

## Chapter 17

# The Fenced Off Cities of Ceuta and Melilla: Mediterranean Nodes of Migrant (Im)Mobility



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### 17.1 The Iconic Fortification of Ceuta and Melilla

Since their building in the mid-nineties, the border fences around the North-African enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla have become icons of what has been popularly known as “Fortress Europe”. They have also been central stages of what academics and activists have critically denounced and referred to as the external EU ‘border spectacle’ (Andersson, 2014; Brambilla, 2021; Cuttitta, 2012; De Genova, 2013; Gabrielli, 2021a; Van Reekum, 2016). For years, the fences have symbolized the harshness with which the European Union has tackled irregular migration flows across its external borders.

Back in the nineties, the fences represented a poignant visual counterargument against the then widespread rhetoric of a “borderless Europe” -to be built in what was supposed to become a “world without borders”. Later, border reinforcement processes similar to those triggered in Ceuta and Melilla in the mid-nineties were developed, even on a major scale, in other segments of the EU external border (at the land border between Greece and Turkey, at the Hungarian border with Serbia,<sup>1</sup> or at the Polish border with Belarus,<sup>2</sup> amongst others). Certainly, the imagery of walls, sealed off and heavily securitized borders (Jones, 2016; O’Dowd, 2010; Vallet, 2016; Coleman, 2020) has only but proliferated in Europe and elsewhere since the

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-hungary-fence-idUSKBN1692MH>

<sup>2</sup><https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/25/poland-begins-work-on-400m-belarus-border-wall-against-migrants>

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fortification of the EU land borders in Africa started. Thus, the border fences from Ceuta and Melilla do not seem to be an anomaly within the contemporary global border order anymore.

Somehow it could be argued that the fences of Ceuta and Melilla acted as forerunners, as precursors in the radical anti-immigration and securitization turn EU borders have gone through over the last decades. And probably also because of that, for years they have gained widespread media attention and uninterrupted scholarly focus (Acosta-Sánchez, 2022; Driessen, 1992; Barbero, 2021; Castan Pinos, 2014; Coleman, 2020; Español Nogueiro et al., 2017; Ferrer-Gallardo, 2008, 2011; Ferrer-Gallardo & Albet-Mas, 2016; Johnson, 2013; Gabrielli, 2015; Saddiki, 2010; Scott et al., 2018; Soddu, 2002; Fuentes Lara, 2018, 2019; Planet, 1998; Pallister-Wilkins, 2017; Queirolo-Palmas, 2021; Suárez-Navaz & Suárez, 2022).

Building on the already vast body of academic literature about border governance and migration management in Ceuta and Melilla, this contribution situates the border regime of the EU-African cities within the broad research agenda on Mediterranean migration studies. The chapter traces the evolution of these cities' border regimes since they joined the European Union in 1986 and gradually became crucial Mediterranean nodes of migrant (im)mobility towards the Schengen Area. The text highlights that the functional and symbolic role played by Ceuta and Melilla echoes that played by other EU external border territories like Lampedusa, Lesvos, Samos or even the Canary Islands (Cuttitta, 2012, 2014; Dines et al., 2015; Kalir & Rozakou, 2016; Tsoni, 2016; Vives, 2017), which have respectively acted as migrant (im)mobility nodes within the Central, Eastern and Western Mediterranean and Atlantic migration routes towards Europe. These territories embody manifestations of socio-spatial exceptionality which are part and parcel of what Alison Mountz (2011) has labelled as the "enforcement archipelago" vis-à-vis global dynamics of border/migration control.

For years, the preponderant media and scholarly focus on the excesses of border management has perhaps eclipsed the fact that the borderwork assemblage operating around the North-African cities has not been exclusively characterized by securitization practices but has also witnessed the increasing intervention of humanitarian actors. However, a recent wave of academic contributions has addressed this gap in the literature and has highlighted how the logic that characterizes the border regimes of these territories is sourced in a permanent tension between securitarian and humanitarian approaches (see for example, Sahraoui & Tyszler, 2021; Aris Escarcena, 2022; Sahraoui, 2020; Pallister-Wilkins, 2017; Cuttitta, 2018; Garelli & Tazzioli, 2018; Gorrín & Fuentes Lara, 2020; Vaughan-Williams, 2015).

On the other hand, these dynamics have been deeply influenced by Morocco's postcolonial claim of sovereignty over the cities as well as by Rabat's growing relevance as a partner within the EU border externalization strategy. Gradually, and even without its authorities officially recognizing the legitimacy of the EU land borders in Africa, Morocco has become an indispensable actor when it comes to deploy the EU migration control strategy at the borders of Ceuta and Melilla. EU foreign dependency vis-à-vis migration and border control has only but grown over

the last years. And Morocco has skillfully used it as strategic advantage in its bilateral relationships with Spain and with the EU (Ferrer-Gallardo & Gabrielli, 2022; Okay & Zaragoza-Cristiani, 2016).

