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Initial Perspectives on Spain's Migration Crisis

By Malia Politzer

MP-6\SPAIN\FEBRUARY 2014

CEUTA, Spain – Jutting up over the horizon on the Moroccan side is the rocky profile of a mountain that looks like a woman lying on her back. Known as the "Southern Pillar of Hercules" on the European side, the Moroccans call the mountain the "dead woman," after the myth of an Islamic princess who was hunted down and killed for marrying a Spanish Christian man. Given the myth, I find it both ironic and fitting that the mountain hosts makeshift camps for thousands of would-be migrants getting ready to risk their own lives for an opportunity to cross into Europe.

Just a few weeks ago, a group of 250 men streamed out of Dead Woman Mountain onto the sandy shores of Tarajal beach a few kilometers away, where a six-meter-high chain-link fence divides the Spanish territory of Ceuta from Morocco. Armed with rocks, the group charged the international barrier, while the Spanish *Guardia Civil*—the Spanish equivalent of the U.S. Border Patrol—tried to stop them. In the melee that followed, nearly half the migrants threw themselves into the ocean in a desperate attempt to swim around the tip of the border fence to the Spanish side. The surviving migrants claimed that the Spanish security forces targeted them with tear gas and fired blank cartridges and rubber bullets into the water. Fifteen migrants drowned.

And that was just the beginning. The day after the tragedy in Ceuta, another 500 migrants charged the border fence in the sister territory of Melilla, 100 of whom successfully entered the city. Just a week later, another 150 migrants successfully stormed the border fence in Melilla. Then, at the end of February, 200 African migrants successfully scaled the border fence into Melilla, marking the biggest single assault on the border in more than eight years. Even as I was getting ready to turn in this first newsletter, I woke up to news reports of another mass-entry attempt across the border with Ceuta. Involving more than 1200 people in two groups, it was the largest entry attempt recorded in Spanish history. This time, dispersed by Moroccan authorities, none managed to get across the borderline.

The events at the border, and the subsequent press coverage, raised a

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Formerly a writer for *Mint*, an Indian business and economics news daily paper, Malia Politzer wrote on a variety of social issues including disability issues, internal migration, gender, social entrepreneurship and development trends. As a fellow at the *Village Voice*, she wrote primarily about immigration. She has won multiple awards for her reporting and published articles in the *Wall Street Journal Asia*, *Far Eastern Economic Review, Foreign Policy Magazine, Reason Magazine*, and Migration Policy Institute's monthly magazine *The Source*. She has also reported from China, the US-Mexico border and South Korea, and speaks fluent Spanish, conversational Mandarin, and working on learning Hindi. Malia holds an M.S. in multimedia and investigative journalism from Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, where she was a Stabile Fellow, and a B.A. in Liberal Arts from Hampshire College.

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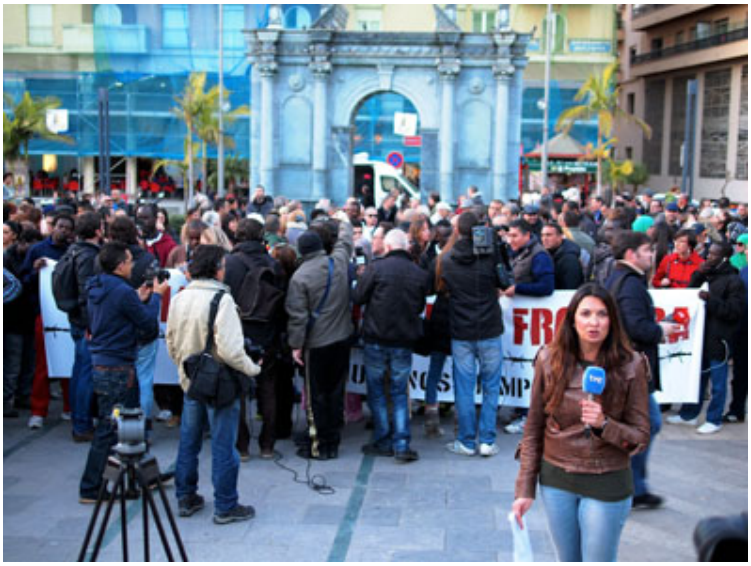
number of other questions for me. Why is this happening here, now, when Spain is in the worst economic crisis since before the Spanish civil war? Is immigration really spiking so dramatically, or are politicians merely stirring up the issue for their own political gain? What is the on-the-ground reality, and how are communities in Ceuta and Melilla affected by this issue? And what about the migrants themselves?

