

Spanish visit by Syria's Assad highlights differences between Madrid and Washington

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A two-day official visit by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to Spain has highlighted differences between Madrid and Washington over the occupation of Iraq and overall Middle East policy.

The visit took place following US-imposed sanctions against Syria and the blocking of an Association Agreement between Syria and the European Union (EU) by Britain, Germany and the Netherlands. The agreement envisages cooperation between Syria and the EU in the field of tourism, transport, customs and the environment. It reduces import tariffs and covers trade in goods, services and public procurement. With the agreement more or less finalised, it was delayed on May 1 as a result of demands for a clause denouncing chemical weapons. The agreement already contained a clause denouncing weapons of mass destruction, but at the last moment, the three countries demanded a stronger wording.

Syrian officials complained to the European Union that the demand was biased against their country, pointing out that a similar demand was not made in the case of Israel, which is widely believed to possess nuclear weapons. The agreement is of crucial importance to Damascus because it will allow European investments in Syria and will remove duties on a number of Syrian products exported to the EU.

Another important factor in the agreement for Syria is an attempt to establish closer ties to Europe, which it hopes will act as a counterweight to the military threats of US imperialism.

Since coming to power in June 2000, following the death of his father, Hafez al-Assad, the Syrian president has maintained close links with Spain, making several telephone calls to former Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar. Syria expects this relationship to become much closer with the election of the Socialist Party under the

leadership of Jose Luis Zapatero. The Socialist Workers Party of Spain (PSOE) was returned to power in March amid widespread disgust at the right-wing Popular Party (PP) and a wave of anti-war sentiment. Zapatero, conscious of the mass opposition to the PP's support for the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq, quickly announced the withdrawal of the 1,400-strong Spanish contingent. Zapatero also made clear that foreign policy would emphasise a closer relationship with Europe as against the very close ties to Washington under Aznar.

Zapatero's withdrawal of troops from Iraq was based on a demand for the occupation to be brought under the auspices of the United Nations. The new government quickly began discussions with the French and German governments to formulate a proposal for the occupation of Iraq, which would relieve domestic pressure on the Bush administration and ensure that the European powers get their share of Iraqi oil supplies and commercial contracts. A government source said they planned "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." Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos has indicated the possibility of sending Arab forces into Iraq.

Spain is increasingly presenting itself as a bridge between Europe and the Middle East and offering its services as a force for diplomacy in the region. Despite furious opposition to Spain's withdrawal of troops, the US welcomed Spain's assistance on the diplomatic front. The newly appointed foreign minister, Moratinos, has a long history of diplomacy in the Middle East. He was posted to Rabat in 1984, and by 1991 he had risen to director general of the Institute for Cooperation with the Arab World. After serving briefly as the Spanish

ambassador to Israel, he was the EU Special Representative for the Middle East peace process from 1996 to 2003. 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. Based on this history, US Secretary of State Colin Powell and National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice asked him, at a meeting in Washington in May, to help in promoting peace between Israel and the Palestinians. Describing his role, Moratinos said, "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 welcomed Sharon's decision to permanently annex more than half of the West Bank in return for the creation of a Palestinian enclave on the Gaza Strip as "an opportunity"—the line also taken by the EU. Moratinos has played a crucial role for Washington, presenting Sharon's plan as a step towards improved conditions for the Palestinians.

In a statement on June 1, Moratinos said, "Syria is an important country in the Middle East. She is the key country for solving all causes pertaining to security and stability in this significant region." On the Syrian-European Association Agreement, Moratinos stressed that Spain will do its best to accelerate signing of the agreement. Reiterating Spain's opposition to the US economic sanctions imposed on Syria, Moratinos said, "These sanctions are not in favour of dialogue and do not create an understanding atmosphere for solving the raised obstacles and disagreements between Syria and the US."

On Iraq, Moratinos pointed out that Spain has the same concerns as Syria over the situation, saying that it will exert "every possible effort" in the UN Security Council in favour of returning security and stability to the Iraqi people.

In a joint press conference following a meeting with Zapatero, Assad said all the topics discussed were positively and directly influenced by the withdrawal of Spanish troops from Iraq and a return to the international legitimacy. Assad described the latest Spanish stance as the restoration of balance on the international level, which had also restored balance to the European position.

"Spain's latest position has enhanced its stance and credibility in Iraq.... It will be appreciated by the Iraqi people and all peoples in the region and the world.... Spain will now be able to play a more positive role regarding Iraqi issue and the [Middle East] deadlocked peace process as well," Assad said.

He added that "this Spanish role could not emerge necessarily over the next few months because international circumstance may not pave the way for moving the peace process ahead, but dialogue with Spanish friends now...and laying joint visions with the Spanish government could push this process ahead in the near future...when international conditions change...and the process becomes ready to be re-launched." The international conditions he was referring to are the US presidential elections and the possible defeat of the Republicans.

Following Assad's visit to Spain, Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk A-Shara told a Kuwaiti newspaper that Syrian-American ties were at their lowest because of Washington's blind support of Israel. "The Syrian Accountability Act is a violation of international law and was passed under Israeli pressure," Shara said.

Zapatero is seeking to convince the US that its "credibility" can be of use to them in the area of Middle East diplomacy. But while such offers of assistance were welcomed by the Bush administration, it will not tolerate anything that undermines its domination of the region. Spain's welcome to Assad will bring it into further conflict with the US and those within Europe who are giving at least tacit support to Bush's attacks upon Syria.



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