

The Image of Spain in the Arab Press

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The image of Spain in the Arab world fundamentally evolves in function of the treatment by the press of the political agenda at each moment, especially in Morocco: the bilateral questions, Sahara, Ceuta and Melilla, and the repercussions of the Perejil crisis are the issues that continue to dominate the preferences of the media in that country. Moreover, the Alliance of Civilizations initiative, despite the criticisms received, has generated a globally positive impact in the Arab press, as an attempt to counteract the predominant policies of confrontation.

What images do Arabs have of Spain through their press? In order to respond to this question the first thing we should do is enter into the Arab reality, into the current events experienced by Arabs, if there is something called “Arab current events”. What is indisputable is that there is a series of issues of interest to all, although each country also has its own concerns, and even these shared points are seen and analysed from diverse perspectives, but they are what after all fill the pages of their newspapers. The presence of Spain in the Arab press is comparable to the beam of light of a lamp: the closer we get to it, the more light it sheds. In this way the presence of Spain in Moroccan newspapers bears no comparison with that of any other country. If we move to Algeria the intensity decreases and the news centres more on the triangle formed by Algiers-Madrid-Rabat, of which the Spanish capital is the balancing component while the two Maghrebian capitals try to attract it to their side. Thus, beyond the bilateral visits and the direct gas pipeline between Algeria and Spain, which is under construction, almost all

the references to Spain are reactions to Moroccan proposals in relation to Sahara, declarations by Spanish officials on the issue, or any response to a preference of Madrid for Rabat to the detriment of Algiers, whether when organising an international immigration conference or the first meeting of the Alliance of Civilizations outside Spain. The torrent of information produced by the Arab world and, more specifically, in the Middle East (Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon...) also contributes to this blurring of the Spanish light. These are the priority issues for the Arab media, and it is in this context that news from Spain must be framed.

The director of one of the three big international Arab newspapers responded to the question of the scarce coverage of the 11-M trial by stating that in Iraq there are, unfortunately, 200 deaths every two days, and that despite the blow that the Madrid massacre meant for Spain and Europe, it cannot be expected to have the same repercussions in an Arab world devastated by the conflicts. Each one of the aforementioned conflicts has its ramifications, as what happens in Iraq not only concerns the “land of the two



Not even its Andalusí past helps Spain escape from its Western double image. A traditional patio in Córdoba.

rivers” but also its neighbours, and the other Arab countries who anxiously follow an unstable situation which we do not know if it can spread; Lebanon, with its external interferences; Palestine as the recurrent core of the Arab struggle; and, beyond, the difficult situation in Sudan, Somalia or Yemen.

In terms of international information (in the Arab press, Arab affairs, although they may be from another country, are considered national news) there is a clear and perfectly understandable obsession with the United States and its relations with the Arab world. In the foreground are the old colonial powers that have never weighed anchor in their former territories. Once a newspaper editor has man-

aged to fit all this information into its limited pages it is possible to consider introducing news about Spain, or another European country, or China or any other non-Arab Muslim country like Iran or Indonesia.

Following this yardstick of interests, it is easy to understand why the vast majority of appearances of Spain in the Arab press are about subjects related to the Arab world: official visits in both directions, the Barcelona Conference, inauguration of the Casa Árabe, etc. There is almost a total absence of articles on the Spanish domestic reality.

The presence of Arab correspondents in Spain is directly proportional to the publication of news about our country in the Arab press.

There is only one Arab correspondent that can be regarded as such: Hussein Machdubi, of *Al Quds al Arabi* (with the exception of the members of the official Moroccan news agency, Maghreb Arab Press). This does not mean that there are no other Arab journalists who write from Spain: Gassan Juri for *Al Hayat*, George Rais for *Al Sharq al Awsat*, Malak Mustafa of *Al Zaman* or Abdelaziz Hamdi for the *Al Sabah*, are freelancers who cannot live exclusively from their work with the press, which undermines the dedication and thoroughness of their observations. On occasions, as happens frequently in *Al Sharq al Awsat*, the Rabat offices prepare the news about Spain. The mere regular presence of these Arab authors is now a positive effect in terms of the regular and well reported presence of Spain in the Arab press.

In this context, it would be appropriate to consider the role that the Spanish institutions must play in the work of more efficiently providing information to the Arab media,¹ promoting their presence in our country,² and, in short, being more aware of this news sector of more than 500 million people.

