

Ceuta and the Risks of Interdependence

Migration, Human Security and Counterterrorism at Europe's Border

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Abstract

The July 2026 mass crossing into Ceuta exposed a security vulnerability that cannot be understood through migration pressure or counterterrorism capability alone. Approximately 80,000 people entered the Spanish autonomous city over two days after Moroccan upstream border enforcement deteriorated, overwhelming the capacity to encounter, identify and differentiate entrants under normal processing conditions. Yet Spain's counterterrorism intelligence, databases, legal powers and bilateral cooperation with Morocco remained intact. The crisis therefore illustrates how a security capability can lose part of its preventive effect when the operating conditions on which it depends are disrupted.

Drawing on newly declassified Spanish intelligence and security documents and the subsequent operational response, this report examines the consequences across border management, human security and counterterrorism. Previously identified terrorism-related subjects, including individuals expelled from Spain and prohibited from returning, re-entered during the crossing and were located retrospectively, shifting part of the security task from prevention to recovery.

The report argues that externalised border cooperation creates strategically significant dependence when an external contribution is critical, cannot be substituted at equivalent speed and scale, can deteriorate faster than alternative capacity can be activated, and generates downstream demand faster than receiving systems can expand. Comparisons with Turkey and Poland further demonstrate the importance of substitutability, flow geometry and controlled encounter points. Ceuta consequently highlights a central problem of European external-border resilience: not whether national and EU capabilities can eventually restore control, but how much legal, humanitarian and security exposure accumulates during the substitution gap before they do.

Introduction

Ceuta is a Spanish autonomous city on the North African coast, separated from Morocco by an approximately eight-kilometre land border that forms part of the EU's external border.¹ The city's geography makes Spanish border management unusually dependent on cooperation with actors outside Spanish territory, and particularly on Moroccan authorities preventing large groups from reaching the perimeter or surrounding waters. Simultaneously, Ceuta sits within a wider Spain-Morocco security relationship that includes extensive counterterrorism (CT) cooperation.

On 30 and 31 July 2026, an estimated 80,000 people entered Ceuta from Morocco,² almost equal to Ceuta's resident population of 83,595.³ The scale and compression of the movement overwhelmed Spain's capacity to control, identify and process those entering its territory. The crisis therefore exposed more than the limits of migration management: it showed how disruption in one part of an interdependent border-security system can change the operating conditions of functions that remain institutionally intact.

The crisis developed in two distinct but connected phases. During the acute phase, the scale and speed of arrivals simultaneously produced border-security and human-security emergencies, terms used here in their people-centred sense and encompassing threats to life, physical safety, health and dignity, as well as the protection needs of children and other vulnerable persons. Fatality estimates differed substantially, with NGOs reporting 141 deaths associated with the crossings while official Spanish reporting confirmed 82 total deaths.⁴ Spanish security and emergency personnel rescued hundreds of others, including children, from the sea.⁵ Border control, identification, healthcare, emergency accommodation and reception services, and child-protection capacity came under extreme pressure. Although returns to Morocco began almost immediately,⁶ reducing the number of people physically present, they did not end the crisis.

Instead, a sustained phase followed. The number of people who had entered during the mass crossing and the number still present in Ceuta weeks later are therefore separate figures. By 12 September, the government of Ceuta reported approximately 13,000

migrants remaining in the city, including around 2,100 minors and nearly 11,000 adults.⁷ This residual population represented roughly 15 percent of Ceuta's resident population and had to be accommodated and processed alongside the continuing administrative, humanitarian and security consequences of the original mass entry. Prolonged uncertainty and inadequate living conditions have coincided with increasing violence involving some of those remaining,⁸ while pressure on accommodation and public services has fuelled growing tensions between migrants and residents.⁹ The crisis has also developed into a wider political, judicial and diplomatic confrontation.¹⁰

The sustained phase exposed a further security consequence of the initial breakdown. As authorities reconstructed who had entered, they identified individuals already known for jihadism-related security concerns, including people previously expelled from Spain and prohibited from re-entering. The significance of those cases lies not in an absence of counterterrorism intelligence but in the fact that information and restrictions already attached to known individuals of concern did not prevent their re-entry or enable authorities to identify them and act on the existing security information and restrictions at the point of entry during the surge. Ceuta therefore illustrates how a functioning CT architecture can lose its prospective effect when the border-management conditions required to connect identity, existing information and enforcement break down. The result is not informational blindness but a shift from preventing known security-relevant movement to reconstructing and resolving it after territorial entry has already occurred.

