

THE EVOLUTION OF UN PEACE OPERATIONS FROM A HUMAN SECURITY PERSPECTIVE: THE DILEMMA IN THE ISSUE OF WESTERN SAHARA

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Introduction

The question of Western Sahara, “Africa’s last colony”, is quite peculiar in the context of United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations, when compared to other ongoing missions, and it is also quite unique from a geopolitical point of view since the international community differs regarding this territory (Barros 2020).

In this context, this article seeks to address the following issue: why didn’t the evolution of UN peace operations, which occurred after the expansion of the international security agenda and the emergence of the concept of human security, provide any significant change in the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO)? We will consider the hypothesis that, although there is a consensus at the international level on the importance of the concept of human security, there has been no significant change in MINURSO’s mandate, such as the incorporation of new assignments, due to Morocco’s close relationship with some permanent members of the UN Security Council (UNSC), namely France and the United States.

Therefore, in order to answer the proposed question, the second section initially addresses the concept of human security. Then, we analyze the evolution of United Nations peace operations in the context of an expansion of the international security agenda, until the establishment of the principle of responsibility to protect. In the fourth section, we approach the question of Western Sahara from the perspective of human security. At the end of the

study, in the conclusion, relevant aspects of the proposed problem will be addressed.

The rise of the human security issue

Before approaching the concept of human security, it is important to understand the international situation which promoted it. The traditional concept of security, centered on state sovereignty and territorial integrity, obtained through the strengthening of each nation's military apparatus, had dominated theoretical debates during the Cold War until the mid-1970s, when nuclear tension between the superpowers matured, allowing for the emergence of questioning of this traditional approach to security (Buzan and Hansen 2009).

As Walt (1991) points out, from the 1970s and, mainly, in the 1980s, debates on the issue of security intensified, marking, for the author, the “renaissance of security studies”. At that time, security theorists disagreed about the broadening and deepening of the international security agenda beyond political and military expressions, rejecting the centrality of the State as an agent of security (Buzan and Hansen 2009).

In this scenario, peace studies stood out, especially Johan Galtung's propositions, introducing new concepts for peace, security, and violence. According to the author, there are two forms of peace: negative and positive. Negative peace is characterized by the absence of violence, while positive peace is characterized by a stable social balance, in which the emergence of a new conflict has no possibility of escalating to violence and war (Galtung 1969). Thus, as highlighted by Oliveira (2009, 69), “in order for security to be durable, it must be equated with a stable or positive peace structure, which is much more than just the absence of war” (our translation)⁴. Positive peace provides the reduction of conditions that prevent the development of individuals, such as poverty, social inequality, and totalitarian regimes, among others.

In normative terms, the construction of the concept took advantage of a series of previous discussions of freedom in relation to fear and in relation to necessity. According to Gilder (2021), as soon as the 1941 Atlantic Charter, it was already possible to identify the first references to such freedoms as well as an indirect focus on the individual, in terms of the security agenda. It

4 In the original: “para que a segurança seja durável, ela deve ser equiparada a uma estrutura de paz estável ou positiva, que é muito mais do que somente a ausência de guerra” (Oliveira 2009, 69).

was the first document with guidelines that aimed to shape the international order to be instituted after World War II in case of an Allied victory.

It was not until 1980 that this discussion on both ideas of freedom would be resumed at the international level. The Brandt, Palmer, and Brundtland Commissions produced reports in which they address the link between peace and development, the role of cooperation from a global vision of security as a possible response to the emergence of new threats, and the idea of sustainability as a response to the climate crisis and its possible interurrences that could potentiate conflicts (Gilder 2021).