Over the last decades, as the externalization logic has been intensifying, a joint EU-Spanish-Moroccan political strategy has paved the way to diverse controversial practices of border management in Ceuta and Melilla. These practices have been closely scrutinized from academic, journalistic and activist perspectives. The logic of exception that drives the EU border regime as well as how migrants have challenged it is examined in this contribution. The chapter ends by highlighting that, more than three decades after the fencing off of the cities started, the consequences of the growing foreign dependency vis-à-vis Morocco, together with the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in cross-border mobility dynamics, has contributed to yet a new reconfiguration of the Ceuta and Melilla border regime. As the deadly events at the Melilla fence in June 2022 illustrate (Guardian, 2022), these two interrelated factors have acted as vectors of change, and have toughened the practices of migratory obstruction at the external borders of the EU. In this light, the iconic strength of their border fences remains, and so does its explanatory power both as an illustrative sample of the general EU external border and of its footprint in the Mediterranean migration system.

## **17.2 Ceuta and Melilla into the EU (1986): Crucial Mediterranean Nodes of Migrant (Im)mobility Towards the Schengen Area**

When Spain joined the Schengen Agreement in 1991, the geopolitically contested cities of Ceuta and Melilla started to gradually turn into key hubs of – mainly but not only<sup>3</sup> – sub-Saharan migration to the European Union. The reconfiguration of the Spanish border regime which followed Spain's EU entrance in 1986 ran parallel to the reshaping of migratory dynamics in the North of Africa. In the mid-nineties, the growing flows of sub-Saharan migrants heading the EU implied that Libya, Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco started consolidating as key transit countries, but also as destination countries (Iranzo, 2021; El Ghazouani, 2019; Lahlou, 2015; Collyer, 2007; De Haas, 2007; Schapendonk, 2012). Consequently, migratory dynamics in Ceuta's and Melilla's hinterlands went through huge transformations. The land borders of Ceuta and Melilla emerged as new, but relatively low thresholds to be crossed within the trajectories of sub-Saharan migrants to the EU. Increasingly, the Spanish African cities would be perceived as a less dangerous irregular gate to the

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<sup>3</sup>Refugees and migrants from other origins (Syrians, Bangladeshi, Pakistanis, etc.) had also used this route towards the EU (See Barbero, 2021). During the year 2015, for instance, 7189 Syrians crossed the borders in Ceuta and Melilla, as well as 4.435 people of other nationalities (see Fig. 17.1).

EU. Entering Ceuta and Melilla would therefore become a relatively safer and more attractive alternative to the clandestine crossing of the Mediterranean.

In 1995, the irregular access of sub-Saharan citizens to Ceuta and Melilla (that were not repatriated to their countries of origin nor allowed to cross the maritime border toward the Iberian Peninsula) had already become a frequent phenomenon. Many migrants were stranded in Ceuta and Melilla for long periods of time, and this became a source of social tensions in the city, where racist attacks and migrant protests claiming for their rights proliferated (see Gold, 1999, 2000; Planet, 1998). In this context, Spanish and EU authorities decided to undertake the fortification of the land perimeter of the cities. The range of legal modifications associated to the Schengenization of the Spanish-Moroccan border came together with the physical reshaping of the border. In order to halt the increasing flows of irregular immigration, a double metal fence –whose height would later on reach 6 meters (Saddiki, 2010; Ferrer-Gallardo & Gabrielli, 2018), then 7,20 meters, and subsequently 10 meters in some segments – was erected between the cities and Morocco. This is how the borders of Ceuta and Melilla started to become paradigmatic examples of the EU's sealing off of its outer perimeter. Parallel to that, the Spanish Government began creating the reception system within which the involvement of humanitarian actors would become essential (Aris Escarcena, 2020: 5). And this is also the moment when the hybridisation process of the securitarian and humanitarian logic of the border regime started.

