

GLOBAL, REGIONAL AND LOCAL DIMENSIONS OF WESTERN SAHARA'S PROTRACTED DECOLONIZATION

When a Conflict Gets Old

Edited by

**Raquel Ojeda-García,
Irene Fernández-Molina,
and Victoria Veguilla**



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Raquel Ojeda-Garcia • Irene Fernández-Molina • Victoria Veguilla
Editors

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With this edited volume, we intend to publicize the results of our research in all its complexity, with rigour and consistency, aiming to contribute to fill in the gap that still exists in the academic literature on Western Sahara. Palgrave’s interest in our project also provided an opportunity to expand its thematic scope and our original team in order to include other internationally renowned experts. This represented a step further on previous collective publications in Spanish such as the 2013 special issue “Actores, procesos y políticas en el Sáhara Occidental” edited by Raquel Ojeda-García and Victoria Veguilla in the *Revista de Investigaciones Políticas y Sociológicas* (RIPS) and the book *Sáhara Occidental 40 años después* edited by Isaías Barreñada and Raquel Ojeda-García with Los Libros de la Catarata. We would like to thank the RIPS in particular for their generosity in granting us permission to republish in English a part of the special issue. On the other hand, the new multilevel analytical framework—going from the global to the local dimensions of the conflict—on which this

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book is based was streamlined in an international seminar that was hosted by the universities of Granada and Jaen in October 2015.

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Introduction: Towards a Multilevel Analysis of the Western Sahara Conflict and the Effects of its Protractedness

Irene Fernández-Molina

The Western Sahara conflict is getting old. Having turned 40, which is quite an advanced age for a conflict, it is increasingly showing signs of ageing—wrinkles, changes of shape and fatigue—alongside its still-apparent genetic inborn features. *Protractedness* seems to be ubiquitous in its usual portrayals: a late, zigzagging and protracted decolonization procedure that was reluctantly launched by dictatorial Spain in the 1970s degenerated into a protracted annexation of the territory by Morocco and a protracted conflict between the latter and the pro-Sahrawi independence Polisario Front, which in turn have entailed a protracted refugee situation¹ as well as a protracted conflict resolution process fruitlessly led by the international community for more than three decades. These efforts—which should more accurately be described as conflict management—have been epitomized by the United Nations (UN)’s Settlement Plan, which both Morocco and the Polisario Front accepted in 1991 along with a ceasefire declaration. Like the Oslo Peace Process for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, this UN plan had the unfortunate fate of being

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“dismembered” “from comprehensive ‘agreement’ to a step-by-step process” (Mundy, this volume) and eventually failed to be implemented due to the parties’ insuperable disagreement regarding the electorate entitled to vote in the envisaged referendum for Sahrawi self-determination. After ill-advisedly attempting to find “technical solutions to resolve what were essentially political problems, which the [UN] Secretariat was unable or unwilling to address” (Theofilopoulou, this volume; Jensen 2012), in the early 2000s the UN put forward a series of “political solutions” combining a temporary autonomy formula (under Moroccan sovereignty) for the disputed territory and a referendum to determine its final status. Yet the so-called Baker Plans I and II, named after the UN Secretary-General’s personal envoy for Western Sahara James A. Baker III (1997–2004), also fell short of achieving the consent of both parties. The architecture of the UN peace brokering process virtually collapsed in 2007 when it became diluted into the new blurred approach of “negotiations without preconditions” (Theofilopoulou 2010), which lasts until today.

This book examines the actual traces of the passage of time on the Western Sahara conflict. This means that it is more concerned with aspects of conflict perpetuation (“what keeps the conflict going now”) than with the primordial conflict formation (“what started this conflict in the first place”) (Mitchell 2014: 27). An immediately arising question concerns the conflict’s *intractability*. If intractable conflicts are simply defined as “those which, irrespective of what kind of parties are involved or the social environment in which they occur, continue for a long time and resist efforts to resolve them” (Mitchell 2014: 60), then Western Sahara is definitely one of them (Joffé 2009). Three features concur in this regard: first, the original goal incompatibility between the parties is about a scarce material resource of a zero-sum nature, that is territory and sovereignty (Joffé 2010); second, this involves “goals and aspirations that are logically incompatible and nonsubstitutable”; and third, some of the latter goals have reached the point of “[concerning] the continued existence of one or both of the main adversaries” (Mitchell 2014: 63). Paradoxically enough, this is one of those “intractable asymmetric conflicts” that are “actually highly symmetric, at least in the salience that the adversaries attribute to the issues in conflict, as well as in the value that they assign to achieving their own goals by winning” (Mitchell 2014: 59). Moreover, its identity and existential dimensions appear to have gained prominence over time, which would have added a layer of incommensurability to the fundamental scarcity issue: “The battle for Western Sahara has rolled on, unresolved