The Journey to Africa

Just two weeks after arriving in Europe, I rode the ferry from the Spanish port town of Aljeciraz to Africa. My destination was Ceuta, one of two autonomous Spanish cities carved out of the northern Moroccan coastline. Along with its sister territory Melilla, the two small exclaves are Europe's only land border with Africa, and the two oldest surviving European colonies in the world.

I arrived at the Spanish ferry station at 11pm, rushed through Customs and barely made it in time to catch the last ship, which despite the late hour was crowded with people. Moroccan merchants chatted in Arabic, blocking the narrow corridors between the seats with cloth bags bulging with Spanish goods. Toward the entrance of the ship was a bar, where Spanish families sipped wine and nibbled tapas while their small children, wide awake despite the late hour, ran laps around the boat.



The international border fence between Cueta and Morocco, where 15 migrants were killed in early February. Photo taken by Tomas Conde Kemme

I slid into a seat by the window, glancing out at the churning black sea. Outside it was cold and drizzling. It would take us just an hour to cross the 18 miles of water separating one continent from the next.

For many years, these same waters were the main entrance into Europe for thousands of North African and sub-Saharan African migrants. Traveling by night to avoid detection, men, women and children would pile into *pateras*—shabby rubber dinghies—risking their lives to cross the narrow strip of ocean to the Iberian Peninsula.

Headhunters, Baptist, and the New Generation

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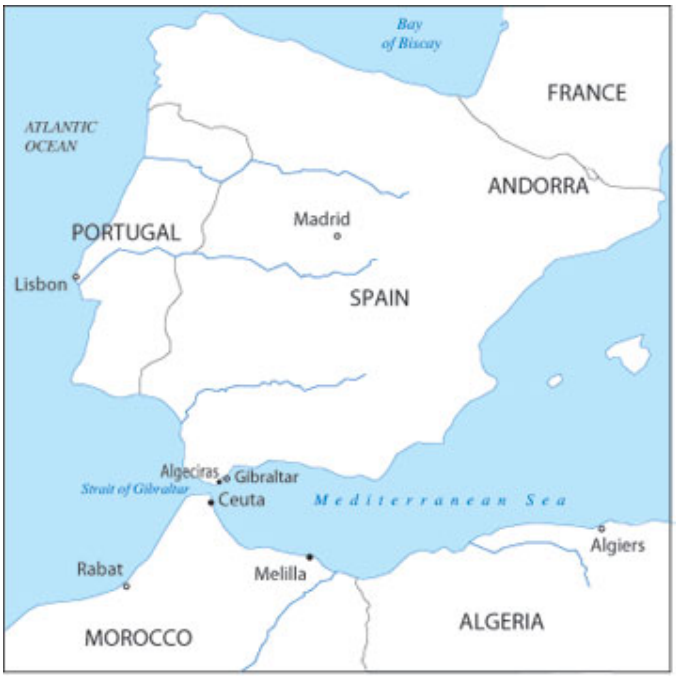
Many never make it across. Between 1997 and 2001, more than 3,285 bodies have been pulled out of the Gibraltar Strait. I wonder how many more bodies were never found, their remains drawn out to sea by the current.

A few days after arriving in Ceuta, I decided to visit Tarajal Beach, which has recently been the site of many mass-entry attempts. Erected in the 1990s after Spain became part of the European Union, the international fence between Ceuta and Morocco has become the iconic face of "Fortress Europe." Standing six yards (18 feet!) high, it winds over the hilly terrain like a snake, jutting out onto the sandy beach and ending several hundred yards into the churning waters of the Sea of Gibraltar. It occurs to me that fence is symbolic not only of the division between Europe and Africa—it's also an economic and religious border, between the developed and developing world, and between Christianity and Islam.

