

# Spain and Morocco: Good partners and badly matched neighbors

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Sparks are flying in the Strait of Gibraltar and not because of friction over tectonic plates. While business cooperation is thriving between Morocco and Spain political relations are not at their best. The authorities of both countries persistently say that their relationship is excellent and that the recurring spats are small disagreements that are simple to resolve. However, misunderstandings continue to occur, and everything indicates that it is not simply a matter of a love-hate relationship based on anthropological Mediterranean roots, but rather a more serious and structural problem.

In the last year, various events have occurred that illustrate the complex relations that exist between the two countries. The cases that have attracted the most attention include the irregular expulsion of Saharawi activist Aminatu Haidar by Moroccan authorities in late 2009 while *en route* to the Canary Islands, which put the Spanish government in a highly embarrassing situation until Morocco reluctantly allowed her to return, or Rabat's decision just a few months later, and bordering on provocation, to appoint a recent Saharawi deserter as new ambassador to Madrid. Moreover, in June the antenna of the Spanish Intelligence Service

(CNI) was dismantled in the north of Morocco at the same moment that the Moroccan nationalist discourse focused on alleged residual Francoism in the Spanish army; in August incidents took place at the border with Melilla, with the passage of merchandise being blocked, supposedly by civil society out of protest against the ill-treatment

of Moroccan citizens and Sub-Saharan migrants by the Spanish police; around the same time, Morocco protested because Spanish military helicopters flew over the monarch's yacht while bringing provisions to the garrisons that were located on small rocks and islands along the North African coast; also in August, some Spanish pro-Saharawi activists in El Aaiún were first beaten up by Moroccan security forces dressed as civilians, then detained and expelled; in September, a visit to Melilla by Mariano Rajoy, the leader of the Spanish opposition party, was perceived as a highly provocative act, and citizens of Melilla and Ceuta were hindered by Moroccan authorities

from undertaking sightseeing activities along the northern coast of Morocco. Taken together, these events have led to a disconcerting image of the supposedly "excellent relationship" between the two neighboring countries.

Despite the profound development gap that exists between Europe and the Maghreb, Spain desires to be as much of a solid economic anchor with its southern neighbors as it is with its immediate European neighbors. Trade with Morocco has intensified and is greater than that with Spain's historic Latin-American partners, or than that with the more dynamic Asian powers.

Are these misunderstandings unimportant, spontaneous and inevitable? There is no doubt that there could have been a lack of tact on both sides, and that non-governmental actors have intervened with their own agendas. As far as Morocco is concerned, the undemocratic political system means that some civil servants and politicians exceed in their nationalist and patriotic zeal and in their clumsiness generate conflicts that have consequences on the bilateral relationship as such. The Spanish government has decided not to create any controversy and instead to try to resolve these tensions discretely, with the least possible coverage in the media. The reasons that explain this approach include the fact that Morocco is a strategic partner and a solid ally, that the geographic proximity of the two countries implies a need for friendly relations, and that in sum Morocco is vital for Spanish interests. In fact, both governments insist, and based on the same formula, that they have shared economic, migration-related and security interests.

It is obvious that Spain, despite the profound development gap that exists between Europe and the Maghreb, desires to be as much of a solid economic anchor with its southern neighbors as it is with its immediate European neighbors.

In the last fifteen years, trade with Morocco has intensified and is currently greater than that with Spain's historic Latin American partners, or than that with the more dynamic Asian powers. Trade with Morocco accounts for a modest 1.5% of Spain's total foreign exchange, but apart from the hydrocarbon-exporting countries Morocco is Spain's leading Arab trade partner, with a trade balance in favor of Spain. Spanish investment in the country has grown, although it is still on a rather low level (0.6% of the FDI total in 2005-2009), which limits the transaction to a type of subcontracting, rather than a more productive integration. For Morocco as well, the north is key; Spain is its second most important commercial partner and its second biggest foreign investor. Spain actively participates in numerous modernization projects in Morocco, it has important interests in the fishing sector, and the two countries are linked through a unique electrical interconnection.

Madrid also wants to maintain and deepen cooperation in migration and security matters, such as anti-terrorist cooperation, and the fight against drug-trafficking – fields in which there have been substantial advances in recent years – and thus develop and intensify good relations with the country of origin of its largest group of non-European

immigrants (in June 2010 around 760.000 Moroccans legally resided in Spain). And all that without negatively affecting its relations with Algeria, a key partner in the area of energy supply.

Also, Morocco is the first Arab recipient of Spanish development aid, and one of the few Arab countries that periodically maintain regular high-level ministerial meetings, the next of which will be held in Rabat at the beginning of 2011.

