

A Response by Edward M. Gabriel

I appreciate the opportunity to provide several corrections to the June 2009 web commentary by Abdel-Rahim Al-Manar Slimi, "The United States, Morocco and the Western Sahara Dispute". As former US Ambassador to Morocco from 1997-2001, I had a unique opportunity to participate in the US policy change in 1999 that shifted US policy away from a referendum on independence and instead recommended a negotiated compromise political settlement based on a formula originally suggested by the United States of a large autonomy for the region, under Moroccan sovereignty.

During President Clinton's second term, the United States abandoned the effort to resolve the seemingly endless and increasingly sterile dispute over the voter list for the referendum and instead began to encourage a political solution to the problem based on the sovereignty/autonomy formula. This has remained US policy to this day. After being briefed by the U.S. on this development in 1999 and then meeting with King Mohammed in the Spring of 2000, former Secretary Baker also changed tactics and made his first proposal, referred to as the Framework Agreement, in the Spring of 2001. That proposal also called for a negotiated political settlement based on the same sovereignty/autonomy formula being urged on the parties by the United States. This change in U.S. policy, initiated by Secretary Madeleine Albright under President Clinton, was continued by President George W. Bush.

Despite the author's assertion, the Bush Administration never threatened Chapter VII action against any of the Parties, including Morocco. This is simply wrong. To the contrary, in a meeting between King Mohammed VI and President Bush in September of 2003, the President made it clear (something he later reinforced in private official communication) that the U.S. would never force any decision on the parties, through Chapter VII or otherwise. Again, the author is not likely aware of these exchanges since the since official transcripts have not been released.

The author's characterization of the view of Congress on this issue is badly stated and misleading. In the past year alone, 233 members of the House, more than a majority, signed a letter in support of the autonomy/sovereignty solution and urged the Obama Administration to pursue this policy more vigorously in both words and deeds. On the other hand, a letter supporting the Polisario's uncompromising stand on the referendum garnered 33 signatures – hardly a "divided Congress" – a 200 member difference. It is now clear that the U.S. House of Representatives, in three clearly pro-Morocco letters in the last two years alone, signed by a nearly even number of Republicans and Democrats and including nearly the entire leadership of both parties, has signaled definitively its desire to see a compromise settlement, allowing for autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty.

The author's general view that the United States has taken a neutral stance in recent years is also poorly supported by the ongoing process at the UN. Indeed, the record shows that since the second Clinton Administration the U.S. has consistently favored the kind of political compromise advanced by Morocco and repeatedly urged compromise on the parties as a means of achieving a sustainable political solution to the issue. President Bush actually went further than President Clinton in not only endorsing an autonomy/sovereignty approach (but not the Moroccan proposal per se), by suggesting that independence was not an option and not in the interest of the U.S.

In conclusion I believe the only way to solve this dispute is through a compromise by both parties, which provides for a self determination mechanism for the people of the territory. A negotiated sovereignty/autonomy approach seems to meet both criteria.

Not finding a compromise only prolongs the misery and suffering of all, especially the tens of thousands of Sahrawi refugees who after three decades still remain

confined by the Polisario in the most inhospitable conditions imaginable in camps in southwest Algeria.

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