

Review – Conflict and Peace in Western Sahara

Written by Irene Fernández-Molina

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IRENE FERNÁNDEZ-MOLINA, NOV 5 2023

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
Routledge, 2023

'MINURSO is an example of what can go wrong with a peacekeeping operation when the basic prerequisites for success are lacking'. Quoted in the introduction, this early pessimistic assessment from peacekeeping scholar William J. Durch (1993:169), made only two years after the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) was deployed, sets the tone for this edited book. The three decades which have elapsed since that evaluation largely correspond with a long period of frozen conflict in Western Sahara which has recently come to an end. In the aftermath of the Guerguerat crisis and the resumption of hostilities between Morocco and the Polisario Front in November 2020, the volume concludes by suggesting that 'useless' MINURSO 'may be witnessing the beginning of an inglorious end because it has lost the only role it played from 1991 to 2020 ... the preservation of the ceasefire' (p.324). What can we learn from such an apparently doomed case?

Evidence of MINURSO's idiosyncrasy and exceptionalism relative to other UN peacekeeping operations are not short in supply. The contributors to the book begin by underscoring the unique 'complexity' (p.2) of the international political and geographic coordinates within which MINURSO operates. The Western Sahara conflict's longstanding low intensity and 'relative triviality ... on the world stage' (p.233) have condemned it to remaining a 'low priority for the great powers before, during, and after the ceasefire' (p.319). MINURSO's work on the ground has always struggled with the "unique trait" posed by the fact that the sovereignty of the fragmented non-self-governing territory it covers—partly occupied and annexed by Morocco, partly in the Polisario Front's hands—is the very source of confrontation between the conflicting parties (p.163). This is compounded by 'striking' legal vacuums surrounding international responsibility for the administration of such territory and the protection of human rights for the people that inhabit it (p.78). The latter human rights gap is particularly glaring in MINURSO's own mandate, making it negatively stand out as the only post-Cold War UN peacekeeping operation deprived of a human rights dimension (Naili, 2023).

Back in 1991, MINURSO was considered 'one of the most ambitious UN peacekeeping operations ever attempted' (Durch 1993: 151). However, due to its timing, MINURSO found itself 'stranded when the tectonic plates shifted' (p.107) from the interpositional missions that were typical of the Cold War—designed to work as a buffer between belligerent parties and ensure compliance with a ceasefire agreement—to the multidimensional missions that became the norm in the 1990s, tasked with broader interventionist functions such as institution-building, electoral monitoring, and security sector reform in the context of then-thriving liberal peacebuilding approaches. Such interstitial positioning between two generations of UN peacekeeping meant that MINURSO was 'conceptually closer to traditional peacekeeping operations than to the new paradigm' (Koops, MacQueen, Tardy and Williams 2017: 264). Thereafter, the permanent members of the UN Security Council (P5), namely France, have been unwilling to mend the 'historical anomaly' (p.287) of its human rights powerlessness. So, what can we take from such a troubled case?

Learning From a Niche Case

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This volume's authors believe, paradoxically, that MINURSO's manifold deviant features and failures in fact make it a valuable reference point, insofar that 'lessons ... can be drawn from this mission for the involvement of the UN ... in (Western Sahara) as well as for peacekeeping operations more broadly' (p.2). Brought together with the goal of offering a comprehensive and multifaceted study of a UN peacekeeping operation which has thus far received little in-depth academic attention (see Solà-Martín 2007 as an exception), the contributors to this book include scholars from the fields of international relations, security and conflict studies, international law, and area studies, as well as (former) practitioners and a journalist. The collection covers MINURSO's historical, legal, and political background, some specific side-aspects of its mandate and activity—concerning human rights, historical heritage protection, and women's participation—the micro dimensions of its military and police operations, as well as the macro politics that have determined its fate, manifestly in the hands of the UN Security Council's P5.

The first theme which emerges from the book that speaks to peacekeeping pertains to the straitjacket imposed by the need for consent from the conflicting parties. In MINURSO's case, this problem dates to the intricacies of the Polisario Front and Morocco's respective 'agreements in principle' to the 1991 UN Settlement Plan, which was presented to them separately—to the point that a top UN representative even wondered 'whether the two sides had been shown the same document' (Goulding 2002: 201, cited in p.82). Subsequently, Rabat would repeatedly demonstrate MINURSO's vulnerability to its goodwill. Demonstrations of wavering consent included hampering the entry of essential resources at the time of the mission's establishment (p.312); displaying the Moroccan national flag at its headquarters in Laayoune (p.164); delaying the Special Representative for Western Sahara (SRSG) and Head of MINURSO's visit (1990-1991) (p.312); preventing Kim Bolduc from taking possession of her post for several months (2014-2017) (p.301); and expelling 84 members of MINURSO's civilian staff following a diplomatic row with Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in 2016 (pp.49-54, 66-67).

