

Moroccan migration to Spain: the case of Ceuta and Melilla

Ceuta and Melilla are two Spanish enclaves in the Moroccan territory. They were formerly part of the dominion left from the Spanish colonial empire and they are historically called *Plazas de Soberanía*.

These two tiny cities have always been important from a geographical and strategic point of view.

Melilla was the first one conquered by Spain in 1497, when the Spanish military occupied the city during the *Reconquista* – a period in which the Christian military started to push back the Arab-Berber forces from the Iberian Peninsula. Whereas, Ceuta was conquered in 1415 by Portugal and then transferred to Spain under the Treaty of Lisbon in 1668¹.

Due to the fact that Ceuta is located right in front of the Strait of Gibraltar, it has always been a strategic and crucial crossing point between trades and cultures.

In 1956, Morocco obtained the independence from Spain, and by 1975 it started to reclaim its territories which were still under the Spanish control. Morocco asked the United Nation to include Ceuta and Melilla under the list of the *Non-self-governing-territories*, the list of territories still under the control of a colonial power.

Morocco based its request on historical, geographical and judicial reasons, despite the fact that the UN never complied with Morocco's request. Nowadays, the only two African territories on the list of *Non-self-governing-territories* are Western Sahara and Gibraltar.

Both enclaves become European cities in 1986, when Spain joined the European Community. A decade after, Melilla and Ceuta became autonomous cities. The entrance of Spain and, consequently, of Ceuta and Melilla, had important consequences on the borders between Spain and Morocco and the possibility to cross them.

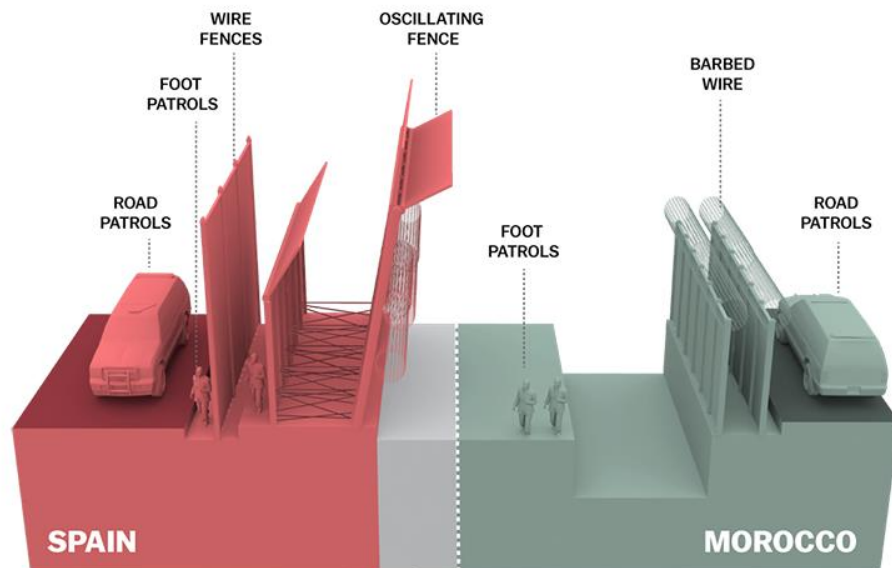
To better understand the significant importance of Ceuta and Melilla, it is crucial to do an analysis of the borders which surround these cities. These borders are noteworthy because they have multiple cultural connotations. They are not just fences between two states: they represent both the most southern border of the European Union and the only one terrestrial border between Europe and Africa. Moreover, the borders have an historical significance: the division between Muslims and Christians.

The first border to be constructed was the one in Ceuta, built in 1993 with a length of 8.3 Km. However, the fence was too easy to climb, so, a few years later in 1995, the construction of a strengthened fence began. The project finished in 2000 with a total cost of 48 million euros, with the EU funding 75% of the total cost.

Immediately after, in 1996. The construction of the fence in Melilla started with a total length of 10.5 Km. In 1998, the fence in Melilla was strengthened too.

¹ Saddiki S., *Ceuta and Melilla Fences: a EU Multidimensional Border?*

Today, the borders have a are under strict surveillance: fixed cameras, microphone cables, motion detectors and military patrol on both Spanish and Moroccan sides, making these fences the most surveillance monitored of Europe.



Another crucial aspect of the borders is what they represent in the life of the people who can or cannot pass through them.

The first remarkable change on the equilibrium around the borders took place at the beginning of the 90s. From 15th May 1991 onward, the citizens of Morocco need a visa to enter Spain. This was due to the fact that the European Union obtained more competence in matter of migration policies, which used to belong to the Member States, and that Spain signed the *Schengen Agreement* (25th June 1991).

When the news of this change started to spread in the proximity of the border, a lot of people tried to cross the fences fearing they would not manage to do it anymore. The EU and its members wanted to build a *security belt* against undocumented migration². For this reason, the EU encouraged the member states – Spain included – to develop their border controls.

During the *conference of Barcelona* in 1995, a partnership based on security, economy and finance, society and culture was established. This partnership sees the cooperation between the EU and other ten Mediterranean states, including Morocco.³

² Alscher S. *Knocking at the doors of "Fortress Europe"*

³ The complete list of the Mediterranean partners of the European Union is: Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, The Palestinian Authority, Syria, Tunisia and Turkey.