Of the most widely read international Arab press – *Al Sharq al Awsat*, *Al Hayat* and *Al Quds al Arabi* – only in the latter is there almost daily reporting of Spain, curiously on the same page where news about the Arab Maghreb appears.³ Most of the news has to do with the relationship between Spain and Morocco, with the Arab world or Islamist terrorism, or the

Muslim reality in Spain generally. “We rarely publish domestic Spanish subjects; the Basque reality or the electoral campaigns are of little interest,” complains Hussein Machdubi,⁴ present in Spain since 1995. Occasions such as the Barcelona Conference, the inauguration of the Casa Árabe and, of course, official visits by Arab leaders to Spain, and vice versa, are the occasions most conducive to briefly contextualise what is happening in Spain.

Despite the proximity and the now famous phrase “condemned to understand each other” that hangs over Hispano-Moroccan relations, the presence of Spain in Morocco has historically been quite limited

Despite this not very encouraging panorama for the weight of Spain in the Arab press, it must be stressed that the Spanish presence has grown and consolidated in the last five years, owing above all to two particular events. One was the crisis in Hispano-Moroccan relations, symbolised in the conflict of the small island of Perejil; and the second was the Madrid terrorist attack of 11-M. For many Arabs, but especially for Moroccans, the political crisis personalised in the figure of José María Aznar was a salutary lesson, a call to discover the Spanish reality. Despite the proximity and the now famous phrase “condemned to understand each other” that hangs over Hispano-Moroccan relations,

1. By way of example, it is worth mentioning the complaint by the journalist Hussein Machdubi about the fact that the organisers of the candidature of the Alhambra as one of the seven wonders of the world have not responded to an initiative put forward by distinguished Arab journalists in Spain to collaborate in the campaign in the Arab world.

2. The Qatari news channel Al Jazeera has spent several years trying to open an office in Madrid, but for various determining factors both of the channel itself and of the Spanish authorities it has not yet been possible. It is worth noting the impact that the regular appearance of news about Spain on this television channel would have in the Arab world, a channel which is said to have 50 million viewers in times of peace and 80 million in times of war.

3. This position has no relation with the ideal of the recovery of Al-Andalus but with the geographic proximity, given that there are times when news about France appears when the other international pages are very full.

4. Telephone interview carried out on 26th April 2007. Hussein Machdubi started work in Spain as a contributor to the Moroccan newspaper *Al Alam*. Today, as well as being the correspondent of *Al Quds al Arabi*, he contributes, among other media, to the Moroccan weekly *Al Ayam*.

the presence of Spain in Morocco has historically been quite limited. Only columnists with a personal vocation for Spanish affairs wrote about the Northern neighbour: Butaleb el Attar and Aziz Satori, of *Al Ittihad al Ishturaki*, or Larbi Mesari in *Al Alam*. The profoundly French affiliation of the Moroccan elite seemed to extend to the whole of the press, including the incipient independent press which in earlier times had come to criticise this excessive dependence: “There are cases in which the obsession of French speakers with their interests clashes with national interests. (...) Morocco has been the backyard of Paris, guarding against any other presence. This is corroborated by the Spanish who complain about the obstacles laid down by this lobby. (...) How long are we going to be the captives of the old colonialism whose followers once again repeat the experiences of that era?”⁵ The Moroccan journalist Nabil Drius comments that “after Perejil, Spain is no longer Maruja chocolate or Ceuta and Melilla; it is no longer the Spain of Franco, but a strong and democratic state.”⁶

The awakening from the torpor experienced by the Moroccan press in terms of Spain is also to do with the loss of international weight of its “godfather”, France; the economic crisis and the uprisings in the suburbs have revealed the deficiencies of the old metropolis in the field of integration. Moreover, the number of Moroccans resident in Spain has grown spectacularly in the last 10 years, reaching a million according to determined sources, which means a greater demand for information about the country where your brother or cousin lives or simply because it is a place where you want to emigrate. At the same time, Spain’s image in



Awaiting a Spanish royal visit in Morocco (Lurdes Vidal).

the Arab world has been establishing itself as one of an economically strong country more present in the international reality, whether for ill with the participation of Aznar’s government in the Iraq war, but which had a very positive reading by the Arab media because of the mass demonstrations by the Spanish people against the war; or positive, with the Spanish government’s response to the attacks of 11-M, proposing the Alliance of Civilizations as an alternative to the repressive policy carried out by the American government, and its allies, after 11-S. This positive image of the Spanish reaction after 11-M was picked up by the editorial of the best-selling Moroccan weekly, *Al Usbue*: “The explosion that caused the death

5. *Al Masaa*, 16th December 2006. A text which appeared in the opinion section of “Morning Coffee” which appeared unsigned on the front page of this newspaper edited by Rashid Nini.