In addition to these elements, there is another factor related to domestic Spanish politics that underpins Spain's relationship with Morocco. Madrid is determined to play an active role as the legitimizer of the Moroccan regime through symbolic goodwill gestures and by representing the Spanish-Moroccan relationship as a solid alliance. Two examples: since the days of the Spanish transition to democracy, it is an established tradition that the first foreign visit of the President of the Spanish government is to Rabat. More recently, Spain has become a permanent guarantor of Morocco in the European Union (EU) and in the context of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation. Undoubtedly, one of the highlights of this patronage was the granting of EU Advanced Status to Morocco (2008) and

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the holding of the first EU-Moroccan summit during the Spanish EU Presidency (Granada, March 7<sup>th</sup>, 2010). There is good reason to ask not only to what extent these gestures are justified – and are reciprocated by Rabat – but also what the political costs for Spain are in dealing with a partner that exhibits serious shortfalls in its democratic structure, and with whom there are both contentious issues and serious disputes.

Repeated incidents of more or less significance and transcendence point to the existence of more serious problems that are silenced by both sides, for the sake of business and security for Madrid, and in the name of stability and legitimization for Rabat. Without disregarding the existence of mutual ignorance, suspicion and distrust – or what some consider arrogance and lack of respect on the Spanish side (according to Hispanist and ex-ambassador Larbi Messari: “the relationship has to be decolonized”) – there are profound differences which neither side wants to make apparent, but that necessarily condition their relations. The four main issues are: the question of the Western Sahara (on which the Spanish people and the Spanish government diverge); the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla; competition with France and the interferences of Algeria; and the

profound distrust of Spanish actors towards the regime and the Moroccan political class.

The main aspect of the bilateral discord is definitely the Western Sahara question. The international community and the Spanish public opinion disagree with the ambiguous and contradictory Spanish government policy; officially Spain abides by international law, supports the right of self-determination of the ex-colony and backs up the United Nations' efforts. However, at the same time it refrains from taking a leading role in the solution of the conflict, insists on supporting "a mutually-accepted solution" (which means that Spain agrees with the Moroccan veto to a self-determination referendum) and considers the Moroccan proposal of autonomy positive. By doing this, Madrid has alienated itself from the Saharawis, but, in fact, this so-called "constructive neutrality" does not make sense any more. The growing distance from the American position on this issue that became increasingly apparent during the last few months, leaves Madrid uncomfortably alone with Paris in defending Rabat.

The enclaves of Ceuta, Melilla and several small rocks are territorial residues of a time when they had a profoundly different geo-strategic value. Although the United Nations do not consider them to be non-self governing territories (colonies), they have become a permanent issue of Moroccan agitation, to the point that no Spanish head of government has visited these places for three decades (except for José Luiz Rodríguez Zapatero in 2006). The future of the two cities is uncertain and the current economic system that makes them the center of informal commerce and of smuggling in Northern Morocco is increasingly unsustainable. A new approach is therefore needed, taking into consideration the will of the inhabitants and the development of the whole region. This implies trans-border cooperation, yet, this is a prospect that clashes with the nationalist Moroccan rhetoric.

Moreover, there is a conflict of economic and geo-strategic interests in which other parties, mainly France and Algeria, are involved, transforming these bilateral

relations into a more complex affair of three and four participants. Rabat, which has bad relations with its Algerian neighbor, does not hesitate to use French support and protection. Owing to the French role, Spain cannot rely on the European Union in any serious dispute with Morocco, as became evident during the Perejil/Parsley Island crisis (2002) when France prevented Brussels from taking a clear stand against Rabat, thus leaving it to Washington to intervene diplomatically. On the other hand, for economic and political reasons, Madrid has similar interests in maintaining a fluid understanding with Algeria.

Finally, it is noteworthy to point to the ballast of Moroccan politics that contaminates all economic, political and even civil society relations. There is widespread distrust among

the Spanish political class and civil society about the Moroccan political system: political reforms that have been applied for almost two decades are seen as very limited and reformists have proven to be impotent vis-à-vis the forces in power; the political transition is endless and the system has been disjointed, as the Royal Palace continues to interfere regularly; authoritarianism prevails, the human rights situation is not promising, and freedom of the press is violated. Eventually, these factors hinder the establishment of normal bilateral relations based on dialogue and trust. Ironically, crises are

usually resolved through the Kings' intervention, who, in an effort to reach out to the Moroccan public, tends to resort to drama-like demonstrations of goodwill, thereby emphasizing the close relations with Spain. This practice, however, confuses Spanish society to a great extent.

