

WESTERN SAHARA: HISTORY, UN ACTING AND FOREIGN INTERESTS

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Introduction

Some authors refer to Western Sahara as “the last colony” of Africa. Indeed, officially, the saharawi territory has never been decolonized; thus, the situation of Western Sahara is very peculiar in the context of UN Peace Operations, when compared with another ongoing missions, and, yet, is quite unique in the geopolitical context, since the international community has divergent opinions regarding this territory.

In this context, the present article aims to answer the following question: Which are the main reasons that allows the deadlock for the resolution in the Western Sahara’s conflict, initiated in the 70s, to endure until the present days, even with the MINURSO establishment in 1991? The hypothesis sustained is that the dilemma in the conflict solution in West Sahara continues due to political-economical interests, and also the interference/ interests of important global geopolitical actors, impelling that the diplomacy intermediate by the UN, through MINURSO, reaches the success and the aimed solution. In order to answer the proposed question, it is intended to present the history of the conflict until the MINURSO implementation, followed by the detailing of that mission and, in the end, to approach economical, strategic and geopolitical interests of the main actors involved in the saharawi question.

Finally, the conclusion will address the principal reasons that prevent the conflict’ solution in the Western Sahara. Furthermore, a consideration will be made regarding the effectiveness of the UN Mission in the territory.

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Geographical and Historical Characteristics

The Western Sahara is a territory situated in the northwest of Africa, in the region known as Maghreb, and it has borders with Morocco, Algeria, and Mauritania, in addition to having the west coast bathed by the Atlantic Ocean.

Map 1: African Continent



Source: [https://www.ufrgs.br/cebrafrica/analises-de-conjuntura-africana-2/\(2020\)](https://www.ufrgs.br/cebrafrica/analises-de-conjuntura-africana-2/(2020)).

The Berlin Conference, held in 1884, attributed to Spain the colonization of the territory that encompassed the Western Sahara. Thus, the region remained under the administration of the Iberian country, during the period of 1884 to 1976.

Nevertheless, the period post-World War II, specifically from the 1950s, marked the beginning of the process of Africa's decolonization. These processes were driven by many factors, among which stand out: the weakening of the main European colonizing powers, the emergence of a nationalist sentiment (Pan-Africanism), corroborated by the UN Charter of 1945, which recognized the right of colonized peoples to self-determination, as well as the polarization between the United States of America (USA) and the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), during the Cold War, since both countries saw decolonization as an opportunity to expand their zones of political and economical influence.

It was in this scenario that, in 1975, the signature of the Madrid Accord, involving Morocco, Mauritania and Spain, initiated the conflict that extends to the present days. On one side there is the Reign of Morocco, that occupies the west portion of the territory, about 85%. On the other side, separated by a wall of sand with extension of more than 2.500 km and surrounded by land mines, known as The Berm, there is the rest of the territory, under the control of Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguia el Hamra y Río de Oro (POLISARIO Front)², a political-revolutionary movement, founded in 1973, to fight for the independence of the sahwari people from Spain and, later, against the moroccan occupation.

In this context, through the resolution 690, on April 29, 1991, the Security Council (SC) authorized the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO)³, which aims for the organization and conduction of a referendum of self-determination in the sahwari territory.

Origin of the standoff in Western Sahara

Spain's relationship with the Western Sahara territory has existed since 1497, when the Spaniards were trying to protect their possessions in the Canary Islands. In this context, they reached the population of native tribes to enslave them as manpower, seeking the exploitation of the natural resources available in the Canary Islands (Menezes, Morais and Carvalho 2018).

Almost three centuries after the first contacts with the native tribes' population, in 1884, anticipating the Berlin Conference, Spain sent a mission to the sahwari territory, in order to claim *uti possidetis* to make the region a spanish protectorate (Estrada 2016). Thus, during that conference, the spanish protectorate was recognized and, after successive agreements with France, it was established that Spain would control the lands below the parallel 21° 20' N. In this place, Spain established three garnishes: La Guera, in the South; Villa Cisneros, in the Middle, and Villa Bens, in the North (Daudén and Suzin 2011).

Initially, the spanish occupation was limited to the coast of its colony. However, from 1934, two factors encouraged the Spaniards to seek the interiorization of the territory. The first one was a new agreement, settled

2 *Saguia el-Hamra e Rio de Oro* were the extreme limits that divided the territory of the Spanish Sahara, situated in the North and in the South, respectively.

3 French initials, *Mission des Nations Unies pour l'organisation d'un référendum au Sahara Occidental*.

with France, which demanded measures from Spain to shield the frontiers of the colonies belonging to the two european countries, impelling the attack of natives. In order to attend to this demand, Spain sent spanish militaries to the region, with the purpose to monitor and patrol the area. The second motivating factor for the territory's interiorization were the speculations about the existence of big phosphate reserves in the region (Estrada 2014).