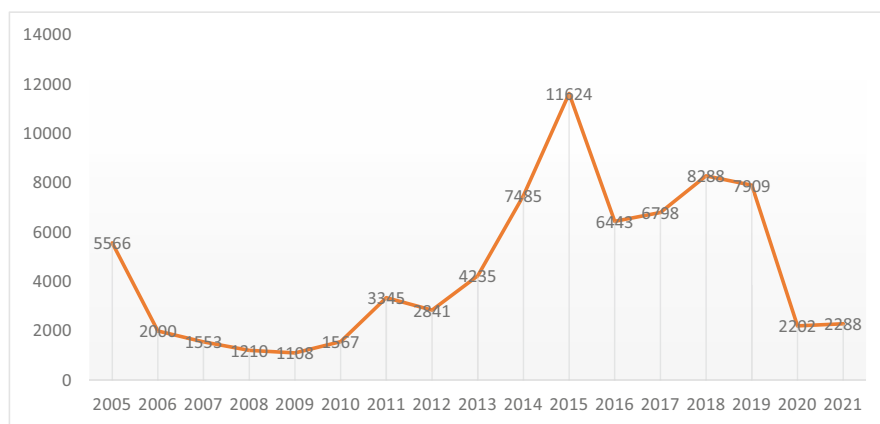
Over the years, due to the implementation of a variety of Spanish, EU and Moroccan policies of deterrence, dissuasion, containment, detention and even abandonment (Gross-Wyrzten, 2020; López-Sala, 2015), the cities were gradually transformed into crucial Mediterranean nodes of migrant (im)mobility fulfilling a significant role within the contemporary system of Mediterranean migrations (Panebianco, 2022; Zapata-Barrero, 2020). Since the (EU)ropeanization of the cities started, both the increasing securitisation of their land perimeters and the fluctuant – though persistent – arrival of migrants (see Fig. 17.1) have transformed the socio-spatial nature of these Spanish territories and that of its Moroccan surroundings.

### 17.3 Border Acrobatics

After Spain's EU entrance in 1986 divergent patterns of cross-border (im)mobility of people and trade have coexisted in the region. 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 has been profound. For decades, the harsh though ineffective attempts to completely obstruct the mobility of some “undesired” non-EU citizens across the borders of Ceuta and Melilla contrasted with the elasticity that EU legislation showed when it came to facilitate the free cross-border flow of “desired” non-EU citizens (see Ferrer-Gallardo, 2011; Krichker, 2020; Fuentes Lara, 2019). The rationale of this acrobatic border regime of “exceptional Schengenization” lies in the fact that the economic sustainability of

Ceuta and Melilla has been largely dependent on the interaction with its hinterlands. For this reason, Spain exempted the visa requirement to the citizens of the neighbouring Moroccan provinces of Tétouan and Nador.<sup>4</sup> The coexistence of daily crossings of workers and *porteadoras*<sup>5</sup> (Fuentes Lara, 2019) from one hand, and of migrants and refugees' crossings from the other, underlines the porosity of borders in the enclaves and illustrates the existence of selective and differential cross-border (im)mobility patterns.

As explained later in this chapter, these dynamics were deeply affected by the Covid-19 pandemic as well as by Morocco's unilateral decision to close the borders and freeze all types of trade and human flows across them in March 2020. Borders were only reopened in May 2022, after Spanish-Moroccan diplomatic frictions related to the Western Sahara conflict were smoothed out. The consequences of the two-year border closure deeply impacted in the complex amalgam of political and socio-economic interdependencies between Spain and Morocco. Irregular entries of migrants persisted though (see Fig. 17.1).



**Fig. 17.1** Migrants entry in Ceuta and Melilla (land and sea borders)

In 2014: 3305 Syrians and 4180 from other nationalities; in 2015: 7189 Syrians, 4,435 other nationalities. In 2020, it has to be considered the COVID-19 pandemic impact. Data of 2021 do not include May 18th–19th crossings in Ceuta

Source: Ministerio del Interior, Balances y Informes, 2005–2021. <https://www.interior.gob.es/opencms/es/prensa/balances-e-informes/>

<sup>4</sup>This exception was incorporated into the Protocol of Accession of Spain to the Schengen Agreement in 1991 with the commitment to maintain tight identity controls to those wanting to travel to the rest of Spanish territory (Planet 2002).

<sup>5</sup>This Spanish expression to define women carrying on their shoulders large bundles of products is commonly translated as 'female porters' or 'mule woman'.

## 17.4 Cracks in the ‘Fortress’: The Agency of Migrants and the Agency of the Neighbours

Since the mid-nineties, the fortress-like EU border regime has had to functionally, geopolitically and symbolically cope with a series of cracks in its walls. Despite the growing geopolitical, economic and human cost of EU border control policies (Ferrer-Gallardo & Van Houtum, 2014), irregular entries to Ceuta and Melilla have never stopped.