One-hundred meters of no-man's land separates one country from the next, a long corridor of chain-link fence punctuated by haphazard barriers. On the Moroccan side, smooth asphalt gives way to pot-holed roads, crowded with battered late 1980s Mercedes taxis, street hustlers and beggars.



Though the Ceuta side of the border closest to the fence is not much prettier—an industrial zone of concrete buildings and warehouses—it takes just 10 minutes by taxi to reach the glittering duty-free shopping district, a world of lavish colonial buildings, tapas bars, sculptures and well-kept plazas.

Walking down the streets of the city, I found it is surprisingly easy to find people to talk to who had recently made the illegal journey from one side to the other. In front of a *Coviran*, an inexpensive Spanish grocery-store, two young black men chatted in French while they

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retrieved stray grocery carts, organizing them in neat rows. If someone asked, they'd help carry groceries for people for tips. The younger one was lean and tall, and wore a red sweatshirt, loose-fitted blue jeans and black sneakers. He smiled widely when I introduced myself and extended his hand in welcome, while his friend held back, eyeing me suspiciously. In broken Spanish, the younger one introduced himself as Oumar, and proudly said that he was from Mali. He was just 19 years old.

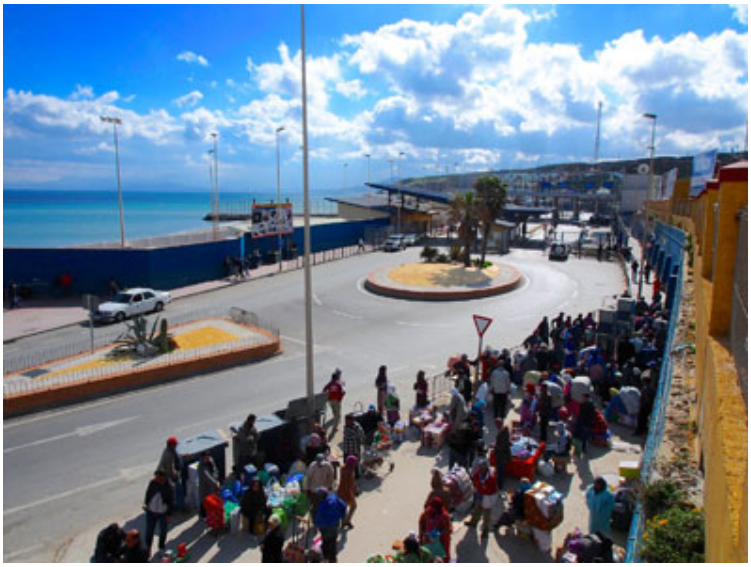
"We here three months. We jump over the fence. See?" He pulled his sweatshirt up to his elbow to show a four-inch scar where the razor wire had sliced his arm.

"Was it difficult to cross?" I wanted to know. He shook his head.

"No. Easy. We go in a large group. So many people. Hard to stop."

The language barrier made communication difficult—he spoke little Spanish, just a few words of English, and I speak no French. But eventually, I managed to get the skeleton of his story. Oumar told me that he left Mali three years ago, when he was just 16. He worked his way up to Morocco, and camped in the Dead Woman Mountain with other migrants for one year before jumping over the fence three months ago. He and his friend had met in the mountains, and entered Ceuta in the same run. The other man had lived in Morocco for three years and spoke fluent Arabic. They both came to Spain for economic reasons, and neither had plans to plea for asylum. "We go to Barcelona," said Oumar. "I have a cousin there. We go there to work."

Just a few blocks away, I met two more young men, also from Mali, working as parking attendants, who told me that they sneaked across the border in the trunks of cars. All of them openly admitted they had no papers, and not one was applying for asylum.



