The global political-economy of conflict intractability:
Western Sahara and Middle Eastern (in)security

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Summary

Year after year, the official United Nations’ list of non-self-governing territories lists one state in Africa that has yet to enjoy the universally recognized right of people’s to self-determination: Western Sahara. Adding insult to injury, Western Sahara’s status as Africa’s ‘last colony’ is compounded by the fact that, for nearly thirty years, there has been a UN mission inside Western Sahara whose ostensible objective is to organize a referendum on independence for the Sahrawi people.

At one level, the durability of the Western Sahara dispute is said to stem from the intractable positions of Morocco, which first occupied the territory by force in 1975, and the Western Saharan nationalist movement, the Frente POLISARIO (Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguiria el Hamra y Río de Oro), which was founded in 1973 to fight for the rights of the native Sahrawi people. Whereas the former claims historical title to Western Sahara as a part of a larger irredentist idea of ‘Greater Morocco’, the former seeks independence for Western Sahara. Though the Morocco-Polisario war for Western Sahara lasted for sixteen years (1975–1991), the presence of the Mission des Nations Unies pour l’Organisation d’un Référendum au Sahara Occidental (MINURSO) since 1992 has done little to alter the fundamental claims of Morocco and Polisario. At the domestic level, internal support for annexation and colonization among Moroccans remains unflinching. Sahrawis, whether living under Moroccan occupation or in refugee camps in Algeria, likewise show no signs of giving up their right to an independent national homeland.

What then can explain the durability of the Western Sahara impasse? Looking beyond the mutually exclusive claims of the Moroccan state and the Sahrawi nationalist movement, the Western Sahara conflict also has to be understood as embedded within global dynamics that help to reinforce the ongoing stalemate, the continued dispossession of the Sahrawi people, and the international absurdity of there still being a Britain-sized non-self-governing territory in Africa today.

These global dynamics are rooted in the dramatic changes that occurred largely in the 1970s with respect to the geopolitical architecture of North Atlantic hegemony and the international political-economy underwriting it. Just as the Western Sahara conflict began to emerge in the mid1970s, so too did US leaders begin to forge a new policy towards the postcolonial world, one that would seek to provide a stable foundation for North Atlantic political and military supremacy after a string of defeats in places like Korea, Algeria and Vietnam. The basis of this policy was to emphasize the use of more indirect forms of control over the postcolonial world through such techniques as regional balancing and the empowerment of local hegemons. Above all, this vision of global stability under North Atlantic hegemony required a permanent condition of instability at the regional level. The eruption of the Western Sahara conflict fed into these dynamics by introducing instability into the Maghrib, notably between Morocco and Algeria. That these dynamics have persisted for five decades is not simply a testament to their indispensability vis-à-vis North Atlantic hegemony, it is also a testament to the ability of these geopolitical arrangements to reproduce themselves and repulse disruptive counterforces.

Nowhere more than the Middle East and North Africa have these developments been more visible, particularly in the increasingly high number of incidents of wars and civil conflicts in then region, especially internationalized ones, before and after the events of September 11, 2001. This geographical concentration of insecurity in the region is not by coincidence; it reflects the geological fact that the majority of the world’s hydrocarbon reserves are located there as well. In the 1970s, as the North Atlantic world faced growing political and military crises vis-à-vis the postcolonial world, there was also an economic crisis as the means to control the production of hydrocarbons, and so the price of oil, increasingly shifted from the major international oil companies to producer states. The solution to this crisis of profitability (for the major oil firms) and the crisis of control (for North Atlantic states) was the same mechanism described above: permanent insecurity. What became apparent in the 1970s was the ability of war and other forms of conflict in the Middle East and North Africa to drive up oil prices to levels that not only restored the profitability of the major international oil firms, the petrodollars themselves were then repurposed to help finance the hyper-militarization of the region so as to sustain the region’s permanent state of insecurity.

Though the Western Sahara conflict and its long-delayed referendum are rarely considered in such contexts, this paper highlights various historical moments when, in fact, the inception and perpetuation of Western Sahara conflict was very much articulated within these broader global dynamics. Moreover, this paper will consider, by comparison with the case of Palestine, the extent to which the Western Sahara peace process has become an important mechanism of regional insecuritization.