Due to the Ceuta border “crisis” of May 18th 2021 discussed later in this chapter, more than ever before, the metaphorical and material expanding cracks in the fortress became blatantly visible. For the umpteenth time, it was made clear that irregular border crossings in the region do not exclusively depend on the height of the fences, on the millions of euros invested in innovative securitization measures (see Akkerman, 2019; Andersson, 2014; López-Sala & Godenau, 2022; Migreurop, 2020; Statewatch, 2021), or on the degree of inflammation of the anti-immigration political rhetoric manifesting in each member state’s electoral microcosmos. In order to fully grasp what was going on during this and similar border “crises”, other equally important variables –still often overshadowed– must be taken into consideration.

One of these variables is encapsulated in what migration/border scholars have traditionally referred to as the “agency of migrants”. This can also be read through the lens of the now more widespread notion of “autonomy of migration”, which, as Casas-Cortés et al. (2015: 895) explain, contributes to shift the analytical focus from the apparatuses of control to the multiple ways in which migration responds to, operates independently from, and in turn shapes those apparatuses. As Mezzadra (2010: 121–122) suggests, it is necessary to look at “the subjective practices, the desires, the expectations, and the behaviours of migrants themselves” and at how their struggles to overcome border restrictions foster a tense conflict-driven process in which “the ‘politics of control’ itself is compelled to come to terms with a ‘politics of migration’ that structurally exceeds its (re)bordering practices”. Over the last decades securitarian and humanitarian practices in Ceuta and Melilla have been continuously adapting to counteract the new challenges posed by migrant struggles as well as by the action of solidarity networks. The action of migrants has responded to growing border securitization measures, and, in particular, to the wide range of costly and often externalized apparatuses of control by means of which the border regime operates (Casas-Cortés et al., 2015; Andersson, 2014; Tiszler, 2019).

Since the middle of the 1990s, events in Ceuta and Melilla demonstrate how migrants are constantly updating their tactics in order to confront infrastructural innovations. The cyclic reinforcement of border-fences, as well as the action of security forces on both sides is constantly translated into new ways to overcome them.<sup>6</sup> As argued by Pallister-Wilkins (2017) the North-African border fences are producers and sites of resistance. Moreover, as Scheel (2018) underlines, the

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<sup>6</sup>Migrants react to update of the border apparatus utilizing in turn wooden ladder to overcome the growing height of fences, harpoons for shoes and hand hooks to climb the ‘anti-climb netting’, as

European border regime is “a parasitic and precarious apparatus of capture” recuperating tactics and practices implemented by migrants at the borders in order to use their creativity and knowledge to update its own control apparatus and sustain its existence and development.

In other words, what we want to remind here is that, for years, many of the cracks in the EU-African “fortresses” have been repeatedly produced by the capacity of initiative, organization, resistance and subversion of migrants and refugees (Scheel, 2019; De Genova, 2017; Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2008; Mazzara, 2019). The yearning to seal off the borders is also related to another factor: the increasing dependency of Spain and the EU in their attempt to stop migrants before they enter in Ceuta and Melilla, and to reaccept them expeditiously after they eventually cross the fences. Certainly, the “weaponization of migration” strategy (Greenhill, 2010) or, differently said, the instrumentalization of border control and migrants’ crossings has been increasingly used as a resource for foreign policy purposes within the EU and elsewhere. It is true that migrants can be (and in many cases are) used as pawns, and they are instrumentalized in the framework of long and remotely played geopolitical games. Notwithstanding that, it should not be neglected that these so-called pawns are not passive actors on a chess board. Migrants make their own decisions, and unlike what happens in chess, these pawns do not require the hands of any player to move themselves around. They can design their own strategies and trajectories; they can choose their allies. And, clearly, they can even individually or collectively defeat the adversary and subvert the mechanisms of control of the border regime. This, in turn, sheds light on the porosity of the EU external borders in Africa – which are far from being impermeabilized (Ferrer-Gallardo & Gabrielli, 2018) – as well as on the performative dimension of the costly (in human, diplomatic and economic terms) securitization apparatus.

## 17.5 Permanent Crisis and Exceptional Migration Management Policies

The cases of Ceuta and Melilla clearly exemplify the rhetoric of “emergency” that time and again informs the management of irregular migration flows towards the European Union. The arrival of migrants in Ceuta or Melilla is often constructed by the Spanish authorities as an unpredictable phenomenon which falls into the “crisis” category (New Keywords Collective, 2016; Jeandesboz & Pallister-Wilkins, 2016; Scott et al., 2018.). However, the word “crisis” refers to a break from the status quo, a crucial and decisive point, a climax. A brief chronology of irregular migration at the Spanish border in the past two decades clearly shows the structural nature of this phenomenon (Gabrielli, 2015). It is hence clear that the arrival of migrants to Ceuta

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well as hiding in cars, swimming, using “fake passports” (in the case of Syrians and Algerians), among other creative means.

and Melilla is by no means exceptional. Nevertheless, treating the structural phenomenon of irregular migration as an emergency has for years constituted an essential feature of the Spanish immigration and border policy which, in turn, overfocuses media and policy attention to specific segments of the border.

