



Managing Decolonization: The UN and the Depoliticization of Sahrawi Self-Determination

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Abstract

This study explores the motives and the motivations that led the United Nations to not deliver a self-determination vote in Western Sahara and how UN governance has shifted from decolonization to long-term conflict management. It asks: *How has UN governance evolved since 1975, and what has this meant for Sahrawi self-determination?*

Using qualitative document analysis and critical discourse analysis, the study examines Security Council and General Assembly texts, Secretary-General reports, MINURSO materials, legal opinions, and selected NGOs reports, corporate records and trade data. Entman's framing is used to code UN language over time. An integrated framework links material interests and institutions to discourse: Le Billon (resources), Chimni (global imperial state), Flinders & Buller and Stone (depoliticisation and governance), Entman (framing), and Fassin (humanitarian government and moral economy). Together, these lenses track how interests translate into procedures and, then, into the words that shape policy.

Findings show a feedback loop. First, French and U.S. interests around Sahrawi resources align with informal Security Council practices, Group of Friends and Penholding, that narrow agenda space and filter strong decolonization language. Second, UN discourse shifts from framing Western Sahara as a colonial question to treating it as a technical management issue. Third, MINURSO's practice follows suit, contracting from a referendum mission to ceasefire observation and humanitarian tasks. This loop stabilizes the status quo and delays self-determination. The thesis contributes a joined-up account connecting political economy, Council micro-routines, and discursive change. It suggests that repoliticization would require opening Council working methods, reconnecting MINURSO's outputs to the referendum mandate, and re-centering decolonization language in UN texts.

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Acronyms

AFD — Agence Française de Développement (French Development Agency)

OAU — Organization African Union

CBM — Confidence-Building Measures

CJEU — Court of Justice of the European Union

CIA — Central Intelligence Agency (U.S.)

CRS — Congressional Research Service (U.S.)

C-24 — UN Special Committee on Decolonization (Committee of 24)

GCEU — General Court of the European Union

GA — UN General Assembly

HRW — Human Rights Watch

ICJ — International Court of Justice

IHL — International Humanitarian Law

IHRL — International Human Rights Law

KFOR — Kosovo Force (NATO)

MINURSO — United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara

NATO — North Atlantic Treaty Organization

OAU — Organization of African Unity

OHCHR — Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

OLA — UN Office of Legal Affairs

ONAREP — Office National de Recherches et d'Exploitations Pétrolières (Morocco)

ONHYM — Office National des Hydrocarbures et des Mines (Morocco)

UNSC/SC — UN Security Council

UNSG/SG — UN Secretary-General

UNDPKO — UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations

UNDFS — UN Department of Field Support

UNGA/GA — United Nations General Assembly

UNHCR — UN High Commissioner for Refugees

UNMIK — UN Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo

UNTAET — UN Transitional Administration in East Timor

US — United States

USGS — United States Geological Survey

USIP — United States Institute of Peace

WSRW — Western Sahara Resource Watch

Introduction

Western Sahara, often called ‘Africa’s last colony’, remains one of the longest unresolved cases in the UN list of non-self-governing territories (United Nations, n.d.). For the last 50 years, Morocco has occupied and annexed the Territory, and its decolonisation has been obstructed by the strategic interests of France and the United States, which complicated the path towards independence for the Sahrawi people. The right to self-determination, a foundational principle of international law, represents the core political issue behind this conflict. The United Nations Charter promoted explicitly the principle of self-determination in article 1 stating that one of the main goals of the UN is “*to develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples*” (United Nations, 1945, Art. 1, para. 2).

In 1991, after 16 years of armed conflict between Morocco and the Polisario Front (the Sahrawi liberation movement), the Security Council established the Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) with a specific mandate to hold a referendum for Sahrawi self-determination (UNSC, 1991, Resolution 690). However, still today, there has been no vote, and this political deadlock has contributed to one of the most protracted refugee displacement in the world. Since Morocco annexed the Territory, most of the Saharawi population, over 173, 000 people, has been living in five refugee camps in the Algerian Sahara, near the town of Tindouf. Under the coordination of various UN agencies and humanitarian Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), the Sahrawi refugees rely essentially on international assistance for basic needs, education and healthcare, suspended in a state of indefinite limbo (UNHCR, 2024, pp. 10-13). Western Sahara is now split by the world’s largest military wall, 2700 km including a 5 km wide minefield, built by Morocco to

divide the occupied Territory facing the Atlantic Ocean, and Polisario-controlled areas in the east, towards the Algerian Sahara (Besenyő, 2017, p. 41).

Over recent years, the United Nations have contributed to shape the narrative around Western Sahara, and today the stalemate is often attributed to a lack of political will between Morocco and Polisario, or to regional tensions in the Maghreb region. In contrast, I argue that this was the result of an active depoliticisation process made possible by the United Nations institutional framework and by the strategic interests of two permanent Council's members, France and the United States, to maintain the status quo. The existing literature offers crucial insights into the various factors that have influenced the UN's governance in Western Sahara. Several scholars have examined the geopolitical interests of powerful states, others have delved into the role of Sahrawi natural resources on the diplomatic process. Some have focused on the institutional dynamics of the Security Council, while others have studied the evolution of MINURSO at the expense of the referendum on self-determination. These analyses, however, often focus on one dimension of the problem: economics, geopolitics, global governance and so on. A clear gap remains in providing a comprehensive, integrated analysis that systematically connects these different elements over time. What is less understood is how material interests, institutional practices, and evolving discursive frames have interacted to produce the political stalemate in Western Sahara.

In this respect, this study is to provide a coherent explanation for the prolonged stalemate in Western Sahara, by asking: *“How has the United Nations’ governance of Western Sahara evolved from its initial involvement in 1975 to the present, and what consequences did this shift have for the pursuit of Sahrawi self-determination?”*.

To answer this question, the thesis develops into three analytical chapters, each constructed to answer a sub-question. By employing an integrated theoretical framework, the first chapter asks: *“Why and How France and the United States shape the Security Council decisions on Western Sahara?”*. Drawing on Flinders and Buller (2006), and Stone's (2017) theories of depoliticisation and global governance, supplemented with Le Billon's (2004) reconceptualisation of *‘resource war’*, and Chimni's (2004) theory of *‘global imperial state’*, I examine the involvement of French and U.S. corporations in the illegal trade of Sahrawi natural resources, to show how these material interests are translated into UN's decision-making dynamics. The second and main analytical chapter asks: *“How did the UN*

discourse on Western Sahara develop from 1975 to recent years?” To this end, I employ a longitudinal discourse analysis to track the development of the UN language, drawing principally on Entman’s (1993) framing theory to illustrate how the United Nations’ discourse has shaped the narrative and the decisions on the matter. The third and last analytical chapter asks: *“How did the UN practice translate that discourse into the management of the conflict?”* Here, Fassin’s (2012) concepts of ‘humanitarian government’ and ‘moral economy’ will be employed to study how the discourse examined in the previous chapter has contributed to shape the structure of MINURSO from its creation in 1991 till its recent shift from a political towards a humanitarian mandate.

Context

Before moving to the literature that informed this thesis, it is important to set up a comprehensive background of the context. Therefore, this chapter will provide the institutional, historical, and geopolitical background of this study. First, I will briefly define the United Nations’ institutional and normative frameworks that are central to the conflict, then I will cover its chronology, and finally I will expose the strategic alliances between Morocco, France and the United States.

The United Nations Institutional and Legal Framework

To begin with, it is worth clarifying the roles of the UN bodies that are central to my thesis: the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Secretary-General, and the International Court of Justice. Then, this section will shortly clarify the legal basis for the right to self-determination, and the United Nations peacekeeping principles.

The Role of UN Bodies

The General Assembly (GA) is the principal organ of the United Nations, the “policy maker”, and can make recommendations to member states or the Security Council (SC) (United Nations, 1945, art. 10). Concerning decolonization cases, the GA’s Fourth Committee is the organ that places issues such as the “Question of Western Sahara” on its agenda and forwards draft texts to the plenary (UNGA Fourth Committee, 2024). In simple terms, the GA functions as a “global parliament”, where all member states participate and discuss a broad range of international topics, however its recommendations are not legally binding.

Instead, the Security Council (SC) holds that power. The UN Charter affirms that the Council has the “*primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security*”, but also “*shall act in accordance with the Purpose and Principles of the United Nations*”(United Nations, 1945, arts. 24–25). In practice, the SC is the authority that establishes peacekeeping missions such as MINURSO (UNSC, 1991, Res. 690), and, as this study will show, it holds the final decision on many aspects, specifically in terms of renewing or suspending UN mandates.

Appointed by the General Assembly, the Secretary-General (SG) is described as the “chief administrative officer”. It represents the UN organ that has the duty to bring issues that threaten global peace security to the Council’s attention (United Nations, 1945, arts. 97, 99). In this study I will show that the SG can also appoint Personal Envoys, namely the UN officials that mediate between the parties in conflict, facilitate meetings and negotiations. Nonetheless, the SG authority is limited, and beyond appointing the special envoys, can write reports and update the Security Council (UNDPKO/DFS, 2008, p. 26), and can not enforce decisions unilaterally.

Furthermore, my study covers the International Court of Justice (ICJ), which represents the principal judicial organ. Essentially, Its role is to provide advisory opinions on legal questions, which might be requested by the GA, the SC, and even member states (United Nations, 1945, arts. 92, 96). The work of the ICJ regarding Western Sahara was crucial. In 1975, the General Assembly requested an advisory opinion to the Court asking: “*Was Western Sahara (...) at the time of colonization by Spain a territory belonging to no one (terra nullius)?*”. Although the ICJ acknowledged some legal ties between the then Sultan of Morocco and some Sahrawi tribes, it responded in negative to this question, concluding that no element could affect the decolonisation of Western Sahara and the realisation of the principle of self-determination for its people (ICJ, 1975).

The Right to Self-Determination

The GA’s ‘Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples’ affirms: “*All peoples have the right to self-determination; by virtue of that right they freely determine their political status*” (UNGA, 1960, p. 5, para. 2). GA’s Resolution 1541 also identifies the legitimate outcomes through which a non-self-governing territory can achieve the “*full measure of self-government*”: (a) emergence as a sovereign independent State, (b)

free association with an independent State, or (c) integration with an independent State (United Nations OLA, n.d., p. 192). As mentioned previously, the ICJ's 1975 Advisory Opinion concluded that identified ties between Sahrawi tribes and the Moroccan Sultanate did not negate the application of self-determination to the Territory (ICJ, 1975, p. 68, para. 162). Institutionally, this means the GA, through the Fourth Committee, keeps the item under review as a decolonization question, while the SC and SG manage and track the peace operation of MINURSO.

UN Peacekeeping Principles

UN peacekeeping practice is guided by three inter-related principles: (1) consent of the parties, (2) impartiality, and (3) non-use of force except in self-defence and defence of the mandate. (UNDPKO/DFS, 2008, pp. 31–34). As noted by the UN Peacekeeping Department, the consent of the parties requires the actual commitment of Morocco and the Polisario Front to the political process and their approval of the mandate of MINURSO. Accordingly, without the consent of both parties, the UN mission *“risks becoming a party to the conflict”*. As regards the principle of impartiality, the UN guidelines are clear: *“Impartiality is crucial to maintaining the consent and cooperation of the main parties, but should not be confused with neutrality and inactivity. United Nations peacekeepers should be impartial in their dealing with the parties (...), but not neutral in the execution of their mandate”*. This specific principle is critical to understand the development of the UN's governance in Western Sahara, because it was made explicit that impartiality *“should not become an excuse for inaction”*, and that the UN peacekeeping missions should not tolerate any action in opposition of the peace process, or any violation to international norms and principles. (UNDPKO/DFS, 2008, pp. 31–34). It should be stressed that these three principles regulate and guide peacekeeping operations under the so-called Chapter VI, which always require the consent of the parties. By contrast, peace operations under Chapter VII allows enforcement and coercive measures. As a matter of fact, when the Security Council determines a threat to the peace, these missions do not require any consent from the parties in the conflict (United Nations, 1945, ch. VII; UNDPKO/DFS, 2008, p. 19). In these cases, the Council may authorize the use of force to protect the mandate (UNDPKO/DFS, 2008, p. 19). In the case of Western Sahara the peacekeeping mission was established as a Chapter VI operation, a consent-based model. In fact, MINURSO was created to monitor the ceasefire and facilitate the Sahrawi self-determination process (UNSC, 1991, Res. 690; UNDPKO/DFS, 2008, p. 26).

Chronology of the Conflict

The armed conflict began when the Spanish colonial presence in Western Sahara, at the time ‘Spanish Sahara’, started being under international pressure during the 1960s, when many African and Asian countries were moving to independence (Mingst et al., 2022). In 1973, it was the actual King of Morocco at that time, Hassan II, who called for the ICJ opinion to claim the territory, contended with Mauritania, under his sovereignty (Zoubir, 2007, pp. 161-162). The ICJ advisory opinion in 1975 stated that the materials presented “*do not establish any tie of territorial sovereignty between the territory of Western Sahara and the Kingdom of Morocco or the Mauritanian entity. Thus the Court has not found legal ties of such a nature as might affect the application of General Assembly resolution 1514 (XV) in the decolonization of Western Sahara and, in particular, of the principle of self-determination (...)*” (ICJ, 1975, p. 78)

Shortly after, King Hassan II called Moroccan people (350,000 marchers, among them tens of thousands soldiers) to invade Western Sahara in the so-called “Green March”, presented as a peaceful “repossession of its Southern provinces” (Zoubir, 2007, p. 162). When Morocco was occupying de facto the Territory, the Security Council passed Resolution 380 (1975), which “*deplore[d] the holding of the march*” and called upon Morocco to “*immediately withdraw*” (UNSC, 1975, Res. 380, paras. 1-2). In this context, Spain not only failed to meet its legal obligations, but also signed in 1975 a secret agreement, the ‘Madrid Accords’ which resulted in the transfer of the administrative power to Morocco and Mauritania (Zoubir, 2007, p. 162). From a legal perspective, these agreements were never recognized by the United Nations as conferring sovereignty, and fundamentally, Western Sahara remains today a case of incomplete decolonisation (UNGA, 1975a, paras. 7–10; UNGA, 1975b, paras. 1–4). Indeed, the crucial opinion of Hans Correl, the UN Legal Counsel in 2002 confirmed that the Madrid Agreement “*did not transfer sovereignty over the Territory, nor did it confer upon any of the signatories the status of an administering Power, a status which Spain alone could not have unilaterally transferred.*”, therefore Spain is still considered the administering power with unfulfilled obligations under the UN Charter, and Western Sahara a non-self-governing territory (UNSC, 2002, para. 6).

As Spain withdrew from Western Sahara, Morocco moved into the northern and central part of the Territory, while Mauritania occupied the southern area. At that moment, the armed conflict began in the late 1975, with the Polisario Front fighting both armies in a guerrilla

war. While Mauritania withdrew from the conflict in 1979 after signing a peace agreement with the Sahrawi liberation movement, Morocco extended the control into the southern part. (UNGA, 1979, Res. 34/37, p. 204; Zunes & Mundy, 2010, pp. 6-12, 106-114). As noted by Zunes and Mundy (2010) and Zoubir (1990), the conflict has been heavily shaped by the external backing of France, which provided air support and military logistics in the late 1970s, and of the United States, which supplied weapons, military trainings and intelligence services to the Moroccan army from the late 1970s (Zunes & Mundy, 2010, pp. 12–20, 75–77; Zoubir, 1990, pp. 233–234).

In 1991, the United Nations and the the Organization of African Unity (OAU), mediated the Settlement Plan proposed by the Secretary-General, which resulted in a ceasefire and to the establishment of MINURSO, with the political mandate to organise a referendum for self-determination (UNSC, 1991, Res. 690, paras. 2, 4).

Alongside MINURSO, the Identification Commission was created in order to begin to identify the eligible voters for the referendum (UNSG, 1991, p. 6). Almost immediately, controversies emerged regarding who could be counted as a ‘Sahrawi’ and vote, with Polisario arguing that the electorate should be based on the 1974 Spanish census of native Sahrawis, while Morocco obstructed the referendum process, by seeking to extend the voter list to Moroccans who settled in the Territory after 1975 (Mundy, 2012, p. 112), obstructing the referendum process. As a result, by 1996 the voter identification process stalled, and the Security Council recognised the lack of “*significant progress towards the implementation of the Settlement Plan*”, suspending the procedure temporarily (UNSC, Res. 1056, 1996, paras. 2-3). During this period, Human Rights Watch carried an investigation to assess the transparency within the identification process and came to the conclusion that “*Morocco (...) has regularly engaged in conduct that has obstructed and compromised the fairness of the referendum process*” (HRW, 1995, para. 5). The same investigation found that some Moroccan candidates were clearly acting as native Sahrawis: “*Testimony from members of MINURSO’s identification commission indicates that many of the applicants proposed by Morocco have no documents proving links to the Western Sahara, do not speak the Hassaniya dialect of the region, and have clearly memorized answers to the factual and biographical questions posed by the identification commission*” (HRW, 1995, p. 13). Theofilopoulou (2006), a former UN official, working on the Sahrawi issue during the voter identification period, reported that “*throughout the process, the UN endeavoured to break the*

impasses... through technical solutions that addressed the problem at hand without addressing the underlying political problem” (Theofilopoulou A., 2006, p.2). The primary solution was the establishment of an appeal mechanism, so those who were considered ineligible could appeal. Consequently, between 1992 to 1997, there has been no actual political progress, but the Security Council managed to keep MINURSO alive by renewing its mandate every year (Theofilopoulou A., 2006, pp. 4-8). In July 1999, Morocco's King Hassan II passed away and a few months later, in September, the successful referendum in East Timor, another long-denied territory, ultimately resulted in self-determination and independence for the Timorese people (United Nations, 1999). This episode might have alarmed Morocco because it exposed an historical precedent, where an occupying power under international pressure, in that case Indonesia, lost a referendum and had to withdraw the occupied territory.

