

Spain assumes leading role in Middle East diplomacy

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Spain's Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos is continuing to promote his government's diplomatic role in the Middle East in the wake of the withdrawal of Spain's combat troops from Iraq. This is likely to intensify the pressure Spain comes under as divisions between Europe and the US deepen.

The Socialist Workers Party of Spain (PSOE) was returned to power in March's election amid widespread disgust at the right-wing Popular Party (PP). The new Prime Minister Jose Luis Zapatero was extremely conscious of the unpopularity of the PP's support for the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq, and quickly announced the withdrawal of the 1,400-strong Spanish contingent.

This move infuriated Washington. The previous government of Jose Maria Aznar was one of the most fervent supporters of military action. For all the evident displeasure of the US administration, however, (Secretary of State Colin Powell did not even accompany Moratinos to a press conference after their recent meeting on the matter) the foreign minister has been at great pains to emphasise the role Spain can play in the region.

The Zapatero government's withdrawal of troops was based on a demand for the occupation of Iraq to be brought under United Nations auspices. Moratinos has not answered questions about the redeployment of troops elsewhere (Afghanistan, for example), and has stated his support for other methods of pacifying and stabilising Iraq.

The Zapatero government has not been motivated by the same opposition to barbarism that distinguished much of the opposition to the war. Rather, Zapatero has sought to reintegrate Spain into a coalition with other European nations, as opposed to the very close links Aznar forged with Washington. Moratinos has

emphasised the Spanish government's support for the military presence in Afghanistan, for example, as it is under UN mandate and under NATO command.

Spain has already started discussions with the French and German governments to formulate a new proposal for the occupation of Iraq, which would relieve domestic pressure on the US government and ensure that the European ruling class gets its share of any spoils.

A government source said the idea was "to see if Spain, France and Germany can help the United States find an exit from Iraq and devise a formula for an international presence there that would not be perceived as an occupation by most of the population".

Moratinos has indicated the possibility of sending Arab forces into Iraq. He has also suggested that a future international presence could be made up of soldiers from countries which were not part of the US-led coalition. Militarily this would effectively mean France and Germany.

Moratinos welcomed comments from UN Secretary General Kofi Annan that he expects the Security Council to adopt a new resolution authorising a multinational force to remain in Iraq after June 30, the date set by the US for restoration of "sovereignty" to the Iraqi people.

The appointment of Moratinos was a calculated move. Apart from his staunchly pro-European sentiments, he has a long history of diplomacy in the Middle East. From his earliest jobs on the foreign ministry's Eastern Europe Coordination Desk, and subsequently at the embassy in the former Yugoslavia, he moved to a posting in Rabat in 1984. By 1991 he had risen to director general of the Institute for Cooperation with the Arab World. He was briefly the Spanish ambassador to Israel. From 1996 to 2003 he

was EU Special Representative for the Middle East peace process. Moratinos was involved in the negotiations to end the siege of the Basilica of the Nativity in Bethlehem in 2002, and is widely respected within Palestinian bourgeois circles.

It is this extensive knowledge of Middle Eastern diplomacy that is being offered as a sop to the US. After the meeting in Washington, Moratinos said that Powell and National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice had asked him to help in promoting peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

Moratinos was very cautious about what this meant, saying that it was not mediation. “Mediations are when you have the mandate of the parties, or a clear mandate of the international community”. The role he would be playing, he said, was that “Spain should contribute within the European Union to create this new dynamic that has begun with [Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s] initiative to withdraw from Gaza”.

Moratinos previously welcomed Sharon’s decision to annex permanently over half the West Bank in return for the creation of a Palestinian enclave on the Gaza Strip as “an opportunity”. This was also the conciliatory line taken by the EU, which said the planned withdrawal from Gaza could be a “significant step” towards peace.

Moratinos has played a crucial role for Washington, presenting Sharon’s plan as being a step towards improved conditions for the Palestinians. A US State Department official made this quite clear when he said Moratinos was playing no mediating role: “[I]t was agreed they would help on the subject of the withdrawal from Gaza and reform in the Greater Middle East Initiative. They agreed to help us present these things as moments of opportunity”.

The EU delegation, however, sees this as an opportunity to return to the previous “roadmap” peace plan endorsed by the US, the EU, the UN and Russia. Moratinos, with his long experience in the region, is seen as a key component of this return. French Foreign Minister Michel Barnier said the EU needed Moratinos’s “knowledge and sensitivities on the ground” in order to get the roadmap back on track.

“There is a plan, the roadmap,” said Barnier. “We believe that the withdrawal from Gaza is positive on condition that it is part of a step on the roadmap. And we call for dialogue and consultations with the

Palestinians”.

This has served to endorse Sharon’s disengagement plan. Following Sunday’s referendum in the Likud party, in which 59.5 percent of participating party members opposed the proposal, Moratinos spoke sharply of the settlers who “do not want to leave Gaza or the West Bank and are blocking all momentum towards peace”.

At a point when some Israeli officials are saying that Sharon remains committed to the roadmap, Moratinos and the EU delegation are effectively encouraging belief in the disengagement proposal.

In this respect Moratinos may yet prove to be important to the US. One State Department official was quoted as saying “We have to prove there is a process under way and we weren’t played by Sharon. But we’ll get hammered and our judgement will be questioned”.

Moratinos may well be able to relieve this pressure in the short term. His assertion that “The international community should accept its responsibilities because we cannot support the policy of settlement of territories occupied by Israel” will win support for its opposition to Israeli settlements. Ultimately, though, the US and the European ruling class have different requirements in the region. These differences will not be settled by a statesmanlike phrase, and Spain is likely to find itself caught between them as they sharpen.



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