for over forty years, because it is that very nature/quality of being [being Sahrawi] that has come to be contested by many voices. The trouble with time is that new voices appear in the geographies of the argument, each seeking to write or over-write themselves ‘within’ while the ‘original’ geographies fade from the record and memory” (Isidoros, this volume).

In any case, the focus of the book is not the never-ending debate on *why* this conflict has grown old behind the scenes, faced with the inadvertent neglect of the international community, but *how* specifically it has aged—ramifying on various scenes and geopolitical scales while conversely being impacted and reshaped by developments on each of them. A second caveat is that the object of study are the tangible dynamics and effects of the conflict’s durability that can be observed in agents and structures at different levels of analysis, rather than ethical and normative debates such as the one sparked by Jeremy Waldron’s (1992) thesis on the supersession of historic injustices. At the same time, a shared concern of the authors of this volume is to make an effort at *reflexivity*, which can be defined as the “researchers’ (and policy makers’) awareness of their necessary connection to the research situation and hence their effects upon it” (Schierenbeck 2015: 1030).

A SPARSE AND UNEVEN ACADEMIC LITERATURE

The origins of this collective volume on the global, regional, state/national and local dimensions of the Western Sahara conflict lie in an international seminar that was hosted by the universities of Granada and Jaen in October 2015, as well as a previous special issue published in 2013 by the Spanish *Revista de Investigaciones Políticas y Sociológicas* (Ojeda-García and Veguilla 2013). The initiative to organize the seminar and edit these publications arose from some dissatisfaction with the state of the art in the scholarly analysis of this conflict. With some noteworthy recent exceptions (Zunes and Mundy 2010; Boukhars and Roussellier 2013; Barreñada and Ojeda-García 2016) and leaving aside highly valuable contributions from journalists (Hodges 1983; Bárbulo 2002; Shelley 2004), the academic literature dealing with this conflict has largely failed to do justice to all of its complexity and multidimensionality, as well as to make sense of the diachronic evolution entailed by its very longevity. This is to a significant extent the result of this literature being itself quantitatively limited and subject to a number of qualitative constraints and biases stemming from issues of sociology of knowledge. By and large, Western Sahara has long suffered from a marked lack of international interest at both political

and academic levels (Errazzouki 2013). Its peripheral position discourages research on it as being marginal and hardly publishable in leading academic outlets even under the remit of area studies. This has resulted in four observable trends in the available scholarship, namely a disciplinary concentration in the areas of anthropology and international law, a widespread inclination towards exceptionalism in accounts of the conflict, the limitation of a large number of publications to Spanish-language audiences and the predominance of normative and legalistic approaches over empirical socio-political analyses.

In the first place, the observation of the academic marginality of the Western Sahara issue needs to be qualified by distinguishing between disciplines. In actual fact, this conflict has enjoyed significant attention if not predilection in the field of international law, especially in Spain (Soroeta Licerias 2014; Ponce de León et al. 2012; Ruiz Miguel 1995), and not least the study of Saharan tribalism and Sahrawi refugees are deemed to be even overcrowded by anthropologists (Caro Baroja 1955; Caratini 1989, 2003; López Bargados 2003; Naïmi 2004, 2013; Campbell 2010; Wilson 2010, 2014; Boulay 2015, 2016; Isidoros 2015; Gimeno Martín 2016).² Anthropology and international law make an odd disciplinary couple, with each of them arguably standing at opposite ends of the continuum between the localized micro-level subjectivity of everyday human life and exogenous top-down legal objectification. Yet both have addressed the old and intricate question of who/what are the “Sahrawi” and somehow fed each other insofar as the international legal emphasis on Sahrawi “autochthony”—since the 1975 advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice—has drawn on the anthropological concept of “kinship” (*asaba*) (Isidoros, this volume). An immediate remark is that there remains an essentially *political* gap to be bridged between anthropology and international law in analysing this conflict, all the more so if, as claimed by Konstantina Isidoros and Isaías Barreñada in this book, the major identity boundary currently demarcating who is viewed as a Sahrawi in the context of the Sahrawi nationalist camp lies in support for self-determination as a political project, “regardless of where they live and how it affects them” (Barreñada, this volume).

