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**THE SPANISH-MOROCCAN “CRISIS”
AND THE FUTURE OF EURO-MED RELATIONS:
FARCE OR HARBINGER OF THINGS TO COME?**

Bruce Maddy-Weitzman

Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies

At first glance, the Spanish-Moroccan confrontation over an uninhabited rock outcropping, 200 meters off the Moroccan Mediterranean coast, seems like something conjured up from a Marx Brothers movie. However, the triggering of nationalist passions on both sides of the Straits of Gibraltar, the speedy support by the two countries' respective allies (the European Union for Spain, and the Arab and Islamic states, apart from Algeria, for Morocco), and the swift and decisive flexing of Spanish naval muscle, indicate that there is more to the matter than initially meets the eye. The fact that both countries have agreed to an American-brokered stand-down and initiated a round of high-level diplomacy is a tribute to mutual good sense. Nonetheless, the brief storm clouds over what Spain calls *Isla de Perejil* (Parsley Island) and Morocco calls *Leila* (Night), just when Morocco was officially celebrating the marriage of its King, serves as a reminder of how contentious Spanish-Moroccan relations have become in recent years. Moreover, this bilateral relationship seems to encapsulate the underlying, ongoing difficulties in creating a stable Euro-Mediterranean space, let alone bringing to fruition the dream of a true Euro-Med partnership as envisaged by the Barcelona Process.

Morocco's links with its former colonial masters, France and Spain, have never been as emotionally complicated and sensitive as have Algeria's ties with its former French rulers. With Spain's emergence in the last quarter of the 20th century as an economically dynamic and democratic constitutional monarchy, the common interests of the two countries in regional and internal stability and economic growth pointed them towards steadily more intimate ties. Spain quickly emerged as Morocco's second-leading trading partner; and Spain's King Juan Carlos maintained good relations with Morocco's late King Hasan and his son and successor, King Muhammad VI. In fact, Juan Carlos was often referred to in Morocco as a model for emulation by an evolving monarchy and polity.

However, in recent years, Moroccan-Spanish relations became increasingly fraught with tensions. Concern over the depletion of its fish stocks led Morocco to refuse to renew an agreement with the EU (affecting mostly Spanish trawlers) that allowed European fleets to fish in Moroccan territorial waters. The impact on the Spanish fishing industry was severe, and retaliatory action against both Moroccan companies and Moroccan immigrants was not long in coming. Morocco's own ongoing economic difficulties and the lure of a prosperous Europe made Spain the chief potential entry point from the South. An estimated 250,000 Moroccans now reside in Spain, the bulk of them illegally, and many thousands are estimated to have perished in the perilous Atlantic currents while attempting to make the crossing.

Violent outbursts in southern Spain by local residents against Moroccan agricultural workers testify to the increasing social tension between the veterans and the newcomers. Spain's economic boom in the 1980s and 1990s has slowed. Nevertheless, for both poverty-stricken North Africans and Africans from south of the Sahara, Spain, and Europe as a whole, remain a tantalizing, beckoning destination worth risking their lives for. The innumerable meetings between Moroccan and Spanish officials regarding the need to regulate and control the flow of immigration, drugs and other smuggling have not produced the desired results, and Spain is convinced that Moroccan officials are not only not doing enough to stem the flow but are actually complicit in the trafficking.

Morocco has had other complaints, as well: about access to the Spanish media and even to official Spain by the Polisario movement struggling against Morocco's efforts to incorporate the Western (formerly Spanish) Sahara; about Spain's refusal to discuss the status of its two enclaves on the Moroccan Mediterranean coast, Ceuta (held since 1580) and Melilla (held since 1497), even as it demands that Britain divest itself of exclusive sovereignty in Gibraltar, on the Spanish side of the Straits, (which Britain took over in the early 18th century); and, most recently, about Spanish naval maneuvers held without prior coordination or notice adjacent to the Moroccan coast. Morocco's ambassador to Spain was recalled last October as an expression of official discontent and has not yet resumed his post. And the non-invitation of Juan Carlos to King Muhammad's wedding celebration was a pointed reminder of the level to which official relations had sunk.

Domestic politics also served as background to the latest crisis. Morocco's initial assertion of sovereignty on the island may have been an effort by the new King to play the nationalist "card" in the hope of reinforcing his credentials during the celebration but at a time of growing malaise and economic difficulty. Alternatively, it may have been a show of muscle-flexing by senior Moroccan security officials. If this was the case, and if it was done without the King's consent, then there is considerable cause for concern. Either way, Moroccan decision-makers clearly did not anticipate the forceful Spanish response, which derived, at least in part, from Prime Minister Aznar's own domestic needs. But beyond that, Spain's quick eviction of the handful of Moroccan policemen from the island was a clear signal that any unilateral actions to change the status quo in Ceuta and Melilla would be resisted vigorously.

While some of these issues are unique to the Spanish-Moroccan arena, others are pertinent to the relationship between the EU and the southern Mediterranean region as a whole: the “pull” factor of an economically developed and democratic North and the “push” factor of an economically underdeveloped and politically repressive South; Europe’s long-term demographic demands versus the social and political tensions engendered by resentment of mostly non-Christian and/or non-white immigrants; the continuing saliency of the colonial legacy and nationalist sensitivities; Europe’s fear of instability in the South, expressed in the vitality of radical Islamist movements which may threaten existing regimes and spill over into Europe, versus its reluctance to make economic development and political reform in the South a top priority; and, more recently, the realization that “September 11” possesses European and North African dimensions. The future of Euro-Med relations will surely evolve against this difficult background, posing hard choices for policy makers on both shores.