

# Spain seeks to extend its influence in North Africa

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The Spanish government of Jose Luis Zapatero has lost little time in stressing again its role as a key diplomatic player in North Africa, following the resignation last month of James Baker, the United Nations secretary general's personal envoy to Western Sahara.

Foreign Minister Miguel Moratinos visited Algiers in May. Zapatero himself travelled to the Moroccan capital, Rabat, soon after his election, and is talking of a trip to the Tunisian capital, Tunis, in the near future. In the last two weeks, Zapatero has led a high-level delegation to Algiers, which included Moratinos and Industry Trade and Tourism Minister Jose Montilla. Once again, the conflict in Western Sahara was discussed.

Zapatero's Socialist Workers Party of Spain (PSOE) has distanced itself from the pro-American line of its predecessor in government, the reviled Popular Party (PP) of Jose Maria Aznar, by seeking closer ties with other European powers. This is deepening political divisions over the strategically vital Maghreb.

Spain has long been a pivotal power in the region. It retains its enclaves in Morocco, Ceuta and Melilla, and has a long colonial history in the area. In concert with the other main former colonial power in the region, France, it is seeking to reassert its influence.

The conflict in Western Sahara has its roots in resistance to Spanish colonial rule. The Polisario Front was established in 1973 as the military wing of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) to fight the Spanish. When Spain withdrew from the region in 1976, the territory was annexed by Mauritania and Morocco. Mauritania withdrew in 1979, but Polisario fought Moroccan occupation for 16 years. There is a general view within Moroccan politics that Western Sahara is part of its national territory.

In 1991, the UN brokered a ceasefire. It put a peacekeeping force—MINURSO—into the territory, with the stated long-term aim of achieving a referendum on the future status of the region. But, bogged down in disputes over voting rights, the referendum was continually deferred.

Baker was appointed by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan in 1997. His proposal, which was finally accepted by the UN Security Council and the Algerian-backed Polisario in 2003, was that Western Sahara should be a semi-autonomous region of Morocco for five years, to be followed by a referendum on the status of the territory. Baker had talked of the viability of an independent Western Sahara, but his proposal was geared towards ensuring the stability of the region under American domination.

Morocco is a favoured state of the United States, which sees it as a useful counterweight to growing hostility across the Arab world. The US was keen to ensure its stability, as well as reserve access rights to Western Sahara's potential mineral and oil resources. (Morocco had already issued licences to oil companies to explore off the coast, and the US has troops stationed in the area south of Algeria and Morocco.) Baker's proposal, though, was ultimately rejected by Morocco, which insisted there could be no option of eventual sovereignty for the region. Frustration at this position led to Baker's resignation.

Zapatero has made it clear that he is not pursuing the same tactical line as Baker, although he is motivated by the same concerns for stability. After meeting Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, Zapatero said he did not want to be bound by any plan "be it called Baker or not." Instead, he proposed direct negotiations between Algiers and Rabat. Any proposal, he said, "will be effective only if it meets with the agreement of all

parties involved.” He called for the UN to explore all the available options.

This appeal to direct negotiations brings Zapatero into line with Paris. French Foreign Minister Michel Barnier, who was in Algiers at the same time as Zapatero, said dialogue between Algeria and Morocco was “essential and very useful.” Miguel Moratinos insisted that Paris and Madrid should pursue the same line on North Africa.

Zapatero’s comments were welcomed by the Moroccan press: *Aujourd’hui le Maroc* praised him for having “the courage to give up the policy of neutrality adopted by [his] predecessors during the last 30 years.” The paper insisted that his proposals could only succeed with a change in Madrid’s line and suggested that Zapatero’s concern was for the strengthening of a Maghreb economic unit.

This is the line being pursued by the PSOE. Miguel Moratinos shares Baker’s concerns over instability in the region. He argued that “a referendum without a political solution might lead us to a situation of generalised crisis in North Africa.”

The UN had no real intention of confronting Morocco’s domination of Western Sahara. Moratinos effectively stated this explicitly with his comment that it was impossible to tell how Morocco would react in a referendum. “Would the Moroccan armed forces accept being defeated in a referendum?” he asked.

When the United Left criticised the government for ignoring the rights of the Sahrawis, Moratinos was at pains to say that they were not ruling out the idea of a referendum. He promised that they would not betray the legitimate rights of the Sahrawis. This has not impressed SADR, which has denounced this “Paris-Madrid-Rabat axis.”

Moratinos, though, has made clear the need for a political solution to stabilise North Africa. Rejecting the “neutral and somehow hypocritical” line of previous Spanish governments, he said Madrid’s options were to “refer to the UN and hide” as before, or “roll up its sleeves and get down to work.”

The economic unity of the Maghreb is the chosen vehicle for implementing this stability. Bernardino Leon, the secretary of state for foreign affairs, said earlier this month that a settlement of the Western Sahara dispute would tend towards the integration of the Maghreb and would improve political and

economic relations, particularly if Algeria and Morocco were to reopen their borders. (They were closed in 1994, after a bomb was planted in Marrakech by Algerian nationals.) Leon pledged that Spain would “contribute positively” to this process of integration.

The Maghreb Arab Union (UMA), set up in 1989 by Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia, has been a moribund organisation for many years, partly as a result of this conflict. Leon stressed the need for “solid relations” between the countries of the Maghreb, rather than conjunctural alliances. This has met a favourable response within Morocco. Interior Minister Mostafa Sahel last week visited Algiers, where he discussed reopening the border and deepening relations between the countries. Sahel argued that a united Maghreb was a viable regional structure for negotiating directly with transnational corporations.

Spain is concerned directly with safeguarding its own interests. The Maghreb-Europe Gas Pipeline, which links the Hass R’mel oilfield in Algeria with Cordoba, meets nearly 60 percent of Spain’s natural gas requirements. The pipeline passes through Morocco.

There are also plans to build another pipeline from Beni Saf to Almeria. Work is due to begin on the pipeline, with a projected capacity of 4 billion cubic metres per annum, later this year, to be operational in 2007. Algerian Energy Minister Chakib Khelil has also talked of plans to link the Spanish and Algerian national grids via submarine cables.

Trade between Spain and Algeria last year was worth 3 billion euros (\$3.7 billion), and many Spanish companies are moving south across the Mediterranean. In Algiers at the same time as Zapatero’s party was a large delegation of Spanish businessmen, particularly from the building and energy industries.



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