

CEUTA: When Migration Pressure Becomes a Strategic Vulnerability

Bouzemouri Achraf

(RIEAS Senior Analyst)

Copyright: @ 2026 Research Institute for European and American Studies

(www.rieas.gr) Publication date: 11 August 2026

Note: The article reflects the opinion of the author and not necessarily the views of the Research Institute for European and American Studies

The migration crisis that unfolded in Ceuta at the end of July 2026 was extraordinary not only because of its scale, but because of the speed with which a local border problem became a wider security and political crisis. Spanish authorities initially estimated that around 49,000 people had entered the enclave within approximately 24 hours. Subsequent Spanish estimates placed the total number of arrivals during the episode at around 72,000, while Moroccan authorities gave a considerably lower figure of approximately 40,000.¹ Whatever figure is ultimately retained, the scale of the movement is difficult to put into conventional terms: Ceuta has a population of roughly 84,000.

The episode also demonstrated that the security of a border cannot be reduced to the physical barrier separating two territories. Within a matter of days, the crisis involved maritime and land surveillance, the capacity of the local authorities to receive large numbers of people, the application of Spanish immigration law, the activities of migrant-smuggling networks, the rapid circulation of information through social media, and, ultimately, the political relationship between Spain and Morocco.

¹ For the initial Spanish estimate of approximately 49,000 arrivals, see Reuters, 31 July 2026. Later reporting and Spanish estimates placed the total during the episode substantially higher, while Morocco reported a lower figure. See Reuters, 3 August 2026.

This makes Ceuta particularly interesting from a security perspective. The central question is not simply why so many people attempted to enter the enclave. This episode exposed a structural vulnerability in Spain's security architecture: the effective control of Ceuta depends to a considerable extent on cooperation with Morocco, while the dynamics capable of generating a sudden migration movement are increasingly difficult for either state to control.

From a legal change to a mass movement

One of the most important developments preceding the crisis was a ruling by Spain's Supreme Court on 8 July concerning the immediate return of people who reach Ceuta or Melilla by sea. The ruling restricted the possibility of automatically returning such individuals without the applicable legal procedures being followed.²

The significance of the ruling lies not simply in its legal content but in the way it was subsequently interpreted. Spanish authorities argued that migrant-smuggling networks had exploited an "opportunistic" interpretation of the judgment, creating the perception that reaching Spanish territory by sea would provide migrants with a substantially greater possibility of remaining there. Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez similarly argued that trafficking networks had taken advantage of the ruling.³

Morocco offered a different interpretation. A senior Moroccan official argued that Spain should have anticipated the consequences of the judgment because it weakened an important element of deterrence. At the same time, Morocco rejected the suggestion that it had relaxed its own border controls and instead pointed to trafficking networks and the exploitation of the Spanish ruling.⁴

The disagreement is important because it illustrates a broader problem in contemporary border security. A change in domestic law can have consequences well beyond the jurisdiction in which the law operates. In the case of Ceuta, the perceived change in the

² Spanish Supreme Court / Consejo General del Poder Judicial, judgment of 8 July 2026 concerning the immediate return of persons reaching Ceuta and Melilla by sea. The precise legal formulation should be checked against the original Spanish judgment before publication.

³ Spanish government statements attributed the sudden movement in part to the exploitation of the Supreme Court ruling by migrant-smuggling networks. Reuters also reported the Spanish government's position.

⁴ Reuters, 3 August 2026, reporting the Moroccan government's position that Spain should have anticipated the migration consequences of the ruling and that Morocco had not relaxed its own border controls.

consequences of reaching Spanish territory appears to have altered the calculations of people considering the crossing, while also creating an opportunity for other actors to disseminate information about the new situation.

The border therefore became vulnerable not necessarily because the physical barrier had disappeared, but because the assumptions surrounding that barrier had changed.

The information environment

The role of social media makes the 2026 crisis particularly different from previous episodes of mass migration towards Ceuta.

