

The Self-Determination Delusion: How Activist Scholars and Journalists Have Hijacked the Western Sahara Case

Samir Bennis

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The United Nations (UN) Security Council resolution 2797, adopted on October 31, 2025, was a historic turning point in the Western Sahara case¹, to the extent that Morocco declared the same day a national day (The Day of Unity). For the first time, the international community supports the Moroccan initiative “autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty” as a sole basis for negotiations on the Western Sahara issue, which means that all traditional approaches based on referendum or independence are not acceptable in the UN. Before this resolution, there had been a very long period for missed opportunities, and many confrontations between the parties of the Sahara conflict including scholars and journalists. This period formed the historical and thematic framework for Samir Bennis’s book titled “*The Self-Determination Delusion: How Activist scholars and Journalists Have Hijacked the Western Sahara Case*”, published in July 2024. The 575-page book seems to have anticipated resolution 2797.

In this book, Bennis, a diplomatic advisor at the UN, tries to answer two important questions: Why has the UN failed to resolve that protracted international conflict, considering the influence of intellectuals in this failure? What are the effective ways to change the current deadlocked situation? In answering, the author adopted an argumentative strategy based on analyzing the history of the Sahara conflict, and the positions of all countries concerned, using some crucial documents around the issue: the UN archive, declassified the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) reports and briefings, articles and research by numerous renowned journalists and scholars, as well as diplomatic cables. In the midst of this, he criticizes the Western intellectuals’ immersion in a caricatured retelling of the case.

1 This case is a protracted conflict in North Africa; it began with three major political events in 1975: The International Court of Justice Advisory Opinion on Western Sahara in October, the Moroccan Green March on November 6, and the Madrid accords on November 14. These events led to escalating tensions among several parties regarding sovereignty over the territory: Mauritania, Morocco, and the Polisario Front, supported by Algeria, the latter two parties have been engaged in numerous military and political conflicts to this day. The UN has addressed this issue since its inception under Chapter VI, seeking a solution.

This thick book consists of 14 chapters; the first is dedicated to United States (US) President Donald Trump's decision to recognize the Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara during his first term. According to Bennis, this turning point changed the course of the issue, as the recognition forced the UN to adapt to the new situation, after it had long been influenced by media and political discourse that exaggerated the concept of self-determination². This discourse or alleged narrative has been defended by a number of diplomats such as Christopher Ross, James Baker, and John Bolton, as well as scholars such as Stephan Zunes. In the second chapter, the author further clarifies how the UN and the US became subject to a misleading narrative about human rights in the Sahara region, leading to a distorted perception of the conflict, and a paradox between reality and the image promoted within the UN. He gives as an example what the American activist and famous lawyer Kerry Kennedy did when she posted a video on YouTube in January 2013 to show Morocco's abuses in Sahara, using footage of the disarray in Tunisia during the Arab Spring (p. 70).

Other chapters address the historical position of the key players in this issue. After explaining "Moroccan exceptionalism" in the decolonization process as a multi-colonial state, the study centers on the Spanish role, which further complicated the solution, given its status as a former colonizer power in the region; the study also examines the historical Mauritanian struggle against Moroccan territory in alliance with Algeria and Spain (chapters 3 and 4). The focus of chapters 5 to 7 is the Moroccan offensive diplomatic reaction that led to the so-called "Moroccan initiative for negotiating an autonomy status for the Sahara region" in 2007. That reaction also confronted inherited concepts of the conflict such as "The Sahrawi People" which the author calls a "myth",³ "Moroccan Occupation", "Algerian Support for Right of People to Self-Determination", "Moroccan Expansionist Agenda". The Western propaganda machine has promoted these terms, supported by a large literature published on the issue by authors like Maurice Barbier, Tony Hodges and Jacob Mundy (p. 214). However, the author notes that the prevailing political climate among UN decision-makers at the time began to view these concepts as unrealistic, and therefore none of the Security Council resolutions after 2004 mentioned "independence" or "referendum" as a solution. These resolutions focused on political negotiations to find an acceptable political solution based on compromise, meaning that the issue was treated as merely a territorial dispute between Morocco and Algeria.