A television journalist reports at a demonstration protesting the migrant deaths in Ceuta. Photo taken by Tomas Conde Kemme.

Accustomed to having to navigate the fear and insecurity pervasive in undocumented communities in the United States, I was struck by how open people seemed to be about their immigration status. I found it puzzling. Weren't they afraid of deportation? Nor was it the last time that I found myself startled by the contrasts between national attitudes, policies, and approaches toward undocumented immigration in Spain versus the United States.

Media coverage and overall response toward migration in Spain has also surprised me. With Spain deep in economic crisis, I had expected people to be more concerned about what could easily be seen (and inevitably would be, had it occurred in the United States) as an immigrant invasion. However most of the migration-related press coverage and editorials have been intensely critical of the *Guardia Civil*, representing the events on the border as a humanitarian crisis. In fact, the deaths have provoked a string of protests across the country—apparently for the first time in Spanish history.

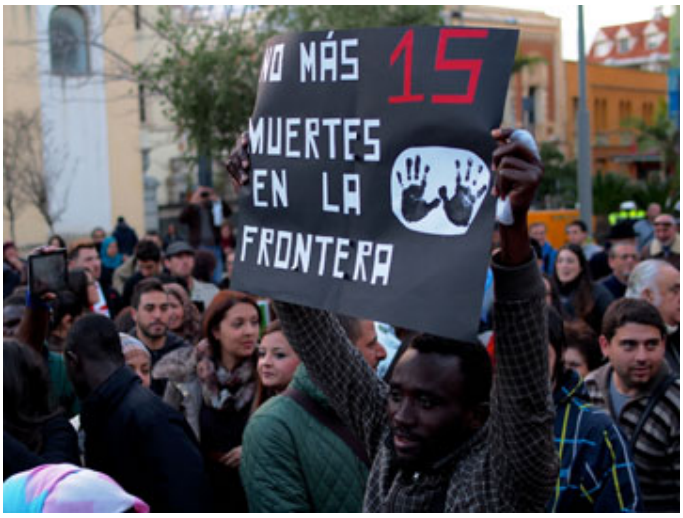
A few days later, I attended one such protest in Ceuta. Amplified by a megaphone, the chants were audible even before I saw the protestors. *"No mas muertes en la frontera, no mas muertes, en la frontera!" (No more deaths at the border!)* The group of approximately 300 people were gathered in front of the municipal building in the *Plaza de Reyes,* where the *Guardia Civil* and municipal government offices were located, wielding signs and yelling angry slogans. "*No matan a los migrants!"* (Don't kill the migrants!) *"La guardia civil son facistas!"* (The border guards are fascists!)

Organized by migrant-rights NGOs and the political o pposition, the event was advertised in newspapers as a "day of mourning" for the migrants who lost their lives attempting to cross. In reality, it seemed to me to be more a political rally aimed at stirring up criticism targeting the *Partido Popular*, the current conservative party in power. Roughly half the people in attendance appeared to be from the media. The rest were angry Spaniards. About a dozen African migrants, recruited by a migrant-rights organization called ELIN, were strategically placed in front of the cameras, wielding a dramatic sign printed in bold red and black ink reading "*No Mas Muertes en la Frontera: Derechos Humano Siempre."* (No More Border Deaths: Human Rights Forever). They would later become the face of the protest in news photos published about the event, they seemed to be the only African migrants in attendance.

