

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

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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, 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 “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. 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, i.e. 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 overwrite 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 shaped 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) 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. Its peripheral position discourages research on it as being marginal and hardly publishable in leading academic outlets even under the label 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 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, Arts and Pinto Leite, 2012; Ruiz Miguel, 1995), and not least the study of Saharan tribalism and Sahrawi refugees are deemed to be even overcrowded by anthropologists (Caratini, 1989; Caratini, 2003; López Bargados, 2003; Naïmi, 2004; Naïmi, 2013; Campbell, 2010; Wilson, 2010; Wilson, 2014; Boulay, 2015; Boulay, 2016; Isidoros, 2015; Gimeno Martín, 2016).ⁱⁱ 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.ⁱⁱⁱ 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 peacekeeping 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, 2011: 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 studies 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 available publications within the limits of the Spanish language and Spanish-speaking audiences. 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. Although the voluntary or involuntary involvement of scholars in the battlefield seems hardly exceptional in the field 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 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 NGO workers and activists to academics and journalists, yet priority has been granted to “practice-oriented, rather than research-oriented visits”. 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 both 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.^{iv}

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; Diego Aguirre, 1991; De Piniés, 1990; Pazzanita, 1994; Hernández Moreno, 2001; Hernández Moreno, 2006; Bárbulo, 2002; Shelley, 2004; Barona Castañeda, 2004). Secondly, authors concerned with the global level of analysis have examined the involvement of the great powers and especially the United States (US) 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; Souaré, 2007; Jensen, 2012; Theofilopoulou, 2006; Theofilopoulou, 2007; Theofilopoulou, 2010; Theofilopoulou, 2013), the limited involvement of the EU throughout these decades (Vaquer, 2004; Benabdallah, 2009; Gillespie, 2010; Darbouche and Colombo, 2011; Riquelme Cortado and Andrés Sáenz de Santa María, 2012; Smith, 2013; Torrejón Rodríguez, 2014; Fernández-Molina, 2016) 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; International Crisis Group, 2007b; 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; Veguilla, 2009a; Veguilla, 2011a; Veguilla, 2011b; 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) as well “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 (Stephan and Mundy, 2006; Brouksy, 2008a; Brouksy, 2008b; Brouksy, 2016; 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 (Geldenhuys, 2009) embodied by the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (RASD) 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; San Martín, 2010; Mundy, 2007a; Caratini, 2007a; Caratini, 2007b; Gómez Martín and Omet, 2009; Wilson, 2010; Wilson, 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, Chatty and Crivello, 2005; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2009; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2010; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2011a; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2011b; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 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; Dedenis, 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 theoretical debates in political science and international relations (Messari, 2001; Maghraoui, 2003; Daadaoui, 2008; Benmessaoud Tredano, 2011b; El-Maslouhi, 2011; Rahimi, 2014; El Houdaïgui, 2015); sociological and anthropological studies that make interesting empirical contributions but end up shoring up the official arguments on the conflict (Naïmi, 2004; Naïmi, 2013; Cherkaoui, 2007); and timely publications that explicitly follow and acclaim flagship Moroccan policies and chiefly the 2007 autonomy plan (El Ouali, 2007; El Ouali, 2010; El Ouali, 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 contribute to 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). 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 in 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), achieving a considerable impact at 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 crystallised 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 US, on the other, in 2012-13 and 2016 (Fernández-Molina, 2013; Theofilopoulou, 2016). However, some of the authors in this book consider that this Sahrawi approach has been ultimately ineffective: "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, 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 annulment by the Court of Justice of the EU of 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 the second case 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, Woodhouse and Miall, 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 case, since it no longer meets the definitional requirements of sustained combat involving organized armed forces and resulting in a minimum of 1,000 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” which 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 the 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.^v 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.^{vi} 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”.^{vii}

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 central, 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 the Western Sahara territory. In any case, 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 which 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 people 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.^{viii} 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, Öjendal and Schierenbeck, 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, Öjendal and Schierenbeck, 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) which cut across various levels of analysis. 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, Öjendal and Schierenbeck, 2015: 818-819).

