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# CONTESTED STATES AND THEIR EVERYDAY QUEST FOR RECOGNITION

*Dimitris Bouris and Irene Fernández-Molina*

## Introduction

A number of conspicuous phenomena in contemporary world politics escape the conventional (binary) legal understanding of international recognition. For instance, what do we make of the strenuous efforts invested by contested states (Geldenhuis 2009), i.e. state-like entities short of international recognition, in their *sui generis* diplomacy in Brussels? On the one hand, lawyers remind us that the European Union (EU) cannot recognise states; international law is clear that only states may recognise their peers and legal equals. On the other, the ‘Brussels bubble’ is known to be buzzing with contested states’ representatives striving to make their voices heard and engage with the EU institutions and adjoining actors. Even the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization has its headquarters there (McConnell 2017: 143). What is the point of this strategic choice if their primary concern is the pursuit of international recognition and such recognition is supposed not to be on the menu? The debate remains open and it has been rightly pointed out that, while the EU ‘does not recognise states in the traditional sense’, ‘it can generate common positions amongst its members which have a significant effect upon the foreign policy actions of these states and also steer global opinion – and sometimes practice – on particular cases’ (Newman and Visoka 2018: 780).

This chapter proposes a conceptual-analytical alternative to address this conundrum, which is to shift the focus from conventional international recognition to what is here referred to as *transnational recognition*. This involves overcoming at least three divides that constrain our understanding of recognition in world politics, i.e. the domestic vs. international gap in terms of levels of analysis, the state vs. non-state dichotomy in terms of actorness and the binary either/or view of state recognition in international law. As such, our approach is part of a multidisciplinary effort among international relations (IR) scholars, area studies experts and human/political geographers to reorient the conceptual and praxiological boundaries of state recognition as a scholarly and policy field.

Complementarily, the chapter introduces a second concept that is useful for approaching transnational recognition from the angle of the contested states’ agency and struggles therefor, and how these are manifested in their regular patterns of interaction with, and self-representation vis-à-vis, other international/transnational actors: *contested state diplomatic practices*.

In ontological terms, contested states are inherently liminal international actors living in a no man's land or state of transition, 'betwixt and between' the usual binary categories of state and non-state actors (Corcuff 2012; Mälksoo 2012; McConnell 2017). Empirically, by focusing on *what they do* rather than *what they are*, the practices perspective provides a productive analytical lens to challenge structural legal-institutional accounts of the international relations of contested states, which often fail to do justice to their agency and to explain change. When put into practice, the ontological liminality of contested states translates into largely hybrid diplomatic practices. Proposed in critical diplomatic studies as a way to overcome the decreasingly useful distinction between so-called 'old' (state) and 'new' (non-state) diplomacy, the notion of 'hybrid diplomacies' acknowledges the role of 'a multitude of different actors as both intertwined with each other and co-constitutive of the ongoing transformation of diplomatic practice' (Constantinou, Cornago and McConnell 2016: 52). Although contested states certainly care about the state vs. non-state distinction when it comes to their existential status and political aspirations, the same dividing line becomes routinely blurred in their everyday diplomatic practices, which stand out for their hybridity.

The following two sections elaborate on the concepts of transnational recognition and contested state diplomatic practices, drawing from the literature on recognition, transnationalism, international practices, liminality and hybridity in IR. Then, these concepts' empirical potential is illustrated through two case studies examining the diplomatic practices carried out by the representatives of Palestine and Western Sahara in Brussels. Three fundamental empirical questions are addressed: how have Palestinian and Sahrawi diplomatic practices towards the EU developed and changed over the past two decades? How do they differ from each other? How do the everyday interactions involved affect issues of recognition, that is, can we talk about an unconventional/unstructured social form of international recognition through some sort of 'practice upgrade'?