Secondly, the academic—just as the political—discussion of the Western Sahara conflict has tended to depict all phenomena surrounding it in quite particularistic terms. Assuredly, arguments in favour of the uniqueness or anomaly of this case are not in short supply. Chief among them are the cliché that describes Western Sahara as Africa’s “last colony” and the footnote that distinguishes it as the only odd territory on the UN list of non-self-governing territories that lacks an uncontested administering power—as

Spain has purported to be exempt from any international responsibility in this regard since 1976.³ Similarly exceptional are the old-fashioned mandate of the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), which lacks a human rights component unlike most of the UN peace-keeping operations of the post-Cold War era (Capella Soler 2011; Khakee 2014), and the European Union (EU)'s longstanding non-involvement and backseat role in this issue, which stands in stark contrast to its attempts to contribute to the resolution of other protracted conflicts in its southern and eastern neighbourhoods (Vaquer 2004; Fernández-Molina 2016). This is not to mention the widespread discourse on the uniqueness of Sahrawi refugees (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014: 1–2) and the actual exceptionality of the Tindouf camps in terms of self-management and limited control by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011b: 9), which would add to the inherent “state of exception” (Agamben 2005) or political and legal no man’s land that characterizes all refugee situations and refugee camps throughout the world. This being said, it is unclear whether the fixation with exceptionalism has benefitted our knowledge and understanding of the Western Sahara conflict, or has rather contributed to isolating its analysis from the wider literature in conflict studies, forced migration studies and many other disciplines. One of the contentions in this book is that more comparative analyses would help overcome a somewhat blinding idiosyncratic bias.

Thirdly, the overall international academic neglect of this conflict, coupled with post-colonial linkages and sympathy, has confined a significant part of the extant publications within the limits of the Spanish language and Spanish-speaking audiences (see Hernández Moreno 2007). The academic literature in English, French and Arabic has been sparse and, most problematically, all of the linguistic clusters have often worked as hermetic compartments, with authors tending to read and reference works mainly in their own working language. Fourthly, due to the longstanding predominance of legal studies within Spanish social sciences as well as well-meaning normative concern about the injustices inflicted upon the Sahrawi people, the “Spanish bias” has come hand in hand with a legal and prescriptive bias in the study of the conflict. This would not be a problem itself if it were not for the gaps it has created over the years in the knowledge of (in David Hume’s terms) *what is* as opposed *what ought to be* in the context of this issue. Moreover, the ever-repeated argument that “the conflict of Western Sahara is a classic example of the conflict between the logic of power or realpolitik and international law, which includes the right to

self-determination” (Omar 2008: 56) has crystallized in a neat dichotomy of international law vs. politics, which does not reflect a far more complex reality. Among other things, as argued by Anna Theofilopoulou in this volume, “those who espouse the legal argument either ignore or are ignorant of how the Settlement Plan came into being, how it was negotiated and the geopolitical dynamics surrounding the conflict”.

In addition, besides the aforementioned factors relating to the sociology of knowledge, attempts to understand and explain what was/is effectively happening out there in the Western Sahara conflict have recurrently encountered the obstacle of the high politicization of conflicting accounts and narratives, including many academic analyses (for a recent useful pro-Sahrawi collective publication, see Véricel 2015). Although the voluntary or involuntary involvement of scholars in the battlefield seems hardly exceptional in the realm of conflict studies, in this case the lack of a critical mass of research and researchers increases the risk of “creating a vicious academic combat zone” (Isidoros, this volume). In connection to this, the researchers’ access to the field in the two main local scenes of the conflict—the Western Sahara territory annexed by Morocco and the Sahrawi refugee camps ruled by the Polisario Front near Tindouf, Algeria—has often been hampered by the corresponding governing authorities or shaped by reliance on specific networks of interlocutors. On the one hand, visits to the territory under Moroccan control and particularly to the capital El Ayun by most foreign observers remain carefully administered and ostensibly, intimidatingly watched by the Moroccan security services. This makes long-term fieldwork virtually “impossible” (Zunes and Mundy 2010: xxxiii), subjects empirical research on the ground to a constraining semiclandestinity and limits the time scope to short stays under the permanent threat of expulsion. Contacts with the local population are in equal parts marked by suspicion and eagerness to meet the stranger—especially by pro-independence Sahrawi activists (Fernández-Molina 2015a: 237)—which might somewhat bias the findings. A noteworthy exception in this regard is the extensive intermittent field research carried out by Victoria Veguilla in the Western Saharan city of Dakhla from 2001 to the present (Veguilla 2011a). Constraints in this particular case were of a different kind: access to the field over the years was contingent upon not addressing every topic and not interviewing all the actors. On the other hand, the Tindouf refugee camps have traditionally been more open to outsiders, from non-governmental organization (NGO) workers and activists to academics and journalists, yet priority has been granted to “practice-oriented, rather than research-oriented, visits” (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014: 34).