Elsewhere it has been argued that both the practices and the rhetoric of securitization and humanitarianism at the borders of the North-African enclaves have unfolded within the framework of a political imaginary of permanent crisis (De Genova & Tazzioli, 2022; Gabrielli, 2021b, Gabrielli, 2015, Scott et al., 2018). This imagery has paved the way to the implementation and chronification of exceptional and costly migration management policies (Ferrer-Gallardo & Gabrielli, 2018), in human, economic and diplomatic terms.

The deployment of exceptional border/migration control practices has transformed these cities into what in Agamben terms could be defined as “pieces of land placed outside the normal juridical order” (see De Lucas, 2015: 19). This gives rise to a *de facto* state of exception, which is even outside the legal framework of the exception itself. We refer not only to ‘*devoluciones en caliente*’ (express deportations) that for several years have been practiced outside any existing legal framework (and also actually these practices, despite their inclusion in a law, are deeply criticised by CSO and human rights activists), but also to the immobilisation of asylum seekers (now sanctioned by several judgments of the Supreme court<sup>7</sup>), or to the use of counter-riot devices against migrants swimming to cross the border, among other examples. This entails a clear example of how borders are used strategically to shift the balance between security and freedom through the non-coincidence between the space for State action and this of fundamental rights (Basaran, 2008).

As explained by Cuttitta (2012: 20), the emergency has to be considered as “an essential characteristic of the current migration regime, an essential part of the border spectacle.” Similar to Cuttitta’s characterization of Lampedusa (2012, 2014), the borders of Ceuta and Melilla also represent symbolic scenarios where the fiction of the efficient response to the ‘unexpected’ migration crisis is represented. Exceptionality also applies to the Spanish government’s actions concerning its legal obligations vis-à-vis the rights of refugees and potential asylum seekers (Ferrer-Gallardo & Gabrielli, 2018). Immediate and indiscriminate push-backs which have been documented in Ceuta and Melilla constitute a clear violation of the 1951 Refugees’ Convention. This produces not only a “neo-refoulement” practice<sup>8</sup> (Hyndman & Mountz, 2008) but also a situation in which refugees entering informally through the Spanish borders are thus in a zone of rights exclusion, in legal black holes, in real “areas of pure sovereign power” (Basaran, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> See: <https://www.cear.es/nuevo-a-favor-de-la-libre-circulacion-de-las-personas-que-solicitan-asilo-en-ceuta-y-melilla/>

<sup>8</sup> This concept is defined as the “rights-based legal instruments are trumped by geographic strategies that constitute neo-refoulement, the strategy of preventing the possibility of asylum by denying access to sovereign territory” (Hyndman & Mountz, 2008: 268).



Emergency and exceptionality become, on the one hand, permanent, as do the reassertion of state power, backed by violence and extra-legality. Permanently exceptional management of migration by Spanish governments has been implemented in close cooperation with Morocco and has entailed fast and slow forms of violence (from beatings to abandonment, etc.) (MSF, 2013; Gross-Wyrtzen, 2020). As Schindel (2019, 146) argues, episodic, recurrent, but isolated media, activist and academic references to border-related deaths should be put in relation to the rather invisible, daily, silent forms of violence migrants and refugees are exposed to on their journeys to Europe.

Over the last decades, the increasingly intensive monitoring of these “exceptional” border management practices by activists, journalists and critical scholars has unveiled the existing juridical void surrounding migration/border control dynamics – such as those related to the irregular push-backs of sub-Saharan migrants (Escamilla et al., 2014) and the refusal of entry to Syrian refugees.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, the visibilization of these practices and the multiplication of expressions of resistance to official understandings of the EU Southern border has shed valuable light on the logic of permanent exceptionality that governs the land borders of the EU in Africa.

## 17.6 The Externalities of Externalization (“Crisis” of May 2021)

During nearly two decades, EU border control policies have pursued the involvement of third countries like Morocco in the management of irregular migration beyond the EU external border. This has been translated into political pressure vis-à-vis these countries. As Saddiki (2022) reminds, in order to implement the border controls outsourcing agenda, in the 2002 Seville summit of the European Council, EU member states concluded that any future association agreement between the EU and any third country should include a clause on joint management of migration flows and on compulsory readmission of “illegal migration” (Council of the EU, 2002).