In chapter 8, Samir Bennis raises the question about the causes of the UN failure in the Sahara conflict, this time analyzing the situation after 2007, the year of Moroccan initiative, when both Ban Ki-moon, the Secretary-General of the UN, and Christopher Ross, the longest-serving personal envoy for Western Sahara (2009-2017), missed the opportunity to find a

2 The concept of self-determination is a key factor in the Western Sahara issue, given the differing opinions among its parties and intellectuals regarding its application. Morocco believes that autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty is the best way to achieve it, while the Polisario Front, backed by Algeria, believes that this right should be exercised via a referendum leading to independence. The author sees that the real reason behind the insistence on this approach is to create a satellite state in the region, in order to separate Morocco from its African depth (p. 411).

3 The author considers this a "myth" based on a 1975 CIA report (the year the conflict began), and a 1977 US bureau of research and intelligence report, the two reports proved the heterogeneous origins of Sahrawi populations (p. 217-218).

solution. In his opinion, the main reason for failure is bias, and linking the concept of self-determination to independence. The next chapter (9) raises Moroccan diplomatic tactics dealing with the case developments; Morocco officially rejoined its African Union position in 2017, after decades of empty chair policy. In addition, the kingdom did hard to present itself as a role model in managing the war on terrorism and the repercussions of African migration. As another major reason that made the conflict chronic, the author discusses in chapters 10 and 11, the Algerian role since the beginning of the crisis, using a very hard expression: “A long legacy of ingratitude and broken promises”, concluding that Algeria does not want dialogue. On the contrary, it is seeking its own interests, not those of the “Sahrawi People” or Polisario Front, and it is implementing a policy of hostility driven by historical and psychological complexes against Morocco, its former ally during the colonial era.

The final three chapters of the book look at a crucial variable in the evolution of the Western Sahara issue: The European Union’s position and Spain’s contradictory policy towards Morocco. Regarding EU policy, Bennis sees a double standard in European judicial and political action, which has provoked a firm Moroccan response, linking the upgrading of relations to the recognition of Morocco’s sovereignty over the Sahara region. As for Spain’s fluctuating position, the author indicated that the historical background and ongoing diplomatic developments would lead to Spain’s recognition of the Moroccan autonomy plan (chapters 13 and 14), which actually happened in 2022 (the conclusion).

As a result, two main strengths make this book stand out: firstly, it unveils the double standards employed by Western politicians and intellectuals regarding issues of self-determination, human rights, and decolonization. While they advocate for integration within their own nations, they encourage fragmentation in others, such as Morocco, Turkey, and Sudan, under the guise of human rights and international law. Secondly, Bennis details the political tactics model employed by Morocco to preserve its territorial integrity; tactics that rely on proactive and offensive diplomacy rather than making gratuitous concessions and that would be an effective diplomatic approach to countries suffering from separatist movements. On the other hand, the book’s audience may notice a disjointed chapter structure; for example, the author analyses Spain’s role in the conflict in separate chapters, when it could have been addressed in a single chapter to avoid distracting the reader. Furthermore, the author did not adequately discuss Russia’s role in the issue, despite its importance; Moroccan diplomacy, through its balanced stance on the Russian-Ukrainian war, succeeded in neutralizing the obstacle of the Russian veto against Security Council resolutions supporting the Moroccan autonomy plan.

In general, the reader can discover in this book a synthesis of developments in the Sahara case up to 2024, enabling him to predict how international relations related to this conflict will develop. Furthermore, one will discover a practical example of the profound impact political propaganda wielded by Western intellectuals has on Third World conflicts; they can transform an ordinary border dispute into a matter of self-determination and the right to create new mini-states. This has prolonged these conflicts and hindered the UN solutions.