



Special issue: Spain in Europe 1996-2004

EE 05/2004

Spain and the Middle East Conflict: from perspectives of peace to crisis



Rina Weltner-Puig

Rina Weltner-Puig

PhD candidate in International Relations at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

When the Popular Party first took the reins of the government in 1996, Spain was a highly active player in European Mediterranean policy, including the Middle East conflict. In the Socialist period, Spain had come a long way from the former one-sided pro-Arab policy - designed to alleviate country's international isolation during the Franco dictatorship - and the lack of diplomatic relations with Israel that this policy was believed to entail. The overall normalisation of Spain's foreign relations that accompanied the adhesion of the country into the European Community (EC) and NATO had called for a balanced relationship with all countries involved in the conflict, one that would fit into the frame of the 1980 Venice Declaration by the EC countries and the resolutions of the UN. In 1986, hence, Spain recognized Israel and, a year later, bilateral co-operation with the Palestinian territories began.

The Middle East policy that the Socialist governments moulded not only assigned a fair parity between the conflicting parties. It also aspired to put into the service of peace Spain's new relationship with Israel and the traditionally good ties to several Arab countries and the Palestinian Liberation Organisation. Just and durable peace between Israel and its Arab neighbours had become a necessity both for Spain and the other EC countries that, after the oil crisis, had begun to focus on challenges arising from the Mediterranean region.

The first Spanish presidency of the EC in 1989 illustrated that Spain could play a global role in Mediterranean and bridge between its different countries. In the Middle East, Spain reacted actively to the changing dynamics of the conflict, brought about the first Palestinian uprising. As a result, the Madrid declaration set the new basis of the European stance in the conflict. Also, from the initiative of the Spanish Foreign Minister, Francisco Fernández Ordóñez, the European collective leadership - or troika - began to visit the region. After the 1991 Gulf war, Madrid hosted the conference that initiated the Middle East peace process.

During the following years, the US became the principle mediator between the parties, a circumstance that left an economic role for the European Union (EU). It also assumed an active role on multilateral cooperation and gradually became the main partner of the Palestinian Authority (PA). Within the EU, Spain continued to promote a global orientation towards the Mediterranean and, in 1995, the EU launched the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership Initiative that brings together the EU countries and 12 southern and eastern Mediterranean states. A year earlier, Jordan and Israel had signed a peace agreement, and talks between Syria and Israel were under way.

If the prospects of peace in the Middle East had favoured the global Mediterranean policy of the Socialist governments, the arrival to power of the Popular Party coincided with a slowdown and stagnation in the peace process. Consequently, the visibility of Spain decreased even if the new government reaffirmed its commitment to the Mediterranean as one of the natural foreign political scenes of Spain. The fact that President Aznar, Foreign Minister Piqué, the King, and the leaders of the opposition parties received the Yasser Arafat during his visit to Spain in 1996 illustrated that Palestinian Authority and people still enjoyed special attention in Spain, as long as this did not endanger cordial relations to Israel. The same year, a Spanish diplomat and

specialist in Middle East issues from the Socialist period, Miguel Ángel Moratinos, was appointed as the Special Envoy of the EU for the Middle East Peace Process.

During the subsequent years, low profile and lack of new political initiatives characterised the Spanish policy towards the Middle East. Indisputably, increasing difficulties in the peace process contributed to this. In 1998, on a trip to Egypt, the Palestinian Territories and Israel, Mr Aznar reaffirmed the four pillars of Spain's Middle East policy: the UN resolutions, the peace agreements, territorial integrity and security of the two states, and the rights of the Palestinian people. He also gave his support to the US mediation efforts and reiterated the offer to organise another Middle East conference.

While the visibility of Spain's national Middle East policy decreased, the role of the EU increased. Through the Special Envoy, the EU gradually consolidated its position in the area. The creation of the High Representative of the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the appointment of Javier Solana to the post further strengthened the actorness of the EU in the Middle East. In the course of years, the support of the EU to the Palestinian Authority and people has continued and intensified, and Israel has had a preferential trade and association agreement with the EU.

The end of a series of peace talks in 2000-2001 without an agreement and cabinet changes in Israel and the US were followed by increasing violence under the name of second Palestinian uprising or al-Aqsa intifada. The all the more evident breakdown of the peace process in the shadow of Palestinian suicide bombings and Israeli military repression activated the European diplomacy. In 2001, Mr. Aznar travelled to the region, yet the results remained modest. In November, however, Spanish efforts contributed to a short meeting between Arafat and Peres in Foro Formentor, a Spanish-sponsored Mediterranean forum for exchange of ideas and opinions. As a sign of good diplomatic relations, the new Syria president, Bashar al-Asad chose Spain as his first visit to Europe.

When Spain assumed the presidency of the EU in January 2002, it had two objectives with respect to the Middle East. It aimed to increase efforts to stop the unprecedented violence that reigned in the region and to give peace talks another opportunity. Stability and security in the area were considered essential also to succeed in the struggle against terrorism that had become a Spanish priority. Further, Spain aspired to unite the positions of the US, the EU, the UN, Russia and the Arab countries affected by the conflict.

In practice, the management of the events that unrolled during the presidency severely tested the Spanish and the European diplomacy. Already in early January, Spain faced an uneasy situation when Israel discovered a Palestinian ship that carried Iranian weapons. While the US and Israel attributed the responsibility to the PA and its leader, the EU remained silent until the end of the month when it requested the PA to clarify the case. Also when Israel, with implicit support of the US, began its attack against Palestinian infrastructure and the PA, the EU in the person of Mr Piqué expressed support to the PA and defended Yasser Arafat. With Ariel Sharon, Piqué insisted on re-launching the peace talks. These standpoints become consolidated in the course of the months. The escalating conflict, however, tried the capacity of Spain to co-ordinate positions within the EU as well as with the US. A meeting between Piqué and the American State Secretary Powell in which the two welcomed the Saudi peace plan re-established trans-Atlantic understanding. Also relations between the EU and Israel deteriorated to the point that the Sharon administration neither received Mr Piqué and Mr Solana nor allowed them to meet Yasser Arafat during their visit to the area.

The incapability of outside parties to halt violence led to a new UN resolution that, for the first time, referred to an independent Palestinian state. As a result, the positions of the EU, the US, the UN and Russia began to approach and, in April, a Quartet was created with the objective to coordinate peace efforts. Although its immediate impact was minor, the Quartet has steadily become part of Middle East peace diplomacy. On the other hand, the Spanish and European diplomacies were able to resolve the problem of Palestinian activists encircled in the Church of Nativity. Despite the initiative of the Quartet to organise a new Middle East conference, the lack of Bush administration's support has put, for the time being, the idea on halt. The

indecisiveness of the US on how to re-launch the peace talks and occasional, yet destructive violence and subsequent precession have increased uncertainty on the future of the process.

To conclude, the Middle East peace process illustrates a policy area in which national policies are giving way to a common European stance as this takes form. During the Socialist period, Spain actively contributed and shaped the common policy, and the Popular Party governments have kept the commitments assumed by their predecessors. The salience of their Middle East policy, however, has been minor, except the 2002 presidency when Spain demonstrated that it could bring together the Quartet. Along with EU diplomacy, Spain also handled exceptionally acute developments in the area. It has become increasingly clear that a durable solution to the conflict requires a coordinated effort from the international community, as a whole. Within it, Spain, independent of the political colour of its cabinet, enjoys a position that permits it to favour resolution efforts.