### **Transnational recognition and bridging gaps**

The rationale and potential effects of the diplomatic practices of contested states cannot be understood on the basis of the conventional (binary) legal understanding of international recognition. The alternative analytical avenue proposed here consists in switching to the concept of transnational recognition (Fernández-Molina 2019), and thereby incorporating key insights or corrections from the scholarship on transnationalism. Whether one looks at the original neo-liberal definition of transnational relations as 'contacts, coalitions, and interaction across state boundaries that are not controlled by the central foreign policy organs of governments' (Keohane and Nye 1971: xi), or the new transnationalism's refocus on 'regular interactions across national boundaries when at least one actor is a non-state agent' (Risse-Kappen 1995: 3), three core themes and analytical commitments emerge: first, crossing borders, which applies to both substantive state boundaries and the more subtle, intellectual ones posed by levels of analysis in IR; second, highlighting the role of non-state actors; and, third, prioritising process over stasis – as also emphasised by the literature on liminality. Based on this and on a general understanding of recognition as 'a social act' whereby 'another actor ... is constituted as a subject with a legitimate social standing' (Wendt 2003: 511), transnational recognition may be defined as a social and relational process cutting across state borders and involving both state and non-state actors, which results in the constitution (identity formation and social status building) of a given actor in world politics.

The transnational reinterpretation of recognition in world politics appears a productive way of bridging the gap between two strands of scholarship whose dialogue has remained so far limited in spite of important points of intersection. The first of these is the social theory of recognition, which was developed in the 1990s in parallel by continental critical theory (Honneth 1995), and the Anglo-American ‘politics of recognition’ school (Taylor 1994), building on Hegel’s concept of the ‘struggle for recognition’ and his emphasis on the idea that the constitution of a subject’s self-identity inherently depends on the interaction with, and acknowledgement by, other autonomous subjects. The second strand is the literature on the recognition of states in IR, which has remained heavily influenced by the classical debate on statehood in international law, pitting the declaratory theory against the constitutive theory (Crawford 2006; Oeter 2015), and largely isolated from developments in social theory. A burgeoning strand of scholarship inspired by social theory of recognition has recently emerged in IR, mostly within the constructivist school (Wendt 2003; Lindemann and Ringmar 2012; Daase et al. 2015). Yet, to date, its empirical applications have primarily focused on (mis)recognition and ‘disrespect’ as drivers of state behaviour causing inter-state hostility and war (Lindemann 2010; Duncombe 2016). This has left aside, among other things, the fundamental and ontologically prior problem of the recognition of statehood, as well as recognition dynamics affecting non-state or non-fully-state state actors.

More specifically, three blind spots stemming from unwarranted dichotomies are still in the process of being overcome within the IR scholarship on recognition. These efforts may benefit from the transnationalist emphasis on crossing borders, foregrounding non-state actors and prioritising process. First, in order to cross borders, the divide that needs to be reconsidered is that of the domestic vs. the international levels of analysis. Despite their common sources, a certain disconnect can be observed between the domestic focus and methodological nationalism of the ‘politics of recognition’ and the peacebuilding literature on recognition (e.g. Allan and Keller 2012; Aggestam and Björkdahl 2013; Strömbom 2014), on the one hand, and the fundamental attention to inter-state relations prevailing in the IR current, on the other. The missing link of the chain here are relations of recognition that cut across boundaries and levels of analysis – recognition processes occurring ‘*across, between and beyond the state*’ (Brincat 2017: 2). This transnational expansion seems to be fully consistent with the foundations of recognition theory. As some of Honneth’s followers have rightly pointed out, there is nothing in his theory that ‘precludes the possibility of struggles for recognition expanding any given cultural horizon across the boundaries of political, ethnic, or religious communities’ (Heins 2012: 213).

The second dichotomy that needs to be overcome in studying transnational recognition is the one between state and non-state actors. In this case, the applicability of recognition theory to inter-state relations in IR has been subject to some debate due to the ontological problem of anthropomorphising the state, or the difficult conceptual transfer ‘once we switch from the level of group struggles to relationships between nation-states’ (Honneth 2012: 27). As a result, it is non-state actors that have always had it easier for recognition theorists, while the traditional IR understanding of state recognition has remained constrained by the rigid black-and-white terms of international law. The point made here is that the recognition needs and aspirations of state and non-state actors do not appear to be that dramatically different when ‘looking at international politics from a Hegelian perspective’ (Ringmar 2012: 11). Logically, this is even more the case for liminal international actors such as contested states, which conduct their ‘diplomacy at the margins’ (McConnell 2017) as part of their struggle for international/transnational recognition in any possible form. Third, and related to the prioritisation of process over stasis, it is necessary to

overcome the conventional binary view of international recognition in either/or terms – either an actor (i.e. a state) is recognised or it is not – due to the aforementioned legal reductionism. The alternative is to acknowledge that there exist unstructured, social and relational forms of international/transnational recognition that are analytically distinct from the legal one. Social-relational recognition is a process rather than a permanent feature, and has the potential to be ‘incrementally accumulated by multiplying the quantity and quality of international engagement’ (Bouris and Fernández-Molina 2018: 321), that is, through diplomatic practices.