Investigations by the Associated Press and *Le Monde* found that rumours concerning the opening of the border and supposed changes to Spanish immigration policy circulated rapidly through Instagram, Facebook, TikTok and other online networks. Videos showing successful crossings were shared widely, while some posts provided information about routes and movements around the border.⁵

This does not mean that social media "caused" the migration crisis. Economic conditions, individual aspirations, perceptions of opportunity and the longstanding attractiveness of Europe remained important factors. Nor is there currently sufficient evidence to conclude that the online mobilisation was directed by a foreign government.

The more interesting security phenomenon is therefore different.

A migration movement no longer necessarily requires a centralized organization to reach a very large scale. Individuals can observe successful crossings, communicate with others, share information and make decisions collectively without belonging to a formal organization. Once enough people believe that a particular route has temporarily become viable, the movement can acquire its own momentum.

⁵ Associated Press, *Runaway online rumors sparked frantic rush by migrants to the Spanish territory of Ceuta*; and *Le Monde*, investigation into the origins of the rumours surrounding the supposed opening of the Ceuta border. Both sources are useful precisely because they document extensive online circulation without establishing that a state actor directed the operation.

This creates a problem for conventional border-control models. A state may be prepared to intercept organized groups of smugglers, but it is considerably more difficult to prevent thousands of individuals from responding simultaneously to information circulating through social networks.

The distinction is important for the analysis of organized crime as well. The presence of smugglers does not necessarily mean that smugglers organized the entire movement. Criminal networks may instead exploit a movement that has already begun to develop through social, economic and digital channels. In this sense, organized crime can function as an accelerator or facilitator rather than as the sole cause of migration.

This is particularly relevant to the broader security relationship between North Africa and Europe. The interaction between irregular migration and organized crime is not new, but the Ceuta episode suggests that the environment in which these networks operate is changing. The ability to exploit a temporary legal ambiguity or a rapidly spreading online narrative may be as important as the traditional organization of transport and smuggling routes.

Morocco: partner, gatekeeper or source of strategic leverage?

The most politically sensitive question concerns Morocco's role.

There are strong reasons to examine the possibility that migration pressure can become an instrument of interstate leverage. The precedent of 2021 is particularly relevant. In May of that year, approximately 8,000 people entered Ceuta in a matter of days, producing one of the most serious crises in Spain-Morocco relations in recent years. The episode occurred during a period of intense diplomatic tension surrounding Spain's decision to allow Polisario Front leader Brahim Ghali to receive medical treatment in Spain.⁶

The 2021 episode therefore created an important precedent: a sudden migration movement at Ceuta could coincide with, and potentially become part of, a wider diplomatic confrontation.

The 2026 crisis is more complicated. There is already a political interpretation according to which Morocco deliberately facilitated the movement in order to demonstrate its ability to

⁶ Reuters reporting from May 2021 recorded approximately 8,000 arrivals during the Ceuta crisis and linked the episode to the diplomatic dispute between Spain and Morocco surrounding Brahim Ghali.

exert pressure on Spain. Some Spanish commentators and analysts have gone further, describing the episode as part of a broader Moroccan strategy concerning Ceuta and Melilla.⁷

Such interpretations should not simply be dismissed. They deserve examination, particularly given the strategic importance of Ceuta and the history of migration pressure in the bilateral relationship.

However, the available evidence does not allow the conclusion that Morocco deliberately orchestrated the 2026 movement to be presented as an established fact. Morocco has denied relaxing its border controls, while Spanish authorities themselves have emphasized the role of migrant-smuggling networks and the consequences of the Spanish Supreme Court ruling.⁸

This distinction matters.

The strategic vulnerability exposed by the crisis does not depend upon proving Moroccan intent.

Spain's security interests in Ceuta are structurally dependent upon what happens on the Moroccan side of the border. Morocco possesses the physical capacity to influence the number of people reaching the frontier, while Spain possesses responsibility for what happens once individuals reach Spanish territory. This creates an asymmetrical form of interdependence.

Morocco can therefore possess strategic leverage even without deliberately using migration as a political weapon. The mere possibility that cooperation could weaken, whether through diplomatic disagreement, domestic political pressures, criminal activity or the inability to control rapidly developing movements, creates a vulnerability for Spain.