The somewhat Eurocentric lens through which Ceuta and Melilla border dynamics have been often scrutinized has tended to overshadow Morocco’s political agency and its crucial ability and capacity to set (or at least influence) the agenda of border/migration control. Securitarian and humanitarian borderwork in the region has been clearly operating in growing cooperation with Morocco, which has become an indispensable partner in the EU border externalization strategy. The same has occurred with other neighboring countries like Turkey, Libya and Egypt (Bachelierie, 2021; Tsourapas, 2017) vis-à-vis the management of other Mediterranean migration routes towards the EU.

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<sup>9</sup>I.e., see: [https://elpais.com/elpais/2015/09/21/fotorrelato/1442847540\\_598870.html](https://elpais.com/elpais/2015/09/21/fotorrelato/1442847540_598870.html)

What happened in May 2021 in Ceuta is a paramount example of this. On May 18th 2021, more than 8000 people irregularly crossed from Morocco into Ceuta in a single day (Ferrer-Gallardo & Gabrielli, 2022; Saddiki, 2022). Morocco was accused of encouraging its own population -minors included (Independent, 2021)- to irregularly cross the border (Casey & Bautista, 2021), or, more subtly, of not acting diligently enough to prevent the irregular crossings. Migrants were not stopped at the Moroccan side of the fence. One of the main partners in the EU border externalization venture seemed not to be cooperating at all.

After more than two decades of border externalization policies, these events transparently showcased the rising EU dependency on some of its neighbouring countries. Hence, at first sight the events of May 2021 looked like the same old song, like the classic “border crisis”. However, on this occasion events unfolded on a much bigger scale. Unlike what had occurred many times before in this very same spot, migrants were not immediately and irregularly pushed back or even shot with rubber bullets (Ferrer-Gallardo & Gabrielli, 2018). Instead, on this occasion migrants were somehow being irregularly pushed forward. Thousands made it across by swimming from Morocco, others were even allowed to access Ceuta via the literally open doors of the iconic securitization fence that was supposed to stop them (FaroTV Ceuta, 2021).

In so doing, and although many of these migrants would be subsequently pushed back during the following days, Morocco seemed to be unilaterally and temporarily suspending the border control outsourcing deal it agreed with its EU neighbors. It seemed to be launching a clear warning message northward (Garcés, 2021). Similar messages had been launched before in a more discrete way (Águeda, 2021), but this time the volume in which the message was projected was stridently louder. Spanish and EU authorities “timidly” described this as blackmailing (Adami, 2021).

## **17.7 The Western Sahara Conflict and Covid 19: Catalysts of a New Border Reconfiguration**

The Ceuta border “crisis” of 2021, of course, did not happen in a vacuum. The chapter must be read in light of both the effects of the Covid 19 pandemic in the border region and the deterioration of the traditionally tense Spanish-Moroccan diplomatic atmosphere (Serón & Gabrielli, 2021). The crucial point here is that this already tense bilateral relation was further tensed by the Trump’s administration recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the Spanish former colony of Western Sahara, in December 2020 (USEM, 2020).

This last-minute diplomatic “gift” was offered by Trump to Rabat just after Biden had won the presidential elections in the US in November 2020. In exchange, and by acrobatically merging US recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara with the “Abraham Accords”, Morocco would restore diplomatic relations with Israel (Joffé, 2021). Trump’s move was a potential game-changer in the region.

Morocco's position vis-à-vis the Western Sahara conflict (Kutz, 2021) was significantly reinforced. And the positions of the Polisario Front, and of those countries in tune with UN resolutions regarding the decolonization of the non-self-governing territory of Western Sahara – like Spain's position back then – were fragilized. The seismic waves of this unexpected geopolitical earthquake in the Sahara just came to further embroil a series of Spanish-Moroccan unresolved territorial disputes and postcolonial diplomatic frictions. Things reached a peak of complexity when Brahim Ghali, the secretary-general of the Saharawi Polisario Front, travelled to Spain in order to receive treatment for COVID-19 in April 2021. Morocco interpreted this as an affront and reacted.

After the events in Ceuta on May 18th 2021, the Moroccan ambassador in Spain, Karima Benyaich, established a crystal-clear link between Ghali's presence in Spain and the irregular entries across the Ceuta border which quite evidently sounded like retaliation. She declared that "there are acts that have consequences in relations between countries" (Kasraoui, 2021). This constituted a handbook example of how to use the European obsession on border and migration control for foreign policy purposes, and how to manufacture a border/migration 'crisis'.<sup>10</sup>

Significantly, the Moroccan ambassador would only travel back to Madrid after Spain (although not officially supporting Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara) diplomatically suggested that Morocco's proposals were "the most realistic ones" vis-à-vis the resolution of the conflict. The "Joint Statement" published on April seventh 2022, after the talks between King Mohammed VI and the President of Spanish Government Pedro Sanchez, notes that.