### **Diplomatic practices of contested states**

When it comes to contested states, we are facing a number of ontologically liminal international actors lacking full recognition in the conventional sense, whose activity in world politics revolves around their struggle for recognition and tends to be based on a particular, largely hybrid repertoire of diplomatic practices. Their ambiguous nature and status make even their labelling in academic literature challenging. Most of the overlapping concepts used to refer to the heterogeneous universe of contested states or parts thereof, including *de facto* states (Pegg 1998), quasi-states (Kolstø 2006) and unrecognised states (Caspersen 2012), share an emphasis on these political entities’ territorial control, functional capabilities and limited or lacking international recognition. The territorial element included in their definitional criteria tends to push to the margins or exclude those contested states that do not possess substantial control over (most of) the land they claim, such as Palestine and Western Sahara/Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). On the other hand, the greater flexibility of looser terms such as contested states (Geldenhuis 2009) makes it harder to find a lowest common denominator besides the international contestation of their status. In fact, it may be argued that what is ontologically shared by all contested states as polities is liminality. As coined in anthropology, the notion of liminality originally refers to the rites of passage and to ambiguous spaces or situations that are ‘betwixt and between’ regular categories and points of reference (see Thomassen 2009). Liminality therefore describes the nature of contested states in terms of both temporality – as their struggle for self-determination and sovereignty, irrespective of its length, is perceived to be a state of transition – and positionality and status within the Westphalian system, i.e. sovereignty (Rumelili 2012: 497) – as they challenge the binary state vs. non-state categorisation.

Then, when we shift our gaze to what practitioners do, the ontological liminality of contested states tends to materialise in a certain range of diplomatic practices. International practices have been defined as ‘socially meaningful patterns of action which, in being performed more or less competently, simultaneously embody, act out, and possibly reify background knowledge and discourse in and on the material world’ (Adler and Pouliot 2011: 6). The emerging literature on practices in IR looks at international relations through performative lenses, breaking it down into sets of competent patterns of activity that are anchored in the material world and continually in process, socially (re)generated through knowledge embedded in action and the ‘logic of practicality’ (see Pouliot 2008; Bueger and Gadinger 2015). This approach has been productively applied, among other spheres of activity that constitute or ‘make’ world politics, to the study of diplomacy (Pouliot and Cornut 2015). Diplomatic practices stand out for their relational and processual nature: ‘Diplomacy is not merely a practice that deals in relations between pre-constituted political entities. Rather, these relations are seen as constitutive of, and ontologically prior to, these entities’ (Sending, Pouliot and Neumann 2015: 7). Moreover, and crucially for structurally marginalised liminal actors

such as contested states, the very play of diplomatic practice may strengthen the agency of those who perform it, for it endogenously generates ‘emergent power’ in the form of social skills and competences (Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014).

Combining all of these ingredients, the concept of contested state diplomatic practices (Bouris and Fernández-Molina 2018) refers to the basic performative ingredients of what contested states view as their diplomacy and the everyday, patterned and competent activities of individual agents or representatives that act as their ‘diplomats’ (see also Visoka 2018, 2019). These essentially consist of contacts, communications and interactions, and need therefore to be approached from a relational perspective. Within the wider category of diplomatic practices – all of which share the aim of ‘representing a polity vis-à-vis a recognised other’ (Sending, Pouliot and Neumann 2011: 528) or ‘to the outside world’ (Pouliot and Cornut 2015, 299), those associated with contested states stand out for two reasons, i.e. their hybridity in transcending the dichotomy of ‘old’ (state) vs. ‘new’ (non-state) diplomacy and their structure-generating properties in terms of recognition. Regarding hybridity, contested states present the paradox of combining a strong desire for the ‘old’ diplomacy’s *ius legationis* due to *what they are* (liminal actors), for this right has been traditionally monopolised by actors possessing the sovereign statehood they cherish, with the routine blurring of the state vs. non-state boundaries in *what they do* (hybrid diplomatic practices). The post-colonial notion of hybridity is useful for capturing how the contested states’ liminal nature and position translates into specific diplomatic practices that are ‘neither the one nor the other’ and thus ‘[alienate] our political expectations’ (Bhabha 1994: 37).