6. Nabil Drius began to work as a journalist on the newspaper *Al Sabah*, where he specialised in Hispano-Moroccan relations following the Perejil conflict. Today he forms part of the Rabat office where the Moroccan edition of the international newspaper *Al Sharq al Awsat* is produced.

of 200 people in an instant was treated by the security forces with complete wisdom and seriousness, without any social agitation or group detentions. Neither did the photos of the victims of the attack lead to media exploitation, because the structure of the Spanish state is sufficiently strong.”⁷ The coverage of the attacks and the later police investigations was a constant in the Arab press in general, but above all in the Moroccan. When it was known that the majority of those involved were Moroccan, news appeared about the fear of possible racist acts against this community resident in Spain and their difficult situation after the attacks. A very significant example is the article published in *Al Ayam* which states: “Throughout Spain, immediately after the announcement of the news, Moroccans have preferred to remain in their homes. (...) The concern in the Moroccan community in Spain is normal, given what has been suffered by Arabs in the United States after the attacks of 11th September 2001.”

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With reference to this, Pedro Canales writes: “Whenever there is a terrorist attack the Spanish always say yes to the Basques and no to the terrorists. I think that the Spanish will say yes to the Moroccans and the Muslims and no to the terrorists. Four days have gone by without any clear aggression. I have hope in the understanding of the Spanish with what has happened.”⁸

Gradually, they focused on the investigations, stressing the collaboration between the two security forces, but still expressing some discontent with the poor attention given to the warnings that same summer by the Moroccan secret services about individuals as significant as Yamal Zugam.

The high regard that Spanish society earned in the Arab media for the demonstrations against the war in Iraq continued after the attacks of 11-M and the elections of 14-M 2004. The editor of *Al Quds al Arabi*,⁹ Abdelbari Atuan, on 17th March 2004, dedicated his column on the front page of his newspaper to the fall of Aznar’s government: “Aznar’s government behaves like many of the corrupt Arab governments, and treats its people as if they were heads of cattle, believing that it can hide the truth from them about the attacks. (...) The Spanish people have not voted for the opposition as a consequence of the attacks or out of fear of them, but angry with a right-wing government which got them involved in the Iraq war without respecting their wishes (90% of Spaniards opposed the war) and tried to conceal who was behind these attacks.”

In this context, Mohamed Krishan¹⁰ wrote an article entitled “The Spanish Example” which states: “Hundreds of millions of demonstrators have already come out against the war in Iraq; it is a lesson that could well be applied by the Arab governments (...) given that if there were real general elections, worthy of the name, in any Arab country the people would have the opportunity to settle the score with those who have spent years deceiving and telling lies.”

7. *Al Usbue*, 18th March 2004. The complete translation of this article can be read at www.boletin.org.

8. *Al Ayam*, 18th March 2004. The complete translation of this article can be read at www.boletin.org.

9. Newspaper published in London. Very critical of the Arab regimes. It is the most widely read Arab newspaper in Europe.

10. Mohamed Krishan is one of the most familiar journalists of the Al Jazeera channel. This article was published in *Al Quds al Arabi* on 17th March 2004.

But it is not all praise for the new head of government. In the Arab imaginary, the West has two faces: an image of modernity, economic development and defender of liberties, which contrasts with another negative one which mixes the colonising past, the superiority from which the Arab world is managed, the egoism and above all the lack of commitment to the defence of Arab interests.