In these circumstances, in the early 1950s, emerged in Morocco the *Dij Tahrir*, or Liberation Army, with the goal to expel the european colonizers. This movement was originated from many guerrilla groups that had grown after the french expelled the moroccan sultan Mohammed V. However, even with the moroccan independence from France, in 1956, the movement stayed active, but now, it ambitioned the withdrawal of european colonizers of all the territory, and the unification of part of Maghreb, that Morocco believed be part of the "Greater Morocco" (Menezes, Morais and Carvalho 2018).

The conception of "Greater Morocco" has its origins in 1950, when Allal el-Fassi, leader of Istiqlal, a center-right party of the moroccan politics, understood that the moroccan empire extended beyond its territorial limits, encompassing, in addition to Morocco, the whole of Western Sahara, Mauritania, the spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, as well as part of Algeria and Mali (Ferreira 2018).

In 1956, Mohammed V returned to the newly independent Morocco, and started to claim all the territory he believed being part of the "Greater Morocco". This claim was initiated by the Ifni province, belonging to Spain. Subsequently, in 1957, Spain lost the war against Morocco by the referred province and, as a consequence, they ceded the province of Villa Bens to Morocco. Thus, from now on, the spanish domains were limited to the Sahara, below the parallel 27° 40'N, an area of approximately 260,000 square kilometers (Daudén and Suzin 2011).

Due to the defeat suffered to Morocco and, in addition, to contain the expansion of the Liberation Army among the saharawi, in 1958, Spain altered the status of the Western Sahara, which ceased to be a spanish colony and became a province of Spain, of number 53, going on to be called Spanish Sahara (Daudén and Suzin 2011). As a result of this move, an intense process of urbanization was initiated in the so-called Spanish Sahara, with the application of massive investments, especially in infrastructure. The capital was established in Laayoune and, in order to take the development to the countryside of the desert, 5.494 km of roadway were constructed (Estrada 2014).

The beginning of the UN's involvement in the Western Sahara issue occurred in 1963, when the organization classified the Spanish Sahara as one

of the eligible territories in the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples. According to the declaration, the sahwawi people should exercise its right of choice and decide between: its independence, becoming a sovereign State; free association with Spain or the integration with that same european country. For any of the decisions to be taken, it would be imperative to hold a referendum, in which the population itself would decide its future (Menezes, Morais and Carvalho 2018).

From this moment, the UN started, through resolutions, to pressure Spain in order to proceed the self-determination referendum. Beyond the UN pressure, Morocco and Mauritania started to claim the realization of the referendum in the Spanish Sahara's territory (Daudén and Suzin 2011).

Meanwhile, on May 10, 1973, the POLISARIO Front was created, from the junction of two sahwawi nationalist groups: those originated in Tan-Tan, formed by a sahwawi academic elite, who studied in Morocco, and the sahwawis from Zouerat in Mauritania. In addition to these groups, many sahwawi workers and soldiers from the Spanish Sahara joined the POLISARIO Front⁴ (Justo 2013).

The POLISARIO Front was created with a very specific purpose: the independence from Spain and the formation of an independent sahwawi State, as demonstrated in the first article of the Movement Statute:

POLISARIO Front is a National Liberation Movement, originated from a long sahwawi resistance against all forms of foreign domination in which sahwawis are voluntarily mobilized, for the fight of national independence and the recovery of sahwawi sovereignty in the whole RASD territory⁵ (Justo 2013).

It is important to highlight that the POLISARIO movement emerged from a pan-arabist and socialist ideology, since it had as a model of inspiration the Egyptian, the Libyan, and, mainly, the Algerian liberation movements. All of those movements awakened, in the youngest sahwawi population, the urge to conquer its independence (Menezes, Morais and Carvalho 2018 apud Cobo 2011).

Right after its creation, the POLISARIO Front declared war against Spain, starting to carry out numerous guerrilla actions against spanish patrols and posts, in addition to implementing kidnappings and sabotages, which

⁴ Our translation.

⁵ Our translation.

resulted in the deaths of eight Spaniards (Menezes, Morais and Carvalho 2018 apud Miguel 1995).

In this context, suffering with sahrawi incursions, Spain was very vulnerable, since, at this time, the country was in a period of great internal instability, due to of Francisco Franco's weakened state of health and, consequently, the crisis of the Francoist regime (Menezes, Morais and Carvalho 2018). All this instability was determinant for Spain to, in 1974, pressured by the UN, decide to conduct a census with the native population to hold the referendum of self-determination, planned to take place in the first half of 1975 (Estrada 2014).

However, this referendum never happened. Morocco did not accept the independence of Spanish Sahara as one of the voting options, as it believed that this territory belonged to the country. Therefore, the King of Morocco, Hassan II, asked Spain to postpone the referendum and, at the same time, joined to Mohtar uld Dada, then president of Mauritania, to request an opinion before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on the legal ties between the Spanish Sahara, Morocco and Mauritania (Barata 2012).