Furthermore, an additional form of hybridity comes from the fact that there may be both reproductive and transformative ways for contested states to *practise* liminality in their diplomacy:

Although their very being challenges the established social distinctions, they may engage in representational practices that reposition them in one of the existing categories, with an overall reproductive effect on structure, and/or they may practice their liminality in a subversive manner by reproducing their own ambiguity.

*(Rumelili 2012: 497)*

In other words, reproductive diplomatic practices are those whereby contested states ‘respond to the ontological insecurity engendered by liminality’ by ‘[reinforcing] and [reproducing] the existing social categories’ (Rumelili 2012: 503), that is, by mimicking “‘official’ state diplomacy as the “gold standard” to aspire to’ (McConnell, Moreau and Dittmer 2012: 805). By contrast, transformative diplomatic practices enable liminal actors to perform and capitalise on their own political inbetweenness, taking advantage of the state vs. non-state muddling – for instance, investing their efforts in activities conventionally associated with non-state activism, campaigning and lobbying.

Second, in line with the concept of transnational recognition as well as the perspective of liminality, contested state diplomatic practices possess structure-generating properties that feed into these actors’ struggles for recognition. This explains other international actors’ usual concern about implied or ‘creeping recognition’ being inferred from any of their dealings with contested states, which they try to justify as constituting ‘engagement without recognition’ (Ker-Lindsay 2015; Ker-Lindsay and Berg 2018). Actually, according to a social-relational view of recognition, ‘engagement without recognition’ is never absolutely possible as a matter of fact, and irrespective of intent. Conversely, the spectre of ‘creeping recognition’ would not be fully justified based on a strictly legal, binary

understanding of international recognition – just like the strenuous diplomatic efforts of contested states to engage the EU institutions in Brussels would not make sense. Contested state diplomatic practices matter because they happen in a context of liminality, and the beauty of liminality lies in being ‘unstructured and highly structuring’ (Thomassen 2009: 20) or an “‘unstructured’ origin of structure’ (Mälksoo 2012: 488). Their potential for change is twofold. Not only do these practices contribute to constituting and endogenously empowering (Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014) the liminal actors that perform them within the diplomatic field, but they also allow them to accumulate transnational recognition in unstructured, social and relational forms that range along an incremental continuum – as opposed to conventional/legal international recognition. This is relevant to debates in the international practices literature about whether, and how, ‘the ordinary unfolding of practice [generates] transformations’ (Adler and Pouliot 2011: 18). Moreover, as will be shown in the case studies below, some contested state diplomatic practices may have a counterintuitive impact on the sphere of ‘high politics’ in spite of these actors’ structural disadvantage, suggesting that bottom-up practice-led change has structure-generating properties.

### **Contested statehood in Palestine and Western Sahara**

Palestine and Western Sahara are two notable and exceptional cases, which differ from the wider universe of contested states in that they have not resulted from secessionism but rather from deviant/thwarted decolonisation processes and the ensuing foreign occupation of their territories. Their liminality has also become protracted due to the deadlock of their respective conflict resolution attempts initiated in the 1990s, thus confirming the paradoxical argument put forward by Pace and Pallister-Wilkins (2018) that liminality can also be permanent.

The reasons behind Palestine’s contested statehood can be traced back to the 1993 Oslo Accords, which led to the creation of the Palestinian Authority (PA) as a proto-state with limited territorial control for a supposedly interim period (Bouris 2014). With the Oslo Accords, the West Bank was divided into three areas: it was only in Area A (17.7%) that the PA was given full administrative and security control. In Area B (21.3%), the PA was only given civil control, while Israel maintained security control. In Area C (61%), Israel would retain full responsibility and control (Bouris and Kyrus 2017: 758). Despite its inability to fully control the territory it claims, in 2012 the UN decided to ‘upgrade’ Palestine from ‘non-member observer entity’ to ‘non-member observer state’, thus paving the way for the Palestinians to join a number of international bodies and organisations. The upgrade also reconfirmed that Palestinians enjoy what Geldenhuys (2009) has called ‘titular recognition’ – recognition of their *right* to statehood. In the case of Western Sahara, the SADR was proclaimed in 1976 by the Polisario Front. In the case of the SADR, which has been recognised since its proclamation by 84–85 UN member states and still upholds diplomatic relations with around half of these, there is also some level of ‘titular recognition’, but this is significantly lower than that of the Palestinians and has a distinct non-Western bias. Despite this, since 1979 the Polisario Front has been officially considered by the UN ‘the representative of the people of Western Sahara’ (UN General Assembly 1979).

