

# Time for Spain to lead the EU's Mediterranean policy

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It is well known that Spain's profile in the Mediterranean has diminished in recent years. It was squeezed to the sidelines by Nicolas Sarkozy's Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) initiative. The Socialist government has been focused primarily on internal challenges since the mid-2000s. This low profile has been disappointing. But in some senses it is a blessing: compared to other member states, Spain may now find itself with greater legitimacy and less negative baggage to lead the EU's rethink in relations with a Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in revolt.

To play this lead role Spain counts with many assets. But it must fundamentally change its approach to the southern Mediterranean. Spain still tends to see its deeply entrenched interests in and proximity to North African states as reason for caution in support of political reform. Bitter tension dominates debate between the Socialist government and the opposition Partido Popular; but in truth realpolitik thinking dominates *both* main parties – a germane fact given that elections are due early next year.

In light of current events, Spain has every reason of enlightened self-interest to be at the forefront of an enthusiastic European policy backing potential democratisation. So far its response to the upheavals has been ambivalent. But there are a number of opportunities for Spain to play a pro-democracy, leadership role.

## RETRACTION

Given its privileged relationship with North African states, Spain could and should be at the forefront of European policy towards the MENA region. But judging by its response so far to the recent uprisings it is

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Spain's profile in the Mediterranean has diminished in recent years but because of this it may now find itself with greater legitimacy and less negative baggage to lead the EU's rethink in relations with the Middle East and North Africa.
- In light of current events, Spain has every reason of enlightened self-interest to be at the forefront of an enthusiastic European policy backing potential democratisation.
- But it will need fundamentally to change the way it deals with its Arab partners.

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»»»»» either unprepared or unwilling to assume such a leadership role.

Spain's official response to events in the region was initially subdued, with pronouncements lagging behind the unfolding events. It took Colonel Qaddafi's savage reprisals against his own population to elicit a reaction from the notoriously domestically-focused President José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero. The timidity and reactive nature of the approach reveal apprehension about future uncertainty and a default position of non-interference.

Spanish officials do not tire of repeating that indigenous political and social forces should lead the process of reform in their own countries - as if such a fact could ever be in dispute. The fact is that Spain's hands-off policy has only really been hands-off in terms of support for democrats and protestors. Spain has traditionally been close to the region's autocrats in an effort to protect its economic interests, to stem potential waves of immigrants and for security considerations.

Foreign minister Trinidad Jimenez claimed that 'intervening in Egypt earlier would have been interfering'. But this is disingenuous. Diplomats' oft-repeated and self-serving argument about Arab societies' weak appetite for freedom has been discredited. If Spain had not coddled the region kings and dictators for so long, the population might have been able to vent their frustrations earlier and in less violent fashion.

Although Spain was slow to react, it picked up steam once it started advocating for a UN sanctioned no-fly zone in Libya. It has since provided, if not leadership at least solid support for EU positions and for the NATO offensive in Libya. Spanish official rhetoric *ex-post* claims to be firmly on the side of the protesters, at least in the cases of Tunisia and Egypt. Zapatero's and Jimenez's visits to Egypt and Tunisia are touted as proof of such support. Zapatero has claimed that Spain is 'playing a very active role in Tunisia and Egypt beyond the headlines and photo opportunities'. Apparently, former

President Felipe Gonzalez has been dispatched as an advisor to the transitional government in Tunisia.

But the fact remains that Spain stood on the sidelines until the autocrats were overthrown and only then became a cheerleader for the process of reform. Such a reactive mode is again justified by its mantra of non-interference. Spain's volte-face in Tunisia and Egypt is made all the more conspicuous by the gushing praise showered on the new regimes. While support is in order for the transition governments, circumspection is required given the lengthy, difficult and reversal-prone processes these countries are embarking on.

The ambivalence in Spain's reaction to the Arab revolts comes at the end of a period of declining Spanish influence over the EU's Mediterranean policy. Spain has been losing influence in the MENA region since the heyday of the Barcelona process. First, the European Neighbourhood Policy diluted the focus on the Mediterranean and transformed Spain from a policy-driver to a policy-recipient. Then came the lacklustre 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Barcelona process in 2005. Finally, France upstaged Spain and other member states by forcing through the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), despite nobody in the rest of Europe thinking president Sarkozy's initiative was a good idea.

Spain did successfully lobby to grant its privileged partner Morocco an 'advanced status' and fought to have the UfM secretariat based in Barcelona. But big on symbolic coups, it has been slow to imbue these moves with any substance. This mirrors the critique frequently made against the Zapatero-instigated Alliance of Civilisations. EU neighbourhood policies have been so depreciated by easy agreements and concessions that 'advanced status' has become no more than a symbolic gesture. The UfM secretariat stands headless and paralysed, scandalously inactive amidst historic change in the region it is supposed to cover. Spain has played more than its share in bringing about these lamentable outcomes.