Another episode which had important consequences, was the one happened in 2005, when a massive number of migrants tried to cross the border, . This led to a military intervention which caused the death of four migrants and forty-five injured.

The violence of this event can be read as a turning point in the migration policies because the EU understood that illegal migration was something to be controlled and not something to be ignored.

From 2005 to 2008, the Spanish government put in practice the so-called “Africa Plan” to control migration influxes. Because of the europeanization of the migration policies, the EU gave funds to Spain in order to strengthen the fences and the border control.

The fences in Ceuta and Melilla are a clear representation of the EU strategy to externalise the irregular migration, given the burden of the asylum seekers and migrants coming from the centre of Africa to other third countries – such as Morocco. In this sense, we can say that Ceuta and Melilla represent a sort of barrier between Africa and the EU. Actually, according to the new European Pact concerning the externalisation of the EU migration management, Ceuta and Melilla borders represent the *de facto* southern frontier of the EU⁴.

Beside the irregular migration, another phenomenon which took place around the borders is the so-called *atypical trade*. This kind of trade is carried out mainly by Berber women (in the recent years this job is widespread also among men) which are allowed to cross the borders on a daily basis, perhaps because they work in the enclaves but live in Morocco. They are paid 50 dirham (about 4.50 euros) for each bundle they manage to carry. For that reason they are often called *porteadoras* or *mujeres mulas*.. These women bring even 80 kilos of goods every day, and often they do not even know what they are carrying. Usually the bundles contain food, clothing or other first need necessities that *porteadoras* buy in the enclaves without paying taxes on them (the enclaves have special fiscal regimes).

On November 2008, Sofia Azizi – 41 years old – died after other women step on her in the chaos in crossing the border through El Biutz Passage, a very tiny tunnel connecting Ceuta and Castillejos. Since then, the Spanish government opened another passage, to make the crossing point less crowded.

Both Spain and Morocco have no interests in trying to stop this *atypical trade* which generate about 45.000 direct jobs and 400.000 indirect jobs. Moreover, the trade is estimated at 440 million in Melilla⁵ and 500 million in Ceuta⁶.

In Ceuta and Melilla it is possible to find many symbols which constantly remind you that you are in the Spanish territory and not in Morocco anymore.

The autonomous cities are surrounded by the Spanish and the EU flags. The presence of these flags is much more prominent in Ceuta and Melilla than in the rest of the Spanish territory.⁷ The national flag is an important symbol to legitimise the power because they influence the consciousness of the people.

⁴ Ceuta and Melilla fences

⁵ Data from 2006, El Pays

⁶ Data from 2008, El Pays

⁷ Castan Pinos J. *Identity challenges affecting the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla*

Moreover, Ceuta and Melilla have been an important element for the propaganda of the dictatorship regime put in place by Francisco Franco in 1936

In fact, in Melilla it was possible to find the last statue of Franco – demolished in February 2021. The two enclaves were crucial elements which serve to the regime to underline the glorious past of the colonial empire. Besides, Melilla was particularly important for the regime because it serves as the launching point for the nationalist troops at the beginning of the Spanish civil war⁸.

It is important to point out that in the two enclaves rituals are used to underline the presence of the Spanish authority. Rituals have a strong impact on the emotional sphere of individuals, probably even more than symbols. The two most important rituals which took place in the cities are the *sábado legionario* – a tribute for the fallen soldiers – and the *el levantaamiento del sito* – the commemoration of the defeat of the sultan in 1775.

Nowadays, for Spain it is still important to affirm its power on these two enclaves, even though, as a consequence, the relationship with Morocco is becoming more and more complicated – Morocco has never recognised Ceuta and Melilla as Spanish territories. The enclaves have an economic importance to Spain due to trade and tourism, but the most important reason why Spain will never give up on the control of these territories, is the geopolitical and strategic issue.

Ceuta and Melilla are important points to control the migration flows, creating a sort of barrier between the Sub-Saharan Countries and Europe. In fact, by observing the data on migration, we can see that in 2019 Spain was the EU member which issued more refusal of entry – even more than the other twenty-seven members combined- - with 493.4555⁹ . The *Alien Act* of March 2015 introduced the possibility to reject people at the borders. This means that when a person is found at the Spanish borders - including Ceuta and Melilla's– she or he is taken outside the Spanish territory through passages controlled by border guards. This amendment aimed at legalising the push back operations and stripping people of the right to request asylum. For that reason, it has been criticised by the UNHCR and the European Commissioner for breaching human rights ¹⁰. This measure affects groups in vulnerable situations such as unaccompanied minors and victims of human trafficking the most.

Moreover, these fences can be considered as an element of externalisation of the problem of illegal migration and they served the aim of exporting migration and asylum problems to the neighbouring countries. Morocco is a transitory country and Ceuta and Melilla have a strategic position in put a stop between the migration flows and the *fortress of Europe*. The militarisation and strengthening of Ceuta and Melilla can be viewed, not only as an attempt to reduce the number of illegal migrants, but also as an attempt to demonstrate the presence and the exercise of the power of Spain – and subsequently, of Europe – in the African continent.

⁸ Johnson C., Reece J. The Biopolitics and geopolitics of border enforcement in Melilla

⁹ 717.600 total persons refused entry in Eu in 2019, Eurostat data.

¹⁰ *Country report: Access to the territory and push backs*

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