The structural differences between Palestine and SADR as well as variation in terms of recognition are closely linked to the respective degrees of institutionalisation of their relations with the EU. This also has reverberations with regard to the level of social interaction and recognition and EU officials are aware of the ‘political capital’ which contested states’

representatives derive from interaction with them (Bouris and Fernández-Molina 2018: 313). The legal basis for the relations between the EU and the PA is the Interim Association Agreement (AA), signed in 1997 with the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) on behalf of the PA. Since Palestine's upgrade at the UN, an effort has been initiated by Palestinian officials to push the EU to offer Palestine a full AA, a move which has also received the backing of France.<sup>1</sup> Under EU rules, though, such an agreement can be offered only to sovereign states, although France has argued that the EU has a full AA with Kosovo despite the fact that it is not recognised by all 28 EU member states. In the case of Western Sahara, the EU has an AA with Morocco but not with Western Sahara; in the latter case the EU and its member states have adopted a twofold non-recognition policy whereby they do not recognise Moroccan sovereignty claims over Western Sahara but neither do they recognise the SADR or maintain any formal contact with the Polisario Front (Fernández-Molina 2017).

These structural and legal differences are reflected in the diplomatic practices of the Palestinian and Sahrawi representatives 'on the ground'. The physical representation of the Palestinians in Brussels was before the UN upgrade named 'Palestinian Delegation', a label which could be used by any other actor. However, after the UN upgrade, as well as a number of EU member states' decisions to grant a higher diplomatic status to the Palestinian representatives, the Palestinian representation was renamed to 'Mission of Palestine to the Kingdom of Belgium, the EU and Luxemburg'. Although such label resembles more a 'state' diplomatic representation the label 'state' is still missing, contrasting with the Mission of the State of Palestine to the UN.<sup>2</sup> Contrary to this more 'official' standing, the status of the Sahrawi representation in Brussels is much more liminal. There are two representatives of SADR: a SADR delegate-minister for Europe and a Sahrawi diplomat who introduces himself as the 'Polisario Front's representative in Brussels' (Bouris and Fernández-Molina 2018: 314). The human resources of the Sahrawi diplomacy are limited to these two men and sometimes a non-Sahrawi assistant while they also use the services of Independent Diplomat (ID), a non-profit consultancy firm which among other things also advises unrecognised states in developing their diplomatic capabilities (Ross 2007).

### **Palestinian and Sahrawi diplomatic practices in Brussels**

When it comes to the practices that are carried out within this context, the European Parliament (EP) has always played an 'interesting role'<sup>3</sup> within the EU institutional ecosystem, especially with regard to contested state diplomacy, as its open nature and rules facilitate the organisation of different events where contested states' representatives can be present and also interact with other EU officials. This is part of a broader 'parliamentary diplomacy' (Stavridis and Jančić 2017) which enables participants to avoid concerns about recognition. This is the reason why the EP has long been prioritised as a venue by both Palestinian and Sahrawi diplomats. Despite this, non-state actors and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were initially the ones most involved with the EP. That is the case of the Mattin Group in the case of Palestine, and Western Sahara Resource Watch (WSRW) and ID in relation to Western Sahara. Mattin and WSRW worked independently from Palestinian and Polisario representatives and they always stressed their autonomy as civil society organisations. On the other hand, not only has ID, as a professional consultancy (Seabrooke 2015), been supporting the Polisario Front in establishing contact and arranging meetings with a number of members of the EP, but its staff would also accompany the Polisario Front representatives in these meetings (Bouris and Fernández-Molina 2018: 315). The practices of the Mattin Group and WSRW were based on legal arguments and on an effort to



activate normative latency to regulate the EU's 'own practices'.<sup>4</sup> One of the effects that this activation had was the shift of focus on some side effects, or 'low politics' (Fernández-Molina 2017) that Israel's and Morocco's occupation policies had, such as dubious economic activities and human rights violations. As such, they tried to take the discussion out of the realm of 'foreign policy' and focus on different aspects of human rights violations which would eventually contribute to the delegitimisation of Israel's and Morocco's occupations.