Justifiably or not, the issuing of official invitation letters from the Polisario Front required to obtain an Algerian visa has often been linked to assessments of the visitors' actual or potential contribution to the "cause" of Sahrawi nationalism (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014: 34–35).

One final bias that is admittedly present in this very book and deserves some unpacking is the "conflict bias" involved in construing and labelling the phenomena under study as a conflict. This assumption can be problematized particularly as one of the parties, Morocco, has always preferred to tone down the wording and talk about the "Sahara issue" or "question" (under the influence of the French language), thus trying to normalize the country's long annexation of the disputed territory. Also, full-blown armed conflict or war has been objectively absent since at least the early 1990s in both qualitative (ceasefire) and quantitative (level of battle-related fatalities) terms. Thus a relevant question arises: "What sort of a conflict do we have either when one party denies that a conflict actually exists or when both disagree over whether the issues have been properly defined or characterized? Who defines/decides whether there actually is a conflict? One of the parties? All of the parties? Third-party outsiders?" (Mitchell 2014: 25). When it comes to empirical research, it can be at times appropriate and even more productive to analytically push the "conflict" framing into the background when studying some of the political dynamics occurring in Western Sahara—especially at the local level and in connection to the Moroccan governance of the territory.⁴

All in all, this (self-)critical appraisal of the academic literature is not to diminish the significance of existing works on the Western Sahara conflict but quite the opposite. In spite of all of the aforementioned difficulties, four-five strands of scholarship have developed and settled in English, French and Spanish, each of them largely focusing on a different level of analysis. The first includes historical, military and journalistic accounts of the origins of the conflict. Most of these works underscore the conflict's national and bilateral nature by depicting it as the result of Western Sahara's unachieved decolonization and self-determination process as well as a confrontation for sovereignty between the Polisario Front and Morocco (López and de la Lama 1975; Criado 1977; Vilar 1977; Gaudio 1978; Villar 1982; Barbier 1982; Hodges 1983; Bontems 1984; Lawless and Monahan 1986; Diego Aguirre 1988, 1991; De Piniés 1990; Pazzanita 1994; Hernández Moreno 2001, 2006; Bárbulo 2002; Shelley 2004; Barona Castañeda 2004; for the pre-colonial and colonial history of Western Sahara, see Hernández Moreno 1989; Martínez Milán

2003; Pazzanita 2006; Correale and Gimeno Martín 2015). Secondly, authors concerned with the global level of analysis have examined the involvement of the super powers and especially the United States of America (USA) during the Cold War, post-Cold War and War on Terror eras (Zoubir and Volman 1993; Zunes 1998; Mundy 2006; Darbouche and Zoubir 2008; De Orellana 2015), the vicissitudes of UN attempts at conflict resolution since the late 1980s (Zoubir and Pazzanita 1995; De Froberville 1996; De Saint-Maurice 2000; Dunbar 2000; Mohsen-Finan 2002; Callies de Salies 2003; Pointier 2004; Solà-Martín 2007; Mundy 2007b; Souaré 2007; Fisas 2011; Jensen 2012; Theofilopoulou 2006, 2007, 2010, 2013), the limited involvement of the EU and EU member states throughout these decades (Vaquer 2004; Gillespie 2004, 2010; Benabdallah 2009; Darbouche and Colombo 2011; Riquelme Cortado and Andrés Sáenz de Santa María 2012; Smith 2013; Torrejón Rodríguez 2014; Fernández-Molina 2016; for the case of Spain, see Ruiz Miguel 1995; López García 1999; Vaquer 2007) and the increasingly politicized legal issue of Morocco's international trading in Western Sahara's natural resources (Shelley 2006; Trasmontes 2014; White 2015; Zunes 2015). A third group of scholars has prioritized the regional dimension, discussing the extent to which this conflict has historically resulted from or been fuelled by competition between Morocco and Algeria for regional hegemony in the Maghreb (Damis 1983; Berramdane 1992; Mohsen-Finan 1997; Zoubir and Benabdallah-Gambier 2004; International Crisis Group 2007a, b; Mundy 2010; Martinez 2011; Ammour 2012) as well as its actual or potential connections with growing instability and security threats in the Sahara-Sahel area since the turn of the millennium (Mohsen-Finan 2010; Wehrey and Boukhars 2013).