As a consequence, in October 1975, the ICJ's opinion established that neither Morocco nor Mauritania had the right to claim the Western Sahara's territory – as it came to be called by the international community – ratifying the understanding that Spain should hold the referendum on self-determination, as noted in the following excerpt from the ICJ opinion⁶:

[...] Hence, the Court found no legal ties that could affect the application of resolution 1514 in the decolonization of Western Sahara and, in particular, the principle of self-determination through the free and genuine expression of the territory's people's will [...] (ICJ 1975).

As soon as ICJ's opinion was released, King Hassan II made a national statement calling on the Moroccans to march towards Western Sahara in order to retake the plundered lands and liberate the population from spanish colonization (Daudén and Suzin 2011). Thus approximately 350,000 Moroccans, escorted by the Royal Moroccan Army and encouraged by the benefits offered by the Kingdom, such as tax exemptions, for example, occupied the northern part of the territory of Western Sahara. This episode became known as the "Green March" and was an important maneuver to pressure Spain to negotiate (Menezes, Morais and Carvalho 2018).

6 Our translation.

Days after the “Green March”, Spain, unable to face a war against Morocco due to the collapse of Francoism, secretly signed an agreement with Morocco and Mauritania: the Madrid Agreement. In this agreement, Spain divided the administration of the Sahrawi territory, leaving one part with Morocco and the other part with Mauritania; in return, Spain would continue to administer the rest of the territory, until 1976, and would remain with 35% of the economic rights over Western Sahara resources (fisheries and phosphate) (Menezes, Morais and Carvalho 2018 apud Franck and Hoffman 1975-76).

With the occupation of the territory by Morocco and Mauritania, the POLISARIO Front began an intense combat, using guerrilla tactics, against the two countries, and starting the war itself (Estrada 2014). On 26 February, 1976, Spain officially withdrew from the territory, and the next day, the POLISARIO Front proclaimed the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (RASD), created for the purpose of giving international legitimacy and claiming sovereignty over Western Sahara. According to Estrada (2014), “the RASD functions today as a *sui generis* Republic, by acting as a state-in-exile that manages the lives of refugees in the semi-autonomous territory granted by Algeria”.

Implementation of MINURSO

In 1979, Mauritania decided to withdraw from Western Sahara, considering that its troops were drained, due to the guerrilla implemented by the POLISARIO Front. On the other hand, after the Mauritanian withdrawal, Morocco extended its occupation to the part of the territory that was disoccupied by Mauritania, inflaming the conflict against the POLISARIO Front (Menezes, Morais and Carvalho 2018). Between the late 1970s and the beginning of the 80s, POLISARIO Front conquered a good political and military advantage, materialized by the growing recognition by the international community and the conquest of important territorial areas, including significant localities (Barata 2012).

In the beginning of 1976, OAU was involved in the Western Sahara issue, given that the conflict contradicted the values inscribed in the charter governing the organization, which sought to foster progress from cooperation between African states. Therefore, OAU assumed the conduct of the negotiation process between the parties. Taking advantage of the interest and involvement of the OAU in the issue, the RASD requested its entry into the

organization, being officially recognized as a member in 1982. Following the admission of RASD, Morocco left the organization in 1984⁷ (Ferreira 2018).

In the military field, as a response to the military conquests obtained by the POLISARIO Front, during 1981 and 1987, Morocco constructed a huge wall of sand and stone, known as The Berm, which divided the Western Sahara in two zones: the Occupied Zones, dominated by Morocco, located in the western side of the wall and that encompasses 85% of the territory; and the Liberated Zones, about 15% of the territory, controlled by the POLISARIO Front, located in the eastern side of the wall (Duarte 2016).

Photo 1: The Berm



Source: The author.

Thereby, taking advantage of the process already conducted by the OAU in 1984, the UN effectively decides to intervene in the progress of the negotiations, taking its command and encouraging Morocco and the POLISARIO Front to begin the talks (Ferreira 2018).

In 1988, Morocco and the POLISARIO Front agreed with the UN proposition to effectuate a ceasefire and, later, to realize the self-determination referendum. In this way, a definitive ceasefire was signed in 1991, one year

⁷ In 2017, Morocco was readmitted to the African Union (AU), successor to the OAU, after receiving 39 favorable votes out of a total of 54 member countries.

after the approving of the *Settlement Plan*⁸ by the Security Council. Later this year, MINURSO was created (Estrada 2014).

Since then, the main obstacle to the negotiations is the lack of a consensus on the identification of voters who would have the right to vote in the referendum on self-determination. On one hand, the POLISARIO Front advocates that the electorate be formed according to the census conducted in 1974; on the other hand, Morocco demands the expansion of the list of voters, since, from 1975, the year in which the “Green March” was held, there was an increase of Moroccans in Western Sahara, making increasing the chances of success in the referendum (Estrada 2014).