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The Andalusí past does not have enough weight for Spain to escape from this dual image.¹¹ The Spanish transition (so often cited by the Moroccan democrats as a possible model for themselves), the Spanish economic strength while the great European countries remain almost stagnant, a growing presence of Spanish culture outside of Spanish-speaking borders, the greater Spanish presence in the international sphere, and the general attraction that the Arab past generates in the Arab media is the friendly side of the coin. The other side is made up of postures of superiority and domination that are quickly attributed to the colonial past and the West's position of strength over the underdeveloped world in general, and the Arab world in particular: the fact that the King of Spain does not apologise to the Muslims expelled from Spain in 1492 as he has done to the Jews; the refusal of the Spanish Parliament to deal with the issue of the use chemical weapons

in the colonial wars in the North Africa; the "occupation" of Ceuta and Melilla, or the role of Spain as the gendarme of Europe in terms of immigration. The paternalism distilled by some declarations by European leaders is very poorly seen by the Arab media. The attempts at defence of Arab interests by Europe are quickly unmasked and explained in terms of European or private interests which, hidden behind fine words, have the same end. In this sense, Abderrahman Rashid,¹² in an article entitled "The Meaning of Defeat in Spain",¹³ asserts that "all this opposition to the Iraq war is right, but José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, like the French president or German chancellor, are not people who manage hair salons which they can decide to open or close. There are big differences between the great powers on the procedures for dealing with different cases, but at root all agree on the main objective. (...) As an Arab Minister of Foreign Affairs said: "The difference between Washington and Paris in the confrontation over Iraq is that the former wants a quick death and the second a slow one.""

Spain-Morocco Bilateral Relations

The complicated and ruminated relations between Spain and Morocco experience low points, some more serious than others, but all are reported in their media. The complicated network of Moroccan power is also reflected in the press. It is difficult to distinguish between the newspapers' own opinion and that set by the guidelines of the power, especially when

11. See "The image of Moroccans in Spain. The Stereotype of Contempt and Inferiority", by Abdala Saura, *Al Zafía* (14th June 2002): "It is not surprising that there are articles written by people who consider themselves intellectuals and researchers who violently attack Arabs and Moroccans, serving the political interest of the moment and seeking to ignite discord among the peoples."

12. Former director of the newspaper *Al Sharq al Awsat*, he is currently director of the news channel *Al Arabiya*, the only one that challenges the domination of *Al Jazeera*.

13. *Al Sharq al Awsat*, 17th March 2004.

we talk of issues of “sovereignty” such as foreign relations or the Western Sahara dispute. Although in recent years there has been greater critical information in almost all the aspects of Moroccan life, the foreign relations are not at the same level in terms of a critical vision, although there are incipient hopeful cases, such as some of the articles about the issue by the editor of the weekly *Al Ayam*, Nureiddin Miftah,¹⁴ or by Hussein Machdubi in the same newspaper.

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In the Perejil crisis the press had a particularly important role, because the usual diplomatic lines of communication were broken and many of the information exchanges between the two governments were carried out through the media.¹⁵ The guidelines set down by the Palace in this sense are clear. Taking as an example the newspaper *Al Alam*, of the conservative nationalist party Istiqlal, one can clearly follow the evolution of the Moroccan posture in the conflict. On 7th May 2002 it published a harsh editorial under the title “Spain Accused”¹⁶. “Since Sahara returned to Morocco after the Spanish occupation in the colonial period, after the liberation of the Moroccan coasts of the pillaging of its fishing wealth, it rejected the renewal of the fishing agreement with the

European Union. After these two happy events, the Spanish government, and especially in the era of the right, is undertaking a hostile campaign towards Morocco.” When the crisis had abated, once again its editorial (of 29th January 2003)¹⁷ spoke more calmly of the importance of maintaining good relations with the Northern neighbour. Later – another editorial by this same newspaper carried the headline “New Mood in Hispano-Moroccan Relations”¹⁸ coinciding with the visit of Rodríguez Zapatero –, it focused on unconditionally praising the new executive. This example is among those that make up a clear and unified standard on the treatment of the crisis in the Moroccan press, following official indications or commentaries expressed through the sympathetic press or the declarations of the leaders. There are Moroccan journalists who defend this behaviour owing to the poor information they had about the issue, and specifically about relations with Spain. Others, however, put it down to the gag that still besets, although less strongly than in the past, the freedom of the press in Morocco. Only some of the incipient independent weeklies dare to criticise Moroccan actions. Hussein Machdubi wrote at that time an article entitled “Our Morocco Deserves Better Diplomacy”,¹⁹ in which he asserted that: “Moroccan diplomacy did not get underway until the second day, once the EU had made public a communiqué supporting Spain, with a very similar posture by NATO, that put Morocco before the international community in the same situation as Iraq when it made its incursion into Kuwait. (...) In the midst of the maelstrom unleashed

14. See “Aquellos días. Las carencias de la autonomía (del Sáhara)”, in Pedro Rojo (ed.), *El mundo visto por los árabes. Anuario de prensa árabe 2006*, Barcelona, Icaria editorial, 2007.