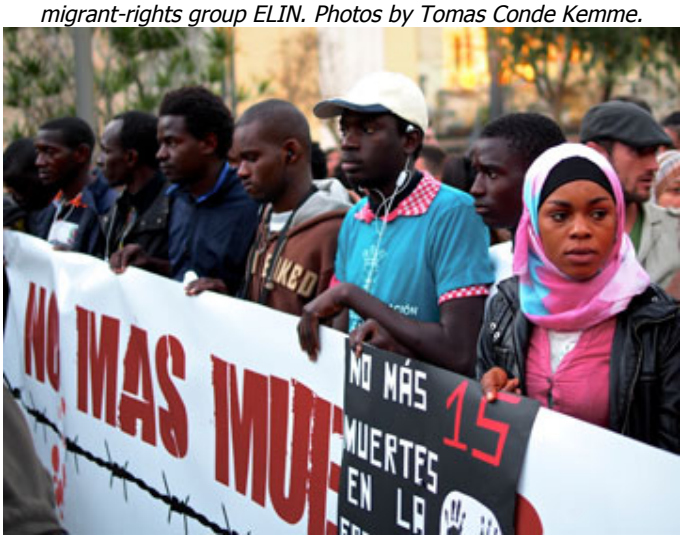
Wandering through the crowd, talking to protestors, I thought that for the bulk of people in attendance, the migrant deaths had become a proxy for discontent aimed at *Partido Popular*. A pudgy balding man pushed his way to the front, yelling angrily *"Derechos Humanos! Derechos Humanos!"* I asked him why he thought the deaths had happened. He looked at me with scowling, angry eyes.

The government doesn't care about the people—neither the migrants nor the rest of us," he bellowed. From his angry rant, I learned that he

for the rest of us," he bellowed. From his angry rant, I learned that he worked in a shop, but lost his job almost two years ago. Now his *paro* (unemployment) was running out, and he had no way of supporting his family. "They kill migrants because they don't care about people," he repeated.



Protestors at a demonstration in Ceuta organized by the migrant-rights group ELIN. Photos by Tomas Conde Kemme.

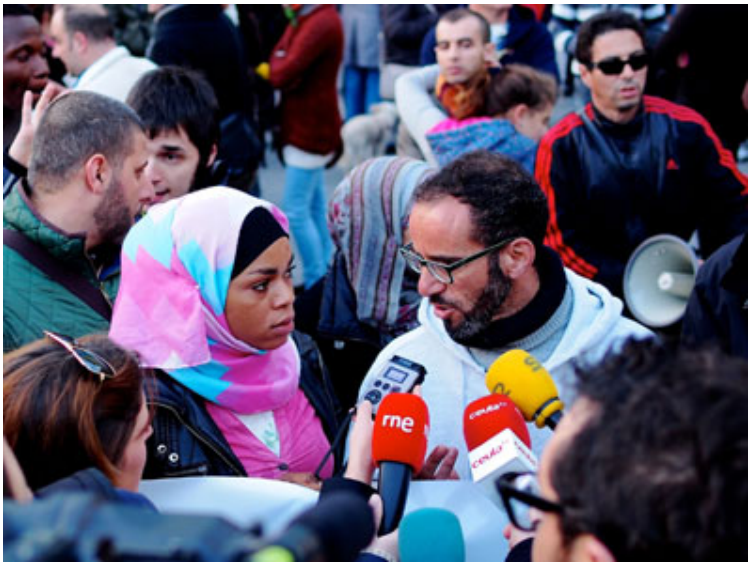


When I asked people why they were there, though many spoke first about the tragedy that took place at the border, the conversations quickly transitioned to larger complaints of government incompetence, concerns over the failing Spanish economy and the poor direction they feared the country was taking. At a protest held for them, the stories of the migrants themselves seemed almost secondary.

It was there that I met Mariam Camara, a shy but articulate young woman who had managed to climb over a barbed-wire fence into Ceuta just three months before. Dressed in a flowing pink skirt and matching hijab, she told me about her life in Guinea Bissau after her father had died, leaving her mother and seven younger siblings destitute. She began her journey just after her twentieth birthday, and it took her more than a year to travel up through Africa to the border. "I knew it would be dangerous to come, but it is more dangerous to starve," she said. She had come to the protest to honor the migrants

who had died, calling them her “brothers.” Traveling as a destitute woman alone through war-torn countries was dangerous—and many women migrants get raped. But she said that her brothers protected her. She wanted to honor their deaths.

“We are strangers here,” she said. “They can send us away, but they have no right to kill us.”



Reporters interview Miriam Camara at the demonstration.