MINURSO's acting in the diplomatic field

In order to guide the sequence of MINURSO actions, aiming the realization of the self-determination referendum, the *Settlement Plan*, approved by the UN SC, established four phases⁹:

Phase 1 - Ceasefire monitoring. Focuses on the ongoing monitoring of the ceasefire agreed between the parties to the conflict in order to create favorable conditions for the political peace process to move forward;

Phase 2 - Transition phase. It will be initiated from the publication of the list of persons authorized to vote and will lead to the reduction and containment of forces of the Royal Moroccan Army and the POLISARIO Front;

Phase 3 - Referendum Phase. It will focus on the military support necessary for the successful holding of the referendum;

Phase 4 - Post-referendum phase. It will correspond to the decrease of personnel and the complete withdrawal of the military component in Western Sahara, when conditions allow (UN 2015).

In this context, aligned with the planning predicted on the *Settlement Plan*, originally, the mandate of MINURSO, in summary, stipulated the following actions to be triggered¹⁰:

⁸ Present in the Report of the Secretary-General of the UN (S/21360, 18 June 1990), it envisaged the actions to be implemented for the effective realization of the referendum on the Sahrawi people's self-determination.

⁹ Our translation.

¹⁰ Our translation.

- a. to monitor the ceasefire;
- b. to verify the reduction of Moroccan troops in the territory;
- c. to monitor the confinement of Moroccan troops and the POLISARIO Front in designated locations;
- d. to take actions with the parties to secure the release of all prisoners or political detainees from Western Sahara;
- e. to oversee the exchange of prisoners of war;
- f. to implement a refugee repatriation program from Western Sahara;
- g. to identify and register qualified voters;
- h. to organize and ensure a free and fair referendum and proclaim the results (UN 2015).

It is important to highlight that, according to the premises of the Settlement Plan, the self-determination referendum should have occurred in the year following the implementation of MINURSO, i.e., in 1992. However, due to the lack of consensus regarding the composition of the electorate, the same was not accomplished (Duarte 2016).

Therefore, by mid-1996, MINURSO was going through a very critical period, with all voters identification centres closed. Soon, in an attempt to advance the negotiation process, the UN Secretary-General appointed the US James Baker¹¹ to intermediate the negotiations. Thus, in 1997, for the first time throughout the peace process, Morocco and the POLISARIO Front committed each other to an accord that became known as the Houston Agreement, which envisioned the holding of a referendum on self-determination in 1998 (Ferreira 2018).

However, the Houston Agreement failed. After MINURSO reopened the identification centres to finally determine who had the right to vote in the referendum, the Moroccan stance, which sought to “flood” the identification centres with new names, in order to ensure a greater number of voters in favor, ultimately determined the failure of the agreement, making it impossible to hold the referendum in 1998 (Ferreira 2018).

Still confident in a solution to the deadlock in Western Sahara, in 2011, James Baker presented a new plan, known as the Baker Plan I, which proposed a certain autonomy for Western Sahara, recognizing its integration with Morocco. The plan was immediately accepted by the Moroccans, but

¹¹ American politician and diplomat who served as Secretary of State of the United States, during the period of 1989 to 1992, when he worked in American foreign policy towards the Middle East, especially during the Persian Gulf War (Ferreira 2018).

refused by the POLISARIO Front. Therefore, the proposal was redefined and, in 2003, Baker Plan II was published, suggesting a three-year period in which the territory would be administered by a government elected by the sahwari population and, after the provisional period, a referendum would be held, establishing as voters all residents in the region since 1999, so that the population decided between independence, integration or autonomy. The POLISARIO Front accepted the definitions of the Baker Plan II, but, surprisingly, Morocco rejected it. Even if the proposal defined all residents in the region since 1999 as voters, as claimed by the Moroccans, Morocco stated that it would not agree to any proposal that would allow the Western Sahara's independence (Duarte 2016).

Negotiations continued without progress and, in 2007, Morocco submitted its proposal for Western Sahara, the Saharan Autonomous Region, which was based on the granting of sahwari autonomy, but within a framework of moroccan sovereignty. On the other hand, at the same time, the POLISARIO Front presented its own proposal, based on its desire for self-determination and independence (Estrada 2014).

Since then, it appears that the Security Council resolutions on the issue of Western Sahara appear to be the result of a superficial discussion on the subject, indicating that the deadlock has been dealt with in such a way as simply to "comply with the agenda", limiting itself to the annual renewal of the MINURSO's mandate, without proposing any concrete measure or action that would make it possible to resolve the issue.

The military component of MINURSO

While the negotiations in the diplomatic field are marked by numerous disagreements, the military component of MINURSO aims to monitor and assist the parties in the conflict in complying with the provisions of the ceasefire, according to the Settlement Plan and the Military Agreements nffl I, n° 2, and n° 3¹² (UN 2015, 26).