In the 1990s, concurrently with these new proposals and theoretical formulations, the concept of human security was developed. The term was formally presented in 1994, in the Human Development Report, commissioned by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), which, according to Dias (2018, 39), suggested a “passage from military security to human security, acknowledging that there is only peace to the extent that people have guarantees of security in their daily lives”⁵, thus redefining the logic of the threat by stating that:

The concept of security has for too long been interpreted narrowly: as security of territory from external aggression, or as protection of national interests in foreign policy or as global security from the threat of a nuclear holocaust. It has been related more to nation-states than to people. The superpowers were locked in an ideological struggle-fighting a cold war all over the world. The developing nations, having won their independence only recently, were sensitive to any real or perceived threats to their fragile national identities. Forgotten were the legitimate concerns of ordinary people who sought security in their daily lives. For many of them, security symbolized protection from the threat of disease, hunger, unemployment, crime, social conflict, political repression and environmental hazards. With the dark shadows of the cold war receding, one can now see that many conflicts are within nations rather than between nations (UNDP 1994, 22).

In addition, the UNDP report defines human security based on two main aspects: the concept is used in a more limited view to refer to people’s freedom from threats such as hunger, epidemics, or repression (freedom from want), and in a broader view to refer to the consequences of conflicts, genocides, ethnic cleansing (freedom from fear) (UNDP 1994). As Rocha

5 In the original: “*passagem da segurança militar para a segurança humana, reconhecendo que só há paz na medida em que as pessoas tenham garantias de segurança em seu cotidiano*” (Dias 2018, 39).

(2017a, 56) points out, the logic of this approach is that “by guaranteeing the absence of physical threats, it is possible to guarantee the development agenda and vice versa”⁶, safeguarding the human security of individuals. In addition, the document establishes the following dimensions of human security: economic, dietary, sanitary, environmental, personal, community, and political. From these seven dimensions, the report presents six probable threats to human security, namely: transnational terrorism, drug trafficking and crimes, economic inequality, population displacement, environmental degradation, and demographic issues (UNDP 1994).

Along with the emergence of this concept, a series of criticisms emerged about its formulation and practice. In this sense, Paris (2001, 88), argues that the conception lacks precision, remaining uncertain “whether the concept of human security can serve as a practical guide for academic research or formulation of government policies” (our translation)⁷, since, according to the author:

Existing definitions of human security tend to be extraordinarily expansive and vague, encompassing everything from physical security to psychological well-being, which provides policymakers with little guidance in the prioritization of competing policy goals and academics little sense of what, exactly, is to be studied (Paris 2001, 88).

Despite this, it is fair to say that the concept of human security, although controversial and polemic, was adopted by several actors in the international system (states, international/regional organizations, NGOs, and others). As Rocha (2017, 105) points out, “there is a constant debate regarding its relevance, meaning, and definition, but the concept has already been incorporated in academic and political circles” (our translation)⁸.

At this point, it is important to highlight that the UNDP report was the result of a process that began with the release of the Agenda for Peace, which marked the beginning of the evolution of the United Nations peacekeeping operations, as will be discussed below.

6 In the original: “ao garantir a ausência de ameaças físicas, é possível garantir a agenda de desenvolvimento e vice-versa” (Rocha 2017a, 56).

7 In the original: “se o conceito de segurança humana pode servir como um guia prático para pesquisa acadêmica ou formulação de políticas governamentais” (Paris 2001, 88).

8 In the original: “o debate em relação a sua relevância, significado e definição é constante, mas já está incorporado nos círculos acadêmicos e políticos” (Rocha 2017, 105).

The evolution of UN peacekeeping operations

It has become common to divide the evolution of peace operations into different generations. However, there is no consensus on the exact timeline of these generations, nor on the usefulness of this taxonomy (Kenkel 2013). Therefore, for the purpose of this study, it is relevant to address the division of peace operations into traditional and multidimensional, according to the classification carried out by Bellamy, Williams, and Griffin (2004) based on the analysis of the objectives established in the mandate of each peace operation approved by the UN Security Council (SC), thus disregarding the timeline criterion (the idea of a division into different generations).

In this sense, during the Cold War, traditional peacekeeping operations were systematically implemented, when the lack of consensus among the permanent members of the UN Security Council, especially between the US and the USSR, imposed a time of near ineffectiveness for this collective security system. In this scenario, in general, operations were implemented in the period between the establishment of a ceasefire and the formalization of a political agreement between the parties in conflict, seeking to develop some degree of trust between them. In addition, they can be classified in Chapter VI of the UN Charter and were composed of lightly armed or unarmed forces, since they did not aim to solve the conflict by their own means, serving basically as a buffer between the belligerents to prevent the re-escalation of the conflict violence (Bigatão 2015; Valença and Affonso 2018).

