

# Ceuta and Melilla: Euro-African Borderscapes

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**Fences, six meter high, mark the transition to the cities of Ceuta and Melilla: icons of 'Fortress Europe'. A story about migration attempts, border patrol, mutual interaction, crossing border trading and the future.**

For decades, the Spanish-Moroccan conflict regarding the sovereignty of Ceuta and Melilla has provided these two North African territories with remarkable geopolitical significance. Moreover, since 1991, when Spain joined the Schengen Agreement, the fortification of both cities' land perimeters has become iconic. The border landscapes around the cities symbolize the harshness with which the EU seeks to tackle irregular migration flows across its external borders.

Nevertheless, despite the territorial dispute and the spatial constraints arising from the securitization of their perimeters, socio-economic interaction between the cities and their local environment is profound. Territorial dynamics within the euroafrican borderscapes of Ceuta and Melilla develop within the framework of a fascinating



The locations of the Spanish enclaves Ceuta and Melilla in Morocco.

spatial conjugation of continuities and discontinuities. Within these two unique EU border sceneries on African soil, divergent patterns of cross-border (im)mobility of people and trade coexist.

## Socio-cultural borderscapes

Since the Castilian-Portuguese capture of the cities in the fifteenth century, Ceuta and Melilla have been part of a symbolic demarcation line between the areas of influence of Christianity and Islam. The cities' boundaries have long delimited long different linguistic, religious and national imaginaries. As a result of this, stigma, prejudice and exclusionary identity categorizations are deeply embedded into these two euroafrican borderscapes.

## Ceuta and Melilla are the most heavily guarded borders of the EU

Although many Moroccans from neighboring areas often entered Ceuta and Melilla for commercial purposes before, it was not until 1868 when Spanish law allowed them to reside there. From that moment onwards, a small group of Moroccans who worked for the Spanish army began to give shape to the cities' Muslim communities. However, most of the Muslim inhabitants from Ceuta and Melilla were unable to acquire the Spanish nationality until the mid 80's. The growth of the Muslim population of the cities has been the catalyst for a major phenomenon. It has helped establish a scenario in which dynamics of cultural interaction are multiplying. Family ties between the local population and Moroccan population across the border proliferate. At the same time, the room for cross-border religious, linguistic and relational continuity expands, and hence challenges the rigid symbolic marker the cities' borders have traditionally represented



*The border between Marocco en Ceuta. The negative image overshadows the lively and growing interaction between both sides of the border.*

Parallel to that, the growth of the Muslim communities has proved decisive in shaping the collective imagination of a significant part of the Christian community of the city. Amongst the latter, the "feeling of threat" has spread. For many, this feeling stems from a double fear vis-à-vis: the Islamization of the local society on the one hand, and the transfer of the cities' sovereignty to Morocco, on the other. However, this has not resulted in a conflictive scenario of coexistence between citizens of different religions and backgrounds. The coexistence in schools, workplaces and public spaces is fruitful. However it is more limited in the suburbs, which are mainly inhabited by Muslim population and receive growing migration flows from Morocco.

### **Borders and Immigration**

Since 1991, when Spain joined the Schengen Agreement, Ceuta and Melilla have played a key role within the diagram of African (and to a lesser extent Asian) migration flows towards the European Union. In 1995, the land perimeters of the two cities were fortified, in order to halt the increasing flows of illegal immigration. A double fence, whose height has now reached 6 meters, was erected. Its symbolic power sharply transformed the border landscape in visual, functional and even ethical terms. The fortified euroafrican borderscapes of Ceuta and Melilla became paradigmatic examples of how the EU tries to seal off its outer perimeter against irregular immigration. The cities became globally known icons of so-called "Fortress Europe".

The aforementioned iconic dimension of Ceuta and Melilla was reinforced by the migration crisis that took place during the autumn of 2005. Prior to the crisis, in 2004, there was a 37% fall in the arrival of immigrants to the shores of the Iberian Peninsula. This occurred due to the implementation of the Integrated External Surveillance (SIVE) in the Strait of Gibraltar, and also due to greater collaboration between the Spanish and Moroccan border control. Following the blockage of the route through the eastern Mediterranean, the migratory pressure on the land borders of Ceuta and Melilla increased remarkably. In this context, during September and October 2005, illegal entries to the cities increased substantially. Border guards, both in Morocco and in Spain, harshly repressed the attempts of entry. Hundreds of migrants crossed the fence and made it into the cities. But there were many more who did not. Eleven immigrants were killed and many more were wounded during the events. The crisis reached dramatic proportions and placed the cities under the global focus of media interest. The 2005 events led to a significant transformation of the securitization apparatus. The immediate response was the reinforcement of the fences and the border patrols on both sides of the perimeter. Spanish and Moroccan army units were sent to the border and remained there for a short time. Ceuta and Melilla would thus become the two most heavily secured border posts of the European Union. Also, surprisingly, Morocco agreed to contribute to the monitoring of two borders that defines as illegitimate and colonial.