For this, the map below presents the unfolding of MINURSO in Western Sahara's territory.

¹² Our translation.

Map 2: Unfolding of MINURSO



Source: UN (2015).

As can be seen in the map above, the military component of the mission is unfolding in Laayoune, where is located the MINURSO's headquarter (MHQ) and the Medical Unit of the mission, and in o9 (nine) Team Sites¹³, where o4 (four) are located to the West of the Berm – Awsard, Oum Dreyga, Smara and Mahbas – in territory controlled by Morocco, and other o5 (five) located to the East of the Berm, in the region controlled by the POLISARIO Front: Agwanit, Mijek, Mehaires, Tifariti and Bir Lahlou.

¹³ *Team Site* is the english terminology to the base or station work of the UN Military Observers. In the specific case of MINURSO, the military observers live and work in the *team sites*.

Photo 2: Team Site Mehaires



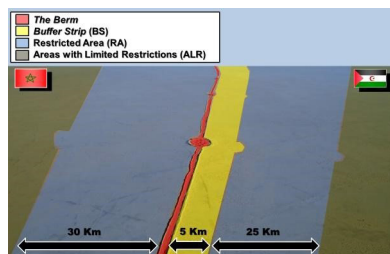
Source: The author.

The Military Agreement nº 1 (MA No 1) is an agreement signed between the POLISARIO Front and the MINURSO, in december 1997, and between MINURSO and the Royal Moroccan Army, in january 1998. It should be noted that it does not refer to a military agreement between the parties to the conflict, but rather to an agreement signed by the parties with MINURSO. The agreement establishes guidelines and procedures that must be followed by both parties, in the context of the ceasefire, in order to avoid any kind of hostility. In this way, in the military field, it is a vital document for the daily work of MINURSO, carried out by the Military Observers, since it defines the actions characterized as “violations”, not only of the agreement, but also violations contrary to the spirit of the peace process¹⁴ (UN 2015, 26).

Thus, MA 1 also establishes important geographical definitions in the territory of Western Sahara, dividing it into three distinct areas, taking as a reference the Berm: Buffer Strip, Restricted Area and Areas with Limited Restrictions. In addition, it describes which activities, military or otherwise, may be undertaken in each of the geographical areas, and establishes the necessary procedures for obtaining authorization from MINURSO to conduct them¹⁵ (UN 2015, 26).

¹⁴ Our translation.

¹⁵ Our translation.

Figure 1: Geographical definitions established in MA 1

Source: The author.

By the other hand, in April 1999, MINURSO and the POLISARIO Front signed the Military Agreement n° 2, while Military Agreement n° 3 was signed in March 1999, between MINURSO and the Royal Moroccan Army. Although signed separately with each of the parties, the agreements are essentially the same, referring to the procedures for reducing the threat caused by the existence of mines and failed devices, through the exchange of information between the parties and MINURSO, aiming at the marking and destruction of all found artifacts¹⁶ (UN 2015, 27).

Thus, in order to achieve the objectives of monitoring and assisting the warring parties in complying with the ceasefire provisions, the Military Observers carry out numerous actions in the field, with the intention of monitoring the activities of the Royal Moroccan Army and the POLISARIO Front, among which stand out: the execution of day and night patrols throughout the area of operations, frequent visits to the military units of the warring parties to verify changes in the Battle Order¹⁷, monitoring the conduct of military exercises and training of the parties, and conducting monthly liaison meetings with the Moroccan and Sahrawi military leaders in their respective areas of operations.

Economic, strategic and geopolitical interests

Over the course of more than 40 years of conflict, geopolitics offers a very enlightening viewpoint towards the impasses involving self-determina-

¹⁶ Our translation.

¹⁷ Information on personnel, units and equipment of a force, friend or foe, including, if possible, effective, identification, location, command structure, historical and other data relating to units and military personalities (EME 2018).

tion in Western Sahara, especially when it is analysed, from Spanish rule, the involvement of important international actors in the Sahrawi issue. Besides the territorial question, embodied by the Moroccan ambition in the formation of “Greater Morocco”, there are several economic interests that justify Morocco’s insistence on occupying Western Sahara. Although the Sahrawi territory is characterized by a typical desert environment, the region possesses numerous natural riches, which highlight both the Moroccan ambition and the interest of states and companies, private or public, contributing to the unresolved conflict.

In this context, in order to facilitate trade of resources from Western Sahara, Morocco issues a certificate of origin stating that all products come from Moroccan territory. In this way, the country can profit from the exploitation of Sahrawi resources without inflaming international public opinion, since many countries legitimize the RASD¹⁸ (Hagen 2008).

Initially, the Sahrawi coast is very prosperous for the practice of fishing, as it houses the Canary Island-Saharan fishing bank, considered one of the largest and richest on the planet, extending for 150,000 Km² in front of the Sahrawi coast (López 2012). According to Ferreira (2018) apud Zoubir (2006), “the Western Sahara has 700 Km of Atlantic coast with strategic importance. Moreover, the territory retains one of the richest waters for fishing in the world, which today are exploited illegally by Morocco and EU members”.