The new King of Morocco, Mohammed VI, quickly became to any referendum that included Sahrawi independence as an option, (Theofilopoulou, 2006, pp. 1, 11; International Crisis Group, 2007, pp. 3-4), thereby neglecting the UN key principle of self-determination and previous SC resolutions on the matter. The same year, the Commission did publish a provisional voter list, identifying 86.386 qualified voters. It is worth stressing that most of them, specifically 84.251, came from the census used by the Frente Polisario, while 2135 were added from the Moroccan contested settlers (UNSG, 2000, para. 6) At that moment, MINURSO was finally ready to hold the referendum, and it was politically evident to Morocco that the likely result of the vote could lead to the independence of the Sahrawi people. Thus, Morocco submitted an excessive number of appeals for over 130,000 people, who were previously declared ineligible (UNSG 2000, paras. 14–16). The UN received the appeals and the Identification Commission began processing them, a task that, according to the Secretary-General at that time, could have taken at least two years (Boukhari A., 2004, p. 10).

In these circumstances, the Secretary-General appointed the former U.S. Secretary of State James Baker as UN Personal Envoy to overcome the obstacles that occurred during the voter identification process (UNSG, 1997, S/1997/742; Theofilopoulou, 2006, p. 1). Baker put forward the first proposal, namely the 2001 “Framework Agreement”, known as ‘Baker Plan I’, which offered Western Sahara a sort of autonomy under the Moroccan Kingdom, that would still keep authority on defence and foreign policy matters. This proposal was accepted

by Morocco, but rejected by Polisario because it did not include independence (UNSG, 2001; UNSG, 2002, paras. 44–46). The failure of the first proposal led Baker to prepare a more detailed one: the “Peace Plan for Self-determination” or ‘Baker Plan II’, that involved a transitional autonomy period, followed by a referendum on self-determination, giving the legitimate choice to the Sahrawi people to decide between independence, integration or autonomy. The Security Council Resolution 1495 (2003) endorsed this proposal as an “*optimum political solution*” (UNSC, 2003, Res. 1495, para. 1), the Polisario Front accepted it, but Morocco instead rejected it. (UNSG, 2003, para. 21; Theofilopoulou, 2006, p. 11; UNSC, 2004, Res. 1541, paras. 3–5, 15).

A new diplomatic phase began in 2007, where both parties presented competing proposals: Morocco’s proposal, which reflected Baker Plan I, offered autonomy to Western Sahara “*within the framework of the Kingdom’s sovereignty and national unity*”, maintaining the control over defence and foreign relations, and above all, excluding independence as political outcome (UNSG 2007a, paras. 2, 14); while the Polisario’s proposal essentially reflected Baker Plan II parameters, calling for a referendum with independence, integration, or self-governance as options. (UNSG, 2007b, annex, paras. 6, 9.1). From this point, Morocco’s rejection of any plan that included independence obstructed the diplomatic process, which led the Polisario Front to declare in 2020 the ending of the ceasefire agreed in 1991, with armed clashes resuming around the town of Guerguerat in South Western Sahara (UNSG, 2021, paras. 2–4).

France and U.S. Strategic Alliances with Morocco

The failure of the MINURSO mandate to hold the promised referendum was fundamentally enabled by powerful actors that strengthen the diplomatic backing for Morocco, specifically Security Council key permanent members like France and the United States.

As Morocco’s closest European ally since its independence in 1956, France considers the Moroccan kingdom as a pillar of French influence in the Maghreb and a dependable economic partner in the francophone Africa (Direction générale du Trésor, 2024; French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2025; Ayerra M., 2025, para.1-2). Since 1912, when France colonised Morocco, its interests are the most evident and enduring among the Security Council members. In view of the the general decline of its influence in francophone countries, and the growing tension with former colonies in West Africa, the recent years have

seen Morocco and France's economic relationship growing substantially (Ahmed F., 2025, para.1-2; Direction générale du Trésor, 2024). A clear demonstration is the recent meeting in October 2024 between French President Emmanuel Macron and King Mohammed VI, who stressed the visit as an opportunity for *"a renewed and ambitious vision covering several strategic sectors"*. The two countries signed €10 billion worth of agreements, including energy and infrastructure investments, and during a speech in front of the Moroccan parliament, Macron recognised Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara, stating that French companies *"will support the development"* of Western Sahara whose *"present and future"* belong under *"Moroccan sovereignty"*. He additionally promised *"investments and sustainable support initiatives to benefit local population"* (Marin, 2024). Behind this diplomatic support lay concrete material considerations, as demonstrated by the recent decision of the French Development Agency (AFD) to invest €150 million in Western Sahara in the 2025-2026 biennium, following France's recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over the disputed territory (Eljechimi A., 2025).

The United States, instead, gradually developed their own set of interests. During the Cold War, Morocco was seen by the U.S. as a pro-Western ally against the spread of socialism and Arab nationalism in West Asia and North Africa. (Zoubir, 1990, pp. 233-234; Mundy, 2006, pp. 278–279). In 1978, a U.S. memorandum, discussed the decision to supply military equipment to the North African Kingdom, and explicitly framed the conflict as Morocco fighting *"an externally-based guerrilla group supplied with Soviet arms by the Algerians"*. The same document adds *"Moroccan attitudes on the Middle East also are appreciated by Israel's friends"* (U.S. Department of State, 1978/2017). anchoring the issue to Cold War dynamics and U.S. interests in Occupied Palestine. By contrast, the Polisario Front and its regional backer, Algeria, aligned with anti-colonial movements, as the latter was a leader in the Non-Aligned and Third World movements, in direct opposition to many Western Cold War policies, especially those of France and the U.S. in Africa and Asia (Mundy, 2006, pp. 278–279). As Mundy (2006) demonstrates, in this bipolar context of the 1970s–1980s, U.S. policymakers tacitly supported Morocco's annexation of the territory, because they feared that an independent Western Sahara could become a socialist-oriented republic sympathetic to the Soviet Union, at the expense of Western influence in the region (Mundy, 2006, pp. 288–292; U.S. Department of State, 1978/2017), a view mirrored in CIA assessments of the conflict (CIA, 1978, p.4 ; CIA, 1979, pp. 2-4). Declassified records from 1975–76 suggests that Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and other U.S. officials, while officially professing

neutrality within the Council, were inclined to facilitate the “Green March” and Morocco’s occupation, through a bilateral agreement between Spain and Morocco (U.S. Department of State, 1975/2014, Docs. 99–101, 108), which led the way to the Madrid Agreement. As recorded by an internal U.S. memorandum, by the late 1970s, the U.S. had leaned towards Morocco in practical terms: military and intelligence cooperation grew, including training on anti-guerrilla tactics and arms transfers (U.S. Department of State, 1978/2017, Doc. 222). During the Cold War, King Hassan II actively supported U.S. interests “*within the Third World*”, by cooperating “*in military and intelligence matters*”, and allowing access to U.S. naval and air facilities. Morocco, thus, positioned itself within the Western block as a strong anti-communist ally (U.S. Department of State, 1978/2017, Doc. 222). In sum, this period gave the United States a strategic interest in Morocco’s occupation of Western Sahara, even though internal U.S. legal notes recognized tensions with the right to self-determination and weapon export regulations (Ibis).

Geopolitically, Morocco’s value to the United States increased after 9/11, which was reflected by the United States designation of Morocco as a major Non-NATO Ally in 2004, an alliance status that promotes military cooperation (Federal Register, 2004). Moreover, The United States has repeatedly lauded Morocco’s counterterrorism cooperation and broader security ties (CRS, 2021, pp. 1–2, pp. 7–8; U.S. Department of State, 2022), treating the Moroccan King as a key regional partner in the “Global War on Terror”. That orientation culminated in December 2020 when President Trump issued Proclamation 10126: “*the United States recognizes Moroccan sovereignty over the entire Western Sahara territory and reaffirms its support for Morocco’s serious, credible, and realistic autonomy proposal as the only basis for a just and lasting solution,*” adding that “*an independent Sahrawi State is not a realistic option*” and that “*genuine autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty is the only feasible solution*” (Federal Register, 2020). The recognition was announced in tandem with the normalization agreement between Morocco and Israel, under the broader Abraham Accords, which are intended to establish diplomatic relations between Israel and several Arab states. (U.S. Department of State, 2020, pp. 3–4; Eichensehr K., 2021, pp. 320-323).

As outlined in chapter, since 1975, the conflict has been shaped, from the inside, by the UN institutional framework of MINURSO as a consent based mission, and from the outside, by the French and U.S. military support for Morocco. The next chapter will review the literature concerning the United Nations’ handling of the Western Sahara case.

Literature Review

Employing a funnel model that moves from the macro to the micro level, this literature review is divided in three key sections (Berthon, Nairn, & Money, 2003). First, I consider scholars who examined the geopolitical and economic dimension of the conflict, then I zoom in on the specific institutional and power dynamics of the UN Security Council. The third stream of literature, instead, reviews scholarly work on the depoliticisation of global governance, and analyses the role of humanitarianism in prolonged cases like Western Sahara. Each contribution informs and enriches this thesis by offering a nuanced perspective on the political stalemate in Western Sahara.

Geo-Political Economy of the Conflict

International relations and peacekeeping literature often frames the Western Sahara conflict as a classic case where decolonisation and the right of self-determination have been subordinated to the strategic and economic interests of powerful states. In their book *“Western Sahara: War, Nationalism, and Conflict”*, Zunes and Mundy (2010) provide a foundational historical analysis, tracing how, after 1975, French and U.S. support for Morocco shifted the Western Sahara case from decolonization to realpolitik. (Zunes & Mundy, 2010) Their study helps explain why the costs of enforcing a referendum have repeatedly been considered higher than the costs of prolonging the occupation. A former head of MINURSO, Erik Jensen (2005), offers an interesting insider’s account in his book *“Western Sahara: Anatomy of a Stalemate”*, confirming that the diplomatic process was consistently undermined by the interests of powerful Council members, especially during the Cold War by the United States, who made sure that Morocco was never seriously pressured by the United Nations. His work provides an empirical validation from a practitioner’s perspective for the academic critiques of geopolitical interference.

Adding depth and perspective to this analysis, other scholars have explored the geopolitics behind the conflict. Yahia H. Zoubir (1990), for instance, enriches the discussion. In *“Western Sahara Conflict; Regional and International dimension”*, he actually re-frame the conflict within the broader and lasting tensions in the Maghreb region, arguing that any solution proposed by the United Nations is conditional on Morocco and Algeria. The crucial role of Algeria in the conflict is often overlooked by scholars, who prefer to frame the

conflict as between Morocco and the Polisario. However, while Morocco and its allies often frame the conflict as a proxy war with Algeria, Zunes and Mundy (2010) warn against overemphasizing this dimension, arguing that while Algeria's support for the Polisario Front is evident, it is not the motive behind the rise of Sahrawi nationalism in recent decades.

A significant body of scholarship identifies Sahrawi's natural wealth and potential oil reserves as a structural component of the Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara. To a great extent, this literature corpus is complementary, however, each scholar offers a different nuance and emphasizes different aspects of the resource dimension. In *"History of Western Sahara and Spanish colonisation"*, Munene (2010), provides an insightful historical analysis. She notes that when phosphate in Morocco/Western Sahara became commercially attractive, the Spanish late-colonial administration tightened. Her work informs my study by demonstrating that the material interest in the region is long-standing and did not start with Morocco's occupation (Munene, 2010).

Toby Shelley (2004) documents the role of resource exploitation, particularly phosphates and fisheries, arguing that the economic benefits for Morocco and its international corporate partners create a powerful bloc of interests that prevented Sahrawi independence. Complementing this, Smith (2015) explores the role of natural resources from the Spanish colonisation to the current Moroccan occupation, noting that the plunder of resources like phosphate rock and fish, has been constant since the occupation began, with revenues helping to subsidize the costs of annexation, thereby maintaining the status quo till today.

Haugen (2007), adds to this legal perspective, by analysing the resource dimension within the right to self-determination, and assessing the basis for preventing exploitation of Sahrawi natural resources, including the EU legal framework in his examination. His work provides additional legal insights and arguments against the resource plunder in Western Sahara, and emphasises the aspect of 'means of subsistence' for Sahrawi people, demonstrating the connection between Morocco's economic and political motivations in maintaining the territory annexed (Haugen, 2007). Both Haugen (2007) and Smith (2015) underline that the exploitation occurs in violation of international law, which establishes the right of non-self-governing peoples to sovereignty over their natural wealth.

More recently, Allan, Lemaadel, and Lakhal (2021) has highlighted the concept of "energopolitics," where energy infrastructure, including renewable energy projects, becomes

a tool for entrenching colonial power by creating material links between Morocco, the occupied territory, and international markets. Through a multimethod analysis, including ethnography and semi-structured interviews, they delve into the interrelationship between energy, citizenship and identity, explaining how Morocco, as a colonial and oppressive energoregime produces hostility among Sahrawi refugees and shape their everyday life under occupation (Allan et al., 2021).

These perspectives inform my thesis by providing a material basis for the depoliticization I trace: resource access and strategic alliances make conflict management, not resolution, the rational and preferred policy choice for key actors.

Security Council Institutional Dynamics

The geopolitical interests of powerful states are translated into policy through the UN Security Council's specific institutional practices. The literature in this stream moves beyond the formal veto to examine the informal procedures and working methods that create and perpetuate the stalemate. The UN's own guidance codifies this trajectory, presenting peacekeeping as a multi-dimensional tool for managing complex crises while acknowledging inherent limits (UNDPKO/DFS, 2008).

Institutional accounts show how the Council concentrates authority and shapes meaning. From a theoretical viewpoint, Barnett and Finnemore (1999, 2004) describe international organizations as bureaucracies with autonomous power. The authors argue that these "bureaucracies" can define and fix meanings within the organisation, and thus normalise procedural practices. In this way, their "rule-making" power can drift from the oversight of other member's control (Barnett & Finnemore, 1999; 2004).

Adding depth to this crucial theoretical study, Jane Boulden (2005) explores the principle of impartiality in UN operations, arguing that impartial conduct is conditioned by what missions are tasked and resourced to do. She explains that the Security Council plays a crucial role in the design of UN missions, which then channels their operativity towards monitoring, facilitation of a peace process, or towards a more coercive political intervention. Her work sheds light on how the Security Council's design of MINURSO, shaped by Moroccan strategic allies, made genuine impartiality in pursuing the referendum politically unachievable from the outset.

Ian Johnstone (2008) provides a theoretical framework for understanding this dynamic, arguing that the Security Council's authority rests not just on its formal powers but on its ability to control the deliberative process and frame the terms of debate. This control is exercised through informal mechanisms that are often ambiguous and exclusive. Teresa Whitfield (2007) offers a detailed examination of these mechanisms, explaining how these informal structures of powerful states operate as gatekeepers, shaping the UN process and effectively preventing broader, more critical debate among the full Council membership. Whitfield's analysis informs my thesis, by highlighting the informal institutional mechanism "behind the scenes", that might have facilitated the operational paralysis of the UN mission on the ground.

Depoliticisation and the Humanitarian Turn

The final stream of literature examines the implication of these geopolitical and institutional dynamics on the ground, focusing on MINURSO's mandate evolution and the broader shift from a political resolution process to a kind of system of 'humanitarian conflict management'. MINURSO is widely cited as a case study of a failed peace process, where its primary function has devolved from referendum facilitation to ceasefire monitoring, thereby normalizing the unresolved status of the territory (Mundy, 2006; Theofilopoulou, 2006).

Scholars like James Ferguson (1994) have provided a theoretical framework to describe how international institutions can function as an "anti-politics machine," reframing deeply political problems of power and resource distribution as neutral, technical issues that can be solved by expert planning and management. It should be noted that his work focus on development organisations and their effect in Lesotho. However, the concept of "anti-politics machine" resonates with the decolonisation case in Western Sahara, where the technocratic approach of the UN, might have contributed to obscure the core political aspect of the conflict. This "humanitarian turn" has profound consequences. Vivian Solana (2024) describes the resulting condition as an *"imperial meantime"*, an indefinite liminality of *"no war and no peace"* where humanitarianism exercises a form of *"invisible violence"* that defers a political solution indefinitely (Solana, 2024, p. 502). Various scholars have similarly characterized the Sahrawi conflict as "frozen" and "forgotten", a state of protracted political deadlock where active warfare has ceased but no sustainable peace has been achieved (Chávez Fregoso & Zivković, 2012, p. 140; Zoubir, 2010, p. 2).