Spain recognizes the importance of the Sahara issue for Morocco, as well as Morocco's serious and credible efforts in the framework of the United Nations to find a mutually acceptable solution. As such, Spain considers the Moroccan autonomy initiative, presented in 2007, as the most serious, realistic and credible basis for the resolution of this dispute (Kingdom of Morocco, 2022).

This unexpected and significant turn in Spain's foreign policy triggered a new geopolitical tension (now between Spain and Algeria and the Polisario Front), but in a rather illustrating way, led to a new diplomatic "honey moon" between Spain and Morocco. This implied the possibility of reopening in the short term the land borders between Ceuta/Melilla and Morocco, even if with certain restrictions,<sup>11</sup> and new border/migration control deals (Migreurop, 2022; Saddiki, 2022). This also implied the reestablishment at a cruising speed of deportations to Morocco.<sup>12</sup>

Beyond the above-described grand geopolitical turbulences, what happened in Ceuta in May 2021 should also be interpreted in light of the specific local

<sup>10</sup>For further discussion on the critical analysis of the so-called "crisification of migrant arrivals", see Gabrielli (2015) and Jeandesboz and Pallister-Wilkins (2016).

<sup>11</sup><https://elpais.com/espana/2022-04-30/espana-y-marruecos-mantienen-sus-diferencias-para-abrir-la-frontera-con-ceuta-y-melilla.html>

<sup>12</sup>[https://www.eldiario.es/canariasahora/migraciones/grupos-semanales-20-migrantes-derecho-segundo-abogado-son-deportaciones-canarias-sahara\\_1\\_8934471.html](https://www.eldiario.es/canariasahora/migraciones/grupos-semanales-20-migrantes-derecho-segundo-abogado-son-deportaciones-canarias-sahara_1_8934471.html)

circumstances that had been affecting the Ceuta and Melilla border region before and after the closure of the border due to the Covid 19 pandemic (Latmani, 2021). The pandemic brought with it the complete disruption of all forms of cross-border mobility between Morocco and Ceuta and Melilla in early 2020. This was translated into new forms of forced (im)mobility at the borders of Ceuta and Melilla, the disruption of existing daily cross-border flows; as well as changes in informal migration trajectories.

The COVID-19 outbreak also produced a sudden change in polarity between Spain, and particularly Ceuta and Melilla, and Moroccan territory. This was illustrated by a number of border significant incidents. For example, at the end of March, a group of about a hundred Moroccans boarded two inflatable boats to return illegally to their country and circumvent the restrictions.<sup>13</sup> A bit later, in early April 2022, the Spanish police forces blocked a group of five Moroccan citizens -who found themselves trapped in the city- while trying to leave Spanish territory to enter Morocco, by swimming back from Ceuta's Tarajal beach.<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, the COVID-19 pandemic drastically reduced, at least during an initial period, attempts to enter Spain via Ceuta and Melilla. This occurred mainly due to the tightening of controls on the Moroccan side of the border, not only at the exit, but also at the entrance, and to the lock-down that made movements inside Morocco difficult.<sup>15</sup> The closure of the Moroccan borders entailed another effect associated with informal migration flows: the temporary blocking of forced returns, both of Moroccan nationals and of those from sub-Saharan African countries.

But in order to fully grasp the impact this had in regional border dynamics (Ferrer-Gallardo, 2011), it must be taken into account that the Covid crisis became an opportunity for the Moroccan authorities to fully implement an ongoing agenda that aimed to put an end to the so-called atypical trade (irregular cross-border commercial flows) between the two cities and Morocco (Gabrielli, 2021b). Indeed, on 9 October 2019, in a unilateral -and apparently unexpected decision on the Spanish side-, Morocco sanctioned the end of 'atypical' economic trafficking related to the transit of *porteadoras* women in Ceuta. In practice, the burst onto the scene of COVID-19 and the subsequent closure of the Moroccan borders totally blocked these 'atypical' or informal trade flows even also in Melilla, de facto spurring the implementation of Moroccan plans.

