



Spain and the Arab-Israeli conflict: a demand for a greater European role

Number 15

Maria A. Sabiote

Researcher at the University Institute for European Studies

Eduard Soler i Lecha

Coordinator of the Mediterranean Programme at the CIDOB Foundation

The Arab-Israeli conflict plays an important role within Spain's policy towards the Mediterranean and the Arab world. Moreover, the European dimension is crucial when making sense of Spain's position towards this conflict in the last few years. The Middle East, particularly the Arab-Israeli conflict, has been crucial in the development of the European Union's foreign policy. Notwithstanding, the Union's role in this conflict (and before, that of the European Community) has been conditioned by a number of obstacles, including the internal divisions on this subject among member states, the EU's weak standing in security and defence, and the hegemonic role played by the US in consecutive peace processes. The end result has been the Union's confinement to the position of main donor.

The EU has tried to move away from this restricted image to develop, progressively, a more political role. This is clearly illustrated by the creation in 1996 of the Special Envoy, the EU's participation in the Quartet when defining the "Road Map" for peace, and the deployment of the first European Security and Defence Missions (ESDP) missions to the Palestinian Territories.

This article will provide an analysis of the Spanish position vis-à-vis some of the key recent events in the Middle East. Attention will be specifically placed on its reaction to the Hamas victory in the Palestinian elections, its position towards the division of the Palestinian Territories in two, its attitude towards the war in Lebanon and, more recently, the role Spain played at the peace conference held in Annapolis and related efforts taken to move closer to durable peace in that part of the world.

The European dimension in Spain's policy towards the Arab-Israeli conflict

The involvement of democratic Spain in the Arab-Israeli conflict has been heavily influenced by the European dimension. Spain was forced to recognise the Israeli State during its accession to the European Economic Community, which represented a break-up of the policy followed during the Franco regime. At the bilateral level, following that recognition, Spain showed a willingness to deepen its relations with all sides of the conflict, shedding light on its total support for a solution based on the creation of two viable states and the resolution of the refugee question. By hosting the 1991 peace conference in Madrid, Spain showed its readiness to contribute to the peaceful resolution of a conflict that had always threatened to turn into a destabilising factor in the wider region.

The change of government in 1996, with the Popular Party (PP) coming into government, did not lead to modifications on traditional diplomatic policy in the Middle East. Nevertheless, notwithstanding regional events, this government was relatively less

active than its socialist predecessors. This pattern began to change during Aznar's second administration, particularly in the first half of 2002, when Spain took over the Presidency of the EU. This presidency was forced to tackle the increasing levels of violence developing in the Palestinian Territories as a result of the second Intifada. The Quartet was also created during this period, with its first meeting taking place in Madrid on the 10 April 2002.

During that first half of the year, but more generally during eight years of conservative government, Aznar's team tried to build a more impartial image in the eyes of its Israeli counterparts in order to increase Spain's chances as a possible mediator and, eventually, as a suitable host for a second peace conference involving the whole region. Despite its best efforts, the policy followed by PP towards the Arab-Israeli conflict backlashed towards the end of Aznar's second government due to its clear-cut support of the US offensive against Iraq. This decision was detrimental to Spain's image in the region.

The priorities of the Socialist government

The Socialist Party's (PSOE) electoral programme placed great emphasis on the effects of the Iraq war. The PP was vehemently accused in that document of having ruined Spain's credibility in the region. The socialists were therefore committed to supporting the Road Map adopted by the Quartet, asking for greater EU engagement in the resolution of the conflict and encouraging initiatives such as the Geneva accords¹.

The appointment of the former EU Special Envoy to the Middle East, Miguel Ángel Moratinos, as Foreign Minister was a clear sign of the centrality afforded to the Arab-Israeli conflict by Zapatero's government. In his first appearance in the Spanish Congress he reiterated the administration's commitment to the Road Map and to finding a peaceful settlement of the conflict that included "a solution to the problems in Syria and Lebanon" in order to "recover the balance and security in the region". Moratinos also committed himself to reinforcing Spain's links with the Arab world and Israel².

A number of events took place throughout Zapatero's administration, particularly in the second half, which would put to the test the government's commitments to realise the objectives it defined back in 2004.