Some insights from this “local turn” approach seem suitable for 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 lead to a Cold War mindset in which peacemaking is 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 United Nations 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.”^{ix}

The main aim and common thread connecting the empirical contributions of the authors of this book is to provide a multilevel analysis of the Western Sahara conflict by examining issues and actors located on its concentric or overlapping global, regional, state/national and local scenes, and searching whenever possible for cross-level interactions. This analytical framework is reminiscent of the levels-of-analysis approach developed by Karl Cordell and Stefan Wolff (2009) for the study of ethnic conflicts. Cross-level interactions are broadly defined here as causality links of any kind between agents, structures, events or processes located at different levels of analysis. The subsequent chapters do not purport to be exhaustive in this regard; only a few of all of the possible cross-level interactions are addressed.

Table 0.1. Levels-of-analysis approach by Cordell and Wolff

Level	State structures and actors	Non-state structures and actors
Local/substate	Local elites/leaders, authorities and representatives of the central government, established institutional arrangements and socio-economic structures	Locally resident communities/ethnic groups/religious groups and their elites/leaders and locally operating NGOs, rebel forces, private-sector interest groups and criminals
State/national	National elites/leaders, central government, established institutional arrangements and socio-economic structures	Communities/ethnic groups/religious groups and their elites/leaders and statewide-operating NGOs, rebel forces, private-sector interest groups and criminals
Regional	Neighbouring states and their institutions, regional powers, and regional international organizations, as well as their respective elites/leaders; established structures of political and economic cooperation	Cross-border/transnational networks (ethnic, religious, civil society, business, organized crime, rebel groups, etc.) and their elites/leaders
Global	Powerful states and international organizations of global reach and their elites/leaders	International NGOs, diaspora groups, international organized crime networks, and trans-national corporations, as well as their respective elites/leaders

Source: Cordell and Wolff (2009: 10)

In the first part of the book, and by way of introduction to the global level of analysis, Anna Theofilopoulou offers a practitioner's perspective on the limitations of UN conflict resolution mechanisms within the straitjacket constituted by the great powers' self-interested preferences and approaches. Jacob Mundy argues that the global structure of US hegemony has invariably shaped the Western Sahara conflict and the strategies of all the actors involved since the late Cold War until today. Responses to this global-level constraint include the

RASD's efforts to showcase the "democratization" of the political structures in the Tindouf refugee camps and the new strategies of Sahrawi activism emphasizing nonviolent resistance and human rights issues in the territory controlled by Morocco. María Luisa Grande and Susana Ruiz highlight some of the particular features and inter-institutional inconsistencies observable in the EU's inhibition and limited engagement with the Western Sahara issue, which appear to be quite exceptional in the context of the rise and fall of the EU's ambitions about promoting security and preventing and solving conflicts in its neighbourhood.

The regional levels examined in the second part of the book are plural and comprise both the horizontal geopolitical scene of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), or Arab world, and the vertical scene consisting of a merging Maghreb-Sahel regional security complex, where Western Sahara and the Sahrawis seem to be some sort of missing link. Inmaculada Szmolka assesses the appropriateness and the implications of the Arab Spring regional framing imposed *a posteriori* on the Sahrawi protests that took place in Gdeim Izik, El Ayun, in October-November 2010, as well as the consequences of the reforms launched by the Moroccan state in 2011 as part of the "fifth wave of political change" in the MENA on both the Moroccan state/national and local level of the conflict. Laurence Thieux addresses the Maghreb, where the Western Sahara conflict has often been traditionally located by many scholars. She discusses the domestic and external determinants of the role of Algeria as Morocco's rival in the competition for regional hegemony, as the lifeline for the Polisario Front and the host country for the Sahrawi refugee camps, and even as a full-blown party to the conflict for those who argue, in keeping with Rabat's argument, that this is a fundamentally Algerian-Moroccan dispute. Luis Martinez and Rasmus Boserup analyse the reshaping of regional security and the growing prominence of the north-south Maghreb-Sahel axis in the eyes of the international community in the context of the War on Terror and the post-2011 instability. Miguel García Guindo and Alberto Bueno address the tricky situation and dilemmas facing the RASD/Polisario Front due to these new forms of securitization of the region. Moroccan diplomacy and propaganda have tried to seize the opportunity since the early 2000s by promoting a new securitizing discourse about the transnational terrorist and/or criminal connections (or potential risk thereof) of the Polisario Front, the "threat of ungoverned spaces" and the War on Terror's framing of the Western Sahara conflict, thus "globalizing the local conflict against Polisario" (De Orellana, 2015: 489, 479). The terrorist kidnapping of foreign aid workers from the refugee camps in October 2011 was a particularly critical juncture for the Sahrawi leadership's management of these cross-level interactions.