It is also essential to understand that traditional peace operations are based on a trinity of principles: **the consent** of the host nation, **the impartiality** of the organization towards the parties in conflict, and **the non-use of force** by UN troops, except for self-defense (Bellamy et al. 2010 *apud* Kenkel 2013, highlighted by the authors).

At this point, it is important to highlight the Agenda for Peace as an important normative instrument that marked the beginning of the evolution of peace operations conducted by the United Nations post-Cold War. Presented in 1992 by Boutros Boutros-Ghali, then Secretary-General of the UN, the document addressed the need for UN action in three essential dimensions: preventive diplomacy, peace agreements, and peacekeeping. In this context, multidimensional peace operations, implemented based on the guidelines of that document, began to hold mandates with a variety of objectives (provision of humanitarian aid, protection of civilians, administration of territories, repatriation of refugees, among others), which demanded, in addition to a military contingent, also police and civilian contingents, in order to enable

the execution of services in conflict areas. In this sense, as highlighted by Bigatão (2015, 37), “if between 1947 and 1987, 14 peacekeeping operations had been authorized; between 1988 and 1999 that number expanded to 39 new missions” (our translation)⁹. To a large extent, this was a consequence of the debates on the expansion of international security issues, which allowed for a new understanding of what would be characterized as a threat to peace and security, from the perspective of the UN.

Therefore, it appears that *pari passu* to the expansion of the international security agenda and, consequently, to the emergence of the concept of human security, there was an expansion in the demand for United Nations action in intra-state conflicts of a complex and diffuse nature, which Kaldor (1999) defined as “new wars”, characterized by the existence of issues such as revolutionary processes and civil wars, terrorism, drug trafficking, ethnic conflicts, genocides, epidemics and natural catastrophes, and the flow of refugees.

However, it is important to highlight that such events were already happening before; however, during the Cold War, they were put aside, in view of the dynamics of power disputes of the bipolar period. When such conflicts began to impact beyond national boundaries, crossing borders, they began to receive greater attention from both the scientific community and from policymakers (Duarte 2015).

Since then, based on the guidelines of the Agenda for Peace and in line with the emergence of the concept of human security, UN peacekeeping operations have undergone successive reforms. Thus, peacekeeping mission mandates have begun to encompass new responsibilities, such as the protection of civilians, the provision of humanitarian assistance and human rights, repatriation of refugees, among others, putting into practice the transition from the traditional model of operations to multidimensional operations (Bigatão 2015).

However, this transition and the expansion of peacekeeping missions observed in the early 1990s imposed a series of difficulties on the UN to remain effective and the organization went through a period of crisis, especially after the failures that occurred in Rwanda, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Somalia. Consequently, there was a withdrawal of operations and the subsequent loss of credibility of the UN regarding the ability to act in these new scenarios. Thus, if in 1993 it is estimated that more than 70 thousand

9 In the original: “se entre 1947 e 1987 foram autorizadas 14 operações de paz; entre 1988 e 1999 esse número cresceu para 39 novas missões” (Bigatão 2015, 37).

peacekeepers were deployed under the UN flag, by 1996 this number had been reduced to less than 20 thousand (Bellamy, Williams and Griffin 2004).

In order to seek to overcome the failures that occurred in the 90s, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, in 2000, commissioned a report to a group of experts with the objective of carrying out a deep analysis of peacekeeping operations. Thus, in August 2000, the Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations was published, which became known as the Brahimi Report, as it was chaired by Lakhdar Brahimi, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Algeria. The document constitutes a milestone for the reform of UN peacekeeping operations. Regarding the Brahimi Report, Dias (2018) notes that:

What we see at this point is a step towards the flexibility of the three principles of peacekeeping operations – consent, impartiality and use of force only for self-defense – in addition to operational propositions in order to more efficiently integrate the mission's civil and military components, speed up the deployment of troops after the approval of the mandate and develop more in-depth reconstruction strategies (Dias 2018, 49, our translation)¹⁰.