Spain and the Hamas government

The results of the Palestinian legislative elections of 25 January 2006 left the international community, particularly key players in the region, in a challenging situation. From a total of 132 members of parliament, Hamas ended up with 74 and, therefore, with the power to form a new government in the Palestinian Territories. Despite calls for a Palestinian democratic regeneration, the international community felt uncomfortable with this new scenario. Hamas was portrayed as a terrorist organisation that refuses to recognise the Israeli State and promotes armed attacks against it³.

The EU ended up temporarily cancelling its economic aid to the Palestinian National Authority in order to suffocate any hope for institutional development. The international community imposed very clear conditions on Hamas: its renunciation of the use of violence, the recognition of the Israeli State and the acceptance of previously reached agreements between Palestinians and Israelis. At the same time, this boycott, to which Spain adhered wholeheartedly, included financial and political support for the presidency

of Mahmud Abbas⁴. Against this background, Foreign Minister Moratinos travelled to the Middle East in April 2006 with the goal of reaching an agreement on new economic channels for the Palestinian presidency that could elude Hamas.

This dramatic situation was compounded by the repercussions of the bombardments in Lebanon and Hamas' incapacity to meet the abovementioned conditions set by the international community. As a result the European and Spanish diplomatic offensives moved to an emphasis on the need to create a national unity government in the Palestinian Territories⁵. These demands, with the support of Saudi Arabia, came to fruition and in doing so, to a certain extent, reinforced Mahmud Abbas' position.

The fact that neither the EU nor Spain lifted its sanctions against the Palestinian government contributed months after, to the intra-Palestinian struggles of spring 2007 and the collapse of the government of national unity. Unintentionally they became accomplices in the fragmentation of the Palestinian Territories into two distinct political entities, Gaza under Hamas control and the West Bank under Fatah control.

Spain and the war in Lebanon

The break-up of the conflict in Lebanon had detrimental effects for the already explosive situation in the Palestinian Territories. The strategy followed by Spain towards this new regional episode of violence was fast and blunt, "a policy of public positioning".⁶ That policy consisted in the condemnation of Hezbollah's actions and attacks but also of Israel's disproportionate use of violence and for which it was heavily criticised by the Spanish Popular Party (Álvarez-Ossorio, 2007).

Zapatero was one of the few European leaders to react quickly and strongly against the Israeli offensive. As a result, he was heavily criticised by the Israeli Ambassador in Spain, Victor Harel, and depicted as anti-Semitic by some members of the Jewish community in Spain. Despite these attacks, the Spanish government defended its position in the Council of the European Union, characterised once more by fundamental divisions among member states on the policy to follow towards the Middle East⁷.

EU member states were divided between those supporting a ceasefire, including France and Spain, and those like Germany and the UK that preferred a more flexible formula such as the end of hostilities. At the same time, although the idea that Europe should be implicated in the resolution of the conflict was not questioned, the possibility of an international intervention was similarly divisive. Together with France and Italy, Spain was at the forefront of those countries arguing in favour of an ample international deployment to reinforce UNIFIL on the ground and to support the Lebanese government (Sabiote, 2006 and Soler i Lecha, 2006).

Zapatero's government increasingly became more committed to Spain's participation in that mission, as illustrated by the presence of up to 1,100 soldiers on the ground⁸. This deployment of Spanish troops created a controversy within Spain between the government and the opposition, particularly following the death of six Spanish soldiers in June 2007. The PP used this incident to compare Spain's role in Lebanon with the Iraq war. These tensions proved once more the existence of a split in the domestic consensus on issues of defence policy⁹.

Spain was also a firm supporter of the need for economic support to help in the reconstruction of Lebanon (Goenaga, 2007). It also put great efforts, together with France and Italy, on the diplomatic offensive targeted at the Lebanese authorities and

opposition parties to avoid the collapse of the political and confessional equilibrium achieved in Lebanon. Moratinos was able to use his political experience in the region to develop his preferred option of dialogue with all actors, including Hezbollah¹⁰, for which he has been in constant confrontation with the Popular Party.

Spain and Peace in the Region

During the first half of Zapatero's administration Spain portrayed itself as a firm supporter of the need to progress according to the Road Map but, oddly, it always defended the idea that the definite solution of the conflict depended on taking a regional approach. In this period Spain also backed a greater involvement by the EU in areas in which it had until then been rather marginal or non-existent. A clear illustration is the active participation of Spanish personnel in the two ESDP missions to the Palestinian Territories.