The third part of the book is devoted to the state/national-level analysis of the Moroccan governance of the Western Sahara territory as well as its consequences at the local level. Raquel Ojeda-García and Ángela Suárez-Collado discuss the place and role of Morocco's 2010-2011 Advanced Regionalization Reform in the context of this conflict, as an intended means to boost the legitimacy of—if not fully legalize—the annexation of Western Sahara and reinforce the credibility of the 2007 autonomy plan on both global and local levels. María Angustias Parejo and Laura Feliu disentangle the intricacies of the activities of the members of the Moroccan parliament representing Western Saharan constituencies in the sphere of parliamentary diplomacy and the way these global-level tasks interact with the changing identity substratum of the conflict, based on these MPs' own identity self-descriptions. Victoria Veguilla explains how Moroccan public policies towards Western Sahara such as elections and housing face the challenge of adjusting to the deep socio-demographic transformations provoked by sustained northerner “immigration”—or “settlement”—in the territory while preserving local stability and formally living up to the international legal standards which privilege “autochthony” in the management of local resources.

Finally, the fourth part of the book offers the most grounded and localized insights about Saharawi resistance and identity in both the Western Sahara territory and the Tindouf camps. Claudia Barona and Joseph Dickens-Gavito provide a historical account of the development of Sahrawi civil society and protests in the territory annexed by Morocco. Isaías Barreñada discusses the transborder ethnic and identity dimension that has always underlain the conflict, overlapping—yet not full corresponding to—the territorial issue. His chapter sheds light on the scarcely explored grey zone of the nationalist activism of ethnic Sahrawis from southern Morocco who have mobilized hand in hand with their counterparts from the disputed territory despite falling outside the colonial territorial demarcation of Western Sahara and the electorate for an eventual self-determination referendum, all of which poses challenges for both the Moroccan state and the Sahrawi nationalist movement.

Konstantina Isidoros explores the relationship between the extraordinary resilience of the Sahrawi refugee population and local understandings of “autochthony” and kinship, particularly by women refugees living in the Tindouf camps, also drawing contrasts with the exogenous and top-down categorizations of international law. Finally, Alice Wilson examines the particular features of the “work of elections” on which the Polisario Front and RASD leadership have expended considerable energy—in spite of the lack of multipartyism and free elections in the liberal democratic sense—as well as its effects at the Sahrawi state/national

level (forging a transterritorial “national” imagined political community encompassing the refugee camps, the Moroccan-controlled territory and the diaspora), the global level (enabling Sahrawi parliamentary diplomacy) and the local level (creating “cultural and moral events” in the camps).