Following the evolution of peace operations, and in the wake of political and academic debates, it is important to emphasize the institution of the principle of responsibility to protect (or R2P). Based on the concept of human security, R2P emerged in 2001, when the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS), a Canadian institution linked to the UN, published the study “The Responsibility to Protect”, after a series of debates between diplomatic representatives of States, non-governmental organizations and international institutions. R2P establishes that:

sovereign states have a responsibility to protect their own citizens from avoidable catastrophe – from mass murder and rape, from starvation – but that when they are unwilling or unable to do so, that responsibility must be borne by the broader community of states (ICISS 2001, VIII).

¹⁰ In the original: “O que se vê neste momento é um passo em direção a flexibilização dos três princípios das operações de paz – consentimento, imparcialidade e uso da força apenas em autodefesa – somado a proposições operacionais no sentido de integrar de modo mais eficiente os componentes civil e militar da missão, agilizar o envio das tropas após a aprovação do mandato e desenvolver estratégias mais aprofundadas de reconstrução” (Dias 2018, 49).

Thus, the approval of the principle of R2P, in 2005, at the UN General Assembly, according to Duarte (2015, 131), defined the world population as an object of international security, while “establishing facilitating mechanisms for the execution of measures with the objective of containing manifestations of violence that occur within national boundaries and that have repercussions in conflicts that promote international instability” (our translation)¹¹. In other words, it was established as an instrument that confers legitimacy to the implementation of United Nations peacekeeping operations with mandates specific to act in this new scenario.

The human security dilemma in Western Sahara

The beginning of UN involvement in the issue of Western Sahara occurred in 1963, when the organization classified it as one of the territories included in the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, with the Saharawi people having to exercise their right to choose and decide between its independence, becoming a sovereign state; free association with Spain; or integration to Spain. In order for this to happen, it would be imperative to hold a referendum, in which the population itself would decide on its future (Menezes, Morais, and Carvalho 2018).

However, the idealized referendum never took place. From the 1950s onwards, when the independence processes of the European colonies began, Morocco, which was liberated from France in 1956, understood that the Moroccan empire extended beyond its territorial limits, forming the “Great Morocco”, which covered, in addition to its own territory, all of Western Sahara, Mauritania, the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, as well as part of Algeria and Mali (Ferreira 2018).

Nevertheless, on May 10, 1973, a revolutionary political movement was created, the *Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguia el Hamra y Río de Oro* (POLISARIO Front), which had a very specific objective: the independence of what was then Spanish Sahara and the formation of an independent Sahrawi State (Cobo 2011 *apud* Menezes, Morais, and Carvalho 2018).

Thus, in 1975, even with an opinion from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) stating that Morocco did not have the right to claim Saharawi territory, King Hassan II issued a national statement calling on Moroccans to

11 In the original: “estabeleceu mecanismos facilitadores para a execução de medidas com o objetivo de conter as manifestações de violências que ocorrem dentro do espaço nacional, e que repercutem em conflitos que promovem instabilidade internacional” (Duarte 2015, 131).

march towards the territory belonging to Spain, in order to retake the plundered lands and free the population from Spanish colonization (Daudén and Suzin 2011). In this way, in a movement that became known as the “Green March”, approximately 350 thousand Moroccans occupied the northern region of Western Sahara.

On November 14, 1975, unable to face a war against Morocco, Spain secretly signed an agreement with Morocco and Mauritania, which is considered to have triggered the conflict in Western Sahara: the Madrid Agreement, through which Spain divided the administration of the Saharawi territory, leaving part with Morocco and another part with Mauritania (Estrada 2014).

Immediately after the occupation of the territory by Morocco and Mauritania, POLISARIO Front launched intense combat against the two countries, using guerrilla tactics and starting the war itself (Estrada 2014). On February 26, 1976, Spain officially withdrew from the territory and, the following day, the POLISARIO Front declared the independence of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), in order to give international legitimacy and claim sovereignty over Western Sahara.