15. Carla Fibla, *España desde la orilla sur. La relación hispano-marroquí: opiniones e ideas*, Barcelona, Icaria editorial, 2005.

16. The complete translation of this article can be read at www.boletin.org.

17. The complete translation of this article can be read at www.boletin.org.

18. *Al Alam*, 24th March 2004. See the complete article at www.boletin.org.

19. *Al Ayam*, 18th July 2002.

in the world, we sought Moroccan diplomacy; we sought the Moroccan government to give us an explanation of the situation. Where was Moroccan diplomacy? Where was the Government of Abderrahman Yusufi that did not even call an emergency meeting?”

With the change of Spanish government, relations have changed and thus their reflection in the Moroccan press. The different reception for the personality of each Spanish president in the Moroccan media is obvious. It was said about Aznar that the crisis was caused “by a man who did not feel comfortable with Moroccans, or Arabs, or Muslims,”²⁰ while *Al Sabah*²¹ (independent newspaper of the Eco-Medias group) referred to his replacement as: “Zapatero, the Man who Likes Morocco.” This personalisation of the crisis in terms of the arrogance and contempt of the treatment of Morocco by the figure of the former president limited in the press the possibility of a deep analysis of the cyclical tensions and the approach to the issues that remain unsolved.

The same analysis can be applied to the current relations but from the opposite extreme. The “good chemistry” and the fluid dialogue that mark the current relations seem to influence the press. In addition to the aforementioned article of *Al Sabah*, there are endless texts praising him. On 22nd April 2004, Bugaleb el Attar published in the socialist newspaper *Al Ittihad al Ishtiraki* an article entitled “Visit by Zapatero to Morocco: Conclusions and Meanings”, in which three shared points were suggested between King Mohamed VI and the Spanish Head of Government: “1. José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero and Mohamed VI are from the same generation. The two think about the future and leave to one side the complexes and problems of the past. 2. The two are aware that

democracy, modernisation and opening are the keys to developing relations (...). 3. Spain forms part of our future because it is a neighbouring country, its position in the construction of the EU, its role in Euro-Mediterranean relations and its relations with Latin American countries. Spain represents the axis of the North-South dialogue, between the EU, Morocco and Spain on the one hand, and between Morocco and the countries of Latin America on the other.”

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So much complacency leaves aside questions that are still pending in Hispano-Moroccan relations. It seems as if the normalisation of relations had brought with it the marginalisation of the key role of the press during the so-called Perejil crisis, limiting itself to following current events with little critical perspective, except on a few occasions that have no greater transcendence, such as the aforementioned refusal to deal with the use of poisonous gases by Spain during the colonial war or the visit by Zapatero to Ceuta and Melilla.

This calm tone is especially striking in three particular aspects. The first is the issue of Western Sahara and the declarations, sometimes contradictory, of high level representatives of the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, depending on whether they visit Rabat or Algiers. The strength with which Zapatero’s government publicly involved itself in its early days with respect to Western Sahara seemed to augur a substantial change in the posture of

20. *Al Usbue*, 18th March 2004. See the complete article at www.boletin.org.

21. *Al Sabah*, 24th March 2004. See the complete article at www.boletin.org.

Spain to the conflict. The Moroccan and Arab newspapers in general seem to be in agreement with this change of orientation, to the irritation of the Algerians. The most widely sold Arab newspaper in the world, *Al Sharq al Awsat*, published an article on 15th November 2005 entitled “‘Coup d’État’ in the Spanish Posture to the Sahara Conflict” picking up the expression used by the Europa Press Agency after the declarations of the Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Miguel Ángel Moratinos, favourable to the proposal of autonomy, which had only been mentioned by King Mohamed VI in the commemorative speech of the 30th anniversary of the Green March: “This new positioning is a coup d’état [according to Europa Press] of the diplomacy of Madrid and the socialist government that has supported Morocco since it took power.” Finally, the initial impetus has had to accommodate the weary rhythm of this long conflict. Each positive step of the Spanish executive has been maximised by the Moroccan press, while the declarations contrary to its interests, especially made on official visits to Algeria, were not excessively criticised. It seems that Moroccan newspapers have opted just like their government for a long-distance run, in the hope that Spain will definitively support them in the Security Council.