Other studies have analysed the management of refugee camps in Algeria, characterized by total dependency on aid. Their work highlights how this 'humanitarian governance' has become a central feature of conflict management. **(Dukic & Thierry, 1998, p. 18).** **David Chandler (2006)** extends this critique to post-conflict interventions, arguing that they often embody a form of technocratic governance that seeks to manage populations and their problems rather than facilitating political solutions. International interventions can trap conflicts in a state of perpetual management, through the transformation of political goals into technical objectives. This theoretical perspective helps illuminate the UN's "humanitarian turn" in Western Sahara, central focal point in the third analytical chapter.

Providing a crucial ground-level perspective, the anthropological work of Alice Wilson (2016) explores the social and political effects of this protracted deferral on Sahrawi society in the refugee camps. Her ethnography reveals how decades of dependency on humanitarian aid have reshaped social structures, political aspirations, and the very identity of Sahrawi refugees. Her work demonstrates the human consequences of the UN's political failure. Similarly, Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2014) provides a broader theoretical framework for understanding protracted refugee situations, arguing that humanitarian governance can implicitly depoliticize refugee populations and contain their political claims. This shift raises critical questions about whether focusing on the humanitarian consequences of the conflict, such as the plight of over 173,000 refugees in the Algerian desert (Besenyő, 2010, p. 67; Solana, 2024, p. 502), inadvertently depoliticizes the core political issue of self-determination, making the status quo more durable. As Allan stresses, this prolonged and indefinite state of impasse and limbo has consequences. In her work, she explores how the political stalemate has actually fuelled new forms of resistance within Sahrawis in the occupied Territories, often centered on the very issue of illegal resource exploitation by Morocco and its allies (Allan, 2016, p. 645).

The existing literature offers crucial insights into the various factors that have shaped the UN's engagement in Western Sahara. Scholars have independently examined the geopolitical interests of powerful states, the institutional dynamics of the Security Council, the specific evolution of MINURSO's mandate, and the discursive shifts in how the conflict is framed. However, these analyses often focus on one dimension of the problem. A clear gap remains in providing a comprehensive, integrated analysis that systematically connects these different elements over time. What is less understood is how material interests, institutional

gatekeeping practices, and evolving discursive frames have interacted to produce a specific mode of governance that has transformed a decolonization issue into one of perpetual conflict management.

Research Question

This thesis seeks to address this gap by tracing these connections and analyzing their cumulative effect they had on the pursuit of Sahrawi self-determination, guided by the central research question:

How has the United Nations' governance of Western Sahara evolved from its initial involvement in 1975 to the present, and what consequences did this shift have for the pursuit of Sahrawi self-determination?

To answer this overarching question, the thesis will proceed in three stages, each addressing a specific gap identified in the literature. First, while scholarship consistently points to the influence of France, the United States, and few consider Algeria, in this study, I provide an institutional and economic analysis in order to connect strategic and material interests of key stakeholders to Security Council internal dynamics concerning drafting and agenda setting. Therefore, the first research sub-question asks:

Why and how did France and the United States shape Security Council decisions on Western Sahara?

Second, the literature lacks a systematic, longitudinal analysis of this evolution since the first engagement of the General Assembly in 1972 to the present. To fill this gap, the second sub-question is:

How did UN discourse on Western Sahara develop from 1972 to recent years?

Finally, the literature describes the evolution of MINURSO and the "humanitarian turn," but a crucial link is missing that connects these changes on the ground to the broader discursive and political shifts. Consequently, the third sub-question investigates:

How did UN practice translate that discourse into the management of the conflict?

Theoretical Framework

Geopolitics of Resource Wars and Transnational Capitalism

This thesis employs Le Billon's reconceptualization of '*resource war*' and the theoretical concept of '*contraband capitalism*'. Citing Klare (2001), Le Billon introduces resource wars as "armed conflicts revolving *to a significant degree, over the pursuit or possession of critical materials*", and argues that the importance of resources in war is "*largely rooted in the political and economic vulnerabilities of resource-dependent states*" (Le Billon, 2005, p. 1). These definitions help us ask how and by whom resource access in Western Sahara becomes contested. They also direct the analysis to examine the role of industrialized countries in resource wars. In fact, as Le Billon argues, great powers employ different strategies "*including military deployment, diplomatic support, or proxy wars (...) to maintain allied regimes in producing countries, as well as support to transnational corporations and favourable international trade agreements*" (Le Billon, 2005, p. 3).

In parallel, Le Billon (2004) develops the concept of '*contraband capitalism*', the phenomenon that sees commercial operators, such as entrepreneurs, brokers or transnational corporations, to engage in "wild zones of the world". He argues that these countries in conflict "*constitute a valuable 'niche market' for businesses whose competitive advantage lies in their risk-taking mentality*" (Le Billon, 2005, pp. 13-14). These ideas orient our reading of corporate behaviour, international trade, and licensing practices in legally grey environments, like Western Sahara. Taken together, the resource war lens focuses attention on how resource revenues may influence the United Nations decision-making, while contraband capitalism focuses on the role of transnational corporations' in resource conflicts. In the analysis, we will use these concepts to identify patterns in the organisation of extraction, financing, and trade, and to map how state actors and transnational companies interact around resource access. (Le Billon, 2005, pp. 13-14).

To connect these economic dynamics to institutional power, this thesis also draws on Chimni's argument that a new world order of international institutions has been "*established or repositioned, at the initiative of the first world*". In this sense, the modern network of international bodies, constituted by the United Nations, Bretton Woods institutions, WTO, IMF, WB, etc., functions as a kind of global "imperial" state that advances the interests of

powerful states and transnational capital at the expense of the Global South (Chimni, 2004, pp. 1-2). Specifically, he notes that *“the United Nations (UN) has embraced the neo-liberal agenda”* and is being reconfigured to serve transnational capitalist interests, for example by expanding the role of private corporations within UN bodies, which *“help actualize and legitimize”* neoliberalism as the dominant worldview (Chimni, 2004, pp. 2, 4). This thesis reflects Chimni’s understanding of the critical role that transnational capitalists play in international institutions today. Consequently, this theoretical framework goes beyond the neo-realist idea that international institutions are merely *“reflections (...) of state power and interests”*, and the neo-liberal idea that global governance *“have an independent role in resolving collective (...) problems”*. Instead, it recognises the crucial role and influence of certain social classes, in this case transnational corporations, in shaping the political outcomes of global institutions (Chimni, 2004, pp. 4-5).

From this point of view, the UN’s dealings with Western Sahara cannot be separated from wider geopolitics. Powerful UN members and corporate interests may prefer a status quo that allows resource extraction and political stability, rather than enforcing the right to self-determination for the Sahrawi people. These geo-political and economic factors raise a further question: through what institutional forms and routines the United Nations handle conflicts? In the following section, Depoliticisation theory provides the theoretical foundation of this thesis to examine how decision-making arenas are structured in the United Nations.

Global Governance and Depoliticisation Theory

In this thesis, I draw on Flinders & Buller (2006) and Stone’s (2017) depoliticisation framework to examine how the UN engaged with the conflict in Western Sahara throughout the years. According to Flinders & Buller (2006), depoliticisation can be defined as *“the range of tools, mechanisms and institutions through which politicians can attempt to move to an indirect governing relationship and/or seek to persuade (the public) that they can no longer be (...) held responsible for a certain issue, policy field or specific decision”* (Flinders & Buller, 2006, pp. 295-296). As argued by Stone (2017), the depoliticisation of global governance is an *“inevitable process”* to solve complex transnational policy issues, and it can be *“both an un-directed trend and a deliberate tactic”*, involving a broad range of actors including states, international and civil society organizations (Stone, 2017, p. 4, 6). It is worth noting that the term depoliticisation can be misleading, because *“in reality the politics*

remain". Following Flinders and Buller (2006) understanding, this thesis frames depoliticisation as a process through which the arena where decisions are taken is altered, which can be described more accurately as "*arena-shifting*". Therefore, the concept of depoliticisation, here, does not render the issues under analysis as "*less political*"; instead frames the concept as a process that "*employs a very narrow interpretation of the political*" (Flinders & Buller, 2006, p. 296). In other words, depoliticization is about transforming inherently political questions into supposedly neutral, administrative ones.

Flinders and Buller (2006) identify depoliticization at three levels: '*Principle*': the idea that removing politics from an issue is an appropriate one; '*Tactics*': the strategies used to achieve it; and '*Tools*': the forms used to support the principle of depoliticisation and its tactics (Flinders & Buller, 2006, p. 298). Integrating Flinders & Buller (2006) and Stone (2017), four tactics of depoliticisation are employed by the '*politics*':

Institutional depoliticisation: "*the decision to transfer powers and responsibilities to (...) new institutions (that) 'depoliticise' decision-making and place certain issues beyond the conventional political arena*". As outlined by the authors, this tactic is established through a principal-agent mechanism: politicians (principle), in my case the United Nations Security Council, "sets broad policy parameters" while an appointed administrator (agent) enjoys "*day-to-day managerial and specialist freedom*". Therefore, this mechanism is designed to release the appointed agent from political contestation and pressure which politicians are usually subject to (Flinders & Buller, 2006, pp. 298-300). According to Stone (2017), these policy-making structures are innovations of indirect governance that offer some operations flexibility to decision makers (Stone, 2017, p. 2).

Rule-based depoliticisation: involves "*the adoption of a policy that builds explicit rules into the decision-making process that constrain the need for political discretion*". Once set up, these policies can be reduced to administrative and technical tasks of monitoring with no need for political negotiation (Flinders & Buller, 2006, pp. 303-304). Stone (2017), adds on this definition, by specifying that in the case of global governance, rule-based tactics involve more "soft law", namely they set standards, benchmarks, 'best practices' and other types of targets. (Stone, 2017, p. 2).

Preference-shaping (and Agenda-setting) depoliticisation: these tactics shape the narrative "*through recourse to ideological, discursive or rhetorical claims in order to justify a political*

position that a certain issue (...) does lie beyond the scope of politics". In simple terms, "preference shaping (...) tactics involve the creation of a new reality". This new reality is what Douglas (1999) defines as "dominant rationality", in which "certain factors, options or possibilities can be systematically deleted from the public discourse and normative judgements presented as neutral rationality" (Flinders & Buller, 2006, pp. 307-308). According to Flinders and Buller (2006), these tactics create an 'ideological atmosphere', what they call an 'athmythsphere' that disseminates extremely powerful and influential beliefs, "even though the empirical evidence on which they are based is debated" (Flinders & Buller, 2006, p. 308). Diane Stone extends these ideas to global governance, by showing how transnational politics establish a 'dominant rationality', setting political agendas and disseminating a "certain way of seeing and defining problems" (Stone, 2017, p. 3).

Scientisation: In this case, policy-makers rely on *"regular input and monitoring by highly trained professionals and scientific advisors"*. Therefore, the reliance on experts develops a technocratic governance, resulting in the *"fragmentation of policy responsibilities among (...) global actors and institutions"*, since the accountability and transparency in the governance are split (Stone, 2017, p. 3). Moreover, Stone (2017) adds that expertise is not neutral and, in practice, it is not simply reduced to monitoring and mapping problems. Instead, scientisation may contribute to the shaping of the *"dominant rationality"*, legitimizing practices and translating them into routines. (Stone, 2017, p. 8).

Each of these concepts is used as a theoretical lens. Institutional and rule-based tactics will be applied to the UN's structures and mandates, with the principal-agent mechanism showing how the Security Council delegates authority to formal and informal bodies. Stone's agenda-setting, scientisation highlights how technical expertise drives UN peacekeeping missions. Preference-shaping and the concept of 'athmythsphere' will integrate the discourse analysis, revealing how resolutions or reports shape the narrative around Western Sahara. Alongside institutions, I will also employ a discursive lens to study how UN official documents define problems, causes, and solutions over time. Entman's Framing theory guides the UN discourse analysis by providing the tools to map patterns and/or shifts in the vocabulary of the United Nations. Preference-shaping and the concept of 'athmythsphere' will integrate this analysis, revealing how resolutions or reports shape the narrative around Western Sahara. Each concept thus illuminates a different depoliticising logic and will be used to dissect United Nations internal structures, discourse and practices.

Framing Theory

Entman's framing theory (1993) guides the UN discourse analysis by providing the tools to map patterns and/or shifts in the UN vocabulary, and the implications in the organization's practices. Entman (1993) defines framing as a process in which some aspects of reality are highlighted to promote particular:

- *Problem definitions: What the problem is?*
- *Causal interpretations: What is the cause?*
- *Moral evaluations: What is the moral judgement of the problem?*
- *and/or Solutions: What is the remedy?* (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

In Entman's words, "*to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text*" (Entman, 1993, p. 52) in order to promote a specific interpretation. Frames diagnose problems and assign causes (who is responsible?), make moral judgments, and suggest remedies. For example, Entman describes the "Cold War frame" which portrayed 'civil wars' as problems, identified the cause as 'communism', provided moral judgements: "atheistic aggression", and offered the solution: "U.S. support for the other side". Crucially, by making certain facts or words prominent while downplaying others, framing shapes how audiences understand an issue. The example of the U.S. Cold War framing suggests that the frame "*determines whether most people notice and how they understand and remember a problem, as well as how they evaluate and choose to act upon it*", implying that frames have a huge effect on the receiving audience" (Entman, 1993, pp. 52-54). Entman (1993) characterizes the framing process in four levels: *Communicator*: who frames the problem, explains the cause, makes the moral judgment, and provides a solution; *Text*: where the frame is contained, including the presence or absence of specific key words, source of information, that reinforces the framing; *Culture*: the set of common frames promoted in the discourse and thinking of the communicator; and *Receiver*: the audience that is guided and influenced by the framing (Entman, 1993, pp. 52-53).

According to Entman (1993), framing is a process that works through "selection and salience". The "salience" is the "*making of a piece of information more noticeable (and) meaningful (...) to audiences*". This can be done by placing the saliences in a specific location, by repeating that piece of information, or by sidelining and/or omitting it (Entman, 1993, pp. 52-53). As a matter of fact, frames can be defined "*by what they omit as well as*

include”, therefore the silences are critical aspects of the framing process such as the inclusions influencing the receivers (Entman, 1993, p. 54).

Applying framing theory to Western Sahara means examining *how* the conflict has been presented by the United Nations’ different bodies. The UN’s language itself can be a kind of framing. Entman’s theory alerts us that how the UN *talks* about Western Sahara will shape what is seen as acceptable. In this thesis, framing theory helps us analyze how the UN’s discourse has developed since the Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara.

Humanitarian Governance and Moral Economy

To link these political–economic lenses to the language and practices of global governance, this thesis also draws on Didier Fassin’s notion of humanitarian government and his related idea of a moral economy. Fassin defines humanitarian government as “*the deployment of moral sentiments in contemporary politics*”, a mode of rule that exceeds the state and includes “*international bodies and political institutions*” (Fassin, 2012, pp. 1–2). He adds that humanitarianism “*has become a language that inextricably links values and affects, and serves both to define and to justify discourses and practices of the government of human beings*” (Fassin, 2012, p. 2). This vocabulary is relevant to Western Sahara because, today, much of the UN’s daily work and communication around Sahrawi people is framed in terms of alleviating suffering and protecting vulnerable populations. In the analysis, I will therefore use Fassin to examine how this compassion-based reasoning shapes what becomes governable and speakable in UN forums.

Fassin also argues that a “*new moral economy, centered on humanitarian reason*” has emerged “*in which particular attention is focused on suffering and misfortune*” (Fassin, 2012, p. 7). I use moral economy in his precise sense: “*the production, dissemination, circulation and use of emotions and values, norms and obligations in the social space*” (Fassin, 2012, p. 266), to guide how I read UN texts, mandates, and practices: which emotions and obligations are foregrounded, what kinds of beneficiaries are constructed, and how these elements interact with the resource-political dynamics described by Le Billon and the institutional power relations analyzed by Chimni. This provides a conceptual link from material interests to institutional agendas and discourses, and then to my depoliticisation and framing lenses.

Analytical application of the theoretical framework

This thesis operationalizes an integrated framework that links resource political economy (Le Billon, 2005), critical institutional analysis (Chimni, 2004), depoliticisation (Flinders & Buller; Stone, 2006), and discourse lenses (Entman, 1993; Fassin, 2012). Le Billon is used to map material stakes of France and the United States in Western Sahara and to code state and corporate strategies around access of critical natural resources; Chimni's theory is employed to examine how a transnational capitalist class may interact with and shape international institutions, such as the UN, but in particular the decision making process within the Security Council. Flinders & Buller and Stone guide the whole analysis, and their contribution help to dissect how major aspect in the Western Sahara "peace" process" were handled inside the UN through delegation, rules, agenda-setting, and scientisation; Entman, instead, provides a coding scheme for UN texts (problem, cause, moral judgment, remedy), enabling my study to compare the frame across different historical moments of the failed diplomacy. Last but not least, I utilise Fassin to focus attention on how humanitarian reason and moral economy define what becomes governable. These tools are applied across the same bodies of evidence: Security Council and General Assembly documents, Secretary-General reports, MINURSO materials, legal opinions, NGOs reports, corporate filings, trade data, and interviews, in a linked way: (1) I map material incentives and actors; (2) I trace institutional pathways and procedures; (3) I read the language that frames choices; (4) and then assess how humanitarian vocabularies channel attention and action on MINURSO's mandate. Used together, they allow a coherent, multi-level reading of the UN's management in Western Sahara for the last 50 years.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative, interpretive, and document-based design. The methodology is rooted in a combination of qualitative document analysis (QDA) (Bowen, 2009), and critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 2003). Bowen's QDA serves as the general method throughout the whole analysis. (Bowen, 2009). I applied Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 2003), in the second analytical chapter, integrated with Entman's framing process as a coding device (Entman, 1993). One may ask: *Why a specific*

method in Chapter 2? First, given the relevance of the second analytical chapter within the whole study, I opted for a separate approach in order to deepen the inquiry and gain a critical understanding of how the discourse on Western Sahara developed over time. Second, since the chapter in question focuses on language and power, the combination of critical discourse analysis with Entman's four framing codes, provided me with a powerful tool to dissect the intersection between vocabulary and institutional implications.