In 1979, Mauritania withdrew from Western Sahara, in view of the distress caused to its troops by the guerrilla warfare implemented by the POLISARIO Front. However, after the Mauritanian withdrawal, Morocco extended its occupation, deepening the conflict with the POLISARIO Front (Menezes, Morais, and Carvalho 2018). Between the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, the POLISARIO Front obtained a certain advantage in the political and military fields, having received growing recognition from the international community and, also, having gained control over important locations in Saharawi territory (Barata 2012).

Consequently, in the political field, in response to the official recognition of SADR as a member of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the present-day African Union, Morocco left the organization in 1984. In the military field, in the period from 1981 to 1987, Morocco built a fortified defensive line, composed of an immense wall of sand and stone, protected with minefields, known as The Berm, which divided Western Sahara into two zones: the Occupied Zones, dominated by Morocco, which are located on the western side of the wall and occupy approximately 85% of the territory; and the Liberated Zones, about 15% of the territory, controlled by the POLISARIO Front, located on the eastern side of the wall (Duarte 2016). Aside from isolating the Sahrawi population in the territory controlled by the POLISARIO Front, the wall poses a major threat to the population, due to the various minefields in the area.

During the conflict itself, which took place between 1975 and 1991, the Sahrawi population migrated across the desert toward the border with Algeria, where they settled in refugee camps in the Tindouf region. Sahrawis fled mainly because of the intense Moroccan napalm air strikes, arbitrary arrests, and other forms of violence against the civilian population. During their displacement towards Algeria, for example, Sahrawis occupied some temporary camps, built by the POLISARIO Front in strategic places, located in Guelta Zemmur, Oum Dreyga, Amgala, and Tifariti, where there were water wells and fortifications abandoned by the Spaniards. However, Moroccan forces carried out air attacks on the fields of Guelta Zemmur, Tifariti, and, later, on Oum Dreyga, which resulted in hundreds of civilian casualties (Cobo and Menéndez 2006).

Thus, in 1984, the UN decided to intervene in the negotiations between Morocco and the POLISARIO Front, which were being conducted by the OAU. As a result, in 1988 the parties to the conflict agreed on the proposal to put into effect a ceasefire, which was made official in 1991, one year after the approval of the Settlement Plan, a plan included in the UN Secretary-General's Report (S/21360, of June 18, 1990), which provided for the actions to be implemented for the effective holding of the self-determination referendum of the Saharawi people (Barros 2020).

Also in 1991, the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) was created, with a mandate to implement the following actions:

- a. monitor the ceasefire; b. verify the reduction of Moroccan troops in the territory; c. monitor the confinement of Moroccan and POLISARIO Front troops to designated locations; d. take steps with the parties to ensure the release of all Western Saharan political prisoners or detainees; e. oversee the exchange of prisoners of war; f. implement a program to repatriate refugees of Western Sahara; g. identify and register qualified voters; h. organize and guarantee a free and fair referendum and proclaim the results (UN 2015, 22).

Since then, the main point of divergence has been found in the lack of consensus regarding who would have the right to vote in the self-determination referendum. On the one hand, Western Sahara requires that the electorate be composed according to the census carried out by Spain in 1974, while Morocco defends the expansion of the electorate, since, from 1975 onwards, there was a considerable increase in the number of Moroccans in the territory as a result of the "Green March" (Estrada 2014).

Since the establishment of MINURSO, the UN has made efforts on several occasions seeking to resolve the impasse in the issue of Western Sahara, exclusively in the diplomatic field. However, all attempts at an agreement failed, such as the Houston Agreement (1998), Baker Plan I (2001), and Baker Plan II (2003), which were rejected for not reaching a consensus between Morocco and the POLISARIO Front (Barros 2020).

Seeking a solution to the conflict, in 2007, the UN called on the parties to negotiate directly, under the monitoring of the organization. On that occasion, Morocco presented a proposal for Western Sahara, the Saharan Autonomous Region, based on the concession of autonomy, however, inserted in a framework of Moroccan sovereignty. On the other hand, the POLISARIO Front presented its own proposal, underscoring its desire for self-determination and independence (Duarte 2016). Consequently, negotiations did not succeed.