Table 0.2. Cross-level interactions in the Western Sahara conflict

		Agents/causes					
		Local level 1: Western Sahara territory	Local level 2: Tindouf refugee camps	State/national level 1: Morocco	State/national level 2: RASD	Regional levels	Global level
Recipients/Consequences	Local level 1: Western Sahara territory	X	Family/kinship bonds, communication and visits, civil society connections, defamation of “returnees”	Moroccan governance and public policies, socio-economic investments, recognition measures, settlement policies, repression and human rights violations	Official support for “internal” pro-independence civil society organizations, RASD Ministry for Occupied Zones, inclusion in Polisario General Congress and elections, RASD TV	“Arab Spring” framing of “internal” Sahrawi protests	International civil society and US human rights initiatives, visits by foreign observers/supporters
	Local level 2: Tindouf refugee camps	Family/kinship bonds, communication and visits, civil society connections, official visits by “internal”	X	Internet and media propaganda, encouragement of dissent and “return”	State-like governance of camps, administration of foreign aid, elections, threats of a return to armed	Algeria’s hosting and protection of refugee camps, impact of Maghreb-Sahel security instability on	EU/European humanitarian aid, limited role of UNHCR, support by international civil society, foreign

		Sahrawi activists to camps			struggle	securitization of camps, kidnapping of foreign aid workers	visits to camps
	State/national level 1: Morocco	Participation in Moroccan institutions, elections, parliament and consultative councils, responses to Moroccan public policies and recognition measures, socio-economic and nationalist protests, instrumental usages of Sahrawi identity		X	Diplomatic interaction/negotiations, internet and media propaganda, threats of a return to armed struggle	Escalation and de-escalation of Algerian-Moroccan tensions, opportunities created by Maghreb-Sahel security instability	Expectations of Moroccan security cooperation in War on Terror, post-Arab Spring expectations of political reform and liberalization
	State/national level 2: RASD	Participation by “internal” activists in Polisario General Congress and elections	Participation in RASD institutions and elections, responses to RASD governance of camps, protests	Diplomatic interaction/negotiations, internet and media propaganda	X	Algeria’s material and diplomatic backing for RASD	Expectations of democratization, prevention of radicalization/terrorism and accountability about the

			and dissent, demands of a return to armed struggle				administration of humanitarian aid
	Regional levels			Moroccan foreign policy activism and parallel diplomacy activism in Sahel	Role of RASD/Polisario Front in regional security	X	US counterterrorist policies in Sahel, international military interventions in Libya and Mali
	Global level	Nonviolent resistance, “low politics” international strategy (human rights and natural resources)	Threats of a return to armed struggle	Moroccan foreign policy, diplomatic crisis with UN, US, EU, etc., lobbying, parallel and public diplomacy, propaganda	“Democratization” of RASD and elections, discourse on gender equality and religious freedom, “low politics” international strategy (human rights and natural resources), parliamentary and judicial strategies, threats of a return to armed struggle		X

Source: Author

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ⁱ Protracted refugee situations are defined as those involving a refugee population of 25,000 persons or more originating from the same country who have been in exile and seeking asylum for five or more years in another country, most usually a developing country. Sahrawi refugees in Algeria represent one of the world’s oldest protracted refugee situations after those of the Palestinian refugees (beyond the mandate of the UNHCR) and the 1972 Burundian refugees in Tanzania.

ⁱⁱ Remark made by Alice Wilson during the seminar in Granada/Jaen. The predominance of anthropologists was also visible in the international conference “La question (irrésolue) du Sahara Occidental: quels enjeux pour quelles recherches en sciences humaines et sociales?” organized at the Sorbonne University, Paris, in June 2016 to inventory existing social science research on this subject.

ⁱⁱⁱ See <http://www.un.org/en/decolonization/nonselvgovterritories.shtml>.

^{iv} Remark made by Victoria Veguilla during the seminar. For an argument in favour of analysing Western Sahara as a “crisis”–or a succession of crises–instead of a “conflict”, see Pointier (2004: 30).

^v See COW War Data, 1816-2007 (v4.0), available at <http://cow.dss.ucdavis.edu/data-sets/COW-war>.

^{vi} See UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset, 1946-2014 (v.4-2015), available at http://www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/datasets/ucdp_prio_armed_conflict_dataset/.

^{vii} See <http://ucdp.uu.se/#/statebased/721>.

^{viii} Remark made by Isaías Barreñada during the seminar.

^{ix} See http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2012/197 (p. 5).