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### SHORT TERM EXPEDIENCY

Spain's lack of leadership is hard to justify in terms of objective trends and interests. Many Spanish foreign policy interests are concentrated in the region. The Mediterranean is an increasingly important source of energy for Spain. Nearly a third of its gas imports come from Algeria. Although the MENA is not as important in terms of investment and trade as the official stance might suggest (accounting for around four per cent of Spanish trade flows), Spain's economic exposure to the region is still much greater than for most of the EU. The region also germinates a series of sensitive issues such as fishing, agricultural products and textiles.

Morocco is the clear priority for Spanish interests. Policy towards the country is constrained by fear of immigration, Islamist terrorism and close ties to the monarchy. Since the outbreak of the current revolts, both Zapatero and Trinidad

Jimenez have been at pains to stress that Morocco is different - a country where 'the reform process was initiated many years ago.' Spain successfully lobbied to include a positive reference to

Morocco's announced constitutional reform in the declaration adopted at the Extraordinary European Council on March 11.

But giving Morocco a free pass might not be in Spain's long term interests. Short-term expediency in order to safeguard investments and security interests merely displaces fundamental changes which will eventually have to take place. Similar praise has been showered on Jordan, with Jimenez going so far as to state that 'The King is the most reformist of all'. Spanish officials defend these two countries as comparatively better than their neighbours and point to active parliaments and elections as proof. But despite a reformist

vener these countries are in fact not as different as Spain likes to believe.

Lavishing praise on Morocco and Jordan, and backing the new regimes in Tunisia and Egypt after the fact, is easy. But the Gulf encompasses a whole new set of strategic and economic dilemmas. Officials argue that Spain supports the same values in the Gulf region but within a different timeframe. The Gulf is important for Spain in terms of the stability of energy markets and its effects on the international economy. Spain fears that if change occurs too fast here it could have profoundly destabilising effects on the world economy and international security. Of course, silence on the Gulf is the norm for most EU member states as they race to compete for lucrative infrastructure projects that have opened up through the Gulf regimes' massive subsidy programmes.

President Zapatero visited Qatar and the United Arab Emirates at the end of February 2011 in search of economic backing for Spain's faltering economy. King Juan Carlos attended Kuwait's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its independence at the end of February and is known to have made calls to the Bahraini and Saudi monarchs. Foreign Minister Jimenez has even voiced support for the presence of Peninsula Shield troops in Bahrain.

Syria and Yemen have barely merited a reference, except for Jimenez's ill timed visit in mid-March to Syria in which she met with Bashar Al Assad and stated that she was confident he would undertake reforms. Spain has always made efforts to maintain a privileged relationship with the Syrian regime as a means of playing a balancing role in the Middle East and in order to have a card to play vis-a-vis the US.

Spanish officials are ardent defenders of the premise that each country has, in what is now the stock government phrase, 'a different rhythm of reforms'. This and a policy of non-interference still provide a convenient cover for continuing business as usual.

**Spain has  
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»»»»» **TIME FOR LEADERSHIP**

In some ways, Spain has the most to gain from successful transitions. While working through EU institutions, Spain should strive for a leadership role reflecting its privileged relationship with North African states. Italy cannot see beyond the spectre of waves of immigrants flooding its shores. Although Nicolas Sarkozy is already presenting himself as the defender of Arab democracy movements, France has more baggage in the region. It is Spain's chance to shine. But can it regain the leadership it carved out through the Barcelona process?

Spanish policy makers realise that the current juncture offers an opportunity for Spain to recoup some lost influence. But they continue to articulate this possibility in terms of improving commercial and investment ties in the region. Despite Europeanising significantly, Spanish policy is in places still focused on narrowly-defined national interests. Spain should define its broad strategic goals and focus on core foreign policy priorities beyond trade and security. Commercial ties and investment opportunities should be embedded within a broader strategy. A coherent national policy, which transcends party politics, will help ensure Spain's relevance in European and international institutions. Pursuing bilateral commercial and financial interests does not preclude the promotion of an EU-based policy which encourages political and economic reform. But it will require putting some real substance behind Spain's stated principles of democracy and multilateralism. Immediate trade and security interests might be served by collusion with dictators, but ultimately they only provide an illusory stability. Spain should no longer hide behind narrow conceptions of human rights in order to justify a lack of involvement, while uploading difficult values-based issues to the EU level.