It should be noted that, as discussed earlier, although numerous risk situations encompassed by the concept of human security are present in the issue of Western Sahara, surprisingly, MINURSO is one of the few UN missions in progress whose mandate does not assign the responsibility of developing an action guided by the concept of human security and the principle of R2P. In light of this, Ban Ki-Moon, at the time Secretary-General of the UN, emphasized in his report on the situation in Western Sahara, dated April 2010:

The United Nations has no staff on the ground to address human rights issues, since MINURSO does not have a specific human rights mandate and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has no presence in the Territory or in the refugee camps in Tindouf. Nonetheless, the United Nations recognizes its duty to uphold human rights standards in all its operations, including those relating to Western Sahara. Both parties to the conflict often accuse each other, in communications with the United Nations or in the media, of human rights violations (UNSC 2010, 12).

In this context, Mr. Sangqu, the South African representative during the 6523rd SC Meeting, held on April 27, 2011, emphasized that it is inconceivable that MINURSO is the only mission in African territory that does not include the issue of human rights in its mandate, potentially creating “the impression that the Security Council does not care about the human rights of the people of Western Sahara” (UNSC 2011).

In this scenario, in 2010, an event occurred that gained great international repercussions. Approximately 20 thousand Sahrawis settled in Gdem Izik, near Laayoune, where they set up a camp to protest against the economic and social conditions of the Sahrawi population in Western Sahara. A few days after the protests began, Moroccan soldiers invaded the camp and violently repressed the population, with some Sahrawis being arrested and tortured. On the other hand, Morocco defends the version that the troops were received with violence by the Saharawis, informing that among the 12 (twelve) deaths that occurred in the event, 10 (ten) were Moroccan soldiers (Beristain and Hidalgo 2012).

Still in this context, it is possible to verify numerous reports of violations, whether of the dimensions of human security or the principle of R2P, reported mainly by NGOs, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. In a report presented by Amnesty International in 2015, 173 cases of torture and ill-treatment against the Sahrawi population are listed, in the period between 2010 and 2014, allegedly practiced by Moroccan forces, which was immediately denied by Morocco, with no action in this regard having been taken (Anistia Internacional 2015).

Still from the perspective of human security, it is convenient to highlight that, according to Estrada (2014, 129), “the SADR functions today as a *sui generis* Republic, due to the fact that it acts as a State in exile that administers the lives of refugees in the semi-autonomous territory granted by Algeria” (our translation)¹². However, although SADR is recognized by approximately 80 countries, the fact is that it does not have official recognition in the international system. In this way, it appears that the Sahrawi population, which currently lives in refugee camps near Tindouf, in Algeria, is completely vulnerable to possible threats to human security.

Regarding the stalemate in Western Sahara, within the scope of the SC, the support received by Morocco is noteworthy, especially from France and the USA. Since 1963, when Morocco claimed Saharawi territory, France supported the Moroccan claim, even after the release of the ICJ opinion, in 1975, which established that Morocco did not have any rights over Western Sahara (Fuentes 2014).

Moreover, French support is not only configured in the field of rhetoric, since it involves concrete actions in various aspects of power. This support materialized in the military field, when, during the conflict, France

12 In the original: “a RASD funciona hoje como uma República *sui generis*, pelo fato de atuar como um Estado em exílio que administra a vida dos refugiados no território semi-autônomo concedido pela Argélia” (Estrada 2014, 129).

provided substantial military support to Morocco, supplying weapons and even sending French troops to fight against the POLISARIO Front (Menezes, Morais, and Carvalho 2018).

However, the greatest French support for Morocco's demand in relation to Western Sahara appears in its activities with the UN Security Council. Since the creation 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). One can mention, as a clear example of this influence, the French opposition to the inclusion, in the mandate of MINURSO, of an international mechanism for the protection of the Sahrawis under the focus of human security and the principle of R2P (Duarte 2016).

