

A Response by Anna Theofilopoulou

I should like to point out two factual inaccuracies in the June 2009 web commentary by Abdel-Rahim Al-Manar Slimi, The United States, Morocco and the Western Sahara Dispute.

The first concerns the options proposed in the Peace Plan for Self-determination for the people of Western Sahara (S/2003/565.Corr.1) submitted by James A. Baker, III to the Moroccan Government and the Polisario Front in January 2003. According to the author, the Peace Plan submitted by Baker in 2003 proposed two options: either autonomy within a federal kingdom of Morocco or division of the territory. Nowhere in the document is there any suggestion for division of the territory. The Peace Plan proposes integration of the Territory with Morocco, or independence, or a continuous autonomy, all three to be decided by the people of Western Sahara at a referendum of self-determination that would follow an initial period of autonomy of 4 years. The idea of dividing the Territory came from President Bouteflika of Algeria in November 2001, who also informed Mr. Baker that Algeria and Polisario would be prepared to discuss division of Western Sahara. In a subsequent visit to Morocco Mr. Baker informed King Mohammed VI who responded that Morocco would not contemplate a division of the Territory. (USIP Special Report 166, Anna Theofilopoulou, The United Nations and Western Sahara A Never-ending Affair, July 2006).

The other point concerns the author's claim that the Bush Administration made a sudden shift in its policy vis-à-vis Western Sahara in 2003. The Bush administration completely supported Baker's efforts from the moment it took office in 2000, similar to the Clinton administration, which was also very supportive of Baker's efforts from the start of his appointment as UN Personal Envoy. The US in public and at the UN Security Council was following an overall policy of neutrality by supporting UN efforts to resolve the conflict. Both the Clinton and the Bush administrations were hoping that Mr. Baker, in his capacity as UN Personal Envoy would be able to resolve the conflict without the US

having to take a publicly active role in its resolution, despite its close ties with Morocco. The US was instrumental in the unanimous adoption by the Security Council of resolution 1495 of July 31, 2003, supporting the Baker Peace Plan.

The shift by the Bush administration happened in April 2004, when Morocco outright rejected the Baker Peace Plan and sent a document to the UN that required the parties to agree to a negotiated solution based on “autonomy within the framework of Moroccan sovereignty” (S/2004/325.Add.1). It was at that time, that those within the Bush Administration advocating open support of the Moroccan position because of Morocco's importance in counter-terrorism efforts and its perceived importance on the Middle East conflict prevailed and support for Baker by the US weakened. The US, together with France and Spain co-sponsored resolution 1541 of April 29 2004, which strongly supported a mutually acceptable political solution, which Mr. Baker had informed the Council was all but impossible given the parties' incompatible positions and their unwillingness to compromise. Thus, the US toned down its hitherto support and that of the Security Council of the Baker efforts.

Anna Theofilopoulou covered Western Sahara and North Africa in the Department of Political Affairs of the United Nations from 1994 to 2006. She worked closely with former U.S. Secretary of State, James A. Baker, III throughout his appointment as Personal Envoy of the Secretary-General on Western Sahara - from March 1997 until his resignation in June 2004.