The success of these practices and their contagion were the catalysts behind the adoption of new practices and 'new ways of doing things' of the Palestinian and Sahrawi representatives who in the beginning were reluctant to new ideas and they preferred their 'old school' diplomatic practices. The result of this was a blurring of boundaries between the practices of diplomacy and activism (McConnell 2017: 140), which constitutes transformative diplomatic practices. Neither the Palestinian nor the Sahrawi representatives hesitate to describe their activities at the EP as 'lobbying' and for all of them the EP remains the 'easiest place to lobby' in Brussels. They spend significant amount of time at the EP, in meetings with different MEPs and among the routine aspects of their activities they 'walk the corridors, knock on the doors, speak to assistants, post leaflets through the doors' (Bouris and Fernández-Molina 2018: 316). What is interesting is that the Sahrawi representative gains access to the building of the EP by wearing a brown badge, which is the one reserved for lobbyists, and grants unimpeded access to all the EP buildings, public meetings, committee meetings and hearings. In other words, the 'price' of gaining access is the sacrifice of attributes of statehood and the willingness to accept treatment as any other non-state actor, which is a meaningful sign of hybridisation. Despite commonalities, there are also significant differences in the diplomatic practices of the Palestinian and Sahrawi representatives at the EP and these mainly come from a structural asymmetry in their legal-institutional frameworks of relations between them and the EU. For example, in the EP there is a 'Delegation for Relations with Palestine', while there is only an 'Intergroup on Western Sahara'. The main difference is that delegations are considered 'official bodies' which maintain relations with parliaments in non-EU countries, while 'intergroups' are formed by MEPs as a forum to exchange ideas but they do not have any formal character. Despite this, they still remain significant, as they provide for the opportunity to hold 'official meetings', which can help raise awareness (Bouris and Fernández-Molina 2018: 317).

Outside of the EP, and despite their willingness to adopt more hybrid diplomatic practices and use to their advantage the state of liminality in which they are, Palestinian and Sahrawi representatives still view themselves as 'diplomats'. As such they acknowledge the importance of more 'reproductive' diplomatic practices that mimic conventional state diplomacy. In the words of a senior Palestinian diplomat, 'If you look like a state, act like a state and behave like a state – then you are probably a state'.<sup>5</sup> The main targets of these reproductive diplomatic practices have traditionally been the Council of the EU and the EU member states' permanent representations in Brussels. The main aim of 'targeting' the Council is twofold: on the one hand, the effort to 'provoke debate' and try to influence and shape as far as possible the discussions of the Committee of Permanent Representatives to the EU (COREPER) and on the other hand to attempt and obstruct a further deepening of relations between the EU, Israel and Morocco – lately with a particular focus on these economic and sectoral cooperation agreements which fail to define the explicit territorial scope and differentiate between Israel and Morocco 'proper' and the territories, which are considered occupied by international law. After the Palestinian upgrade at the UN, Palestinian diplomats pushed and persisted for their name to be changed to 'Palestine' and this was eventually accepted by COREPER. Sahrawis were also successful to some extent towards

the Council in 2011, when they tried to prevent the passing of the protocol regarding the extension of the EU–Morocco fisheries agreement, which eventually failed ‘by a whisker’ due to Germany’s last minute U–turn (Bouris and Fernández-Molina 2018: 318–319). The *demandeurs* of these meetings are always the Palestinian and Sahrawi representatives and in most cases these meetings take place in the official EU member states’ premises. Contrary to the findings elsewhere in the literature (McConnell 2017: 144), this does not raise any significant concerns about recognition. Meetings usually involve senior officials, and EU member states which are considered ‘friendly’ or ‘neutral’ are prioritised. This is based on an approach, on behalf of contested states’ representatives, to minimise ‘wasted efforts’ i.e. ‘don’t bother asking the French and the Spaniards’ about Western Sahara (Bouris and Fernández-Molina 2018: 319).