However, despite increased control, illegal entrances persisted during the next years. In particular during 2011, in the post-outbreak of the Arab spring, there was a spike in the number of illegal entries in the cities. Last year there were a total of 3.345 illegal entries to Ceuta and Melilla, according to the Spanish Ministry of Home Affairs. These entries were conducted mainly by people from sub-Saharan origin who entered the cities by swim, aboard of small boats or hidden in cars. The borderscapes of Ceuta and Melilla are still paramount entrance-sites for a number of irregular migrants en route towards the European Union. Furthermore, as denounced by organizations like the Human Rights Association of Andalusia, some of those immigrants keep finding death there.

### **Selective Mobility**

But it is important to note that the border fences of the cities do not stop the mobility of people towards the EU indiscriminately. They do so selectively. In other words, the management regime that governs the borders of Ceuta and Melilla does not obstruct the movement of non-European Union citizens. It filters it.

## ***Unregulated mass trade goes with intensive border patrol***

Given that the economic sustainability of Ceuta and Melilla depends largely on the interaction with its hinterlands, Spain exempts visa requirement to citizens of the neighboring Moroccan provinces (Tetouan and Nador). This exception was incorporated into the Protocol of Accession of Spain to the Schengen Agreement in 1991 with the commitment to maintain tight documentary controls to those wanting to travel to the rest of Spanish territory.

This unique implementation of the Schengen regime in the territories of Ceuta and Melilla enables that many job positions in the cities are filled in by Moroccan citizens from the neighbouring region. The consolidation of a cross-border labour market is a fundamental indicator of territorial continuity within the border region. Apart from those who are engaged in the smuggling business, Moroccan citizens working in Ceuta are mostly employed in the so-called domestic sector (women) and in the building sector (men). Increasingly, both women and men are filling job positions in hotels and restaurants. Notably, the phenomenon of cross-border work in the cities coexists with the highest unemployment rates in Spain and one of the highest in the EU. In the first quarter of 2012 they reached the 43'06% in the case of Ceuta and 38'09% in Melilla.

### **Irregular trade**

The exception that allows visa-free entry to Moroccans from Tetouan and Nador also enables the development of irregular cross-border trade. The informal cross border trade has been especially intense from the second half of the eighties onwards. It constitutes an important pillar of the economic system of Ceuta and Melilla. According to the economist Íñigo Moré, a reasonable estimate of illegal trade of Ceuta and Melilla could reach 1,000 million per year.

This amount equals half of the exports declared at the border running between Spain to Morocco. It is true that both the Spanish and the Moroccan authorities tolerate the transit of goods. However, the Moroccan official discourse refers to it in terms of unfair competition and an obstacle to economic development in the north, while in Spain it tends to be called, euphemistically, atypical trade. But why do the Moroccan authorities allow this cross-border commercial activity if it is, first, illegal, and secondly, detrimental to the country's economic interests? The answer, clearly complex, requires understanding the choice of informal cross border trade as a sort of lesser evil. For years it has helped an impoverished northern Morocco with huge unemployment and bleak economic prospects. For years, illegal trade has played an important role in the Moroccan economy, as an element of substitution. For Morocco, ending an illegal activity that also damages their economic interests is a vital task. Irregular cross-border commercial activity between Ceuta and Melilla and Morocco therefore develops within a context of contradiction between the official discourse and pragmatism. Paradoxically it also coexists with an increasingly securitised border regime. However, Morocco's choice is to gradually eliminate illegal trade, through the implementation of alternative economic dynamics. At present, the weight of cross border trade remains remarkable. Nevertheless, it gradually decays due to, among other factors, the impact of progressive tariff liberalization in Morocco. The free trade agreements between the EU and Morocco have played a determining role. The tariff dismantling of Morocco runs parallel to the political will of Mohamed VI to economically restructure and revitalize the north of the country.

### **Conclusion**

In a way, the metal fences of Ceuta and Melilla have become globally known icons of the unique EU borderscapes in Africa. However, they are imprecise icons, biased representations of the complex territorial dynamics developing there. Undoubtedly, the securitization maneuver deployed in order to stop illegal immigration flows has brought an overwhelming burden of spatial and symbolic segmentation to the border scenarios. However, this obscures another reality: a reality characterized by a vivid and growing interaction between the two sides of the border. In this light, territorial dynamics around the borders of the EU in Africa have become a sort of an acrobatic exercise. They have given rise to a balancing performance between the desire/need of permeability and the desire/need of impermeability. The reinforcement of border securitization policies and the persistence of the Spanish-Moroccan territorial dispute coexist with the consolidation of socioeconomic assemblage across the borders of Ceuta and Melilla. Today, as it has happened in other historical episodes, Ceuta and Melilla find themselves within a crucial process of change. This is mainly triggered by the new by the economic and territorial transformations developing in its hinterland, which is consequently weakening the traditional economic structure of both cities. The main challenge that the region must face in the near future implies matching the potential of Ceuta and Melilla with the new territorial

dynamics of northern Morocco (and vice versa).. Will the cities join the customs territory of the EU? How fast and how intensively will Morocco accommodate in the geopolitical and geo-economic orbit of the EU (under the umbrella of the renewed European Neighbourhood Policy and the advanced status enjoyed by Morocco in its relations with the EU)? Answers to these two questions will be paramount in order to interpret the changing horizon of these two unique euroafrican borderscapes.

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