Document Analysis

Qualitative Document Analysis (QDA) is defined as a *"systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents"* (Bowen, 2009, p. 27). This analytical approach consists of: *"finding, selecting, (...), making sense of, and synthesizing data contained in documents"* (Bowen, 2009, pp. 27-28). According to Bowen *"documents can serve a variety of purposes"*: they can provide data on the context, background information and historical insights (Bowen, 2009, pp. 29-30). Moreover, *"documents of all types can help the researcher uncover meaning, develop understanding, and discover insights relevant to the research problem"*.

In this sense, document analysis was an intuitive choice, considering that written documents are my main source of data. Additionally, QDA qualifies as a relevant method to analyse the 53 years development of UN governance in Western Sahara (1972-2025), as the selected documents *"cover a long span of time, many events, and many settings"*. Due to the extension of my data corpus, I deployed QDA also because *"less time-consuming and therefore more efficient than other research methods"* (Bowen, 2009, pp. 31-32).

According to Bowen (2009), QDA involves three steps: *'skimming'*, *'reading'*, and *'interpretation'* (Bowen, 2009, p. 32). Following this process, I applied content analysis to examine the data in question. In line with Bowen's suggestion to exclude an organisation of information into categories, I employed this content analysis as a *"first-pass document review, in which meaningful and relevant passages of text or other data are identified"*. In other words, I essentially identified relevant information and separated them from the non-relevant (Bowen, 2009, p. 32). Nevertheless, as Bowen warns *"document analysis is not always advantageous"*. Some of its limitations include: *"insufficient details to answer the research question"* and *"biased selectivity"*. In view of these limitations, critical discourse analysis was adopted in combination *"as a means of triangulation"* (Bowen, 2009, p. 28).

This strengthened the credibility of the study, by deepening the discursive analysis of the data.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Fairclough defines discourse as *“language as a form of social practice”* (Fairclough, 1989, p. 22). Any instance of discourse is seen simultaneously as a piece of text, a discursive practice, ‘how it is produced and interpreted’, and a social practice, referring to the wider social and political context (Fairclough, 1992, pp. 3-4). Another important focus of Fairclough is about discursive historical change: *“how different discourses combine under particular social conditions to produce a new, complex discourse”* (Fairclough, 1992, pp. 3-4). Following his approach in this thesis I refer to “text” or “language”, as dimension of discourse: namely the *“written or spoken ‘product’ of the process of text production”* (Fairclough, 1992, pp. 3-4). It’s worth clarifying that the term *“discourse”* in my study aligns with its wide use in social theory and analysis, to refer to different ways of structuring areas of knowledge and social practice (Fairclough, 1992, pp. 3-4). Regarding the relations between language and power, he argues that in modern society *“language has become perhaps the primary medium of social control and power”* and *“ideology is the prime means of manufacturing consent”* (Fairclough, 1989, pp. 3-4). He also adds that *“certain (...) discourses embody ideologies which legitimize, more and less directly, existing social relations, and which are so salient in modern society that they have ‘colonized’ many institutional orders of discourse”* (Fairclough, 1989, p. 38).

With respect to the actual implementation, Fairclough developed CDA in a three stage process: “description”, “interpretation”, and “explanation”, specifying that the three-step procedure should not be treated as a fixed model, but rather considered as an analytical guide (Fairclough, 1989, p. 110).

- *Description*: focuses on the formal properties of the text.
- *Interpretation*: sees the text as *“the product of a process of production, and as a resource in the process of interpretation”*.
- *Explanation*: considers *“the relationship between interaction and social context”* (Fairclough, 1989, p. 26).

To keep the CDA's stages of interpretation and explanation explicit and comparable over time, I integrated Entman's framing functions as a coding device tagging in each UN document four items: problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and proposed remedy (Entman, 1993, pp. 52–54). In other words, CDA provides the analytical guide to study how language works in institutional contexts, while Entman's framing functions are applied as analytical tools that provide the categories (problems, causes, values, solution) to code how UN texts framed the conflict of Western Sahara among different UN bodies and across different periods.

Data Collection Methods

Primary Data

As mentioned before, the second analytical chapter's data corpus was examined more in depth to capture the development of the UN discourse over time. The corpus of the second chapter consists of official UN texts and closely related institutional materials relevant to Western Sahara across five decades (1972-2025).

- UN Security Council (UNSC) resolutions and reports central to Western Sahara and MINURSO mission (1988-2024);
- UN Secretary-General (UNSG) reports on MINURSO (1991–2024) to shed light on the situation on the ground in Western Sahara across different periods.
- UN General Assembly (UNGA) resolutions and Fourth Committee debates on decolonization (1960-1993) to capture the evolution of the self-determination discourse.

In relation to the data collection process, three criteria were followed: I selected documents issued by UN bodies and officials; directly relevant to Western Sahara; and significant in the study timeline (1975-2025). For example, early General Assembly resolutions on decolonization, the establishment of MINURSO, and key peace process milestones. Security Council resolutions that renew the MINURSO mandate or reaffirm commitment to a referendum, General Assembly resolutions on self-determination, and the corresponding Secretary-General reports. In addition, I included public statements from UN officials to provide insider and insightful perspectives. The final sample size comprises a representative

set of texts sufficient to trace discursive patterns since the initial involvement of the UN in Western Sahara.

Secondary Data

Throughout the study, I adopted Bowen's document analysis (2009) to examine contextual and background data, in order to gain a nuanced understanding of the power dynamics within and behind the organization. In line with the selection criteria for the primary data, I prioritized documents that "*provide a means of tracking change and development*" to "*compare them to identify changes*". Using QDA, I was able to reconstruct the development of UN policies and institutions by assembling background insights. Moreover, I selected documents "*to verify findings or corroborate evidence from other sources*". When the documentary evidence was contradictory, I investigated more on the specific issue, and included other documents to enhance my understanding of the specific issue (Bowen, 2009, p. 30).

I treated NGOs, think-tank, and corporate reports; government white papers, press releases, policy notes and declassified intelligence records; EU court judgments and other legal files; MINURSO mission webpage; as documents to be "reviewed or evaluated" through a "systematic procedure" (Bowen, 2009, p. 27). These documents provided "background and context", the critical groundwork for the discourse analysis in the main analytical chapter (Bowen, 2009, pp. 29–30).

Analytical Strategy

For this study, I adopted an abductive strategy, meaning that I moved back and forth between documents and theoretical concepts to provide the most plausible interpretation of the patterns I observed. According to Reichertz (2010), an abductive analysis is "*a means of inferencing (...) [that] helps researchers make new discoveries in a logically and methodologically ordered way*" (Reichertz, 2010, p. 3).

In the main analytical chapter, I opted for a simplified version of Fairclough's CDA. The analysis occurred on two interrelated levels: micro and macro level, supplemented by Entman's framing categories.

At the micro level, I closely examined the language of the texts and the vocabulary choices. Fairclough describes text analysis as including both grammar and semantics (Fairclough, 2003, p. 36), but also what he terms “*interdiscursive analysis*”, that is seeing texts “*in terms of the different discourses, genres and styles they draw upon and articulate together*” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 3, 17). I applied this guidance to identify which established discourses and genres were invoked, noting whether a resolution’s language adopted a legal/institutional tone or a technocratic/humanitarian tone, and how that discourse positioned them in terms of priority and relevance. Fairclough identifies three major types of meaning in texts: genres (ways of acting), discourses (ways of representing), and styles (ways of being) (Fairclough, 2003, p. 17). I operationalized these categories by asking: *What “genre” of UN communication is this?* (e.g. resolution, mandate report, press statement); *How is the conflict framed?* (e.g. occupation, dispute, humanitarian crisis); *Which kind of tone was employed?* (e.g. neutral, technical, compassionate etc.).

At the macro level, I related the UN discourse to the broader political context. In practice, I asked myself: *How does the discourse align with UN norms?* (e.g. principles of decolonization, impartiality); *How does the discourse reflect depoliticisation?* (e.g. delegation of authority, technocratic frame); *How does the discourse mirror patterns of power* (e.g. influence of France and the United States). How are Morocco and Polisario portrayed? *Does the language obscure political conflict by framing issues as technical, administrative, or humanitarian?* Consequently, I interpreted how these discursive features may have contributed to sustaining or challenging Morocco's occupation of Western Sahara.

Along this process, I explicitly applied Entman’s framing functions to each text. In concrete, I coded segments of text that:

- Define the problem: *How the situation is characterised?*,
- Diagnose the cause: *Who or What is blamed for the problem?*
- Make a moral evaluation: *How the situation is valued and/or judged?*
- Suggest a remedy: *What solutions or actions are recommended?*

This framing analysis was integrated with the CDA’s micro and macro level analysis above. Essentially, after the initial text-level coding, I systematically scanned for frame elements to trace how UN discourse constructed narratives about the conflict in different time stages. In this way, Fairclough’s CDA revised model provided the overall guide to investigate UN’s

language shifts, while Entman's framing categories served as a focused analytical lens to expose depoliticisation patterns.

For the secondary data, I employed Bowen's version of content analysis, which provided my study with the "overall picture of the material being reviewed" Specifically, I found, selected and made sense of the document in question to map the political and economic dynamics that affected the UN's handling of Western Sahara (Bowen, 2009, pp. 32-33).

Data Processing and Ethical Considerations

This study relies on three document-based methods, qualitative document analysis (QDA), critical discourse analysis (CDA), and framing analytical tools. That choice enabled me to bring strengths, including breadth and historical reach in the inquiry, but also clear risks. The over-reliance on institutional language was intentional, in order to gain depth in my longitudinal analysis, however it might not have considered other points of view. In this regard, the first and third analytical chapters are intended to fill this analytical gap. The former take in consideration the UN's governance "behind the scenes", by considering France and the US roles within the Security Council; the latter translate the discursive shifts presented in the main chapter "on the ground", by focusing on MINURSO's mandate and its narrowing over time.

My data sampling was purposive and therefore selective, however, to reduce bias I sought variation across the genres of the documents: resolutions, SG reports, NGOs reports, policy statements, and compared UN texts with NGO reports when it was relevant and when findings were in contrast. In order to strengthen the credibility of the study, I read, for instance, a SC resolution beside the SG report on the same episode, and used NGO material to test UN framings (Bowen 2009, 28; 31–32). In doing so, I avoided causal claims that the corpus cannot support and limit inferences to analytic generalization

Regarding the reliability of the study, I approached the analysis as an iterative cycle. I repeated readings multiple times to test the consistency of the emerging themes across different types of document, and when presenting themes and findings, I used several verbatim extracts to ensure transparency (Noble and Smith, 2015, 34–35). Given the fact that my analytical strategy is entirely based on documents, I looked for counter-cases and examples to make patterns emerge.

In relation to my position as researcher, I acknowledge that an analyst's perspective is never neutral. As Fairclough stresses, text analysis is interpretive and *there is "no such thing as an 'objective' analysis of a text"* if that means ignoring researcher's biases and subjectivity. (Fairclough 2003, 13–14). I therefore recognize that my critical and post-colonial perspective on the United Nations, especially the Security Council power dynamics shaped my focal point throughout data selection and the analysis.

Analysis

1. Material Interests in Western Sahara and the Making of United Nations Outcomes

This first analytical chapter investigates the key factors that may have determined the United Nations' governance of Western Sahara in recent years. The aim is to map motivations and mechanisms:

- *Why do France and the United States support Morocco's occupation of Western Sahara, despite its illegality and opposition to the principle of self-determination?*
- *How did the Security Council internal structure permit France and the United States to shape the political outcomes on Western Sahara?*

I employ three theoretical lenses. First, Le Billon's (2005) resource political economy helps trace how France and US corporations' stakes in Western Sahara structured the conflict. Second, Chimni's (2004) postcolonial and institutional critique situates those companies within a transnational capitalist class, clarifying how corporate–state coalitions shape international organizations. Third, Flinders and Buller's (2006) depoliticisation framework is used to examine which tactics were employed by the Security Council to concentrate agenda control and drafting in the hands of few permanent members.

'Contraband Capitalism' in Sahrawi Oil and Energy

The concept of '*contraband capitalism*' developed by Le Billon (2004) provides a relevant insight into the motives behind the intervention of major transnational corporations in "*wild zones*" of global trade (Le Billon, 2005, p. 13). He argues that "*countries in conflict (...) constitute a valuable 'niche market' for businesses whose competitive advantage lies in their risk-taking mentality*". Accordingly, Western Sahara is a pertinent case of "contraband

capitalism”, as a non-self-governing Territory under disputed sovereignty, that creates grey zones of legality and UN’s enforcement. In this context, Western companies leverage their legal and political exposure to secure advantage in accessing Sahrawi natural resources (Le Billon, 2005, p. 13). The following cases demonstrate how French and North American companies have exploited this ambiguity by entering into contractual agreements with Moroccan authorities despite explicit UN and EU legal warnings, effectively transforming Sahrawi political vulnerability into commercial opportunity.

In recent years, French and North American energy corporations have repeatedly sought economic opportunities in Western Sahara. In the early 2000s, the French oil company Total, alongside the U.S. oil company Kerr-McGee, obtained offshore exploration licenses in Western Saharan waters from Morocco’s then National Office for Petroleum Research and Exploitation (ONAREP), now known as Moroccan National Office of Hydrocarbons and Mines (ONHYM). (Western Sahara Resource Watch, 2013, p.3; UNSC, 2002, para. 2). Shortly after, the Security Council requested its Legal Counsel, the Under-Secretary General for Legal Affairs, Hans Correl, to evaluate the legality of these agreements. The UN Legal Counsel had issued a 2002 opinion warning that *“if further exploration and exploitation activities were to proceed in disregard of the interests and wishes of the people of Western Sahara, they would be in violation of the principles of international law applicable to mineral resource activities in Non-Self-Governing Territories.”* (UNSC, 2002, para. 25). Ultimately, after international criticism and pressure from solidarity activists, Total decided not to renew its license in 2004 because of lack of oil potential, according to the French company (WSRW, 2013, pp. 3, 8-11). Despite the evident risk of illegality, and even without a license, Total’s oil research in Western Sahara continued during the period 2004-2011 (WSRW, 2013, p. 11). A recent investigation by Western Sahara Resource Watch, revealed that Total paid for that license near 4 million U.S. dollars to the Moroccan Government (WSRW, 2019; Total S.A., 2016, p. 312). After years of sustained pressure from shareholders and civil society organizations, and two weeks after the EU-Moroccan trade agreement was annulled by the Court of Justice of the EU, Total decided to no longer pursue oil search in Western Sahara waters and not renew its contract in 2015 (Storebrand Livsforsikring AS, 2015, p.2; Total E&P Maroc, 2016, p. 1; WSRW, 2015, para. 3; Petitjean O., 2014, para. 3). However, the involvement of French companies in Sahrawi occupied territories continued. More recently, French consortium ENGIE-Nareva have invested in a wind farm of 50-megawatt around the city of Dakhla to desalinate seawater and produce electrical energy (Nareva, n.d.; CRI

Dakhla-Oued Eddahab, n.d.). In 2024, the French Economy Minister Bruno Le Maire explicitly confirmed France's willingness to co-finance the 3-gigawatt Dakhla-Casablanca interconnection project, effectively integrating energy generated in Western Sahara into Morocco's national infrastructure (WSRW, 2025). Such commitments imply that France is not only politically backing Morocco's claim within the Security Council but also materially investing in Western Sahara, as if it were an uncontested part of Morocco.

In the 2000s and 2010s, various North American oil companies hunted for new reserves, and Western Sahara's offshore waters were assessed to have oil and gas potential (Kosmos Energy Ltd., 2015, pp. 19, 32, WSRW, 2015). As mentioned before, Kerr-McGee, a U.S. energy firm, signed an exploration contract with Morocco in 2001 to survey offshore blocks (WSRW, 2013, p. 3; UNSC, 2002, para. 2), which led Sahrawi solidarity movements to organize political campaigns to target the company. Under sustained grassroots and shareholder pressure, several European ethical funds divested from Kerr-McGee, resulting in the company abandoning its license in 2006. (Council on Ethics, 2005, pp. 5-9; Ministry of Finance of Norway, 2006, sec. 3). However, the potential of oil and gas reserves in Western Sahara led other companies to try again. In 2013, Kosmos Energy, a Texas-based oil company, partnered with Morocco's state oil agency (ONHYM) to drill an exploratory well offshore Western Sahara, in the "Cap Boujdour" block (Kosmos Energy Ltd., 2015, pp. 19, 32). Kosmos publicly argued that it was not breaching international law, effectively taking Morocco's position that Western Sahara was *de facto* Moroccan. The company then pointed to supposed local consultations that Morocco carried out as evidence of Sahrawi benefit (Kosmos Energy Ltd., 2014, pp. 26-29). The UN Legal Counsel, Hans Corell, later criticized Kosmos and Glencore, another U.S. oil company, for interpreting his opinion too loosely, arguing that Morocco's oil contracts, in addition to breaching the UN 2002 opinion, were also violating the Corporate Social Responsibility (Corell H., 2015; UNSC, 2002, paras. 24-26; WSRW 2015), the management mechanism that makes businesses accountable for social and environmental concerns (UN Industrial Development Organization, n.d.). As the interest in the natural resources of Western Sahara was increasing, the UN, through then-UN envoy Christopher Ross, expressly urged companies "*to recognize the principle that interests of the inhabitants of these territories are paramount*" (UNSG, 2014, para. 97).