Fourthly, more grounded research on socio-political developments witnessed in both the Moroccan-controlled territory and the Tindouf refugee camps has straddled between the state/national and local levels of analysis. This is particularly clear in the former case, where studies have addressed, on the one hand, the “carrots” and “sticks” of the Moroccan state's governance of Western Sahara, that is, public policies, decentralization and autonomy initiatives (Veguilla 2004, 2009a, 2011a, b; Sater 2008; Hernando de Larramendi 2010; Desrues and Hernando de Larramendi 2011; El-Maslouhi 2011; Khakee 2011; López García 2011; Vloeberghs 2011; Theofilopoulou 2012; Ottaway 2013; Boukhars 2013; Mohsen-Finan 2015) as well as “settlement” policies, repression and human rights violations (Mundy 2012; Mundy and Zunes 2015; Martín Beristain and

González Hidalgo 2012). On the other hand, a still-budding literature focuses on Sahrawi youth, civil society, social movements, protests and nonviolent resistance (Smith 2005; Stephan and Mundy 2006; Brouksy 2008a, b, 2015; Veguilla 2009b; Barreñada 2012; Gómez Martín 2012; Boukhars 2012; Gimeno 2013; Dann 2014; Mundy and Zunes 2014; Deubel 2015; Fernández-Molina 2015a; Porges and Leuprecht 2016). Meanwhile, the analytical distinction between the “contested” state/national level (Geldenhuis 2009) embodied by the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (RASD, for its French/Spanish acronym) and properly “local” or grassroots dynamics is more blurred when it comes to an exceptional spatial and political setting such as the Tindouf refugee camps. The number of publications showcasing fieldwork conducted there has not been scarce (San Martín 2005, 2010; Mundy 2007a; Caratini 2007a, b; Gómez Martín and Omet 2009; Wilson 2010, 2014; Campbell 2010; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014). This literature links up with some significant contributions from the disciplines of refugee and forced migration studies (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al. 2005; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2009, 2010, 2011a, b, 2012) and migration and diaspora studies (Gómez Martín 2011; Wilson 2014). In addition, these strands of literature are complemented by some insightful publications by geographers who emphasize the multiplaceness and moving socio-spatial borders of the Western Sahara conflict and its actors (Dedenis 2006, 2011; Bennafla 2013).

On a different note, Moroccan scholarship on this issue has grown abundantly over the last two decades and can be divided into three categories, which show dissimilar degrees of independence from official guidelines and discourse, namely more sophisticated academic works that engage with the literature and various theoretical debates in political science and international relations (Messari 2001; Maghraoui 2003; Daadaoui 2008; Benmessaoud Tredano 2011b; El-Maslouhi 2011; Zouitni 2012; Rahimi 2014; El Houdaigui 2015); sociological and anthropological studies that make interesting empirical contributions but end up shoring up the official arguments on the conflict (Naïmi 2004, 2013; Cherkaoui 2007); and timely publications that explicitly follow and acclaim flagship Moroccan policies and chiefly the 2007 Autonomy Plan (El Ouali 2007, 2010, 2012; El Messaoudi and Bouabid 2008; Benmessaoud Tredano 2011a) to the extent of arguably forming part of Morocco’s public diplomacy (Fernández-Molina 2015b: 64). The bottom line is that, in spite of some academics pushing the limits of public debate on the “national question”, “the Moroccan equivalent of Israel’s ‘new historians’ have yet to emerge” (Mundy 2014: 654).

