown by the ICJ's 1975 ruling), but from the impermanence of monarchy as a viable form of rule. US, French, and Spanish policy towards Morocco and Western Sahara sit downstream not from an acceptance of Moroccan claims as legitimate, but from their own fears of what will happen if the monarchy gives into another form.

As Jonathan Paquin wrote in 2010, the USA is a "Stability-Seeking Power", especially when it comes to taking positions on conflicts over self-determination (Paquin 2010). Concerns over stability tend to push US policy towards supporting self-determination when it is expected to increase stability—Kosovo for example—and toward supporting the state when manifested self-determination is expected to lead to chaos—an overarching fear about Western Sahara throughout the Cold War and beyond. Yet, it is this uncritical concern for the region's stability that drags the Saharan stalemate on and on. As Zunes and Mundy write, "What Morocco's international supporters have failed to realize is that the relationship between Western Sahara and Morocco is a vicious catch-22. A solution to the Western Sahara conflict is a precondition for Morocco's stability. Yet a solution to the Western Sahara conflict first depends on Morocco's stability" (p.56).

The authors spend four chapters detailing the "tail wags the dog" dynamic with Moroccan relations to the US and France (and Spain to a lesser extent), as played out in the perpetually failing UN processes. The status quo of conflict irresolution benefits the monarchy in important ways (or rather, keeps its head above the water). In addition to being a foundational argument for the legitimacy of the Moroccan monarchy, it is a necessary diversion and source of

wealth for the military. Many in Moroccan military leadership directly reap the spoils of the territory, for example "…earning millions of dollars every year from fisheries licenses" (p.251). Take the military out of the territory, and it loses its raison d'être, and its leadership their incomes. Fear of the collapse of Moroccan civil-military relations fuels the Franco-American consensus that Morocco must not be pushed into actually resolving the conflict—for example, through Title VII sanctions pressing Rabat to back its signatures on treaties and cease scuddling UN-led peace processes.

What readers of *E-IR* may wish for in this book—more a neutral observation than a gripe—is for Zunes and Mundy to channel their case-specific observations into a more system-wide critique. The ability of single Security Council members to wholly interfere in ongoing peace processes, their repeated rejection of the advice from envoys they appoint to resolve this conflict, and the resultant empowerment of the Moroccan government to dictate terms, are common dynamics across the international system. The conflict irresolution of Western Sahara speaks powerfully to the push-pull dynamic between the state and the international institution—one of the classic, overarching debates in international relations for many decades. That is not to say the authors should spend pages situating this work in a realism-liberalism theoretical framework; no, for that would surely produce a less interesting account. However, they could speak more directly to international institutional design, a minor missed opportunity.

Similarly, their focus is almost entirely on the USA and France as the important third parties. This accurately reflects the distribution of interests in the conflict, but there remain unexplored puzzles. Why do all members of the Arab League side with Morocco? Why is there so much more support for the Polisario Front from Latin American governments than from the governments of the world's Muslim-majority countries? Why do so many democratic governments side with the authoritarian Moroccan government over the democratic Sahrawi Republic? Why exactly do the African Francophone countries cluster around support for Morocco when most of the rest of the continent and the AU membership recognizes Western Sahara (according to AU's own charter statement on colonial borders)? Is that the result of intentional French policy, or is it some other dynamic? To be fair, the authors do thoroughly explicate the AU *processes* very well, but aside from some cursory exploration of South African positioning on the conflict, they largely leave interventionist politics on the African continent untouched.

The front cover of the book displays a bold statement from the *African Studies Review*: "Zunes and Mundy have written the definitive book on the Western Sahara." Aside from their first edition of the same (2010), the best biographies of the conflict until now are Jensen's *Anatomy of a Stalemate* (2005), Shelley's *Endgame* (2004), and Hodges' much earlier *Roots of a Desert War* (1983), as well as our own recent entry, *Conflict and Peace* (Besanyő, Huddleston, and Zoubir 2023). All are good introductions to the frozen conflict in "Africa's last colony", but Zunes and Mundy certainly have earned the "definitive" title for their work. For anyone wanting to learn about this conflict for the first time, this is certainly the very first book they should read.

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