As Goeury (2020) highlights, the irruption of Covid-19 acted as an accelerator of an ongoing process of border reconfiguration that had been put into operation by Morocco earlier in 2019. In this context, the Covid related border closure aggravated the severe socio-economic unrest at both sides of the border (Martínez, 2021), particularly affecting Moroccan cross-border workers and those directly or indirectly

<sup>13</sup> <https://elpais.com/espana/2020-04-23/mas-de-5000-euros-por-escapar-de-espana-en-patera.html>

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>15</sup> If we widen our gaze, we see that instead migrant arrivals seem not only to continue but also to grow considerably in the Canary Islands archipelago, reinforcing a trend that had already emerged in 2019.

making their living out of informal cross-border trade. Interestingly enough, as it has been pointed out earlier, the borders of Ceuta and Melilla would only reopen in May 2022, once the Western Sahara related diplomatic conflict was readdressed.

## 17.8 Conclusion: The Postpandemic Externalized EU Borders in Africa

What happened in Ceuta on May 18th 2021 was a clear example of Morocco's ability and capacity to influence EU border management dynamics, as well as of the increasing foreign dependency of EU border control policies. Once again, the vulnerabilities of the European Union's border regime were staged in one of the most heavily securitized segments of the Union's outer perimeter.

It was of course not the first time that something like this happened. In fact, over the last decades the aforementioned iconic "fortress" dimension of Ceuta and Melilla has been reinforced by a range of so-called migration "crises" that have been taking place in the region, the most significant ones being those of 2005 (Ndaw, 2022) and 2014 (Gabrielli, 2015), in which attempts of entry by migrants were responded by violent actions (with deadly consequences) to deter them by the border authorities. This was also the case in June 2022, when an attempt to cross the fences at the Melilla border which was violently addressed by Moroccan border authorities ended up with 23 people dead – other sources from CSOs rise this number to almost 40 (Lema, 2022).

What these episodes of "crisis" reveal (be it in Ceuta, Melilla, the Canary Islands, Lampedusa, Lesvos or even Poland) is that the EU forged apocalyptic narratives of migratory invasions are increasingly recycled and transformed into bargaining tools at the other side of the border. The EU-forged political rhetoric of migratory dystopias, and the social construction of migration as a security threat have become a really useful instrument for some EU neighbours. These neighbours, be it Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Turkey or Morocco, in turn, have been geopolitically empowered by means of years of border externalization deals, and, in a certain way, they are claiming their right to be able to set the EU border agenda too (Sanz, 2021; see also Gabrielli, 2016; Bialasiewicz, 2012; Okyay & Zaragoza-Cristiani, 2016; Afailal & Fernandez, 2018; Triandafyllidou, 2014).

What happened in Ceuta in May 2021 highlighted the rising feebleness and counterproductive logic of the current general EU bordering regime and resonates with similar unexpected episodes unfolded at other segments of the EU perimeter. The increasing foreign reliance vis-à-vis EU migration and border management policies became apparent.

And in so doing, it points at two mutually reinforcing consequences of outsourcing strategies, which we have elsewhere referred to as the "externalities of externalization" (Ferrer-Gallardo & Gabrielli, 2022). These sequels are: on the one hand, the EU-wide electoral growth of far-right, anti-immigration political

discourses advocating for more strictly securitized border practices (Van Houtum & Bueno Lacy, 2020), and on the other hand, the growing diplomatic leverage at the disposal of neighbouring gatekeeper-countries like Morocco, Turkey, Libya, Egypt or Belarus. As argued during this chapter, this diplomatic leverage was clearly put at work by Morocco during the Ceuta border “crisis” of May 2021. And its output helps understand the subsequent deadly border “crisis” in Melilla in June 2022 (BBC, 2022), when, after Spain’s significant turn in its foreign policy vis-à-vis the Western Sahara conflict, Morocco was much more eager to cooperate in EU external border control practices. It also helps understand the terms in which the border was reopened two years after its Covid-19 pandemic related closure.

Spain and Morocco’s land border reopened on May 17, 2022, although only those possessing Spanish citizenship, EU passports, Spanish residency and/or working permits, or Schengen visas were permitted to walk through. At the time of writing this chapter, the Schengen exception that allowed citizens from the Moroccan provinces of Tétouan and Nador to enter the cities had not been reinstated. But it was politically foreseen, as it was also the establishment of official customs at the borders of Ceuta and Melilla.<sup>16</sup>

More than three decades after the fencing off of the cities, the growing foreign dependency vis-à-vis Morocco, together with the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in cross-border mobility dynamics, have contributed to yet a new reconfiguration of the Ceuta and Melilla border regime. The iconic strength of their border fences remains, and so does its explanatory power as an illustrative sample of the general EU external border and its footprint in the Mediterranean migration system.

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<sup>16</sup><https://www.ceutaldia.com/articulo/politica/albares-traslada-vivas-detalles-acuerdo-marruecos-apertura-aduana-comercial/20220928171645251868.html>

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