

Spain and Morocco clash over a rock

Vicky Short, Brian Smith
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Relations between the neighbouring countries of Morocco and Spain reached boiling point last week over the sovereignty of an uninhabited rocky islet.

On July 11 a dozen Moroccan soldiers set up camp on the island and planted the Moroccan flag. Spain moved a military detachment to the area and, without giving prior public warning to the Moroccan government, removed its troops by force. Six Moroccan soldiers were taken prisoner and moved to the Spanish enclave of Ceuta and repatriated a few hours later. Two Spanish flags were then put up in place of the Moroccan one that the troops had raised and a military presence established.

Spain's action was described by the Moroccan Foreign Minister, Mohammed Benaissa, as "an ignoble act which amounts to an act of war". Both countries have since been conducting a war of words. Spain has positioned warships at other small islets such as Los Lobos, opposite the popular holiday resort of Fuerteventura in the Canary Islands. It has also sent four warships to its remaining enclaves in Morocco, Ceuta and Melilla.

The two countries have resolved the immediate conflict under pressure from the United States, but the agreement can only be temporary given that the island has merely been returned to the previously disputed status quo as demanded by Spain, i.e., both claimants to withdraw their actual or threatened military occupation.

At first glance the intensity of the dispute between the two countries seems inexplicable. Known to Spaniards as the Isle of Perejil (Parsley Island) and to the Moroccans as Leila, the islet is situated 200 metres off the Moroccan shore in the Straits of Gibraltar in the Mediterranean Sea. It is less than one kilometre in diameter and is only visited by herdsman who take their goats there to graze.

The official explanations for the conflict over sovereignty ring hollow. Spain claims because the islet contains a large cave that could accommodate about 200 people it is often used for smuggling drugs and trafficking in humans. It could therefore, also be used by terrorist supporters of Al Qaeda.

The dispute has long historical antecedents stretching

back to the end of the colonial era, when Spain and France relinquished most of their North African possessions. Under a 1956 agreement, Spain kept Ceuta and Melilla, which it had held for centuries. But Morocco strongly disputes Spanish control over several rocky islands. Sections of the Moroccan bourgeoisie have also sought the full devolution of both territories since 1975.

While the Spanish claim that the island has belonged to them since 1668, the history of its ownership is bound up with the designs of rival imperialist powers on the region and their oppression of Africa. Over the past centuries it has featured high in several political and military conflicts.

In 1835 the United States attempted to buy the strategic rocky isle supposedly to build a coal power station. However, the agreement did not go through mainly due to Britain's opposition to the establishment in the Straits area of an emerging great rival power. In 1848, the British attacked Ceuta and wanted to conquer Perejil, but Spain prevented it by sending a military detachment to the area. As a result Britain accepted Spanish sovereignty. In 1887 Spain sent an expedition to build a lighthouse on the islet. The action was opposed by Morocco, which forcibly removed the boundary stones laid by the Spaniards.

During World War II the islet was known in military language as Punta Alemana (German Point) because it was used as a bunker by the Nazi army.

Spain claims that behind the sudden occupation of the islet by Morocco are preparations to move against all of the enclaves it still controls from its imperial past, and that if Morocco is allowed to continue the occupation of Parsley, then Ceuta and Melilla will be next. This comes at a time when Spain and Britain are negotiating terms to resolve the sovereignty of Gibraltar, a British colony in the south of Spain.

The dispute has spread beyond the confines of the two countries involved, invoking fear among other imperialist countries that a deterioration of the conflict would result in the destabilisation of the entire area. Therefore both the European Union and the United States have intervened in

an attempt to resolve the issue.

What then can account for the reignition of a simmering historic dispute that has lay dormant for years? Tensions have grown between the two states over issues such as illegal immigrants coming from North Africa through Morocco into Spain, over agricultural imports to the EU and Morocco's refusal to renew a fishing-license agreement for EU countries including Spain. But easily the most important factor in explaining the present dispute is one that has become all too familiar in recent years: It's about oil.

There have been a number of recent border disputes between Morocco and its imperialist neighbour with regard to the Canary Islands. Spain in 1997 stated that it saw the border as the median between the two "states", with regard to a protocol on "states" less than 720 kilometres apart. Morocco counters that its territory extends to the edge of continental shelf, and therefore the border is much closer to the Canaries. This is particularly important given the recent licenses given out to explore for oil offshore. Spain last year issued a license to Repsol, the formerly state-held concern that dominates the Spanish oil sector and gas sector, to explore for oil in a 600 kilometre square area 10 kilometres off Fuerteventura and 100 kilometres off the coast of Morocco. In October 2001, Morocco withdrew its ambassador to Spain in protest at what it insisted was a violation of its territorial water.

Morocco's present control over the Western Sahara has also been thrown into question. The sparsely populated territory lies on the northwest coast of Africa bordered by Morocco, Mauritania and Algeria, almost facing the Canary Islands. It was administered by Spain until 1976. Both Morocco and Mauritania annexed the territory but were opposed by the Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguia el-Hamra y de Río de Oro (Frente Polisario), supported by Algeria. Fighting ensued between Morocco and the Frente Polisario, while Mauritania eventually backed out of the third of Western Sahara it controlled.

In 1991 the United Nations was called in to resolve the dispute. But the UN mission, MINURSO, has failed over the past 11 years to undertake a promised referendum on the territory's future—whether it stays as part of Morocco, becomes an autonomous province or is granted independence.

UN Legal Counsel Hans Corell recently ruled that Morocco is "not listed as the administering power of the territory in the UN list of Non-Self-Governing Territories". Corell's ruling established that the Madrid

Agreement, which ceded territory to Morocco and Mauritania in 1975, "is not legal". Therefore Spain is the administering power or at least Western Sahara is Spain's responsibility. The ruling came after Morocco had given licences to US firm Kerr-McGee and French Total-Fina-Elf to explore off the coast of the Western Sahara. The UN found that Morocco had no right to grant licences. Meanwhile Frente Polisario signed a licence on May 27 this year with Australian concern Fusion Oil for offshore exploration.

Kofi Annan's emissary, former US Secretary of State James Baker, said in March this year that an independent Western Sahara would be viable, but is known to favour it being granted the status of an autonomous province as an interim measure. France backs Morocco, while Spain increasingly favours an independent Western Sahara.

Spain's interest in this case is determined by what resources may lie of the coast of Western Sahara and its involvement in the \$2.3 billion Maghreb-Europe Gas Pipeline (GME), linking the Hass R'mel field in Algeria with Cordoba, in Andalusia through Morocco and able to convey 20 million cubic metres.

One immediate consequence of the dispute between Morocco and Spain is that it will possibly open up alternative trans-Mediterranean routes bypassing Morocco.

One of the essential conditions for the big powers to exploit the oil and gas deposits and transport them to their own countries is the political reliability of the countries which own them and through which the pipelines will travel. Algeria favours an independent Western Sahara, which it might control and would give it access to the Atlantic.

Rabat provoked the confrontation over Parsley against this background of sharp territorial disputes, in which Spain is by no means the innocent or injured party it likes to make out and in which light the US and the EU have painted it.



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