The changes that took place in the region since 2006 did, nevertheless, force a change in some of the principles and commitments mentioned above, while at the same time reinforcing the conviction that Spanish diplomacy needed to focus on the regional dimension. This realisation became the starting point to achieve Spain's idea that a second regional peace conference, including Syria, was needed. As a preliminary step, in October 2006 Spain hosted the Mediterranean Forum (Foromed) that culminated in a declaration that, among other things, requested the organisation of an international peace conference¹¹. A month later, a peace initiative promoted by France, Italy and Spain was launched consisting of a proposal to send an international observation mission to Gaza, the formation of a Palestinian national government, the encouragement of dialogue between the Palestinian presidency and its Israeli counterpart and, in the medium term, the organisation of a peace conference with the participation of all parties to the conflict.

Regardless of Moratinos' best efforts, this initiative was not that welcomed by other European states and even less so by some key actors. The December 2006 European Council approved a declaration on the Middle East that, despite considerably reducing the French-Spanish-Italian proposal, was declared a success of Spain's diplomacy. In that declaration EU member states had encouraging words on the issue of a new peace conference for the Middle East.

In the end it was the US, and not the EU, that organised that new peace conference. It took place in Annapolis in November 2007 and should be interpreted as an attempt by the Bush administration to obtain some positive results for its Middle East policy that had up until then produced very poor results. Annapolis represented, on the one hand, the re-establishment of direct dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians, and on the other, the involvement of Arab countries, including Syria. The success of the Annapolis conference in attaining its goals remains questionable. It marginalised two principal actors, Hamas and Iran, in the negotiation of a durable peace in the region. Moreover, the dominant role of the US was, from the Spanish perspective, a setback in the commitment to make the EU a more relevant political actor in the region.

Although the EU was invited to participate, with the presence of the European Commission, the Presidency and the CFSP High Representative, its political role in the conference was secondary to that of the US. As with some other European countries, Spain was directly invited to attend by the US, which was of great significance given the deterioration in the relations between Madrid and Washington. In that framework, and

through bilateral contacts at various levels, Spain tried to ensure the participation of Syria in this conference.

The efforts just mentioned illustrate that throughout the last four years one of the lines of Spain's policy towards the Middle East has been to become an intermediary for Syria. Spain has defended at all times that Syria is "part of the solution and not the problem"¹². In some instances this Spanish position has come into direct confrontation with the US and Israel, supporters of isolating the Baazist regime. In other instances, such as during the Annapolis summit, this position has increased Spain's importance for the US and has permitted the Spanish government to build its own profile in this conflict without contradicting EU policies.

Conclusion

Throughout this socialist administration Spain has made the Middle East one of its priorities, not only within its Mediterranean policy but also as part of its foreign and defence policies. Since the 1991 conference held in Madrid, Spain's diplomatic activities in the region lessened but with the new government in 2004 there was a re-assessment of the country's role in the region. Zapatero's government turned the demand for a greater European involvement into one of the axis of its policy towards the region.

Nevertheless, during this period one can also observe that the policies adopted by the EU have not been the most appropriate. The consequences arising from the marginalisation of Hamas represent the most obvious example of this failure and, in this regard, Spain shares with other member states some of that responsibility. Another deficit in the European policy relates to its slow reaction to the Lebanese war and, unlike the previous issue, here Spain cannot be criticised for what happened. Equally problematic was that the European involvement in the region has not been accompanied by a normalisation of Spanish-US relations. If that had taken place, the efforts of Moratinos and his team would have had a greater impact on the ground.

Despite these shortcomings, Zapatero's administration represents, on the one hand, the confirmation that Spain's foreign policy supports a regional solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. For Spain this means, above all, that the isolation of the Syrian regime should end. On the other hand, Spain has understood that its commitment to sending Spanish personnel to the ESDP missions but, more importantly, the reinvigorated UNIFIL, is a crucial complement to increasing its credibility as a mediator in the region. Finally, this administration has been characterised by a much greater coordination both diplomatically and militarily with France and Italy.

Can a change of government in Spain, or among the highest ranks in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, radically change Spain's policy towards the conflicts in this region? It is difficult to image a withdrawal of troops from Lebanon or that Spain will cease to ask for a greater European involvement in the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. But there might be a re-prioritisation of the objectives of the new government and a more discreet diplomatic profile in Spain's relations with Damascus or in its efforts to stabilise Lebanon's political life.

Notes

¹ The Geneva accords were reached by Israeli and Palestinian politicians and intellectuals. For more information see Partido Socialista Obrero Español (2004) *Merecemos una España Mejor, Programa Electoral, Elecciones Generales de 2004*.