In these cases, French and North American companies involved in the Sahrawi resource exploitation, acted as '*contraband actors*', suggesting that their interest might be based on

“the possibility of a competitive advantage” (Le Billon, 2005, p. 13), given the political vulnerability of Sahrawi people. By keeping investing and seeking economic opportunities, despite UN legal warnings, the involvement of French and U.S. companies in Western Sahara leveraged Morocco’s administrative control of a legally contested territory. This pattern reflects the logic that Le Billon describes: transnational corporations exploit grey zones of sovereignty and regulation to externalize legal risk while internalizing revenues (Le Billon, 2005, pp. 13-15), thereby perpetuating the occupation of Western Sahara.

When Natural Resources Shape Diplomacy

Over the recent years, France and the United States directly benefited from Morocco’s occupation of Western Sahara, creating incentives to preserve the status quo and support Morocco’s Autonomy Plan. According to Le Billon (2005), the Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara represents a “resource war”: a conflict that revolves *“to a significant degree, over the pursuit or possession of critical materials”*. He argues these wars are *“rooted in political and economic vulnerabilities of resource dependent states”* (Le Billon, 2005, p. 1). The Western Sahara case conforms to Le Billon's conceptualisation, whereby the access to its natural wealth fuels Morocco's occupation and resource dependency.

Another critical example is fishing. French and other EU fishing fleets gained valuable access to the rich waters off Western Sahara through EU–Morocco trade agreements that treated the Moroccan fishing zone as waters under Morocco’s jurisdiction, without obtaining the consent of the Sahrawi people (EU Council, 2006, Annex, Art. 2(a)). This arrangement persisted until it was struck down by the Court of Justice of the EU (CJEU) in 2016, in 2018 and again by the General Court of the EU (GCEU) in 2021, by affirming that Morocco has no sovereignty over Western Sahara and that any inclusion of the territory in deals required the consent of the people of Western Sahara, which had not been obtained. (EU Court of Justice (CJEU), 2016; CJEU, 2018; General Court of the EU (GCEU), 2021a). Therefore, France was predisposed to defend the “Moroccan” status of those waters in international forums (GCEU, 2021b, para. 236). When legal challenges emerged and the 2016 CJEU ruling nullified the Western Sahara application of EU agreements (CJEU, 2016, paras. 88–93), the EU Council sought workarounds, negotiating new agreements in 2019 that re-extended fisheries access to Western Sahara with slightly revised legal formulas (EU Council, 2019a, paras. 4–10; EU Council, 2019b, paras. 3–4, 8, 11–12). France backed these workarounds, intervening in court in support of the EU Council’s approach (GCEU, 2021a, paras. 78, 97). However, these

revised agreements were also invalidated by the GCEU in 2021 for the same lack of Sahrawi consent (GCEU, 2021a, paras. 311–326, 336–340, 365–366; GCEU, 2021b, paras. 72–81, 345–346). The persistence of France in backing such deals, even at the expense of international law, underscores how corporate-economic interests converged with diplomatic support for Morocco’s position.

Likewise, natural resource interests reinforced the U.S. pro-Morocco orientation. The main interest is phosphates, and Morocco controls around three quarters of the phosphate reserves globally. Western Sahara, including its large Bou Craa mine, managed by Phosboucraa, a Moroccan state-owned subsidiary, accounts for around 10% of Morocco’s total rock export (Taib, 2025, pp. 60.4-60.6; WSRW, 2023; Brownlie et al, 2022, pp. 20-22). Phosphate rock is critical for fertilizer production globally, and Naïli (2022) documents how Bou Craa’s mine has long fed international fertilizer supply chains, especially the U.S. agribusiness. In her work, she exposes North-American companies among the largest buyers for many years, with PotashCorp (later Nutrien), and Mosaic appearing repeatedly in customer mappings of Bou Craa exports in the 2000s–early 2010s (Naïli, 2022, pp. 1208-1211). This trade continued despite the UN Legal Counsel’s 2002 opinion had clearly stated that extracting resources without local consent violates international law (UNSC, 2002, para. 25). It was only in the mid-2010s, under sustained pressure from Saharawi advocacy groups and ethical investment funds, that North American phosphate importers began to pull back (Naïli, 2022, p. 1211). In 2010, the US firm Mosaic announced it had stopped the imports from the territory “*because of widespread international concerns regarding the rights of the Sahrawi people in that region*” (WSRW, 2023, 2010). Nutrien ended its imports by 2018, after being responsible for purchasing 50% of the phosphate exported from Western Sahara (WSRW, 2023). This retreat of North American firms by 2018, described by Naïli (2022) as a major success for the Western Sahara, (Naïli, 2022, p. 1211), underscored that U.S. corporate complicity had been a pillar of Morocco’s ability to profit from the occupation. As a matter of fact, North American agribusiness purchases of Bou Craa phosphate rock provided Morocco with constant export revenues, thereby sustaining its economic hold over the occupied territory (Naïli, 2022, pp. 1208-1211; Taib, 2025, p. 60.5). Nevertheless, the U.S. political stance remained sympathetic to Morocco, and made no objection to U.S. firms’ involvement until civil society and shareholder pressure made it inescapable.

All these factors suggest that France and U.S. support of Morocco sovereignty over Western Sahara is anchored in a convergence of strategic alliance and economic self-interest. For both Council's permanent members, sustaining Morocco's hold on Western Sahara has meant preserving a friendly regime's stability, securing access to resources for North American and European markets, and maintaining influence in the Maghreb region. This aligns with B.S. Chimni's observation that international institutions, in my case the Security Council, often work to "*realize the interests of an emerging transnational capitalist class in the international system to the disadvantage of subaltern classes*" (Chimni, 2004, pp. 1–4, 21–22). Here, the "transnational capitalist class", consisting of North American and European corporations, profited from Sahrawi resources, while the subaltern, the Sahrawi people, were dispossessed illegally. In line with Chimni's critical framework, I argue that the Security Council represents a forum where material interests of powerful states may shape political outcomes, rather than a neutral forum (Chimni, 2004, pp. 1–4, 21–22).

The Security Council: Gatekeeping and Drafting Power

On this basis, this section asks whether informal mechanisms, such as the Penholding and the "Group of Friends" function as channels through which France and United States' material interests are normalized.

To answer this question, I apply Flinders & Buller's (2006) depoliticisation theory to the Council's internal structures that affect the agenda and the drafting of UN resolutions. I argue that the Security Council depoliticized the right of Sahrawi self-determination through two tactics: first, "institutionally", by distancing itself and delegating authority to informal bodies; second, through "agenda-setting": by establishing a "*dominant rationality and non-decision-making dynamics that systematically delete certain problems or issues from (...) debate and policy consideration*" (Stone, 2017, pp. 2-3; Flinders & Buller, 2006, pp. 298-300, 307-309).

Traditionally, the structural politics of the UN Security Council have allowed great powers to entrench their preferred outcomes through formal instruments like the "P5 veto power". However, in recent decades, the Council delegated the authority of setting the political agenda and drafting resolutions to informal mechanisms like the "Penholding" and the "Group of Friends". This is part of a broader structural tendency in which the power of the Council's permanent members is not solely rooted in their veto privilege, but also in their

capacity to shape agendas, dominate resolution drafting, and exercise informal influence (Gifkyns J., 2021, p. 17).

Group of Friends: Gatekeeping as Institutional Depoliticisation

Emerged in the post Cold War period, the *Group of Friends* is the unconventional forum of states that dominates the drafting of Security Council resolutions on specific issues (Deutch D. J., 2020, para. 1). Since the Groups are informal institutions, there are no formal criteria for the membership. From 2012, the Group of Friends of Western Sahara has consisted of five industrialised states: four permanent Council members, the United States, France, the United Kingdom, Russia, plus Spain as the former colonial power (Norwegian Support Committee for Western Sahara, 2018). A Council report in 2020 confirms that “*the draft text for MINURSO mandate renewals is first discussed among the Group of Friends*” (UNSC, 2020). However, it is curious to note that countries sympathetic to the Sahrawi cause, like Algeria and South Africa for instance, are absent, suggesting a policy process inclined towards Morocco’s Autonomy Plan. In this regard, the ‘Friends’ composition and gatekeeping effects have been questioned widely in recent years. The Norwegian Support Committee for Western Sahara (2018) reports that past attempts by elected Council members to broaden the Group’s membership and to include states advocating for Sahrawi self-determination, have been blocked by the existing members, who refuse to dilute their control (Norwegian Support Committee for Western Sahara, 2018).

Similarly, elected members of the Security Council have pointed to the structural bias within the Group of Friends of Western Sahara. In 2008, Costa Rica stressed “*the opposition (of the Group of Friends) to including a reference to the human rights component in the text of the draft resolution*”, and protested that “*just a week ago the Group of Friends provided us with the text*” on which the Council was about to vote (UNSC, 2008, pp. 2-3). In the same meeting, the Council President complained that once the Friends agreed a text, it was “*cast in stone*” and that the Council was being “*undermined by a group of like-minded countries and individuals who chose to determine the fate of the people of Western Sahara*” (UNSC, 2008, p. 4). In 2009, the then-Foreign Minister of Norway underscored how the Friends operate as an exclusive club that produces “*weak and unbalanced*” decisions, sidelining voices that might demand accountability from Morocco (Norwegian Support Committee for Western Sahara, 2018). Similarly, in 2016, New Zealand abstained on a renewal of MINURSO, criticizing “*the preparation of a text in a Group of Friends whose composition*

does not reflect the span of perspectives... and [an] unwillingness to accept modest amendments”, after a draft resolution ignored Morocco’s expulsion of UN personnel from the territory (New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2016, paras. 2–3). Whitfield (2025) finds the same pattern in territorial disputes, such as Georgia and Western Sahara, where the “Friends” *“maintained tight control of drafting processes”* but *“did not advance either conflict toward resolution”*; arguing that *“some members... especially France”* supported Moroccan positions and contributed to the stalemate of the political process (Whitfield, 2025, pp. 6-7).

In view of these perspectives, and in line with Stone (2017), the ‘Group of Friends’, mirrors an institutional tactic to depoliticise Western Sahara, where the drafting of influential and binding resolutions is concentrated in a small and informal circle. In particular, the political authority is delegated to a “network” outside the full Security Council, creating an indirect governing relationship that filters who participates and when (Stone, 2017, p. 2).

Penholding: Draft Control as Agenda-Setting Depoliticisation

Another feature closely intertwined with the ‘Group of Friends’, which reinforces the exclusive control over the UN’s agenda-setting, is the ‘penholder system’, whereby one Council member, often a permanent member, initiates and chairs the informal drafting process and typically prepares the first drafts of Council outcomes (Akasha M.O., 2024, pp. 3-5). Similarly to the ‘Friends’, penholding is not officially codified in the UN Charter and has become a standard practice in the Security Council over the past two decades. This informal mechanism has attracted considerable controversy for concentrating agenda-setting power in the hands of a few dominant states. A Security Council Report documents that by 2010 onward, *“with few exceptions, Council outcomes on specific conflict-related situations are drafted by one of the P3 (France, the UK and the US) as the self-appointed penholders”* (UNSC, 2018, p. 1). Nevertheless, according to the same Security Council *“the term “penholder” is misleading”* because *“the role of the penholder goes beyond the drafting of Council outcomes and includes, with rare exceptions, taking the initiative on all Council activities concerning that situation, such as holding emergency meetings, organising open debates, and leading visiting missions. The penholder also chairs negotiations over a draft and speaks first whenever the Council discusses the issue”* (UNSC, 2018, p. 2).

Penholding also shapes time. The same Council's report underlines that penholders tend to circulate the full draft *"quite late, usually close to the adoption date"*, leaving little time for negotiation (UNSC, 2018, p. 2). As the UN permanent representative of New Zealand, Ambassador van Bohemen warned: *"This precludes any real effort at building genuine consensus on the key policy questions to be considered. Non-penholders must choose between accepting a text largely as presented, or risk being accused of torpedoing important documents if they wish to make substantive policy proposals. Those practices are neither effective, sustainable nor respectful of the perspectives of other Council members"* (UNSC, 2018, p. 3). On the same line, the Indian Ambassador Hardeep Singh Puri stated: *"it is difficult to understand why pen holding should basically be a monopoly of permanent members, with concentration in even fewer fingers"* (UNSC, 2018, p. 2).

To recap, the Penholding delegates to one member the control over initial language, meeting frequency, and when drafts appear to the rest of the Council members. Institutionally, this represents the *'arm's-length mechanism'* described by Flinders and Burrell (2006): a principal, here the Council, lets an agent, the penholder, run the file, including negotiations and speaking order. The authors argue that this tactic is designed to release the agent from short-term political considerations and pressures to which the principal is usually subject (Flinders & Burrell, 2006, pp. 298-301). In this sense, the Penholding mechanism reduces the space for debate and negotiation, and consequently releases political pressure from the Security Council.

A special report of the Council in 2014 already recorded these concerns regarding internal transparency and participation, and noted the perception of a growing gap between the permanent and non-permanent members of the Security Council (UNSC, 2014, pp. 12-13). It is worth remarking that, recently, the Council has tried to codify more inclusive working methods, in particular with the 2017 compendium, the so-called "Note 507". This provision codified three guardrails in order to redistribute agenda-setting power between all Security Council members (UNSC, 2018, p. 3): First, 'universality': *"any member of the Security Council may be a penholder"*; second, 'co-penholder': *"more than one Council member may act as co-penholders, when it is deemed to add value"*; and third, 'minimum inclusivity': *"the drafting of all documents such as resolutions and presidential statements as well as press statements should be carried out in an inclusive manner that will allow participation of*

all members of the Council” and providing “*reasonably sufficient time for consideration*” of the draft (UNSC, 2017, paras. 79–82).

However, since the penholding mechanism had already congealed into informal “issue-ownership” by the P3 on most conflict-specific dossiers, the “Note 507” did not produce any effective change. As a matter of fact, SCR’s empirical mapping shows that the distribution of drafting power remained effectively unchanged “*with the P3 holding the pen on nearly all situation-specific issues*” (UNSC, 2018, p. 4). As Akasha (2024) observes, this pattern is visible across the Council’s agenda: the United States often takes the lead on issues related to Israel/Palestine, Non-Proliferation, North Korea, and Western Sahara; the United Kingdom historically focuses on Yemen, Sudan, generally conflicts in West Asia, and humanitarian issues, while France often leads on African issues, especially West and Central Africa, as well as issues involving other francophone countries like Lebanon. (Akasha, 2024, p. 5; UNSC, 2018, pp. 4–6). Akasha’s work (2024) also captures the power implications. By referring to the penholders, he argues that the first text “*generally reflects their preferred language and policy goals*” and thus, the discourse is anchored to penholder preferences. The result is an agenda-setting ownership by few powerful states, a concentration of power that enables the penholders to control the council’s agenda and produce decisions in their favor (Akasha, 2024, pp. 5-6).

In the case of Western Sahara, the United States serves as the penholder, managing the text of resolutions and when they are brought to a vote (UNSC, 2025). In this case, the effects of penholder dominance are evident in how negotiations and texts are handled: consultations on resolutions often occur within the tight circle of ‘the Group of Friends’, and only near-final drafts are presented to the wider Council, with minimal opportunity to reshape the texts and propose amendments (UNSC, 2020; UNSC 2024a, pp. 7-8). An illustrative example came in 2024 during negotiations for Resolution 2756 to renew MINURSO: Algeria stated in the Council that the U.S. had promised to include a more coercive language about Morocco-EU trade agreements in the draft of a resolution, yet the United States circulated the final draft without the agreed text, ignoring Algeria (UNSC, 2024b, Res. 2576; UNSC 2024a, PP. 7-8). This incident, noted in a Council’s meeting record, reveals how the penholder can leverage its privileged position to ignore input even from key stakeholders. In this regard, even SC permanent members have questioned the impartiality of the Council’s outcomes regarding Western Sahara. For instance, Russia has often questioned the impartiality of recent

MINURSO resolutions, affirming that resolving the conflict needs to include the self-determination of the Sahrawi people in accordance with the principles of the UN Charter (UNSC, 2024a, pp. 5-6).

These cases illustrate how depoliticisation through agenda-setting functions in the Security Council, leading to the stabilisation of a predominant rationality (Stone, 2017, p. 3). In this case, the dominant rationality was a discourse that supported Morocco's position, while alternative perspectives were excluded. The reported absence of the Algerian language from the 2024 MINURSO renewal draft underscores the efficacy of first-draft control in 'muting' stakeholder contributions without the formal veto mechanism, a scenario that might have occurred before the establishment of the Penholding and the Group of Friends.