LOST IN CONFLICT CLASSIFICATIONS

Building on more multidimensional or multilayered studies such as those by Stephen Zunes and Jacob Mundy (2010) and Anouar Boukhars and Jacques Roussellier (2013), the intended contribution of this book lies, in the first place, in bringing together these four levels of analysis: global, regional, state/national and local. The aim is to make headway in disentangling the dynamic interplay between all of them or, in other words, examining change and continuity in the Western Sahara conflict through multilevel lenses. The time frame primarily addressed is the almost two decades elapsed since the turn of the millennium, when it can be argued that a gradual “spatial and scalar shift” or “inward turn” has brought the centre of gravity or locus of the conflict back *inwards*, to the interior of the disputed territory where it originated in the 1970s, and added new dimensions to it (Fernández-Molina 2015b: 46–47; Gillespie 2011). Such evolution can be described as dialectical change, as novelties have not led to a replacement of the original decolonization and sovereignty nature of the dispute but have resulted in growing complexity and contradictions. In terms of levels of analysis, the drivers of change appear to have been located mostly at the local level. While the situation within the diplomatic sphere and the internationally led conflict resolution process seemed to stall or freeze, dynamics occurring within the Western Sahara territory under Moroccan control became more and more prominent. Local protests and resistance by hitherto unnoticed “internal” Sahrawi pro-independence activists (based inside this disputed territory) quantitatively and qualitatively blossomed from 1999 onwards (Barreñada 2012; Smith 2005), achieving a considerable impact on both the global level and the Moroccan state/national level. In the context of the Sahrawi party or national movement considered in its entirety, this was to entail a gradual yet profound strategic reorientation from the old approach “based on armed struggle and diplomacy conducted by the Polisario, to one based on civilian-led nonviolent resistance led by Sahrawis living inside the occupied territory [...]” (Stephan and Mundy 2006: 2). In other words, change did not stem from the state/national level embodied by the RASD and the Polisario Front, but the latter understood the need to capitalize on it by recognizing the aforementioned activists and increasing contacts with them.

Furthermore, this “inward turn” of the conflict also represented an opportunity for the Sahrawi nationalists to recover some of their standing at the global level. It crystallized into new international strategies based on the combination of a “low politics” strategy (in terms of content)

with parliamentary and judicial channels (in terms of means) (Fernández-Molina 2016). This low politics strategy has focused on two secondary issues that were not central to the UN Settlement Plan but contribute to internationally questioning and delegitimizing the Moroccan annexation of the Western Sahara territory, that is, Morocco's human rights violations and the economic exploitation of the natural resources of Western Sahara. The main goal of the internationalization of the human rights issue has been to secure the extension of MINURSO's mandate to human rights monitoring in both the disputed territory and the Tindouf refugee camps (Capella Soler 2011; Khakee 2014). While eventually never achieved, this demand became the main bone of contention in UN Security Council debates on Western Sahara from 2009 to 2015 and provoked unprecedented diplomatic crises between Morocco, on the one hand, and the UN and the USA, on the other, in 2012–2013 and 2016 (Fernández-Molina 2013; Mohsen-Finan 2015; Theofilopoulou 2016). However, some of the authors in this book consider that this Sahrawi approach has been ultimately ineffective for its promoters: "While framing the problem of Western Sahara in the apolitical terms of human rights has won Western Saharan nationalists new sympathy and some diplomatic victories, it has failed to destabilize the fundamental geopolitical architecture underwriting the conflict" (Mundy, this volume). "This has only resulted in diverting the [UN Security] Council's attention from its main task of pressing the parties to work on a solution to the conflict, without meeting the Polisario Front's demand" (Theofilopoulou, this volume).

Meanwhile, the international questioning of the legality of Morocco's trading in Western Sahara's natural resources (fisheries, phosphate and oil) gained momentum after 2002 following an opinion issued by UN legal counsel Hans Corell on contracts signed by Morocco and foreign companies to explore mineral resources in the territory (Boukhars and Roussellier 2013: 244–245). The main target of this Sahrawi strategy has been the EU and its bilateral economic cooperation agreements with Morocco, all of which fail to differentiate between economic activities conducted in, and products originating from, Morocco proper and the Western Sahara territory. Some substantial achievements have been made in this regard through parliamentary channels—the European Parliament's rejection of the protocol of extension of the 2006 EU-Morocco fisheries agreement in December 2011 (Smith 2013)—and through judicial channels—the European Court of Justice's (non-final) ruling annulling the EU-Morocco agricultural trade agreement (as far as its implementation in Western Sahara is concerned) in December 2015. These strategic shifts of the Sahrawi

party demonstrate how changes of conflict dynamics at the local level have had significant effects on the global level, which have in turn sometimes contributed to reinforce the former following a circular logic.