The illusion of Spanish-Moroccan relations, i.e. the determination of both sides to portray them as a "splendid relationship", has prevented a public and transparent debate about the most serious questions and resulted in a foreign policy that is largely incoherent with the discourse that is usually maintained in other settings. It contributes to the perpetuation of tensions, deepens problems and gives protagonism to other non-governmental actors. The crisis is contained, but it is neither resolved nor clarified. As a result confusion

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and distrust are reinforced, generating accumulated resentment.

On the Spanish side, with the exception of the business class, there is widespread public disagreement as regards the management of the bilateral relationship: the center-right asks for a firmer diplomacy in a rather nationalistic fashion, while civil society demands the upholding of democratic conditionality and mutual benefits. In addition, a large part of the population sympathizes with the demands for self-determination of the Saharawis. Curiously however, the major political forces simply ignore their neighbor in the South; proof of this is that the largest political parties barely maintain relationships with their Moroccan counterparts.

On the Moroccan side exists a panoply of positions. While society as such has gradually developed a new and more positive perception of its northern neighbor, any public initiative stems from the political parties and certain media outlets that continue to emphasize the old nationalist discourse and that indulge in the logic of inconclusive decolonization. The dissatisfaction of Moroccan nationalist forces with Spain dates back to the days of independence. In contrast to France, Spain withdrew gradually from the African territory over a period of twenty years, maintaining only Ceuta, Melilla and some tiny islands and rocks where the presence of military garrisons are still seen by Rabat as pending issues. The latter is used by Morocco to reproach Spain for making national unity difficult, and by extension for contributing to the backwardness and under-development of the country – these being issues which are not compensated for by the privileged treatment and the close collaboration that has emerged in other areas.

Despite that, the determination of the Spanish Socialist government has always been to limit conflicts and to defuse tensions by means of a diplomacy that can be described as “firm, but intelligent and sensible”. Rabat is perfectly aware that Madrid wishes to consolidate its relations, as it has very important economic interests and needs effective cooperation on matters of security in the south of the Mediterranean. As Spain, for the reasons mentioned above, cannot rely on the EU in resolving bilateral disputes with Morocco, the latter, in exchange for cooperation on security and economic matters,

demands Spanish backing of the regime, understood as a maintenance and acceptance of the *status quo*. In turn, this means explicit support of the Moroccan position on the question of the Western Sahara, support of the proposal for autonomy and thus a de facto abolition of Spain’s “constructive neutrality” approach towards its “ex-colony”. In view of this order of priorities, Ceuta and Melilla do lose some of their importance as contentious issues and barely serve as a pretext for nationalists on both sides to react instantly to potential offences to their respective nations.

In some ways the bilateral relationship is based on the logic of a veiled threat on the Moroccan side and of explicit interests on the Spanish side. Morocco does not hide the fact that an eventual destabilization would endanger the position of Spanish businesses in the Moroccan market, and would create security problems for Europe and, more

importantly, for Spain itself. By accepting the political *status quo* in Morocco and by having decided to engage itself in the country’s modernization process, Madrid has fully accepted this discourse and simply focuses on security and economic cooperation; although this position implies that it has to put up with continuous incidents and embarrassing situations, act in contradiction to international law as far as the Western Sahara is concerned, provide a non-democratic regime with favorable deals, and turn a blind eye to the perpetuation of authoritarian practices.

The nature of the Moroccan regime also contributes to the

fact that numerous issues are not being debated openly and that a meaningful involvement of the political and social organizations of the two countries is systematically prevented. The result is a serious lack of transparency that adds to confusion and to the deterioration of mutual perceptions. It is hence unsurprising that otherwise meaningless episodes of misunderstanding become suddenly important and place the two partners in extremely uncomfortable situations, which all too often have domestic political implications as far as Spain is concerned and which repeatedly highlights the obsolescence of this particular relationship model.

In various African countries like Morocco, Tunisia and Equatorial Guinea, the political coherence of Spanish foreign policy is seriously in doubt. Spain has characterized itself to be at the heart of the EU

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– to the surprise of many – as being one of the least demanding governments with respect to attempts to condition cooperation and privileged deals and link them to advances in democratization. Madrid has given preeminence to security and to the interest of economic groups in its foreign policy, and in so doing it has seriously put in doubt other clearly progressive and daring initiatives in matters of multilateralism, the Alliance of Civilizations and of human development on a global level.

Spanish-Moroccan relations exemplify impressively that in an inter-dependent world, good neighborly relations cannot be based on tricks and ruses, demands for unconditional support, mere economic interest or the desire to externalize security tasks. Today, more than ever, dialogue is a necessary step towards the expression of mutual demands, the respect for the right to development for all, and upholding international law.