Summary

This chapter exposed a clear pattern: despite the illegality, France tended to support EU Council arrangements that kept the access to Sahrawi's natural resources open, while the U.S. made no objection to the involvement of U.S. corporations in the occupied Territory. It also traces the institutional routes that made this possible: a small Group of Friends shape the debate, while the penholder controls drafts and timelines, leaving little space for political contestation. These findings underline that when Council members manage the drafting, a strong legal and political language can be filtered out, and as a result, the issue moves *"beyond the conventional political arena"* (Flinders & Burrell, 2006, p. 300). Together, these dynamics explain why France and the United States support Morocco's occupation and how Security Council outcomes translate France and U.S. material interests into institutional practice. By tracing potential links between natural resources and UN's agenda-setting and drafting mechanisms, this chapter provides the contextual and empirical groundwork for the following discourse analysis.

2. The Development of the UN Discourse on Western Sahara

Drawing on Entman's (1993) framing theory, in this chapter I track, across periods, how UN texts select and highlight discursive elements in order to examine how the United Nations discourse has progressively framed Western Sahara conflict. Concretely, it looks for textual

patterns, and checks if wording omissions and/or substitutions align with the institutional dynamics outlined above. In parallel, I draw on Flinders & Buller's (2006) and Stone (2017) to demonstrate how apparently neutral language narrows options in advance and how this language affected the political mandate of MINURSO. While the first analytical chapter mapped two upstream channels, namely the material interests around Sahrawi natural resources, and institutional control through the Group of Friends group and the Penholder, the second chapter now shifts to:

How has the United Nations discourse framed the conflict of Western Sahara from its initial involvement in 1972 until the present day?

Western Sahara as a Colonial Case (1970s – Late 1980s)

Between the 1970s and late 1980s, the UN narrative regarding Western Sahara was heavily rooted in the language of anti-colonialism and self-determination. The Territory was mentioned in the General Assembly's discussions before the beginning of the military conflict in 1975 (UNGA, 1972, Res. 2983,). In line with the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples (UNGA, 1960, Res. 1514), GA resolution 2983 "*reaffirms the legitimacy of the struggle of colonial peoples and its solidarity with, and support for the people of the Sahara*" and "*declares that the continued existence of a colonial situation in the Territory is endangering stability and harmony in north-West Africa*" (UNGA, Res. 2983, 1972). After Spain's withdrawal and Morocco's subsequent occupation of most of the Territory in 1975, GA discourse around the conflict sharpened. For instance, GA Resolution 34/37 reaffirmed "*the inalienable right of the people of Western Sahara to self-determination and independence*", and explicitly urged Morocco "*to join in the peace process and to terminate the occupation of the Territory*" (UNGA, Res. 34/37, 1979, para.1-6).

This resolution considered Morocco as an occupying power in Western Sahara and assigned roles of oppressor and oppressed. Reflecting the anti-colonial rhetoric of the UN General Assembly, the conflict was framed clearly as a question of decolonization and the Sahrawi people's right to determine their future was affirmed as non-negotiable. Following Entman's approach, The General Assembly in the 1970s–80s articulated a coherent frame consisting of: the *problem*: "*a colonial territory under foreign occupation*"; the *cause*: "*Morocco's*

occupation”; the *moral evaluation*: “*the Sahrawi’s inalienable right is being violated*”; and the *remedy*: “*end the occupation and realize independence via self-determination*” (Entman, 1993, pp. 52–54). In the period between the 1960s and late 1980s, the General Assembly employed explicit lexical choices as salience devices, such as ‘inalienable right’ and ‘occupation’, and the alignment with the culture of decolonization influenced and channeled the narrative around the conflict. Entman also warns that framing power is partly the “imprint of power” on the text. In simple words, by defining the options of legitimate solutions, frames become self-reinforcing and alternatives drop out of the dominant discourse (Entman, 1993, p. 55). That is precisely what the GA’s anti-colonial frame did in this period: it made self-determination and independence the commonsense of the conflict and made Morocco’s occupation of Western Sahara incompatible within that discourse.

It is important to underline that, throughout this period, the UN engaged with the Sahrawi issue primarily through the General Assembly, supported by the Fourth Committee and the Special Committee on Decolonization (C-24), both serving as the main forums for colonial disputes and non-self-governing territories (United Nations, n.d., paras. 1-2). During the Fourth Committee, newly independent states from Africa, Asia and the Caribbean, which by the mid-1970s had also become a numerical majority in the General Assembly (Mingst at al. 2022, p. 25), used their influence to advocate for Sahrawi self-determination. Yemen, for example, stated in 1974 that “*only the people of the Territory themselves were entitled to decide the nature and form of their future life*” (UNGA Fourth Committee, (1974b), paras. 113-114). Other Global South delegations, such as Algeria, Malaysia, Equatorial Guinea, and Cuba, expressed their support and compared Sahrawi independence to their own liberation struggles (UNGA Fourth Committee, (1974a); UNGA Fourth Committee, (1974b), paras. 32-36, 49-51, 83-84). However, this strong political discourse was limited to non-binding statements within the General Assembly. Meanwhile the UN Security Council disregarded Western Sahara and its resolutions were limited to reaffirm previous GA decisions and request the Secretary General “*to enter into immediate consultations with the parties concerned ... and to report*” back to the Council (UNSC, 1975, Res. 377, para. 1). It was not until the late 1980s that the SC began to address the issue of Western Sahara and re-shape the narrative around it (UNSC, 1988, Res. 621).

Security Council: Shaping the Narrative on Western Sahara (1988 - 1997)

The Settlement Plan Period (1988-1991)

By 1988, the Security Council took the lead on the Sahrawi issue and, with Resolution 621, requested the Secretary-General to appoint a Special Representative to examine how a referendum could be organized, thus bringing the issue directly under its authority (UNSC, 1988, Res. 621). From that point onward, the role of the Assembly was reduced to simply receiving and endorsing the Council's framework, as captured by Assembly's resolutions in the early 1990s (UNGA, 1990, Res. 45/21; UNGA, 1992, Res. 48/49).

This period represents a turning point for the UN's governance of Western Sahara. The Security Council started framing the discourse to one of symmetry by treating Moroccan occupation of the Western Sahara as a dispute between two equal claimants, rather than a straightforward colonial case. In June 1990, for instance, Resolution 659 called *"upon the two parties to co-operate ... in their efforts aimed at an early settlement of the question ..."* (UNSC, Res. 659, 1990). A year later, when the Council passed Resolution 690, creating the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), the discourse became even more cautious and technical. The resolution itself referred to the agreement of the parties and tasked MINURSO to organize and ensure a free and fair referendum in which the people of Western Sahara would choose between independence and integration with Morocco, (UNSC, Res. 690, 1991).

At that moment, the divergence between the GA and SC discourse widened: General Assembly's documents kept referring to the *"inalienable right of the people of Western Sahara to self-determination and independence"* (UNGA, 1991, Res. 46/47, p. 1), whereas the Council resolutions represented a deliberate shift in the UN approach. They did not condemn or even mention *"occupation"*, but spoke to both parties equally, employing a procedural and technocratic terminology, such as *"efforts of the Secretary-General"* and *"implementation of the Settlement Plan"* (UNSC, 1990, Res. 658; UNSC, 1991, Res. 690). As a result, the Security Council's discourse has omitted colonial and principle-based vocabulary. Therefore, key legal and historical references, like Western Sahara's status as

non-self-governing Territory or references to the UN Charter, were disregarded and excluded in Council's resolutions (UNSC. 1994, Res. 907).

In Entman (1993) terms, the problem definition shifted from decolonization to “*process and management*”; the causal diagnosis relocated responsibility from Morocco's violation to “*mutual non-cooperation*”; the moral evaluation recoded virtue as “*procedural cooperation between the two parties*”; and the solution recommended became “*implementing the Settlement Plan and supporting the SG's efforts*”, not *ending occupation*. The Council's framing process worked through three visible salience devices: first, equalizing labels: “two parties”, second, lexical omissions: no “occupation”, and finally, procedural verbs that highlight the managerial aspect: “implement,” “organize,” “ensure”.

All these discursive keys are means through which the Security Council makes some interpretive elements noticeable while downplaying the decolonization perspective. The result is a frame that narrows the remedies beforehand and makes “neutral process” the common sense of the Council's culture of “realism.” In this regard, the avoidance of politically charged terms, such as “occupation”, which represents a clear breach of international law, and “independence”, even though it is one of the possible outcomes of self-determination, began to normalize the Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara. Essentially, the UN began omitting the justice aspect to focus on process, contributing to the depoliticization of the Sahrawi struggle for self-determination. To sum up, the UN began to legitimize Morocco as an equal party to the dispute, rather than a violator of fundamental principles. This symbolizes a crucial shift: Western Sahara was no longer framed as a decolonization issue; it had become a case of a “*dispute*” between two claimants that the UN was simply mediating.

Referendum Obstruction and Political Stalemate (1992-1997)

Alongside MINURSO, the Security Council established the Identification Commission in order to identify eligible voters for the referendum (UNSG, 1991, p. 6), reflecting a scientisation move. Stone (2017) argues that this tactic of depoliticisation shifts decisions into expert arenas and promotes technical instruments (Stone, 2017, p. 4). Accordingly, the Council's establishment of the Identification Commission shifted the focal point to the work of experts, that “equipped with information and evidence, models and measures (...)” were tasked with developing the voter criteria, and verifying their eligibility (Stone, 2017, p. 9).

Almost immediately after the establishment of the Identification Commission, disputes about the process arose, mainly over who counted as a ‘Sahrawi’ and could vote (Mundy, 2012, p. 112). Morocco, by contrast, made pressure to broaden the voter list, by seeking the inclusion of post-1975 Moroccan settlers. (Mundy, 2012, pp. 115–118). During this phase, reports by the UN Secretary General sounded more like administrative updates, e.g., *"As of 4 July 1994, about 55,000 completed forms had been collected in the Territory, over 18,000 in the Tindouf area and over 3,000 in Zouerate. Of the applications received, about 20,000 have so far been processed..."* (UNSG, 1994, para. 5). At the same time, in Resolution 907, the Security Council *"expresses its deep concern over continuing difficulties and delays in the work of the Identification Commission"* and *"decides ... to consider MINURSO's future ... regarding its mandate and continued operations"* in the case the referendum could not be held by the end of 1994 (UNSC, 1994, Res. 907, paras. 3, 4, 8). Here, it is clearly evident that the delays in the identification process were causing frustration even within the Council. However, there was no condemnation of Morocco's attempts to undermine the referendum process, and the language remained *"The Security Council, urging the two parties to cooperate fully with the Secretary-General in implementing the Settlement Plan which has been accepted by them, ... to reaching a just and lasting solution of the question of Western Sahara"*, again emphasizing symmetry in responsibility between Morocco and the Polisario (UNSC, 1994, Res. 907, p. 1).

Another relevant discursive shift is the introduction of the concept of "flexibility". The Security Council started urging the *"two parties to demonstrate cooperation and flexibility necessary to permit the resumption and early completion of the identification process"* (UNSC, 1996, Res. 1056, para. 7). In theory, this sounds fair, but on the one hand, Polisario's "flexibility" was renouncing the fundamental right to independence, on the other, Morocco was accepting some kind of vote, maybe in 5 years. Obviously, these were not equivalent concessions, yet the UN framed the political stalemate like both sides just needed to bend a little more.

Once MINURSO and the Identification Commission were established, the Council reframed the problem as: "delays" and "difficulties" in identification; the cause as: *"insufficient cooperation from both sides"*; the moral evaluation as: *"flexibility"*; and the remedy as: *appeals mechanisms, timetable adjustments, and mandate renewals*. Secretary-General reports produced saliences through administrative updates "55,000 forms collected (...) 20,000 processed" and terms, such as "cooperation" and "flexibility", while the silences

around Morocco's obstruction of the process, contributed to sideline the fundamental justice aspect, that is the referendum for Sahrawi's self-determination.

Baker Era: the Failure of UN Diplomacy (1997–2004)

Whilst in the late 1990s, resolutions explicitly reiterated a commitment to *“the holding ... of a free, fair and impartial referendum”* under the Settlement Plan (UNSC, 1997, Res. 1133, p. 1), by mid-2003, when the Council endorsed "Baker Plan II" (UNSC, 2003, Res 1495, para. 1), the discourse moved away from referring to the referendum as the legal and political tool for resolving the issue. Here, it is interesting to note that Resolution 1495 (2003) does not use the word “referendum” in its operative paragraphs, but rather confirms the Council's commitment *“to assist the parties to achieve a just, lasting and mutually acceptable political solution which will provide for self-determination”*. (UNSC, 2003, Res 1495, p. 1). This formulation is new because it attempted to merge ‘autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty’ with the ‘right of self-determination’, pushing for "mutual acceptance" as a priority in official UN discourse. The same resolution called the plan as *“an optimum political solution on the basis of agreement between the two parties”* (UNSC, 2003, Res 1495, para. 1). The use of the word “optimum” suggests that the UN viewed Baker Plan II, which still included an eventual referendum, as the best way forward. However, the emphasis on the fact that the two parties need to agree confirmed the de facto veto for both Morocco and Polisario.

In principle, the consent of both parties, including Morocco, may appear reasonable, but in a colonial context, it advantages the occupying power to simply refuse any options of independence as a political result. In this sense, the shift of Resolution 1495 towards “an optimum political solution” based on “agreement between the two parties” reframed the end-goal itself as the consent, and considered independence as merely one option that must be accepted by the occupier. Here, the Security Council employed a preference-shaping tactic that involved “the construction of a new reality”, a dominant rationality that overshadowed the referendum from the debate (Flinders & Buller, 2006, pp. 307–308; Stone, 2017, p. 3). Flinders and Buller (2006) named this phenomenon ‘atmythsphere’, the production and dissemination of a belief that might be strongly influential, even if the empirical evidence on which it is based is debated (Flinders & Buller, 2006, pp. 307–310).

Baker later acknowledged that requiring Morocco's 'consent' to any options of independence was an obstacle to the process and told the Security Council that a *“consensual approach*

would not work” (Theofilopoulou, 2006, p. 2). Yet, Kofi Annan, the Secretary General at that moment, neglected any UN’s accountability and continued to accuse both sides symmetrically, stating “*the referendum was never held despite efforts by MINURSO and successive Special Representatives, because of lack of cooperation over the years, by one or the other party, at different times*” (UNSG, 2004, paras. 3, 6). While Secretary-General Kofi Annan’s reports regularly addressed the legal considerations by stressing that the UN could not endorse Moroccan sovereignty without allowing for a referendum, at the same time, he was increasingly adopting neutral vocabulary in his public reports. When James Baker resigned from his position, after seven years working as UN Personal Envoy in Western Sahara, Kofi Annan expressed “*regret that the parties did not take better advantage of his assistance*”, completely ignoring the fact that Morocco was the party obstructing the referendum and refusing to accept Baker Plan II, while Polisario actually accepted the proposal, conforming to the Council, which “strongly supported” it (UNSG, 2004, paras. 2, 6, 7; UNSC, 2003, Res. 1495, para. 1). Once again, this equalization disguises an asymmetry of power: one side sits on the territory and refuses to move, and the other is demanding a referendum from exile, yet both Morocco and the Frente Polisario get blamed for the stalemate.

The Security Council did not do anything with regard to Morocco’s breach of faith and started talking again about searching for a consensual solution (Theofilopoulou, 2006, p. 19). In later resolutions, the Security Council continued to extend MINURSO’s mandate and to call “*the parties ... to continue to cooperate fully with the United Nations*” (UNSC, 2004, Res. 1570, p. 1). By that time, there had been a change in the bilateral relations between Morocco and key UN member states. Spain, an elected member of the Security Council at the time, had a new government that hoped to improve its relations with Morocco. There was renewed concern within the U.S. government about international terrorism, and Morocco’s help was deemed essential. France was continuing its policy of strong support for Morocco. The end result was weakened support for the peace plan. Morocco and its supporters were aware of this change and did not hide their satisfaction (Theofilopoulou, 2006, p. 13). One insight from that period was that Peter van Walsum, who succeeded Baker, suggested to the Council that “*an independent Saharan State was not a realistic option*” (United Nations, 2008), basically encouraging the UN to abandon its insistence on it. After these controversial and biased words towards Morocco, van Walsum became persona non grata for the Frente Polisario which demanded his replacement. In August 2008 van Walsum’s contract was not renewed,

and Christopher Ross was named personal envoy in 2009. The Polisario condemned the UN envoy's characterization of independence as '*not realistic*' as biased, and called for his replacement (Theofilopoulou, 2010, p. 3).

Recent Years: Towards the Moroccan 'Autonomy Plan' (2005–Present)

Between 2007 and 2012, Christopher Ross carried forward the stalled negotiations (UNSG, 2009). Similar to previous attempts, these talks made no substantive progress towards a political solution of the conflict, because at the time, the positions were well established: Morocco was only willing to offer autonomy under its sovereignty, while Polisario insisted on a referendum that contained independence (UNSG, 2012, paras. 10, 102–103). The role of the UN shifted to merely getting Morocco and Polisario to agree to meet and talk. Jacob Mundy (2012) described this phase as a "*tragedy*" or *farce*," pointing out that the Group of Friends of Western Sahara repeatedly renew the mandate of MINURSO every April, every year as a scripted performance (Mundy, 2012, paras. 2-4), while the Sahrawi native population mark their 50th year living in refugee camps in the Algerian Sahara.

