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About this Series

Op-Med is an ongoing series of opinion pieces on topical issues in Mediterranean politics from a transatlantic perspective. The series brings together European, North American, and southern Mediterranean experts through the German Marshall Fund–Istituto Affari Internazionali strategic partnership. The series examines key questions surrounding the political, societal, and economic evolution of specific Mediterranean countries as well as the broader regional and international dynamics at play in the Mediterranean region as a whole.

Spain and the New Mediterranean: Overlapping Crises

by *Jordi Vaquer i Fanés and Eduard Soler i Lecha*

Spain's Mediterranean policy is struggling to adapt to the combined impacts of the debt crisis in the eurozone and the Arab Spring. Spain's traditional and uncontested commitment to multilateralism and region-building in the Mediterranean and the "special" relationship with Morocco — Spain's own 3M, Mediterranean, Multilateralism, and Morocco — are not in question, but the priorities and strategy are being revised as a result of four combined drivers for change. Two of them are domestic: the victory of the Popular Party in the 2011 elections and the effects of the economic crisis. The other two are regional: a democratic opening following the Arab Spring and the proliferation of security threats in Spain's indirect vicinity, particularly in the Sahel.

The Popular Party and its Mediterranean Policy

Spain's Mediterranean policy and its basic tenants have been, in general terms, an area of broad consensus, with a notable exception: relations with Morocco. No other issue (with the one-off special case of the occupation of Iraq) has brought about a comparable amount of controversy

and open confrontation between the two largest parties, the Popular Party (PP) and the Socialist Party (PSOE).

With these antecedents in mind, the transfer of power from PSOE to PP has been surprisingly smooth as far as the Moroccan dossier is concerned. Changes in strategy brought by the new government in Madrid have been subtle, although the PP government makes no secret of its intention to gradually leave behind the socialist heritage in highly ideological dossiers. A case in point is the ongoing process of "de-Palestinianisation" of Spain's Mediterranean policy. While former Socialist Minister Miguel Ángel Moratinos tried, and failed, to contribute to the re-launch of the Middle East Peace Process, the PP government is refocusing Spain's efforts toward the Maghreb. Initially, the Popular Party also wanted to withdraw or downscale Spanish participation in the UN-led "Alliance of Civilizations," a project promoted by Rodríguez Zapatero together with Turkish PM Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, which contained a strong component of West – Islam dialogue that was harshly criticised by conservative commentators in Spain. In the end, though, the PP government

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backtracked for fear of undermining a Madrid-promoted UN initiative that might have jeopardized the Spanish bid to obtain a seat on the UN Security Council in 2015-2016.

The Effects of the Economic Crisis

The economic crisis is having two different effects on Spanish policy toward the region. The first is on instruments, in particular resulting from abrupt budgetary cuts that have deeply bitten into the expenditures for development cooperation and public diplomacy. The second impact is on priorities, as the government is putting a stronger emphasis on “economic diplomacy,” particularly in bilateral relations with Morocco and Algeria, where small and medium Spanish firms try to compensate for the losses in domestic and European economies. Economic hardship has hardened Spain’s restrictive position on agricultural imports and fisheries, but this hardly represents a novelty in Spain’s strategy.

The Impact of the Arab Spring

Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy’s government faces the challenge of redefining its strategy in a region that is changing dramatically. For decades, Spain and its diplomacy felt comfortable enough with the status quo in the region, in particular in view of the disastrous outcome of the 1988-1992 “Algerian Spring.” At most, Spain advocated endogenous reforms and gradual change. After the Arab Spring, Spain’s discourse had to adapt to an unexpected “democratic momentum.” It did so selectively. Spain supports ongoing changes in the countries where autocratic regimes have collapsed (Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt). Meanwhile, it applauds partial top-down reforms in Morocco and Jordan, keeps a low profile regarding Syria, and remains silent on the situation of those countries where changes have occurred at a slow pace (Algeria, Mauritania) or not at all (Gulf countries). In the end, the events did little to dispel Spain’s “democratisation agnosticism”: many Spanish diplomats argue that the change in Arab countries proves that external pressure is not helpful and that mainly endogenous factors will, in the end, bring about meaningful change.

With great differences across the region in terms of intensity and pace of political transition, many Arab countries are experiencing the emergence of “moderate” Islamist groups as central political and social forces. Spain’s diplomacy, like the one of its Western counterparts, is now faced

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with the challenge of establishing links with the new elites, with Islamist politicians and also with Islamist civil society organisations with whom they had avoided contact in the past.

The Sahel Security Complex

The collapse of authority in Libya and the subsequent boom in cross-border movement of weapons and armed groups highlighted the close links across a Northern Africa security complex that links together the Maghreb with the countries of the western Sahel (Mauritania, Mali, and Niger). Instability in the Sahel stands out as a major area of concern. The Spanish government fears that parts of this region, in particular Northern Mali, may become a “new Afghanistan” within easy reach of its own territory (in particular, the Canary Islands). The kidnappings of several Spanish aid-workers in Mauritania, Southern Algeria, and the Somali camps in Kenya have raised the official and popular awareness of these security challenges. These fears are shared with like-minded countries such as France. Spain supported the French initiative to extract a mandate from the United Nations Security Council that creates an opening for an African-led military operation to take control over Northern Mali.

Rethinking Spain’s Mediterranean Policy

Spain’s Mediterranean policy remains an area of broad consensus and continuity. However, changes both in its domestic arena and in the region, to the north and south

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of the Mediterranean, make substantial change unavoidable. The subtle readapting of priorities has so far operated without much controversy. But this should not obscure the fact that Spain needs a fundamental rethink of some of the pillars of its Mediterranean policy: the unconditional support to institutional proliferation and neo-liberal recipes in Euro-Mediterranean relations, its attitudes toward democracy and human rights, or the eternally volatile link with Rabat, to name a few. As the management of the economic and institutional crisis takes ever more space in Spain's domestic as well as foreign policies, the risk is that Spain will miss the opportunity to correct course in its Mediterranean policy. That may lead not just to regional irrelevance but even, possibly, to the inability to deal with unexpected crises right at its southern borders.

About the Authors

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