Except for the Council, Palestinian and Sahrawi diplomacy also targets the European External Action Service (EEAS) which is now seen as an institution which potentially has the power to challenge EU member states’ national diplomacies not necessarily in a material sense but at a symbolic level (Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014). Contested state diplomatic practices towards EEAS are similar to the ones underpinning the interactions with the Council and EU member states’ permanent representations. While there are no concerns about recognition which prevent EEAS officials from receiving contested states’ representatives, this is mainly due to the hybridity and liminality guiding their being – the Polisario Front’s representative, for example, would be ‘received as an individual, just like anyone can be received at EEAS’ (Bouris and Fernández-Molina 2018: 319). Despite this, the level of ‘recognition’ has important reverberations for the European diplomats who try to avoid any action which might be considered a social form of recognition. The issue is much more sensitive in the case of the Sahrawis; the Palestinians enjoy a higher degree of ‘titular’ recognition. In April 2016, for example, the SADR minister of foreign affairs – a very ‘sensitive’ post for interaction with any contested state (Ker-Lindsay 2015: 278) – was visiting Brussels but was treated with ‘radio silence’ by several EU institutions and did not manage to secure a meeting with the EU high representative Federica Mogherini (Hooper 2016; Bouris and Fernández-Molina 2018: 320). Contrary to this, such an avoidance has never happened with the Palestinian president, who can always guarantee unimpeded access to the current high representative and her team.

## Conclusions

This chapter has introduced the concepts of *transnational recognition* and *contested state diplomatic practices*. The former provides a non-legal broadening of, or escape route from, the conventional understanding of (international) recognition in world politics, which is necessary in order to account for recognition dynamics cutting across state borders and involving non-state actors – or non-fully-state state actors such as contested states. The more specific notion of contested state diplomatic practices places the focus on the agency and performative dimension of the struggle for recognition pursued by these contested states in the diplomatic field. In this respect, the chapter has demonstrated that contested state diplomacy has benefited from a hybridisation of practices which has been made possible by their liminal actorness. As such, the ambivalence of being ‘betwixt and between’ (Turner 1969: 95) and ‘neither the one nor the other’ (Bhabha 1994: 37) applies to both what contested states are (liminal international actors) and also what they do (hybrid diplomatic practices). Adopting a practice approach has helped us explore another important aspect of international recognition, namely social recognition. Such an

approach allows us to scratch below the surface of the conventional legal view of international state recognition and to capture more unstructured, social and relational forms of recognition through a ‘practice upgrade’. Existing definitions and approaches to date insufficiently ascribe agency to contested states and also fail to explain what happens in-between these processes. While diplomacy and recognition play a significant role in world politics, a practice approach allows us to delve into the cracks of the current international system and analyse the ‘black box’ of contested states and especially *how* their representatives practice their everyday diplomacy.

An interesting implication of our empirical findings is that, in the performance of contested states, struggles for social-relational transnational recognition and international (state) recognition in the traditional sense are not mutually exclusive but usually go hand in hand with each other. This mixture is reflected in the coexistence of transformative and reproductive diplomatic practices in the everyday interaction between Palestinian and Sahrawi representatives and EU institutions in Brussels. Unapologetic resort to practices akin to non-state lobbying in the EP does not preclude the mimetic desire to ‘look like a state, act like a state and behave like a state’ when dealing with other EU institutions such as the Council, the EU member states’ permanent representations and the EEAS. Such a paradox suggests that a turn to transnational recognition, as such, would not decrease the likelihood for overcoming the international contestation surrounding the recognition of statehood and the many conflicts arising from this in world politics.

By focusing on transnational recognition, contested states diplomatic practices and the everyday interaction between Palestinian and Sahrawi representatives towards EU institutions, this chapter seeks to open up new research horizons which, building on the cross-fertilisation of the study of diplomacy with practice theory (Pouliot and Cornut 2015), may shift the analytical focus from sovereign to contested states. Such an approach ascribes agency to contested states cracking into the micro-politics of the ‘state’ and its making, which is not seen as a static object/process but as the result of everyday practices, performances and processes always in motion.

## Notes

- 1 Interview with EEAS official, 12 September 2016, Brussels.
- 2 Interview with Palestinian official, 31 August 2016, Brussels.
- 3 Interview with Sahrawi official/diplomat, 7 October 2016, Brussels, and interview with advisor to Polisario Front Representation to EU, 31 August 2016, Brussels.
- 4 Skype Interview with Matting Group Representative, 13 June 2018.
- 5 Interview with Senior Palestinian Diplomat, 22 May 2017, The Hague.

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