As the Western Sahara diplomatic process stagnated, the discourse of the United Nations, deliberately leaned towards the Moroccan "Autonomy Plan", a proposal in contradiction with UN self-determination doctrine. It is worth reminding that under General Assembly Resolution 1541 (XV), decolonisation must allow a people to choose among independence, free association, or integration (UNGA, 1960b, Principle VI). A plan that predetermines the status as autonomy "*within the framework of the Kingdom's sovereignty*" and does not, by itself, offer the independence option, it is inconsistent with UN principles unless the Sahrawi people freely choose it (UNGA, 1960b, Principles VI– IX), which is not the case here.

In Security Council Resolution 1754 (2007), the Council "*welcom[ed] serious and credible Moroccan efforts to move the process forward towards resolution*", while merely "*taking note of the Polisario Front proposal*" (UNSC, 2007, Res. 1754, p. 1). Again, this discursive asymmetry, praising the Moroccan "Autonomy Plan" as "*serious and credible*" but not affording the same language to the Sahrawi proposal, set the tone for subsequent UN discourse. The same resolution, while reaffirming "*the right for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara*", also called upon "*the parties to enter into negotiations without*

preconditions and in good faith” (UNSC, 2007, Res. 1754, para. 2). Here, the phrase “without preconditions” suggests that the Council was keen to move forward, placing the referendum in the background, rather than deploy it as political means to pursue Sahrawi self-determination.

In Resolution 1813 (2008), the Council stated that “*realism and a spirit of compromise by the parties are essential to maintain the momentum of the process of negotiations*” (UNSC, 2008, Res. 1813, para. 2). Year after year, UN resolutions echoed the phrasing “*realism and compromise*” signaling a discursive shift from referendum towards a tacit preference of Morocco’s plan as the more reasonable basis for talks. Sahrawi representatives and supportive states, notably South Africa, publicly criticized the Security Council’s ‘*realism/compromise*’ lexicon as unbalanced and departing from the UN’s traditionally neutral wording. In 2019, Ambassador Jerry Matjila, representative of South Africa, explained its objection to renewing MINURSO’s mandate, stating “*We note that once again terms such as “realistic”, “realism” and “compromise”, are being used in the resolution. These references are an attempt to undermine the principle of self-determination for the people of Western Sahara ... This Council must reaffirm its long-standing and unequivocal commitment to the right to self-determination for the people of Western Sahara in an unqualified manner*” (Matjila, 2019, paras. I, II) The Council's word choice implicitly privileged one proposal as more viable without formally saying so, undermining the UN’s impartiality in this negotiation process.

A dramatic illustration of the UN’s constrained language came in 2016, when Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon visited Sahrawi refugee camps in Tindouf, and publicly referred to Morocco’s presence in Western Sahara as an “*occupation.*” The single word “*occupation*” provoked Morocco, which organized mass national protests against the Secretary General, expelled dozens of UN personnel, and closed a military office for the MINURSO peacekeeping mission, saying its decision was irreversible. Ban Ki-moon’s spokesman, Stephane Dujarric, later reported: “*His use of the word was not planned, nor was it deliberate, it was a spontaneous, personal reaction. We regret the misunderstandings and consequences that this personal expression of solicitude provoked*”. He added “*Nothing (Ban) said or did in the course of that trip was meant to offend or express hostility toward the Kingdom of Morocco, which is a valued member of the United Nations*” (Nichols, 2016), effectively backtracking under pressure. By retreating from the term *occupation*, the UN

leadership appeared to compromise its own objectivity to placate Morocco. Ironically, “*occupation*” is the correct legal term: the UN General Assembly itself had “*deeply deplore[d]...the continued occupation of Western Sahara by Morocco*” in the aforementioned GA resolution 34/37 in 1979, even urging Morocco to “*terminate the occupation of the Territory*” (UNGA, 1979, Res. 34/37). Yet, decades later, the UN Secretariat avoided that language, underscoring how the UN’s tone has been carefully calibrated so as not to offend Morocco.

Another notable evolution in UN discourse since the mid-2000s is the growing emphasis on human rights and humanitarian conditions (see chapter 3). By 2011, Security Council resolutions began incorporating language on the human rights situation in Western Sahara and in the Sahrawi refugee camps in Tindouf, Algeria. For example, Resolution 1979 (2011) stressed “*the importance of improving the human rights situation in Western Sahara and the Tindouf camps*”, and encouraged “*the parties to work with the international community to develop and implement independent and credible measures to ensure full respect for human rights*” (UNSC, 2011, Res. 1979, p. 2). It is relevant to underline the term “independent and credible measures” to monitor human rights. However the same resolution, in the following paragraph, welcomed “*the establishment of a National Council on Human Rights in Morocco and the proposed component regarding Western Sahara*”.

Everything considered, Resolution 1979 signals an incongruity: the Council urges independent bodies to monitor rights, yet in the next breath praises Morocco for establishing the National Council on Human Rights, an institution created by royal decree to operate ‘alongside Our Majesty’ and whose president and at least 9 of 27 members are appointed by the King, raising obvious independence concerns (UNSC, 2011, Res. 1979, p. 2; Morocco , 2011, pp. 10-11; Amnesty International, 2018, p. 1; Amnesty International, 2020, p. 1). Subsequent MINURSO’s renewals repeated the encouragement language and “*welcomed*” steps claimed by Morocco. For instance, Resolution 2152 (2014) “*encourag[es] the parties to continue in their respective efforts to enhance the promotion of human rights*” and, in practice that year, welcomed a planned OHCHR delegation visit linked to Morocco’s initiatives (UNSC, 2014, Res. 2152, p. 2; MINURSO, 2014). At the same time, humanitarian issues have taken a prominent place in the UN’s narrative. The Council regularly voices “*deep concern*” about the “*continued hardships faced by Sahrawi refugees, their dependency*

on external humanitarian assistance”, and “insufficient funding for those living in Tindouf refugee camps” (UNSC, 2017, Res. 2351, p. 2).

The post-2020 period brought new challenges in the conflict resolution. In November 2020, tensions erupted as the Polisario Front declared the 1991 ceasefire null and void, following a clash in the buffer zone of Guerguerat (Dujarric, 2020; UNSG, 2021, paras. 2-4). For the first time in nearly three decades, Western Sahara saw a return to open hostilities. One month later, in December 2020, President Donald Trump unilaterally recognized Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara (United States, 2020, pp. 1-2). This move emboldened Morocco’s narrative and, in Sahrawi eyes, further compromised the UN’s impartiality. The end of the ceasefire also left the UN in an uncomfortable position: MINURSO, originally deployed to facilitate a referendum, is now monitoring a non-existent ceasefire amid an active conflict. Resolution 2602 (2021) simply *“reaffirms the need for full respect of the military agreements reached with MINURSO with regard to the ceasefire”* back in 1991, and *“calls upon the parties to demonstrate political will and work in an atmosphere propitious for dialogue in order to advance negotiations”* (UNSC, 2021, Res. 2602, para. 6).

From 2007 onward, specifically from Resolution 1754, the language of the Security Council and the Secretary-General re-set the discourse around the conflict. Textually, the frame was stabilized by salience devices highlighted by:

- asymmetry: “welcoming” the Moroccan Autonomy Plan as “serious and credible” while merely “taking note” of Polisario’s referendum proposal;
- lexical omissions and substitutions: erasing “occupation,” substituting “realism/compromise,” and abstracting “self-determination” from as a referendum output to a floating principle; i
- issue-diversion: prioritising human rights and humanitarian language that displace the question of self-determination;
- and rituality: annual MINURSO renewals that normalized the status-quo.

Summary

From 2005 to today the United Nations’ discourse on Western Sahara has grown increasingly cautious, at the expense of the organization’s own principles. The vocabulary and tone adopted, lauding Morocco’s “serious and credible” proposal, avoiding terms like

“occupation,” emphasizing human rights and humanitarian relief but not enforcement, reflect a UN caught between its legal commitments and political pressures. Key moments like the 2007 autonomy initiatives, Ban Ki-moon’s 2016 gaffe, and the fallout of the 2020 ceasefire breakdown and Trump’s proclamation have all compromised the UN’s impartiality.

It should be emphasized that the discourse itself played a crucial role in shaping the perception and the narrative around the conflict. The UN over a number of years managed to construct an international perception of Western Sahara as simply another frozen conflict that required negotiation, rather than the last colony in Africa whose people are still waiting for decolonization. That “impartial” framing inevitably depoliticized the issue in the international arena and reduced the urgency with which the matter could have mobilized stronger intervention. This did not happen in a vacuum, but it was driven by the political pressure of France and the United States and by structural limits of Minurso’s mandate that we will unpack in the following chapter.

MINURSO As Depoliticisation Tool

The United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) was established in 1991 with the political mandate to conduct a self-determination referendum for the Sahrawi people (UNSC, 1991, Res. 690, paras. 2-4). More than three decades later, that referendum has never occurred, and MINURSO’s role has narrowed essentially to observing a long-standing ceasefire. The official website of the UN’s mission, explicitly states: “*the referendum has not been possible to date, [but] MINURSO continues to perform the following tasks: monitor the ceasefire; reduce the threat of mines and UXOs; continue supporting the UNHCR programme*” (MINURSO, n.d.). This chapter analyzes how MINURSO, through the narrowing of its mandate, became the central vehicle for depoliticizing the Western Sahara dispute. It does so by examining three interrelated dimensions:

1. MINURSO’s shift from a referendum facilitation mission to a narrow ceasefire-monitoring operation (comparing this UN peacekeeping mission with more empowered ones, such as UNTAET (East Timor) and UNMIK (Kosovo)).
2. The exclusion of a human rights component from MINURSO’s structure and the outsourcing of human rights duties to other bodies;
3. MINURSO’s increasing orientation toward humanitarian support functions, which has marginalized its original political purpose.

In this chapter, I draw on three theoretical lenses: first, Flinders & Buller's (2006) institutional and rule-based depoliticisation tactics will help examine the conditions under which MINURSO was established; second, Entman's (1993) salience and omission mechanism will be applied to the absence of human rights monitoring from the mandate; third, Fassin's (2012) interlinked concepts of humanitarian government and moral economy, inform how compassion-based frames reorder obligations from self-determination to refugee care. The aim of this chapter is to clarify the structural limits of UN peacekeeping in protracted conflicts where great-power interests constrain the realization of self-determination, answering the question:

How did UN practice translate its discourse into the management of the conflict?

From Referendum Facilitation to Ceasefire Monitoring

As shown in the previous chapter, the peacekeeping principle implying 'consent of the parties' was evident throughout MINURSO's mandate. This is also demonstrated by Resolution 690 (1991), which states that the Settlement Plan, was "*accepted by the two parties on 30 August 1988*" and the Council "*calls upon the two parties to cooperate fully with the Secretary-General in the implementation of his plan*" (UNSC, 1991, Res. 690), presupposing party cooperation throughout the whole negotiation period.

By the early 2000s, however, the mission's core political project had been suspended indefinitely and its effective function was reduced to ceasefire maintenance (MINURSO, n.d.). The shift was the result of protracted disputes and Morocco's deliberate obstruction of the referendum's modalities. Security Council politics played a decisive role in this outcome. France and the United States, two veto-wielding permanent members with close ties to Morocco, proved consistently resistant to any measures that would press Morocco or impose a solution (Zunes, 2008, p. 9). As a result, the Council never put its full weight behind implementation of the referendum; notably, it kept renewing MINURSO strictly as a Chapter VI mission and refrained from invoking Chapter VII enforcement powers to push the process forward (UNSC, 2004, Res. 1541). Zunes (2008) has pointed out that due to French and American threats to veto any effective action, the Council "*failed to place the Western Sahara issue under Chapter VII of the UN Charter*", thus precluding tools like sanctions or coercive pressure, (in contrast to the similar case in East Timor), that might have forced Moroccan compliance with the agreed plan (Zunes, 2008, p. 9). Instead, Western Sahara was

framed on the Council's agenda as a low-intensity conflict to be managed, not resolved, reflecting the geopolitical realities: Morocco was a strategic ally of France and the U.S., and neither power was willing to undermine Morocco's core interests.

MINURSO's trajectory is another emblematic case of institutional depoliticisation. The Council's choice to "solve" Western Sahara by delegating the referendum to a peacekeeping mission under consensual, Chapter VI parameters shifted the locus of contestation from the United Nations to MINURSO's mandate limitations. This is exactly what Flinders & Buller (2006) call "*arena-shifting*" and "*indirect governing relationship*" in which policy-makers, here the Group of Friends, retain control while delegating decisions to an "independent" body (Flinders & Buller, 2006, pp. 296, 298-300). The practical effect is that MINURSO's mandate narrowed to ceasefire observation, mines clearance and logistics, while the referendum on self-determination remains outside the Council's decision-making process. In addition, throughout the years, the conflict was governed by rules such as identification criteria, appeals procedures, 'military agreements' with MINURSO, mandate renewals and the Council's lexicon of 'realism', 'mutually acceptable', 'without preconditions', etc. These rules operate as the sort of explicit targets/standards that Flinders and Buller identify as rule-based depoliticisation, that convert legal enforcement into technical tasks, such as monitoring the ceasefire (Flinders & Buller, 2006, p. 304). When viewed in this way, it is clear that MINURSO's design and practice institutionalised a depoliticising logic, which enabled the Group of Friends to manage the situation from distance while maintaining the appearance of an impartial process.

For comparative perspective, MINURSO's constrained role contrasts sharply with the more politically empowered UN missions of the late 1990s in East Timor and Kosovo. Both UNTAET, deployed in East Timor from 1999 to 2002, and UNMIK, in Kosovo from 1999, were established under Chapter VII authority and given expansive mandates to govern territories in transition. In East Timor, after an independence referendum in 1999, which the UN conducted despite Indonesia's initial resistance, UNTAET became, in essence, the interim government, and Resolution 1272 vested the UN mission with "*all legislative and executive authority, including the administration of justice*" during the transition (UNSC, 1999a, Res. 1246, paras. 1-4; UNSC, 1999b, Res. 1272, paras. 1-4). The UN administration in Kosovo under Resolution 1244 was similarly empowered to perform civil governance functions and supervise a political process to determine Kosovo's status (UNSC, 1999c, Res.

1244, paras. 10-11). These missions were unprecedented in scope, described by the United Nation as a “*new generation*” of “*multi-dimensional*” peace operations that could “*temporarily assume the legislative and administrative functions of the State, in order to support the transfer of authority from one sovereign entity to another*” (UNDPKO/DFS, 2008, p. 22). Crucially, UNTAET and UNMIK did not merely monitor ceasefires; they actively shaped political outcomes, whether by building new state institutions, like in Timor-Leste’s case, or administering a territory pending status resolution in Kosovo. They operated with the backing of robust Security Council mandates and, at least initially, enjoyed the compliance of the departing sovereigns, respectively Indonesia and Serbia, under significant international pressure (UNSC, 1999b, Res. 1271, paras. 1-4; UNSC, 1999c, paras. 10–11; UNDPKO/DFS, 2008, pp. 22-25). By contrast, MINURSO, as a Chapter VI mission, never had such enforcement powers and required Morocco’s ongoing consent, resulting in MINURSO’s limitation to the military ceasefire sphere. There was no transitional authority in Western Sahara to override Moroccan administration and the UN refrained from any direct governance role or interim control of the territory (MINURSO, n.d). As a result, whereas UNTAET and UNMIK demonstrated the UN’s capacity to be a political protagonist in post-conflict transitions, MINURSO became a passive observer of a frozen conflict.

The disparity also underscores a double standard. On the one hand, East Timor’s decolonization was actively shepherded by the UN, culminating in that territory’s independence. On the other hand, Western Sahara remains in political limbo under de facto Moroccan control, with the UN mission merely keeping a relative peace. In theoretical terms, MINURSO’s evolution exemplifies a “negative peace” scenario: the mission ensures the absence of war, with a ceasefire that has largely held since 1991, but it has not delivered positive peace or justice through self-determination (Galtung, 1969). The conflict’s core political question, sovereignty and the Sahrawi people’s rights, has been effectively depoliticized at the UN level, replaced by a technocratic focus on ceasefire maintenance.

The Absence of a Human Rights Mandate: Externalizing UN’s Accountability

One of the most distinctive and contentious features of MINURSO is that, unlike almost every modern UN peacekeeping mission, it lacks any official human rights monitoring or protection component, despite it became standard UN practice to include human rights

observers or units into peace operations (OHCHR/DPKO/DPA/DFS Policy, 2011, pp. 3-5; UNDPKO/DFS, 2008, p. 27). By contrast, missions from Cambodia and El Salvador in the early 90s to more recent operations in Haiti, the DRC, or Mali have all had human rights mandate or components to document abuses (UNSC, 1992, Res.745; UNSC, 1991, Res. 693, paras. 2-3; UNSC, 2004 Res. 1542, para. III; UNSC, 2010. Res. 1925, para. 17, pp. 4-5; UNSC, 2013, Res. 2100, para. 16(d)) MINURSO, however, is the exception: Human Rights Watch calls it “*one of the few modern UN peacekeeping missions that does not include a mandate to observe and report on human rights,*” adding that Morocco has opposed the inclusion of any human rights component, supported by France vetoes power (Human Rights Watch, 2013, para. 2). This omission has significantly contributed to the depoliticization of the Western Sahara conflict, as it removed a key mechanism by which the UN could witness and report politically salient abuses, thus muting international scrutiny of conditions on the ground. The UN Advocacy Director at the time, Philippe Bolopion, observed that this critical absence implied that MINURSO was “blind” to crucial developments and, as a result, the Council remained uninformed and unable to respond to any violations of human rights (HRW, 2010, paras. 2–3).