More importantly, a lack of consent affected core tasks such as the voter identification process for Western Sahara's referendum on self-determination in the 1990s (pp.25-28, 33, 45-46) and the attempts to add a human rights component to MINURSO's mandate in the 2000s (pp.54-58, 104-105). The problem of consent was explicitly raised by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan in his reports on the conflict from 2002 onwards, where he suggested that the Security Council 'terminate MINURSO, thereby recognising and acknowledging that after the passage of more than 11 years and the expenditure of over half a billion dollars, the UN was not going to solve the problem of Western Sahara without requiring that one or both of the parties do something that they would not voluntarily agree to do' (pp.316-317). This connects to the book's second cross-cutting theme: the UN Security Council's sustained ambiguity and lack of resolve in either supporting MINURSO to its full extent or getting rid of it. What ultimately transpires is that the mission's persisting *raison d'être* for both the great powers and the conflicting parties, especially since the referendum's preparations were abandoned, has been to adopt a minimal, lesser-evil role as a tool for maintaining the status quo (p.324).

The Small Print of International Politics

Chief among this volume's strengths and contributions is the rich and wide-ranging factual overview offered by the various chapters, each from a particular perspective. Such wealth of little-known and little-systematised information will surely be of use for future research, both as background reading and as a source of primary data for new case-specific and comparative analyses. It includes novel empirical insights, for instance, into US-Moroccan relations and US policy towards MINURSO during the years of Donald J. Trump's presidency (pp.68-71), the vandalism of Sahrawi archaeological heritage by MINURSO officers (pp.135-154), and the voting record on Western Sahara from African non-permanent members of the UN Security Council (pp.296-298). Moreover, despite the difficulties that this conflict poses to field research in line with current trends in the peacekeeping scholarship, several chapters (9, 10, 12 and 15) provide precious evidence into the peacekeepers' experiences and everyday practices by drawing on interviews, surveys, and testimonies, including Besenyő's own about his time as a military observer in MINURSO. The introduction's prospective policy analysis and its proposals to reform or replace MINURSO (pp.9-13) are similarly intriguing as food for thought.

On the other hand, more time could have been spent analysing insiders' views and practices. The information on these fascinating aspects is often presented in a report-like, descriptive style which, while effective, leaves the reader

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thirsty for more detail—e.g., on practical communication and language issues among peacekeepers (pp.265-267). The same could be said of just-hinted-at international socialisation and interpersonal dynamics: 'Although in uniform, all military and police personnel are humans with their own socialisation, and cultural, historical, and religious backgrounds, which all make them work and react to the situation in their own individual ways, despite all their trainings' (p.303).

At the meso-level, it would have been a good idea to devote two specific chapters to tracing the evolution of the conflicting parties' relationships with MINURSO. While the book rightly identifies their differing expectations about the mission (p.71) and the 'divergent interpretations' of its mandate (p.104)—much of Chapter 3 is about Morocco-MINURSO crises—a more systematic examination of the two processes would have been a plus. In particular, on the side of the Polisario Front and Sahrawi nationalists, it would have been worth exploring the gradual attitude shift from welcoming MINURSO as 'the "superman" they long hoped would come rebalance the scales of power', to disheartenedly accepting its continuity as 'a powerful international statement that the sovereign status of Western Sahara remained (...) undetermined' (p.71), to then even purposefully limiting its freedom of movement and 'ability to implement its mandate' east of the berm following the resumption of hostilities in 2020 (p.198).

Finally, while many of this volume's arguments rightly revolve around MINURSO's exceptionalism, the research agenda on MINURSO would benefit from more comparative analysis and more dialogue with the peacekeeping literature, which only the introduction and chapters 5-7 engage with here. The case of MINURSO may also need to be reconsidered in light of recent trends and events, such as the withdrawal of the UN Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), suggesting that 'an era of large, complex UN blue helmet missions in Africa is drawing to an end'. In any case, this book constitutes an important contribution that shows why it is worthwhile to read what looks like the small print of international politics, and one that generously paves the way for further study.

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