Coming back to the core of the conflict, it is also worth considering the extent and the implications of this “inward turn” and relative reframing of the agency and issues at stake between the parties. While it is widely acknowledged that a transformation has occurred in the “socio-spatial form of the conflict” (Bank and Van Heur 2007), that is, in the way it is construed and constructed by actors from both sides as well as outsiders, the existence of more fundamental changes affecting the very nature or essence of the conflict remains unclear. Do these signs of internalization involve a *de facto* shift from what was once a typical decolonizing war of national liberation or an extra-systemic war to something more akin to an identity/secession conflict devoid of the armed confrontation component? While the former are defined by the conflict analysis literature as armed conflicts pitting a sovereign territorial state against a political entity displaying some state features but limited international recognition—in this case the RASD—the latter would be carried out by identity or communal groups, “often with the purpose of secession or separation from the state” (Holsti 1996: 21; Singer 1996: 43, 47). In other words, in identity/secession conflicts, the main dispute or goal incompatibility would revolve around “the relative status of communities or ‘communal groups’, however defined, in relation to the state”, including “struggles for access, for autonomy, for secession or for control” (Ramsbotham et al. 2011: 76).

Curiously enough, a quick look at the most well-known international conflict databases in search of some comparative insights reinforces the idea that Western Sahara is somewhat lost in classifications. First of all, Western Sahara does not currently qualify as a war or armed conflict in any of them, since it no longer meets the definitional requirements of sustained combat involving organized armed forces and resulting in a minimum of 1000 battle-related deaths per year (Sarkees and Wayman 2010). In addition, a serious discrepancy can be observed between Correlates of War, which categorizes this conflict as an “extra-state war” that lasted from 1975 to 1983, and the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP)/Peace Research Institute in Oslo (PRIO) Armed Conflict Database, which considers it an “internal armed conflict” running from 1975 to 1989. For Correlates of War, the Western Sahara conflict was an “extra-state war” because it pitted a state or member of the inter-state system (Morocco) against the armed forces of a non-state entity outside the borders of that state (Polisario). It was also an “imperial war” rather than a “colonial war” as the relationship

between the parties was not one of colonial power vs. colony. The outcome of the war in 1983, when Morocco consolidated its military control over the annexed territory and the intensity of armed combat substantially decreased, was that the conflict continued at below-war level of fatalities.⁵ By contrast, the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset assumes that Western Sahara was an “internal armed conflict” between the government of a state (Morocco) and an internal opposition group or “guerrilla organisation” (Polisario) without intervention from other states—except for one year, 1976, when it was an “internationalized internal armed conflict” due to Algeria’s overt involvement.⁶ The situation over the last three decades is summarized as follows: “As no activity reaching the level of an armed conflict has taken place since 1989, the conflict remains terminated as of that year. However, the basic incompatibility between the parties—the status of the territory of Western Sahara—remains unresolved”.⁷

It is beyond doubt that the conceptual neatness of conflict classifications and databases is “less justifiable when one comes to deal with conflicts in the real world, which are invariably much messier than those that appear in the pages of books” (Mitchell 2014: 32). However, these inconsistencies about the nature of the Western Sahara conflict further illustrate that, beyond the letter of the law, the dilemma about it being international or internal is far from new. This is a sensitive line of reasoning since no classification or labelling is politically neutral. The political problem with describing Western Sahara as an identity/secession conflict is that it departs from the premises of international law, for which the original decolonization component of this dispute remains the touchstone, and it strikes a chord with Moroccan positions. On the other hand, this approach might be useful in analytical terms in order to better grasp the evolution of Moroccan governance of and socio-political dynamics in Western Sahara territory. At any rate, for some of the authors in this volume, these relative changes in the shape of the conflict are nothing but the inevitable effects of its very longevity and ageing.