The newspaper *Al Alam* asserted, in its editorial of 19th April 2004, that: “In the case of Western Sahara, apart from the efforts made by France, Spain has a more important role to play. It participated in the solution to the problem with Morocco after the 1975 Green March and signed the Madrid Agreement to put an end to its presence on Moroccan territory, but it has yet to comply with an international duty necessary for the future of the relations between the two countries: to declare before the United Nations that Sahara belongs to

Morocco.” This could already be happening if we believe what Aziz Satori writes in *Al Ittihad al Ishtiraki*²² about what has happened in the latest resolution of the Security Council, no. 1754: “The United States and France, as well as Spain which is a member of the Friends of Sahara group, pressured the Council to approve a resolution in favour of the Moroccan right without giving importance to the proposal of the Polisario Front.” Other questions about the dispute, such as the attempts of Spanish delegations to travel to Western Sahara to assess the state of human rights, were solved by closing ranks and supporting the measures of the Moroccan government to impede them, given that they maintained that defenders of the cause infiltrated these delegations. The internal Spanish controversy over Western Sahara has a relatively important presence, but it is also a marginal issue limited to picking up the declarations of the leaders of the Partido Popular accusing the PSOE of having abandoned the Saharawis, especially because these declarations serve to strengthen the Moroccan posture that there has been a change of attitude in the Spanish government.

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The Algerian press is in principle the only one in the Arab world that defends the Polisario Front cause. But in terms of the bilateral relations with Spain they are not very demanding. Zapatero’s government has been able to combine the receptivity towards the Moroccan thesis with visits and tacit support that allow Algeria to continue justifying their good rela-

22. *Al Ittihad al Ishtiraki*, 2nd May 2007. See the complete article at www.boletin.org.

tions with Madrid, despite the fact that the latter has “abandoned” the Saharawis. *Al Jabar*, the main Algerian newspaper in Arabic, published an article one day before the visit by Vice-President María Teresa Fernández de la Vega to Algiers which said “Spanish leaders will tomorrow visit Algeria to get things back on course”,²³ given that “the relations between the two countries have suffered a deterioration in recent times owing to the clear support of the Spanish socialist government for Moroccan diplomacy in the Western Sahara issue in the international forums.” The following day, the problems appeared to have been solved: “Spain rectifies the ‘errors’ of its diplomacy,”²⁴ as, according to high level representatives cited by *Al Jabar*, “they qualify the visit as a Spanish attempt to rectify their diplomatic errors in issues such as illegal immigration and Western Sahara.” Moreover, the state visit by the King and Queen of Spain to Algeria from 13th to 15th March 2007 served to counteract Zapatero’s declarations in favour of the Moroccan proposal of autonomy for Sahara made in the Spain-Morocco High Level Meeting a week earlier.

Immigration has been the factor with most influence in Spain’s change of vision in Morocco: in ceasing to be a country of transit to become one of reception the information that interests Spain began to change. Gradually the appearance of news about small boats captured by the Spanish authorities and the later repatriation of would-be emigrants have become normal. More tragic news such as the sinking of small boats and the arrival of cadavers on Moroccan or Spanish coasts are also covered in detail. Little was known of the European dream and less was written, and therefore it



The capture of *pateras* (small boats), a daily subject in both the Moroccan and the Spanish press.

continued to be represented by the image of the success of those who returned in the summer with cars full of presents talking of the marvels of their life in Spain.

The first attempt to describe the hard life of the Moroccan immigrant on the other side of the Gibraltar Strait were the notes that Rashid Nini took on small bits of paper or café serviettes on which he told of his experiences as an illegal immigrant in Spain. These weekly chronicles were published by the nationalist newspaper *Al Alam* in 1997,²⁵ but it was not until the events of El Ejido in February 2000 when most of the Moroccans realised that everything was not as positive as told by the majority of the triumphant returnees. It was also the era in which television definitively broke the local news enclosure and international information flowed bringing closer the reality of the Moroccan emigrants in Spain. Gradually more reports and information have appeared about the problems of their compatriots and future neighbours of many awaiting their opportunity to somehow cross the Strait. One series of reports which deserves special mention was by

23. *Al Jabar*, 2nd November 2006. See the complete article at www.boletin.org.

24. *Al Jabar*, 3rd November 2006. See the complete article at www.boletin.org.

25. These chronicles can be read in Spanish in *Diario de un ilegal*, Madrid, Ediciones del Oriente y del Mediterráneo, 2002.