There is no evidence that the wider movement constituted an organised terrorist infiltration operation, nor does the presence of individuals of concern among those who crossed the border on July 30-31 justify conflating irregular migration with terrorism. Rather, Ceuta raises a broader security question: **what happens when disruption in one component of a bilateral security relationship changes the operating conditions under which other, institutionally distinct functions must perform?** In Ceuta, that question arose simultaneously across three dimensions: border and migration management, human security and counterterrorism.

The question is particularly significant because the crisis occurred against the background of one of Europe's most developed bilateral CT partnerships. Since 2014, cooperation between Spain's *Policía Nacional* and Morocco's *Direction Générale de la Surveillance du Territoire* (General Directorate for Territorial Surveillance, or DGST) alone

has produced 31 joint CT operations and 150 terrorism-related arrests.¹¹ Yet the operational effect of intelligence cooperation depends partly on conditions produced elsewhere in the security system. Ceuta demonstrates that a CT capability can remain institutionally intact while losing part of its prospective effect because the conditions required to connect information to people at the point of entry have changed.

The implications extend beyond Spain. Ceuta is part of the European Union's external border, meaning that failures in border control, identity screening and protection there engage wider European systems of migration management and internal security. The EU response already reflects this: in September, the European Commission allocated €114.7 million in emergency assistance to Spain and mobilised operational support from Frontex, Europol and the EU Agency for Asylum.¹² The crisis therefore raises a European question as well as a bilateral one: **how resilient are EU external-border and internal-security systems when critical operating conditions are partly supplied by neighbouring third countries, and how quickly can national or European capacity substitute when that contribution is withdrawn or degraded?**

Recently declassified Spanish intelligence and security documents make it possible to reconstruct how this vulnerability developed.¹³ They show escalating warning indicators throughout July, increasingly specific mobilisation around Morocco's Throne Day celebrations, advance notification to Spanish and Moroccan authorities, and a marked change in Moroccan border-enforcement behaviour during the critical period. This brief uses that evidence and the subsequent operational aftermath to examine how the temporary loss of effective upstream border management altered the operating conditions of border control, human-security protection and counterterrorism, and what the episode reveals about the resilience requirements facing Spain and the EU when a critical component of a wider security relationship is disrupted.

1. A Forewarned Crisis: Warning Before System Overload

The Ceuta crisis did not result from an absence of warning. Throughout July, Spanish authorities recorded a rapidly deteriorating border situation. *Guardia Civil* data showed attempted swimming crossings rising from 223 by 9 July to 644 by 16 July and to 1,241 by 23 July.¹⁴ By 29 July, *Guardia Civil* reporting recorded 1,027 irregular entrants during July compared with 72 during the equivalent period in 2025, an increase of more than 1,300 percent.¹⁵ Simultaneously, *Centro Nacional de Inmigración y Fronteras* (National Centre on Immigration and Borders, or CENIF) and the *Centro Nacional de Inteligencia* (National Intelligence Centre, or CNI) were detecting growing online mobilisation around attempts to enter Ceuta during Morocco's Throne Day celebrations.¹⁶

By 29 July, the warning had become substantially more specific. CENIF assessed swimming entries as highly likely and developed scenarios involving simultaneous pressure by sea and at the border fence classified as carrying an “extreme” risk.¹⁷ The CNI separately identified calls for an assault by sea and fence planned for the following day and traced them to social-media groups with a combined audience of approximately 180,000 followers.¹⁸ The information was communicated to the Government Delegation in Ceuta and *Guardia Civil* and, at 18:26 on 29 July, an urgent intelligence note was sent to Morocco's DGST and *Direction Générale des Études et de la Documentation* (General Directorate for Studies and Documentation, or DGED).¹⁹ By the evening before the crossing, therefore, the possibility of a large, digitally mobilised, and potentially simultaneous attempt by sea and fence was known on both sides of the border. What was not anticipated was the attempt's eventual scale. The government subsequently declassified the relevant communications and reports, which show that the warnings were distributed across *Guardia Civil*, *Policía Nacional*, CENIF, CNI and military intelligence rather than concentrated in a single institutional channel.²⁰

This distinction matters. The evidence does not support describing July 2026 as an intelligence blackout. Spanish services detected the accelerating pressure, identified organised online mobilisation, modelled an extreme-risk scenario and transmitted specific warning to Moroccan intelligence. The subsequent outcome therefore shifts the

analytical question from whether warning existed to how that warning was translated into preparedness and how existing contingency arrangements performed under extreme load.