This may ultimately be more important than the question of whether the 2026 crisis was deliberately engineered.

⁷ Carlos Echeverría Jesús has argued that the 2026 crisis should be understood within a broader Moroccan strategy concerning Ceuta, Melilla and Spain's sovereignty. This should be presented explicitly as an analytical interpretation rather than an established finding.

⁸ Morocco's position, as reported by Reuters, was that it had not relaxed border controls and that trafficking networks had exploited the Spanish legal change.

From border control to border resilience

The principal lesson of Ceuta is therefore that border security should not be understood exclusively as the capacity to prevent physical entry.

The crisis exposed at least four different dimensions of border security.

The first is ***physical resilience***. Spain must be able to prevent or manage large-scale attempts to cross the border by land and sea.

The second is ***legal resilience***. Border-control policies must operate within the constraints imposed by national, European and international law. The July Supreme Court ruling demonstrates how judicial decisions can alter the practical operation of border management and consequently affect behaviour beyond the courtroom.

The third is ***information resilience***. Governments increasingly have to respond not only to movements of people but also to movements of information. Rumours about changes in immigration policy can travel considerably faster than governments can correct them.

The fourth is ***diplomatic resilience***. Ceuta's security cannot be separated from Spain's relationship with Morocco. Cooperation with the neighbouring state is not an optional complement to border security; it is one of its central components.

These dimensions are increasingly difficult to separate. A legal decision can alter perceptions. Perceptions can spread through social media. Social-media activity can encourage migration. Migration can create opportunities for criminal networks. A sudden influx can overwhelm local reception capacity. The resulting political pressure can then affect relations between states.

The security problem is therefore systemic rather than linear.

This is particularly relevant for the European Union. The EU's new migration and asylum framework entered into application in June 2026, shortly before the Ceuta crisis. The framework explicitly seeks to combine stronger external-border management with safeguards

for people seeking protection, while also emphasizing cooperation with third countries and the fight against migrant smuggling.⁹

Ceuta demonstrates why this external dimension is unavoidable. European border security increasingly depends upon cooperation with states that are not members of the Union. This arrangement can be highly effective when political interests converge, as the long-term reduction of certain migration routes demonstrates. But it also creates dependencies. When cooperation becomes strained, the effects may be concentrated disproportionately on the European side of the border.

For Spain, Ceuta is therefore not simply a migration-management problem. It is a test of the resilience of a security relationship that extends beyond Spanish territory.

Concluding Remarks

The 2026 Ceuta crisis should not be reduced to a simple confrontation between Spain and Morocco, nor should it be explained exclusively through migration, organized crime or social media. Its significance lies precisely in the interaction between these factors.

The episode demonstrated how quickly a change in the perceived legal conditions of entry could interact with online information networks and existing migration pressures. It also demonstrated that organized crime can exploit such conditions without necessarily having created them. Most importantly, it exposed the degree to which Spain's ability to secure Ceuta depends on cooperation beyond its own territory.

Whether Morocco deliberately facilitated the movement remains an important question, but it is not the only question that matters. A more fundamental security concern is that the border can become vulnerable even without a clearly identifiable actor directing the crisis. A combination of individual decisions, digital amplification, criminal opportunism, legal constraints and interstate dependencies can produce effects comparable to those normally associated with deliberate strategic pressure.

⁹ European Commission, *Migration and asylum*, updated 26 May 2026. The EU Pact on Migration and Asylum entered into application on 12 June 2026 and includes measures concerning external borders, asylum procedures, returns, solidarity and cooperation with third countries.

The lesson for Spain and the European Union is therefore not simply that stronger border controls are required. Physical barriers remain important, but they are only one component of border security.

What Ceuta exposed was the need for *border resilience*: the capacity to absorb and manage sudden movements while maintaining legal authority, institutional capacity, reliable information, diplomatic cooperation and political stability.

For Spain, the strategic vulnerability is not merely that people can cross its border. It is that the conditions determining whether that border remains manageable are increasingly shaped outside Spain's direct control.