Raduan Ramadani for the newspaper *Al Sabah* in 2005 about the life of Moroccans who live without papers in Spain. He lived with them and shared enough time to portray it with clarity and detail to readers in Morocco.²⁶

The issue of immigration was also a cause of friction between the last government of Aznar and Morocco, with an exchange of accusations of lack of cooperation by both sides. The commitment by Zapatero's government to devote more resources to Morocco and press the issue less belligerently had positive results at a statistical level with the small boats leaving Morocco, with the breaking up of immigration mafias, etc., and in the tranquillity with which this issue is treated in the Moroccan press, emphasising the excellent cooperation. The special dispensation that Spain has on the issue in the Moroccan press was reflected when in September 2005 hundreds of African emigrants tried to enter Ceuta and Melilla en masse. The thorny situation of these two cities, always accompanied in the Moroccan press with descriptions such as "occupied" or "usurped" was added to the problem of immigration and the more than 10 deaths among the emigrants during those days. The fact that the Moroccan army defended the "artificial frontiers of the occupied cities" seemed to create a conflict in itself. But the conflict was not used for an organised request for the return of the two cities, the pertinent language was maintained, and they remained alert, as revealed by the editorial of the young independent newspaper *Al Nahar al Magrebiya* of 3rd October 2005, which talks of the "Prime Minister's Error" when Driss Yettu said in the presence of Zapatero in the previous High Level Meeting: "If hundreds of immigrants have assaulted Melilla and Ceuta in the

last few days, thousands or tens of thousands are in the cities of the north and south of the kingdom." The editorialist pointed out: "The Prime Minister should, at least, control his tongue or describe the cities with their known labels," but he did not go beyond the criticism of the language used.

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The relative lack of the belligerence with which the visit of the Spanish President José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero to Ceuta and Melilla in January 2006 was received is also surprising. It was a historical event, given that no president of the government, or King of Spain, had ever travelled to the autonomous cities since the transition. Not even José María Aznar dared to travel in his capacity as president of the government (he did so as candidate) and thus break the unwritten pact agreed between Rabat and Madrid, according to which no head of state or of government would visit the delicate African cities. Barely had some brief news been published when the trip was announced in which the visit to the two usurped cities is reproached as an affront to the confidence that Morocco has put in this man who has been capable of getting neighbourly relations back on track,²⁷ plus the expected wave of nationalist articles such as that published in *Al Alam* on 2nd February 2006: "The visit by Zapatero to Ceuta and Melilla constitutes a submission to the hate of the colonialist sectors and damages the bilateral relations," to be forgotten after a few days because, as published the same day by

26. Another very interesting article that portrays two antagonistic ways of life of Arabs in Spain is "Los habitantes de El Ejido y de Marbella. Pobres bajo tiendas de campaña para importar divisas y ricos que las gastan en la Costa del Sol", by Abdelmayid Ait Amina, *Al Masaa*, 9th April 2007. See the complete article at www.boletin.org.

27. *Al Nahar al Magrebiya*, 15th November 2005. See the complete article at www.boletin.org.

Al Sharq al Awsat: “Morocco and Spain avoid an escalation after Zapatero’s visit to Ceuta and Melilla.”

The issue of the return of Ceuta and Melilla, despite its symbolic importance, is not present as a priority either in the press or on the Moroccan political agenda

In fact, the issue of the return of Ceuta and Melilla, despite its symbolic importance, is not present as a priority either in the press or on the Moroccan political agenda. In an article by Abdalah Damun, this ambiguity is crystal clear: “Morocco says that it continuously demands the return of Ceuta and Melilla occupied by Spain for more than four centuries, but the Spanish insist that there are no serious demands from Morocco to recover them, and that in the UN there is no record of decolonisation in Ceuta and Melilla. Which means that Morocco uses the discourse of the demand for internal consumption. (...) It is clear that now, in Morocco, the case of Ceuta and Melilla is not a priority to complete the territorial unity which Sahara certainly is. Ceuta and Melilla do not monopolise the interests of Moroccans, but the Moroccan government does not miss any opportunity to imply to its Spanish counterpart that the normalisation of the two cities is impossible.”²⁸ This is used by Moroccan governments as a trump card in determined isolated contexts. When this happens, all the more or less aggressive media paraphernalia is rolled out, depending on the demands of the script, paraphernalia which remains asleep until it is called to arms.