Stefan Fühle, Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy, has put his weight behind the Union for the Mediterranean. He says this 'has the potential to make a real

difference'. If the UfM is indeed going to get a second lease on life, Spain should take advantage to turn it into something useful, beyond a set of programmatic and depoliticised projects which can't seem to get off the ground.

In May the EU will present its review of the ENP. The revamped ENP should make explicit what political and economic reforms are desirable and what the EU is willing to offer in exchange. Clearly opening up markets to agricultural products and easing visa regimes will have to be part of the equation. These are the greatest incentives for the Southern Mediterranean states. Calling for a Marshall Plan for the North of Africa is fine, but throwing money at the problem is not enough. Demanding a reallocation of funds from east to south is not reasonable either. Offering what are painful concessions for the EU would justify a policy of conditionality, which up to now has been hollow. This will be politically difficult and will require a willingness to sacrifice short term benefits for long term objectives. Implementation will require leadership and vision.

Spain has placed its bets on Tunisia. It believes that this country should be the EU's immediate objective as it is small and the odds for a successful transition are greater. Once democratic consolidation is achieved it could serve as a model for the region. But a successful outcome of the political reform process should not be taken for granted. A slide into chaos followed by a reversal into authoritarianism is still possible. In Tunisia, but also in Egypt, there is a special need to be vigilant and to factor in a long-term commitment. Support and pressure will be required for a long period of time. The governments must be held to their promises to be inclusive and transparent in organising the transition to a democracy. Egypt's legislative elections are due in September and presidential elections will take place before the end of the year. Tunisia will hold constituent assembly elections in July. There is great demand for technical assistance on how to organise parties and run campaigns. Spain must make funding generously available if it hopes to lead EU debates.

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While domestic finances are stretched, this makes good long-term sense for Spain's own interests. Trying merely to divert Commission money from the east to the south is not an enlightened strategy.

Heightened international concern over the potential high-jacking of the processes by Islamists makes it imperative for Spain and the rest of the EU to remain level-headed and provide assistance to all players on an equal basis. Attempts to try and boost secular parties to the detriment of Islamists will inevitably backfire. Spain has long proclaimed a need to understand and integrate Islamists; this is the time for it to demonstrate this in practice and convince other, still more cautious member states that political Islam has to be included not contained.

Spain should also set an example in terms of migration. Rather than bullying Tunisia into taking 'strong and clear' action to prevent its citizens from leaving for Europe, as Commission president José Manuel Barroso has done, Spain should strive for an orderly management of migration that is not overly-securitised and is carried out within a framework of shared responsibility and co-operation with the countries of origin, transit and destination. This should obviously be accompanied by financial support for the development of the country of origin. Migration played a key role in Spain's development. In a very short time, Spain has gone from being a country that generated emigrants to a country that receives immigrants. This has contributed to a positive record in terms of the integration of its migrant population and a more nuanced response to dealing with migratory pressures. Spain must now capitalise on this to influence EU policy in the same direction; it would gain huge credibility in the MENA region if it did so.

Perhaps most obviously, a more far-sighted view on trade will also be required. Spain should lead the way by showing that it is willing to offer true (and domestically sensitive) incentives such as visa facilitation and agricultural trade liberalisation which so far have not been on offer in the region. In the run up to the 2012 election, this would be a courageous step to take. But if Spain fails to

temper its trade protectionism it cannot possibly aspire to lead the EU in meeting Arab aspirations.

A rethink is needed on the whole relationship between economic and political reform. Inevitably, given the sensitivity of the Southern Mediterranean states to intromission in their political affairs, EU cooperation has been skewed towards the less sensitive economic realm. But recent events have proven that this is not a sufficient strategy. As it has been one of the most ardent defenders of the 'modernisation' approach, Spain will need to reflect hard on the need for a fundamentally more political strategy.

Most importantly, Spanish politicians still need to register the fact that 'more of the same' is not enough. As new policies such as the 'Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean' are proposed or old ones such as the European Neighbourhood Policy are revamped, it is worth noting that they are all variations on a theme. Most 'new' ideas now proposed were already part of the original Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP). The EMP focused on region-building, the ENP favoured bilateral action plans and the new Partnership talks about an incentive-based, differentiated approach. But all include political and economic reform elements, alongside civil society support and cultural and educational exchanges.

Whether phrased in terms of 'more for more' or differentiation or conditionality, ultimately support for reform is a matter of political will. Elements of conditionality and incentives have always been part of policy; they just have never been implemented or appropriately formulated. The problem has not been so much policy design but rather its implementation. It remains an open question whether the necessary gear change in Spanish political will is immanent.

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