² "Comparecencia del Señor Ministro de Asuntos Exteriores y de Cooperación (Moratinos Cuyaubé) para Informar sobre las Líneas Generales de la Política de su Departamento", Comisión de Asuntos Exteriores, Session no. 2, *Diario de Sesiones*, 8th Term, no. 24, 19 May 2004, p. 7.

³ The Spanish position vis-à-vis Hamas has oscillated in tandem with the EU between pragmatism and a tougher line. The pragmatic approach acknowledges the importance Hamas plays in the daily survival of Palestinian citizens, particularly in the Gaza Strip, but also for the institutional and bureaucratic viability of local politics. Despite this reality, the EU opted for a tougher line by including Hamas in its list of terrorist organisations (Youngs, 2006).

⁴ This strategy of empowering the presidency went against the policy followed up to the elections, characterised by a commitment to reinforcing the prime minister vis-à-vis a corrupt presidency.

⁵ "Comparecencia del Ministro de Asuntos Exteriores para Informar sobre la Posición Española en Relación con la Crisis del Proceso de Paz en Oriente Medio. A Petición Propia", *Diario de Sesiones del Congreso de los Diputados*, 8th Term, no. 634, 19 June 2006, p. 4.

⁶ "Comparecencia del Ministro de Asuntos Exteriores para Informar sobre la Posición Española en Relación con la Crisis del Proceso de Paz en Oriente Medio. A Petición Propia", *Diario de Sesiones del Congreso de los Diputados*, 8th Term, no. 634, 19 June 2006, p. 3.

⁷ Spain was actually very pro-active as illustrated by its proposals in the General Affairs and External Relations Committee: (1) a ceasefire and the deployment of an international force; (2) support to the Lebanese government in complying with Resolutions 1559 and 1680; (3) the formation of a new Palestinian government; (4) the dispatch of a EU diplomatic mission to the area; (5) and exerting pressure on all parties to return to the negotiation table.

⁸ Interestingly, both France and Italy – main proponents of a reinforced UNIFIL – failed to meet their initial offers of personnel.

⁹ For a detailed account on the topic of the domestic consensus on foreign policy during the Zapatero period, see the article by Albert Aixalà in this same publication.

¹⁰ As pointed out by Hurtado de Ory and Masciulli (2007), Foreign Minister Moratinos met with all external and internal actors. His interview with number two in Hezbollah's structure, Naim Qassem, on 30 July 2007 was particularly controversial. This meeting followed on the steps of the regional tour completed by the French Foreign Minister, Bernard Kouchner (*El Mundo*, 31 July 2007).

¹¹ Foromed, *Declaración de Alicante sobre Oriente Medio*, October 2006.

¹² Minister Moratinos argued that "the conflicts are interrelated and therefore it is necessary more than ever to work towards a global solution for the region that incorporates all negotiating parties, including Lebanon and Syria". "Comparecencia del Ministro de Asuntos Exteriores para informar sobre la Asamblea General de Naciones Unidas y de la situación de Oriente Próximo. A petición propia", *Diario de Sesiones del Congreso de los Diputados*, 8th Term, no. 690, 24 October 2006, p. 3. See also *El Mundo*, 3 August 2006 and *El País*, 4 August 2006.

Bibliographical References

- ÁLVAREZ-OSSORIO ALVARIÑO, Ignacio (2007) "España ante el gobierno de Hamas" in *Revista CIDOB d'Afers Internacional*, no. 79-80, pp. 188-206.
- FRIDE (2006) "Europa y la democracia palestina" in *Democracia en contexto*, no. 1, Madrid: Fundación para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Diálogo Exterior.

- GOENAGA SÁNCHEZ, Amaia (2007) "El compromiso español en el Líbano: ¿un nuevo papel para España en Oriente Próximo?" in *Revista CIDOB d'Afers Internacional*, no. 79-80, pp. 227-246.
- HURTADO DE ORY, Alejandro & MASCIULLI, Luigi (2007) "Nuevas concepciones de seguridad en España: el caso de Hezbolá" in *Revista CIDOB d'Afers Internacional*, no. 79-80, pp. 207-226.
- SABIOTE, Maria A. and SOLER i LECHA, Eduard (2006) "La Unión Europea en la crisis del Líbano o la paradoja entre poder y querer", Breve del Observatorio de Política Exterior Europea, no. 25, Bellaterra (Barcelona): Institut Universitari d'Estudis Europeus.