In this sense, as highlighted by Mr. De Revière, French representative at the 8890th Meeting of the SC, held in October 2021, "France considers Morocco's 2007 autonomy plan as a serious and credible basis for discussions with a view to resuming dialogue. We encourage all of the parties to pursue peace", underlining the strong French support for Moroccan pretensions (UNSC 2021, 3).

Another important Moroccan ally in the SC is the USA. First, from a historical point of view, it is important to highlight that Morocco was the first country to recognize the independence of the USA, being, therefore, one of its oldest allies (Solà-Martín 2009). In addition, it is important to remember that the conflict in Western Sahara emerged during the Cold War, when the USA based its actions on mutual security agreements and military assistance with states considered to be geopolitically relevant to its interests, trying to contain the USSR's area of influence (Barata 2012).

In the period from 1975 to 1990, coinciding with the Moroccan conflict against the POLISARIO Front, Morocco received more than 1/5 of total US aid to Africa, with more than 1 billion dollars in military assistance and 1.3 billion dollars in economic aid. After the attacks of September 11, 2001, the US renewed its interests in the Maghreb region due to two main 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 for the US corporate market; and 2) military and security interests, related to the need to monitor/control issues such as Islamism, terrorism and democratization (Zoubir 2009 *apud* Estrada 2014). In the context of the Global War on Terror, Morocco sought to associate the POLISARIO Front with international terrorist organizations, such as Al-Qaeda Maghreb, aiming to consolidate

even further the North American opposition to any Saharawi claim (Ferreira and Migon 2015).

In 2013, the US signaled support for the inclusion of an international human rights monitoring mechanism in MINURSO. However, Morocco immediately suspended its joint military exercise with the US, the African Lion, intensifying its lobby with US policymakers with diverse interests in the Maghreb region, culminating in the US withdrawal from including any mention of human security and R2P in the resolution passed by the SC on April 29, 2014 (Khakee 2014).

As it did with France, the 2007 Moroccan autonomy plan for Western Sahara has gained US support since its announcement. In this scenario, on December 10, 2020, then-President Trump recognized “that the entire Western Sahara territory is part of the Kingdom of Morocco” and also stated that the US saw the Moroccan proposal, the Saharan Autonomous Region, as “the only basis for a just and lasting solution to the dispute over the Western Sahara territory” (UNSC 2020, 2). Furthermore, President Trump emphasized that:

The United States believes that an independent Sahrawi State is not a realistic option for resolving the conflict and that genuine autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty is the only feasible solution. We urge the parties to engage in discussions without delay, using Morocco’s autonomy plan as the only framework to negotiate a mutually acceptable solution. (UNSC 2020, 2).

However, the French and American position, favorable to the Moroccan cause, is not a consensus at the international level. Russia, another permanent member of the SC, on the occasion of the 8246th Meeting of the SC, abstained from voting on Resolution 2414 (2018), stating that the “process of drafting and agreeing the decision was neither transparent nor consultative (...). As a result, the text remains unbalanced (...)”. Furthermore, it criticized the lack of impartiality of the resolution, stating that its main emphasis was “placed on such shaky and contradictory categories as practicability and realism, which could open the way for all kinds of equivocal interpretations” (UNSC 2018, 3).

Also, during the 8518th SC Meeting, Mr. Safronkov, representing Russia, in reference to the actions of the USA and France in support of the Moroccan cause, gave a speech to justify Russia’s abstention in the approval of Resolution 2468 (2019), stating that:

Our arguments for correcting the imbalance were blatantly ignored, although what we were asking for was a restoration of the previously agreed wording. That has once again raised questions about the penholdership system on country-specific subjects in the Council (UNSC 2019, 16).

During the meeting that approved Resolution 2414 (2018), China abstained from the vote and criticized the way in which the draft resolution was prepared, which did not allow for proper discussions among SC members to seek consensus. On the contrary, according to the Chinese, “to take hasty action on a draft resolution when there are still differences affects the unity among Council members” (UNSC 2018, 4).

In this same critical tone, in addition to P5 members Russia and China, other countries that occupy a rotating chair in the SC have, on countless occasions, expressed their dissatisfaction with the unilateral and non-inclusive way in which the texts and projects related to MINURSO are prepared, generally conducted by US penholders, who are usually in charge of this matter.