The Alliance of Civilizations in the Arab Press

When Rodríguez Zapatero gave his speech to the United Nations General Assembly on 21st September 2004 to announce his proposal of the Alliance of Civilizations, the reception in the Arab world was not significant. But its development, with the United Nations adopting it as its own, the inclusion of personalities such as André Azoulay, Jewish advisor to King Mohamed VI, within the High Level Group responsible for developing it, the holding of the first meeting of the group outside Spain in Morocco or Zapatero’s visit to the Arab League Summit in Algiers to present the idea in person have meant that in the political environment of the Arab world it has gradually caught on. It was quickly asserted how appropriate it was for Spain to put forward this proposal as the natural inheritor of Al-Andalus: “The Alliance of Civilizations seeks an identity in the Kingdom of Al-Andalus and in the cultures.”²⁹

There are Arab authors who criticise the Alliance of Civilizations as utopian or for being a cynical exercise in good intentions. In the case of Gasan Tuini, he even uses the “Andalusi legacy” to ask for something more than mere words: “Stop repeating intellectual calls for dialogue between religions and civilisations, and move on to crystallising a practical and direct ‘cultural revolution’ similar to the Chinese revolution. A revolution inspired in our Andalusi legacy and by the Arab golden ages.”³⁰

What is indisputable is that the concept of the Alliance of Civilizations is already assimilated into the vocabulary of the Arab press

28. *Al Sharq al Awsat*, 2nd November 2006. See the complete article at www.boletin.org. See Abdalah Damun, “Ceuta y Melilla, dos ciudades que se acercan y se alejan de Marruecos según las ocasiones” (extracts), in Pedro Rojo (ed.), *El mundo visto por los árabes. Anuario de prensa árabe 2006*, Barcelona, Icaria editorial, 2007.

29. *Al Hayat*, 4th July 2006. See the complete article at www.boletin.org.

30. *Al Nahar* (Lebanon), 25th July 2005. See the complete article at www.boletin.org.

and is used in diverse ambits as a synonym of understanding between the West and Islam, or between Europe and the Arab world, given that there is a debate about which term is most appropriate: “civilisations”, “religions” or “West-Islam”.³¹ Each confrontation or controversy between the West and Islam is an opportunity for Arab authors to recover the idea as a solution to the specific problem. This already happened with the controversial caricatures of Mohammed: “In Europe there have already been cases where the Christian prophet has been portrayed and insulted, but in Arab culture today this is not so. This difference must be respected, given that without respecting differences there will be no place for a dialogue of civilisations.”³² But it has also happened in the crisis of the Parisian suburbs or the declarations of Pope Benedict XVI on Islam.

The fact of assuming the concept as a positive idea does not mean there is no discussion about it. As we have already said, even the terms used are questioned: dialogue, alliance or understanding. There are critical visions of the Alliance of Civilizations which have been

useful for questioning the Arab idiosyncrasy itself: “The progressive liberal spirit, acutely present in the Arab-Muslim world, understands that it must defend the spirit of real progress present in Islam and also its role as a creative civilisation in the history of humanity. The alliance with the vanguard of the West with the objective of defeating the right does not only correspond to the West, but to all the Arab and Muslim countries which still suffer such despotism and backwardness.”³³

There are Arab authors who criticise the Alliance of Civilizations as utopian or for being a cynical exercise in good intentions

Despite the criticisms that it has received for being utopian or opportunist, for being a plagiarism of the Dialogue of Civilisations launched by the then President of Iran, Mohamed Jatami, in 1998, what is undeniable is the assumption and utilisation of the concept in the Arab media as a political and ideological alternative to the policy of confrontation and missiles defended from Washington.

31. See on this subject the article by Abdelaziz Mohamed Al Jater: “Hacia una mejor alianza de civilizaciones”, *Elaf*, 27 February 2006, in Pedro Rojo (ed.), *El mundo visto por los árabes. Anuario de prensa árabe 2006*, Barcelona, Icaria editorial, 2007.

32. Jaled al Dajil, “La libertad de expresión y el concepto sagrado: necesidad de entendimiento mutuo”, *Al Ittihad* (United Arab Emirates), 7th February 2006.

33. Mohamed Yaber Al Ansari, “Si existe una Alianza de Civilizaciones: ¿Cómo coordinar a Occidente y el islam?”, *Al Hayat*, 27th September 2005.



Shop window in the Old City market, East Jerusalem (Muhammad Jaridi).