In 2007, the European Union (EU) concluded the Sustainable Fisheries Partnership Agreement with the Kingdom of Morocco. The agreement lasted until 2011 and, during this period, the Moroccans received approximately EUR 36 million per year to authorise fishing for EU-linked vessels in the waters of the Western Sahara’s coast (Ferreira 2018). Although the European Parliament has recently submitted reservations for the continuation of the renewal of the agreement, in early 2019 the EU Council adopted the new Treaty, applicable for four years, fixing an overall financial contribution of EUR 208 million for Morocco. Even if the EU Council states that “nothing in the Fisheries Agreement or its Implementing Protocol implies recognition of the sovereignty or sovereign rights of the Kingdom of Morocco over Western Sahara and its adjacent waters”, in practice if the approval of the agreement only ratifies the impasse over the Sahrawi territory, favoring Moroccan rule (UE 2019).

Another important natural resource in Western Sahara is phosphate, which had already prompted economic interest since 1960, when phosphate reserves were discovered in Bou Craa, initiating economic exploitation by

18 Our translation.

Spain, which, in 1976, on the occasion of the signing of the Madrid Agreement, received, as a counterpart, 35% of the economic rights deriving from its exploitation (Barata 2012). Although phosphate is not a very valuable good, it is still extremely important and has a very comprehensive utility, highlighting its application in the production of agricultural fertilizers. Meanwhile, according to data from the United States Geopolitical Survey (USGS), only three countries concentrate 75% of the world's phosphate reserves, 42.3% of which are in Morocco (including the existing reserves in Western Sahara), which has 21,000 billion tons, China, in second place, with 26% and the United States, with 7% (Souza and Cardoso 2008). Note that these numbers, mathematically, are already quite expressive; however, relating them to the projection that, until the year 2034/ 2035 the peak of the world production of phosphate is reached, which will decrease from then on, existing phosphate reserves in Western Sahara grow in economic and strategic importance (Ferreira 2018).

In this scenario, it should be noted that Western Sahara has the largest conveyor belt system in the world, with more than 100 Km of extension, connecting the mines of Bou Craa to the port of Laayoune. In this way, Morocco controls and profits from this system, since all extracted phosphate is quickly and easily drained to the port and shipped for export (Ferreira 2018). Thus, mineral exploitation in this region receives massive foreign investments, allocated to Moroccan state-owned enterprises, which dominate most of the exploitation, maintaining partnerships with various private actors around the world, mainly with the US and Europe (Menezes, Morais and Carvalho 2018).

In addition to fishing and phosphate, it is speculated that both the interior of the territory and the Sahrawi continental shelf can hold important oil and natural gas reserves. Therefore, there are foreign companies that have settled in the territory and carry out studies in search of such reservation (Menezes, Morais and Carvalho 2018 apud ONHYM 2020).

Once again, the understanding is ratified that the presence of foreign companies in the Sahrawi territory, such as the French company Total and the US company Kosmos, which have oil exploration contracts with Morocco, in addition to the granting of licenses by the Moroccan state oil company, ONHYM, for oil research and exploration in Western Sahara, they end up in a way legitimizing the Moroccan presence in the Sahrawi territory. Since the beginning of the Sahrawi conflict, it has been apparent that the strategic and geopolitical interests of important external actors, mainly with the Kingdom of Morocco, have been decisive in the emergence and maintenance of the impasse regarding the self-determination of Western Sahara (Estrada 2014).

At the regional level, Algeria stands out as an important external player in the Western Sahara question. Since the beginning of the conflict, the Algerians have always been in favor of the Sahrawi people's self-determination, and are the main supporters of the POLISARIO Front, also sheltering the thousands of Sahrawi refugees who are concentrated in the Tindouf region. It should be noted that Algeria has a historical rivalry with Morocco, especially related to territorial disputes, such as the one that motivated the Sand War in 1963, in addition to the dispute for political hegemony in the Maghreb region. As such, the integration of Western Sahara by Morocco represents a dangerous precedent for the question of the inviolability of borders, and may even affect the integrity of Algerian territory. Another important geostrategic factor for Algeria is the exit to the Atlantic Ocean, which would be possible with the independence of Western Sahara, facilitated through the Saharan territory (Ferreira and Migon 2015).

Spain, a power that theoretically still manages Western Sahara, is another prominent player in the Saharan question. The signing of the Madrid Agreement in 1975 marked a change in the stance of the Spanish Government, which until then was in favor of holding a referendum on the self-determination of the Sahrawi people (Smolarek 2013). However, in general, Spain maintains a rather ambiguous stance towards the Western Sahara conflict. If on the one hand, in the early 70's, it was in favor of Sahrawi self-determination, on the other, it tries to maintain a good relationship with Morocco and the international community, since the Spanish-Moroccan relationship involves economic and geostrategic issues¹⁹ (Miyares 2006).