The exclusion of human rights from MINURSO was not a mere oversight but the result of active diplomacy by certain Council members. A vivid example occurred in April 2010, when France repeatedly blocked efforts to add any human-rights mandate, as Human Rights Watch notes “*for several years behind the closed doors of the UN Security Council, France has used its veto power to keep the UN away from issues related to human rights*” in Western Sahara (HRW, 2010, paras. 1–2). A noteworthy episode is the Gdeim Izik crackdown in October 2010, where Moroccan forces dismantled the Sahrawi protest with several deaths and injuries (including injury to two United Nations staff and damage to two MINURSO vehicles), was reported by the Secretary-General, prompting calls for UN scrutiny that never translated into a MINURSO monitoring role (UNSG, 2011, paras. 2–10). Ultimately, France prevailed by the fact of its veto power, and the Council’s 2010 MINURSO renewal omitted any human-rights mandate (UNSC, 2010, Res. 1920). Morocco, for its part, has long opposed MINURSO extension to human-rights tasks, and the Council’s practice in 2010 effectively accepted the Moroccan position that the mission remain strictly focused on military aspects and ceasefire monitoring (HRW, 2014, para. 8; UNSC, 2013, Res. 2099). Months later the brutal violence of Moroccan forces in Gdeim Izik, in April 2010, the UK, Austria, and Nigeria explicitly pressed the Council on human-rights issues in Western Sahara. While

Nigeria criticised the Council's reluctance on human rights, the UK and Austria urged engagement with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) on human rights in the Occupied Territory and refugee camps (United Nations, 2011, pp. 5–6).

The Security Council began, from 2011 onward, inserting softer language that “*encourag[es] the parties to ... enhance the promotion and protection of human rights*” in Western Sahara and the Tindouf camps. Resolution 1979 (2011), for instance, was limited to “welcomes the commitment of Morocco to ensure unqualified and unimpeded access to all Special Procedures of the United Nations Human Rights Council” (UNSC, 2011, Res. 1979, p. 2), suggesting a discursive compromise after stronger monitoring proposals failed. Meanwhile, Morocco has tightly controlled access to Western Sahara for foreign journalists and NGOs, exploiting the absence of a UN investigative presence. Human rights groups note that independent organizations and reporters are rarely allowed to monitor and report from the ground, with expulsions and access denials documented (Amnesty International, 2020, para. 3; Reporters Without Borders, 2019). In the refugee camps in Algeria, there is no regular UN human rights oversight either. Secretary General reports notes OHCHR access to the Occupied Territory has been denied since 2015, while occasional OHCHR visits provide limited monitoring around the refugee camps (UNSG, 2021, paras 73-74).

The absence of a human rights component represents the result of MINURSO's institutional depoliticisation, rather than a coincidence. The Council shifted the focus from a political mission that would judge and report abuses, to a delegated Chapter VI operation that outsources rights scrutiny to OHCHR visits and Moroccan institutions (Flinders & Buller, 2006, pp. 296, 298-300). In parallel, in Entman's terms, the decision not to include human rights in the mandate acts as an omission that shapes salience. Human rights buses become unnoticeable, while Council's resolutions emphasise ceasefire and 'cooperation', contributing to a narrative that views Western Sahara as a low-urgency security issue rather than an decolonisation dispute involving repression (Entman, 1993, p. 54). It should be stressed that human rights abuses, such as suppression of pro-independence demonstrations or restrictions on Sahrawi freedoms, are inherently political in the context of an unresolved self-determination dispute. If MINURSO documented and reported such events, they would draw international attention. MINURSO personnel, for instance, could be present in Laayoune, the occupied capital of Western Sahara, witness a Moroccan police crackdown on Sahrawi activists, yet have no mandate to even note it in official reports.

From Self-Determination to Humanitarianism

As MINURSO's political mandate atrophied and its human rights scope was curtailed, the mission increasingly found purpose in humanitarian and logistical support roles peripheral to its original *raison d'être* (UNSG, 2018, para. 19; UNSG, 2016, para. 81; UNSG, 2007, paras. 33–35). In effect, MINURSO became structurally oriented toward managing the humanitarian consequences of the conflict rather than resolving its colonial roots, a transformation evident in the mission's heavy involvement in coordinating with UNHCR on facilitating refugee family visits and in clearing landmines (UNSG, 2007, paras. 33–35; UNSG, 2021, paras. 40–46). While these activities are undoubtedly beneficial on a human level, their expansion has coincided with the marginalization of MINURSO's referendum goal. The mission's center of gravity shifted from the political arena to the humanitarian arena, a shift that has wide implications for Sahrawi urgency for the referendum on self-determination.

One of MINURSO's notable humanitarian tasks has been its support for UNHCR's Confidence-Building Measures (CBM) program, implemented between 2004 and 2014. This program created a "*humanitarian bridge*" between the Sahrawi refugee camps in Tindouf and the Moroccan-controlled territory, allowing separated families to reunite briefly (Jacobsen, 2017, pp. 5–9). Under CBM, UNHCR organized exchanges such as family-visit flights in which groups travelled for five-day visits in both directions (UNHCR, 2013, pp. 15–16), MINURSO played an essential logistical role, providing personnel, aircraft, and ground transport to support UNHCR's visits and communications (UNSG, 2009, para. 45). Over 20,000 people benefited from family visits (Jacobsen, 2017, p. 5). The interactions had direct and tangible humanitarian impact, helping to bring people closer and sustain social ties across the divide (UNHCR, 2013, pp. 25–26). The Feinstein International Center (2020) have described these measures as "*significant humanitarian achievements in an otherwise hopeless refugee situation*" where the Sahrawi people are at risk of "*losing their culture and their identity due to the protracted nature of this political impasse*" (Feinstein International Center, 2020, para. 1). Indeed, Western Sahara's refugees constitute one of the world's longest-protracted displacement crises (Jacobsen, 2017, p. 5) and anything that alleviates their plight is crucial. However, it is telling that MINURSO, a mission originally about decolonization, found its most tangible accomplishments in these humanitarian tasks.

After June 2014, family-visit CBM flights were suspended and the programme has not resumed (MINURSO, n.d.; UNSG, 2023, para. 75). The suspension followed disagreements between the parties (Feinstein International Center, 2020, para. 1). In the meantime, UNHCR and UNICEF continued education and livelihood initiatives for Sahrawi refugees, while WFP addressed food insecurity (UNSG, 2023, paras. 69–74). MINURSO’s role remained focused on logistical issues, and its position was “*ready to continue supporting UNHCR pending agreement of the two parties on resumption of activities*” (MINURSO, n.d.) All these reflect a humanitarian turn in the mission, MINURSO acting almost as a support agency for refugee welfare and cross-community engagement.

Another area where MINURSO expends considerable effort is mine action and military liaison, which can be seen as neutral, technical duties that have overshadowed the more political tasks (UNSG, 2023, paras. 49–55, 98). MINURSO’s engineering units and contracted NGOs have been involved in de-mining operations, given that the 2,700 km-long berm dividing the territory is one of “*the densest mine contamination in the world*” infested with landmines and unexploded ordnance (UNSG, 2023, paras. 49–55, 98; Mine Action Review, 2016, p. 330). The mission’s Mine Action Coordination Centre has cleared large swathes of land and made travel safer for civilians and UN patrols alike (UNSG, 2023, paras. 49–55, 98; UN Mine Action Service, n.d.). Additionally, MINURSO’s military observers daily monitor the ceasefire lines, investigate alleged violations, and liaise with both Moroccan army and the Polisario to prevent escalations (UNSG, 2023, paras. 43, 45–48; MINURSO, n.d.). These routine stabilizing functions are classic peacekeeping, but they are completely divorced from the diplomatic process concerning Western Sahara’s status (UNSG, 2023, paras. 40–42, 43–55). As years passed, MINURSO’s reports became dominated by counts of ceasefire violations, minefield updates, and logistical statistics, whereas references to advancing the referendum or political talks grew perfunctory (UNSG, 2023, paras. 45–55; UNSG, 2021, paras. 38–46). In essence, MINURSO settled into a comfortable bureaucracy of conflict management, providing services that maintain calm, like ceasefire monitoring, mine clearance, transport for UN agencies, but not significantly advancing conflict resolution.

Within this context, MINURSO’s humanitarian activities represent a form of *humanitarian government* that reframes the conflict as a crisis of separated families, food insecurity, and explosive remnants of war. Fassin defines humanitarian government as “the deployment of moral sentiments in contemporary politics” (Fassin, 2012, p. 1), a shift tied to “a new moral

economy centered on humanitarian reason,” which brings “particular attention (...) to suffering and misfortune” (Fassin, 2012, p. 7). According to Fassin (2012), *“humanitarianism has become a language (...) that serves both to define and to justify discourses and practices of the government of human beings”* (Fassin, 2012, p. 2). The narrowing of MINURSO’s mandate and its humanitarian reframing changed what became governable, justifying the Security Council discourse on Western Sahara. The focus of the mission moved from Sahrawi people as rights-holders entitled to a referendum to victims to be assisted “invoking trauma rather than recognizing violence” and *promoting “compassion rather than justice”* (Fassin, 2012, p. 8).

In UN discourse, this shift is clearly visible. Early Security Council resolutions in the 1990s spoke plainly of implementing a referendum in accordance with the Settlement Plan (UNSC, 1990, Res. 658; UNSC, 1991, Res. 690). By the 2010s, the Council’s focus moved to lauding incremental gestures, such as human-rights improvements, prisoner releases, humanitarian flights, rather than tackling the fundamental political divide (UNSC, 2014, Res. 2152, pp. 1-2; UNSC, 2018, Res. 2440, pp. 1-3). The UN Secretary-General’s reports on MINURSO grew increasingly perfunctory about the mission’s original mandate, sometimes barely mentioning the word ‘referendum’ at all, except in the mission’s name (UNSG Report, 2023, paras. 43-55, 75). This rhetorical de-emphasis of Western Sahara’s decolonization illustrates how a political conflict can be transformed into an ‘agenda item’ about stability and humanitarian issues (Naïli M., 2020, pp. 75–78). This is exactly the moral economy Fassin describes: *“the production, dissemination, circulation and use of emotions and values, norms and obligations in the social space”*, and it helps explain how a colonial question is managed ethically rather than resolved politically (Fassin, 2012, p. 266). The UN’s moral economy does not only report; it produces and circulates specific emotions and values, in this case compassion for Sahrawi refugees, that reorder UN obligations from a decolonization duty to a humanitarian one. In this frame, Sahrawis appear mainly as vulnerable beneficiaries to be protected, assisted, but not as political subjects with a right to decide their future.

Finally, the very urgency of resolving the conflict has been undercut. The immediate crisis atmosphere of the late 1980s, with active war and impending decolonization, dissipated and was replaced by what Chavez Fregoso and Zivkovic (2012) call a *‘frozen conflict’* (Chávez Fregoso C. & Zivković N., 2012, p. 140–142).

Summary

Chapter 3 shows how UN practice turned a decolonization case into technical management. Kept under a consent-based Chapter VI frame, MINURSO shifted from facilitating a referendum to administering a ceasefire, with endless renewals, and procedures that replaced the political issue of self-determination. The exclusion of a human-rights mandate externalized the UN's accountability and silenced human rights abuses are not a coincidence, allowing the Council to renew the mission without confronting the referendum on self-determination.

Operationally, the focus moved to humanitarian and technical tasks, such as CBM family visits, mine action, logistics for UN agencies, incident counting, which resulted in stabilizing the Sahrawi refugee limbo. Compared with UNTAET and UNMIK, politically empowered operations that could enforce more coercive decisions, MINURSO delivered what Galtung (1968) called "negative peace", a prolonged absence of violence during the years of the ceasefire, but not self-determination for the Sahrawi people. (Galtung, 1968, p. 190.

Discussion

In this thesis, I examined how and why the United Nations' governance of Western Sahara has become depoliticised over five decades. Through a qualitative analysis of UN documents, informed by Critical Discourse Analysis and Entman's framing theory, I traced this evolution across Security Council practices, the design of MINURSO, and the language used in official UN texts from 1972 to 2025. The findings suggest that the shift from a decolonization file to a managed conflict was not a passive drift of the United Nations, but rather the outcome of an interplay between material interests, institutional procedures, and discursive practices.

In the first analytical chapter, the analysis of the Security Council internal politics indicated a correlation between the support of France and the U.S. to Morocco's Autonomy Plan and their material interests in Western Sahara, including phosphates, fisheries and oil prospects. Despite the illegality of the Morocco-EU agreements and the UN legal opinion in 2002, France tended to back the arrangements of the EU to keep the access to Sahrawi's natural resources open. Similarly, the United States did not object to the involvement of the U.S. corporations on phosphate and oil prospects in the occupied Territory. These material preferences appear to be channeled through informal but powerful working methods like the

‘Group of Friends’ and the U.S. ‘penholdership.’ These mechanisms concentrate agenda-setting and drafting power, allowing for first-draft control that limit the opportunities for political contestation and effective amendment of resolutions. This interpretation aligns with Chimni’s argument that links international outcomes to the interests of a transnational capitalist class, and with studies on Security Council practices that highlight the influence of informal drafting procedures on UN’s decision-making. This first chapter underlined that the Security Council internal dynamic allow few permanent members to manage the drafting, and to ‘silence’ strong legal and political vocabulary, with the result that the legitimate referendum to self-determination for the Sahrawi people moves “beyond the conventional political arena” (Flinders & Burrell, 2006, p. 300).

A central finding of this thesis is the rhetorical shift in the UN’s framing of the conflict. The discourse analysis revealed a gradual move from the clear decolonization vocabulary of early General Assembly documents to a more managerial and procedural language within the Security Council, at the expense of the organisation’s own principles. Over time, problem definitions became more ambiguous, the responsibility was equalized between the “two parties,” and the solutions proposed became technical and procedural rather than political. The vocabulary of the Security Council progressively started to lean towards Morocco’s ‘Autonomy Plan’, referred to as “*serious and credible*”, although in clear contrast with the UN’s framework of the right of self-determination, which should always include independence as an option. The discourse started avoiding terms like “occupation”, “referendum”. In contrast, the Council’s resolutions emphasised human rights and humanitarian relief. This pattern seems to have transformed the Western Sahara question from a referendum to be held into a process to be managed indefinitely, and the UN approach in this decolonisation case raise question about the “impartiality” of the organisation, which I remember to be one of the guiding principles of peacekeeping operation, like MINURSO,

The third analytical chapter suggests that the discursive shift was materialized through practice on the ground. Kept under a consent-based Chapter VI framework, MINURSO’s evolution from a mission intended to facilitate a referendum to one primarily focused on ceasefire monitoring appears to be a direct consequence of this process. The mission’s operational focus on humanitarian and logistical tasks, such as Confidence-Building Measures and mine action, became its most visible outputs. Moreover, the exclusion of a human-rights component from MINURSO externalized the United Nations accountability

and silenced everyday human rights violations abuses and the unresolved status question, allowing the Council to renew the mission without confronting Sahrawi's self-determination. This reflects what Fassin terms a "humanitarian government," where compassion-centered logics reorder obligations, moving attention from justice claims like self-determination to the management of refugee care. In this context, humanitarian reason is not just rhetoric, but rather it appears to have become the primary metric of success for the MINURSO.

Taken together, these findings point toward a self-reinforcing discursive-institutional feedback loop. It can be argued that powerful state interests favor continuity, which is translated into neutral language through the Council's informal working methods. This language, in turn, justifies MINURSO's narrow and technical mission on the ground. The outputs of this mandate are then used to validate the managerial language in subsequent resolutions, completing the cycle. This model suggests that the depoliticisation of Western Sahara is not the result of a single cause but of a United Nations' governance regime that combines neocolonial interests, technocratic procedure, and framing discourse.

Conclusion

This study argues that United Nations depoliticisation is not simply a political stalemate but an actively constructed governance regime that manages time while indefinitely sidelining a political decision. For broader debates on global governance, these findings suggest that neocolonial interests, depoliticisation tactics, and institutional practices are not parallel phenomena but are deeply intertwined, converging in the texts, timelines, and mandates that constitute international intervention.

It should be noted that the evidence that I presented is textual and the claims interpretive. Nonetheless, the patterns observed suggest potential implications. If depoliticisation is an assembled regime, it can theoretically be re-assembled. The analysis suggests that any effort to repoliticize the issue might involve re-examining the UN's exclusive working methods to enable political debate within the Security Council meetings, as recommended by the Very United Nations in the "Note 507", in order to broaden agenda and permit non-permanent members to influence political outcomes. In addition, this thesis suggests restructuring MINURSO's mandate to reconnect its daily work on the ground to the core question of

self-determination, thus introducing a human rights monitoring component, and re-centering the language of decolonization in official discourse. While none of these is a simple solution, they indicate where procedure and language could be adjusted if the political will existed to move from managing the file to allow the people of Western Sahara to decide their political future.

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