LEVELS OF ANALYSIS ARE INTERCONNECTED... AND CONTESTED

Another necessary caveat and point for discussion regarding the purpose of this book is that the scale and levels of analysis of the Western Sahara conflict are also a matter of contention. Any labelling the issue—as a decolonization/sovereignty dispute, a regional conflict or a peripheral Cold War East-West confrontation—is politically loaded and controversial. From

the former two descriptions, placing the emphasis on the decolonization component is generally understood as stemming from an essentially “pro-Sahrawi” perspective, while giving prominence to the regional dimension—and Algeria’s involvement—has often (simplistically?) been read as a “pro-Moroccan” position that underrates and undermines Sahrawi agency. This politicization is in line with the increasingly generalized understanding that in conflicts like this, “geographic scale is no longer pre-given or simply a conceptual tool, but [...] it is actively appropriated by social actors as part of their arguments and their practice in order to persuade others” (Bank and Van Heur 2007: 595–596). In other words, it is possible to observe the “promotion of specific scalar imaginations at the expense of others” and dynamic transformations in the “socio-spatial form of the conflict”, which usually involve changes in the geometry of social power (Bank and Van Heur 2007: 596–597). Besides the aforementioned “inward turn” of the Western Sahara conflict, the recent construction of a merging Maghreb-Sahel regional security complex (Martinez and Boserup, this volume) is a good example of this.

That being said, one of the central endeavours of this book in terms of levels of analysis is a call to localize the study of and research into the Western Sahara conflict. This is in line with the “local turn” that has become widespread over the last decade in the works of conflict and peace scholars and practitioners. The “local” has been rediscovered as a reaction to the shortcomings and failures of the top-down and one-size-fits-all toolbox of the post-Cold War international liberal peacebuilding paradigm. The common denominator among the “local turn” advocates is an emphasis on the bottom-up potential for “peace from below”, as well as the need to recognize and empower local agents as primary architects and owners of peace, as authors and not recipients in peacebuilding. On this basis, the “local” has been incorporated into both the mainstream problem-solving discourse of international institutions—which recommends enhancing local governance and ownership in order to increase the legitimacy and effectiveness of what are ultimately externally driven peacebuilding operations—and more critical or transformative analyses—which aim at genuine emancipation and inclusion of local agency (Leonardsson and Rudd 2015).

The latter “critical localism” (Mac Ginty 2015) propounds a reflexive and cautious use of what admittedly remains an unspecified, elusive and contested notion, and is in line with the scepticism about the “local” maintained by some of the authors in this book.⁸ The pitfalls of which

academics and practitioners need to be aware include, in the first place, that of romanticizing, essentializing or homogenizing the “local”. Underrating or obscuring the fact that “local communities are often sites of heterogeneity, change, dissent and agency” (Mac Ginty 2015: 847) amounts to a form of depoliticization: “To the extent that ‘the local’ is plural, dynamic and contested, it must also be political” (Hughes et al. 2015: 821). As a result, questions need to be raised as to “Who controls wealth and power distribution locally? Who gets to decide what is local and what is not? Who speaks for local culture or local community? Who determines who is an outsider and who is an insider?” (Hughes et al. 2015: 821). A second shortcut to be avoided is a static and binary understanding of the “local” as opposed to the “international” (Paffenholz 2015; Kappler 2015), which is far from reflecting any contemporary reality. As an alternative, some propose a sort of de-territorialization of the concept of the “local” by approaching it in terms of “activity, networks and relationships” (Mac Ginty 2015: 840), which cut across various levels of analysis. Meeting the challenge of empirical substantiation and accumulation is also key to deconstructing such false dichotomies. All in all, the conclusion of critical localists is that “the local does not offer a solution, but a range of opportunities to think differently about the relationship between power, agency and freedom” (Hughes et al. 2015: 818–819).

Some insights from this “local turn” approach seem relevant to a multilayered analysis of the Western Sahara conflict, which would counter the fact that it often continues to be discussed as a sort of delocalized issue. Much of the existing international law and normative literature conveys a “sense of placelessness” (Mac Ginty 2015: 843), while usual accounts of international UN-led negotiations are imbued with a Cold War mindset in which peacemaking remains depicted as a national and international affair, “a preserve of diplomats and state machinery” (Mac Ginty 2015: 844). The “local” is notably absent. Of the aforementioned scholarly literature on this conflict, studies on local developments in the Tindouf refugee camps and the Moroccan-controlled territory remain by far the thinnest. It is also about the local level of analysis that international policy-makers know the least, as reminded by the UN Secretary-General in his 2012 report on Western Sahara: “[...] It [is] vital for the UN and the international community as a whole to have access to reliable, independent information on developments in both Western Sahara and the refugee camps in order to consider how best to promote a settlement”.⁹