Moving forward in the analysis of the positions taken on the UNSC, other nations took a stand on the conduct of the Sahrawi issue during various Council meetings, sometimes criticizing the Council’s performance. In this context, during the 8518th SC Meeting, South Africa, through Mr. Matjila, abstained from approving Resolution 2468 (2019), stating that:

[...] regrets that the Council continues to resist a human rights monitoring mandate for MINURSO, despite the fact that many around this table eagerly propose such mechanisms in other mandates, without exception. We have not seen the same vigour or determination in terms of MINURSO, which creates the impression that the human rights of the people of Western Sahara are not held in the same regard as those of other peoples elsewhere in the world (UNSC 2019, 4).

Furthermore, the South African delegation added:

We want to reiterate that the Council’s working methods on this matter, whereby it delegates responsibility to the Group of Friends of Western Sahara, remain a serious source of concern for South Africa. We have consistently raised this issue as problematic, particularly given the unrepresentative nature of the Group, which does not include a single African member of the Council, despite the fact that this is an African issue. This is yet another example of an African issue being decided by non-Africans. It is unjust. (UNSC 2019, 4).

In the same line, in 2021, on the occasion of the 8890th SC Meeting, the Mexican representative, Mr. De la Fuente Ramírez, spoke on the occasion of the approval of Resolution 2602 (2021), stating that:

Nevertheless, we regret the unwillingness, during the negotiations, to include in the resolution important proposals that had the backing of several delegations. I am referring in particular to proposals for more frequent briefings in the light of the significant deterioration of the situation with regard to human rights violations and the collapse of the ceasefire (UNSC 2021, 3).

In this way, after analyzing the positioning of the USA and France, as well as some of the other members of the SC, it is interesting to observe that MINURSO is an exception in terms of most of the ongoing missions on the African continent currently, in which the mandates are increasingly robust and the correlation with the promotion of democracy, development and building stability is the practice.

Conclusion

The concept of human security developed from an intense debate about expanding the international security agenda, especially in the post-Cold War period. Thus, despite the polemics and controversies that accompany the concept until the present day, it is indisputable that it has been incorporated by the various actors of the international system, resulting in the broadening of the security agenda. In this context, there were developments in UN peace operations influenced by the emergence of this concept, which became the basis for the formulation of the principle of R2P, a guiding principle to the various peace missions conducted by the UN.

With regard to the conflict in Western Sahara, which began exactly in the midst of the debate about the centrality of the state as a security agent, and about the expansion and deepening of the international security agenda beyond political and military expressions, it was found that, when MINURSO was set up, in 1991, there was a very clear objective established for the mission: to conduct the self-determination referendum, which has not been carried out until the present moment.

Regarding the situation in Western Sahara, the impasse can be explained in light of Realism, centered on the State, its sovereignty, and its geopolitical and economic interests, reflected in the decision-making dynamics of the

UN Security Council. In this way, through the support received by Morocco from the USA and France, two of the five permanent members of the SC, who use their veto power in favor of their state interests, it is clear that the SC resolutions on the Saharawi question are the result of a superficial discussion, limited to the annual renewal of MINURSO's mandate, without any measure or concrete action that would enable the solution of the deadlock.

Furthermore, although the concept of human security and the principle of R2P have achieved a position of relevance in the international system, it is observed that when guiding the UN's action in Western Sahara, the SC itself ignores these concepts, basing its decisions on an absolutely realistic view of its permanent members, not allowing for the implementation of any change or adjustment in UN's position in face of the conflict in Western Sahara.

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ABSTRACT

The present article intends to analyze the question of Western Sahara from the perspective of human security. For this, after a brief introduction, the concept of human security was presented, explaining the context in which it emerged. In the third section, the evolution of UN peacekeeping operations was analyzed within the context of expanding the international security agenda. Then, an approach to the issue of Western Sahara was carried out from the perspective of human security and, finally, in the final considerations, relevant aspects of the proposed problem were presented.

KEYWORDS

Western Sahara. UN. Peace Operations. Human Security.

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