From an economic point of view, the fisheries agreements signed by the EU with Morocco are of great importance for the Spanish fishing industry. On the other hand, Morocco's own geographical location qualifies it as an important state in controlling immigration, terrorism and drug trafficking from North Africa. Consequently, good relations with Morocco are a relevant factor for both Spain and the EU²⁰ (Estrada 2014; Miyares 2006). In addition, Morocco uses its claims on Ceuta and Melilla, territories of Spain located in northern Morocco, to pressure the Spaniards to support the Moroccan demand on Western Sahara. Thus, despite the constant pressure from public opinion to support Sahrawi self-determination, Spain refrains from putting pressure on the Kingdom of Morocco, as it could trigger a period of instability, which would result in serious consequences for the interests of Spain (Menezes, Morais and Carvalho 2018).

¹⁹ Our translation.

²⁰ Our translation.

Throughout the conflict, France has presented itself as Morocco's main ally in the Western Sahara issue. From the moment Moroccan kingdom first claimed the Sahrawi territory in 1963, immediately after the UN included it in the list of Non-self-Governing Territories and decolonization pending, France supported the Moroccan demand, even after the ICJ decision in 1975²¹ (Fuentes 2014).

In this context, French support is not just a rhetoric, since it involves concrete actions in the military and economic field. The referendum in Western Sahara could unbalance the internal politics of Morocco, France's largest ally in the Maghreb, reflecting the loss of French influence in that region. For this reason, in the course of the conflict, France provided substantial military support to Morocco, with the supply of armaments and even with the sending of French troops to fight against the POLISARIO Front (Menezes, Morais and Carvalho 2018).

In the economic field, in addition to the increase of Morocco's military and financial dependence on the French, it should be noted that the most important companies in France have numerous trade agreements with Morocco, especially those operating in the area of strategic resources in the Sahrawi territory, such as oil and phosphate, which demonstrates that an independent Western Sahara is contrary to France's economic interests in the region²² (Fuentes 2014).

However, the greatest French support for Moroccan demand in relation to Western Sahara is in its work with the UN Security Council. Since the implementation of MINURSO in 1991, France has used its position as a permanent member of the SC to influence the decisions and resolutions of that organization in favor of Moroccan interests (Ferreira and Migon 2015). As an example of this influence are the French vetoes on the inclusion of MINURSO competence for the protection of human rights in Western Sahara, making it the only UN mission not operating in this area (Duarte 2016).

Another important external actor in the Western Sahara issue is the US. From a historical point of view, it should be noted that Morocco was the first country to recognize the independence of the USA, being therefore one of its oldest allies²³ (Solà-Martín 2019). Furthermore, it is important to note that the conflict in Western Sahara was born at a very peculiar geopolitical moment: the Cold War. During this ideological conflict, the US guided its action in agreements of mutual security and military assistance with states

21 Our translation.

22 Our translation.

23 Our translation.

geopolitically relevant to its interests, trying to contain the expansion of communism and the area of influence of the USSR (Barata 2012).

In this way, Morocco's privileged strategic location at the entrance to the Mediterranean Sea, giving access to one of the most important maritime routes in the world, became an extension of American influence in the Maghreb region. Thus, during the Cold War, Morocco received massive investments in the military and economic fields from the US. As an example, in the 1950s, the Americans installed, on Moroccan soil, missile launch bases aimed at the USSR²⁴ (Solà-Martin 2009).

In the economic field, it should be noted that, between 1975 and 1990, Morocco received more than 1/5 of the total US aid to Africa, being more than 1 billion dollars in military assistance and 1.3 billion dollars in economic aid (Road 2014 apud Zoubir 2009). In this scenario, the USSR was, even indirectly, another external actor in the conflict, since all the weapons used by the POLISARIO Front were of Soviet origin, purchased by Algeria and Libya and then ceded to the Sahrawis, allowing the POLISARIO Front to have a considerable arsenal of weapons at no cost (Ferreira 2012).

For this reason, the US strongly supported the Moroccan army during the confrontation against the POLISARIO Front, offering training for the military and making it possible to sell weapons to equip Moroccan troops, since, in the Cold War scenario, it was important for the US that Morocco maintained its stable monarchy, in addition to ensuring that Western Sahara, closely linked to Algeria and Libya, did not become independent due to the threat of communist expansion that would be characterized (Road 2014). Furthermore, the instability of the Moroccan government, and of the region as a whole, could hamper transit through the Mediterranean Sea, preventing US access to the Persian Gulf, including by air (López 2012).

With the end of the Cold War, the securitization of Western Sahara did not cease to exist, however, a new approach emerged, inserted in the context of the US-led Global War on Terror, since the attacks of 11 September 2001. Therefore, according to Estrada (2014) apud Zoubir (2008), the new American interests in the Maghreb region are due to two reasons: 1) economic and political interests, related to the demand for energy (oil and natural gas) and the regionalization of the Maghreb as a potential market for US corporations; and 2) military and security interests, related to the need to monitor/ control issues such as Islam, terrorism and democratization.

At this juncture of the Global War on Terror, Morocco sought to associate the POLISARIO Front with some international terrorist organiza-

24 Our translation.

tions, such as Al-Qaeda Maghreb, a “branch” of the known terrorist group operating in North Africa. This Moroccan attitude aims to consolidate, in a more intense way, the American opposition to any Sahrawi claim (Ferreira and Migon 2015). Finally, from the analysis of the actions of the main external actors that influence the solution of the conflict, it can be seen that *realpolitik* permeates all the dynamics in the question of Western Sahara.

Conclusion

This article sought to address the dynamics surrounding the Sahrawi question, seeking to answer the following question: What are the main reasons that allow the deadlock for the resolution of the Western Sahara’s conflict, which began in the 1970s, to endure until the present day, even with the establishment of MINURSO in 1991?

In response to this question, it was found that the conflict in Sahrawi territory actually started in 1976, after the signing of the Madrid Agreement. This agreement was in practice an affront to the principle of self-determination of peoples, established by the UN Charter in 1945. Furthermore, it is noted that there was a clear disregard for the ICJ opinion drawn up in 1975.

Since the beginning of the conflict, it has been observed that the economic, strategic and geopolitical interests of important external actors in the region, especially Spain, France and the United States, have underpinned the dynamics surrounding the Sahrawi question.

In addition to the territorial issue that initiated the Moroccan claim to control the area, the formation of the “Greater Morocco”, it can be observed that Western Sahara possesses numerous natural resources, which, by themselves, materialize the interest of Moroccan and other states in the region. Therefore, the establishment of a good relationship with the Kingdom of Morocco is a *sine qua non* for the maintenance of the interests of major world powers in the Maghreb region.

Regarding the diplomacy undertaken by the UN, especially after the implementation of MINURSO, it can be seen that the performance of external players contributed to the perpetuation of the impasse. As pointed out by Barata (2012, 151), the support of important geopolitical actors to the Moroccan cause, such as France and the United States, two permanent members of the UN SC, allowed the conflict to be treated from the outset only as a deadlock on self-determination, which Morocco opposes because of its territorial integrity, based on historical rights, that is, the conflict was

not treated as a matter of aggressive territorial expansion. This implies that, in practice, the issue of Western Sahara referred to Chapter VI of the UN Charter - "Peaceful Settlement of Disputes", based on the consensus between the parties - not Chapter VII - "Action in the Case of Threat to Peace, Break of Peace and Act of Aggression" -, which would require more energetic and effective action by the SC, including the imposition, through sanctions or coercion, of a solution to the impasse.

Thus, although the UN has been involved in the issue since 1991, up to the present moment, it is evident the inability of the SC resolutions and the MINURSO action to put into practice the holding of the referendum on self-determination, which should have been conducted in 1992, due to the constant deadlocks in the negotiations. However, the actions of MINURSO have some positive aspects, especially in the military component of the mission, which has delayed the consolidation of Moroccan sovereignty in Western Sahara. In this context, it can currently be stated that MINURSO is limited to actions to monitor the ceasefire, to reduce threats caused by mines and failed devices and to support confidence-building measures between the parties and the UN, all of which are implemented, effectively, by the Military Observers of the mission.

Finally, it is concluded that, in the dynamics of the Western Sahara question, economic, strategic and geopolitical interests continue to prevail over respect for the principle of self-determination of peoples. Thus, the solution to the impasse remains quite distant.

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to answer the following question: What are the main reasons that allow the impasse for the resolution of the conflict in Western Sahara, which began

in the 1970s, to last until the present day, even with the establishment of MINURSO, in 1991? The hypothesis considered is that the impasse in the resolution of the conflict in Western Sahara persists to the present day due to political-economic interests and the interference/ interest of important global geopolitical actors, preventing diplomacy brokered by the UN, through MINURSO, achieve the desired success and solution. In order to find the answer to the proposed problem, through a qualitative bibliographic research, an analysis of the history of the conflict was initially carried out until the implementation of MINURSO, followed by the detailing of that mission and, finally, the economic, strategic and geopolitical interests of the main global actors involved in the Sahrawi question were addressed. In conclusion, it is observed that, since the beginning of the conflict, the involvement of important geopolitical actors contributed to the beginning and to the maintenance of the impasse over the years, motivated mainly by economic, strategic and geopolitical interests.

KEYWORDS

Western Sahara; MINURSO; Morocco; POLISARIO Front; External Interests.

Received on May 24, 2020

Accepted on June 30, 2020

Translated by Luiza Ferreira Flores