Migrants at the Ceuta-Morocco border, 31 July 2026. CCTV footage, public domain (automated recording).

Different institutions observed different parts of the same developing problem. *Guardia Civil* focused on increasing physical pressure at the border and had already warned of the operational consequences of the Supreme Court ruling limiting immediate border rejection for people intercepted after entering by sea.²¹ CENIF analysed migration patterns, online narratives and mobilisation; the CNI identified specific networks, timing and calls for action; and the Spanish Armed Forces Intelligence Centre (*Centro de Inteligencia de las Fuerzas Armadas*, or CIFAS) considered Moroccan security behaviour and the wider geopolitical environment.²² Therefore, the relevant issue was no longer collection but conversion of distributed warning into an operating posture capable of preserving critical functions under surge conditions. Reporting published after the declassification indicates that some CENIF assessments suggesting Moroccan permissiveness were not circulated to the Interior Ministry,²³ illustrating that the problem was not simply whether information existed but whether the parts needed for operational preparation converged in time.

The wider Spain-Morocco relationship is interdependent, but the dependency exposed at Ceuta was functionally asymmetric. Spain and Morocco derive reciprocal benefits from cooperation across migration, policing and counterterrorism, but the specific upstream border function examined here could be reduced more quickly than Spain could

reproduce its effects downstream. A mutually beneficial relationship can therefore still contain asymmetric dependence on specific functions.

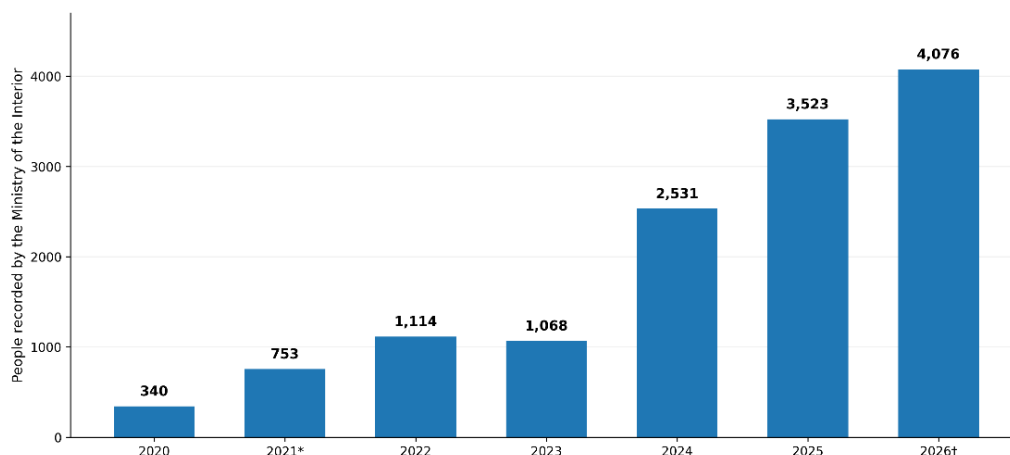
The problem was therefore not simply one of prediction. No realistic intelligence system should be expected to forecast precisely that approximately 80,000 people would cross. Once official assessments were contemplating simultaneous pressure at multiple points and an extreme risk of collapse, the relevant preparedness question became which functions would remain operational if normal border processing failed: control of entry, identity registration, security checks, humanitarian assistance, protection, reception and public order. Ceuta subsequently demonstrated that these were not separate problems. Different legal and security functions depended on the same front-end capacity to encounter, identify, differentiate and route individuals under conditions of extreme compression. Once that front end degraded, several distinct backlogs began to accumulate from the same unresolved population.

When the upstream function changed

That vulnerability became critical because Spanish border management at Ceuta did not function in isolation. It depended heavily on Moroccan authorities preventing large concentrations of prospective entrants from reaching the Spanish frontier in the first place.

Immediately before the crisis, bilateral cooperation was demonstrably functioning. Between 28 and 29 July, Spanish reporting recorded 273 people reaching Spanish waters, while Moroccan forces intercepted 467. During the following reporting period, from 29 to 30 July, 605 reached Spanish waters, while Morocco intercepted 493.²⁴ A *Guardia Civil* report from 22 July likewise noted increased Moroccan activity, recording 773 interceptions in one week compared with 627 the week before, while a CENIF assessment of 29 July recorded 1,164 Moroccan interventions compared with 119 Spanish rescues or interceptions during the period examined.²⁵ Spanish authorities, therefore, had recent evidence that Moroccan upstream enforcement could substantially reduce the pressure reaching Ceuta.

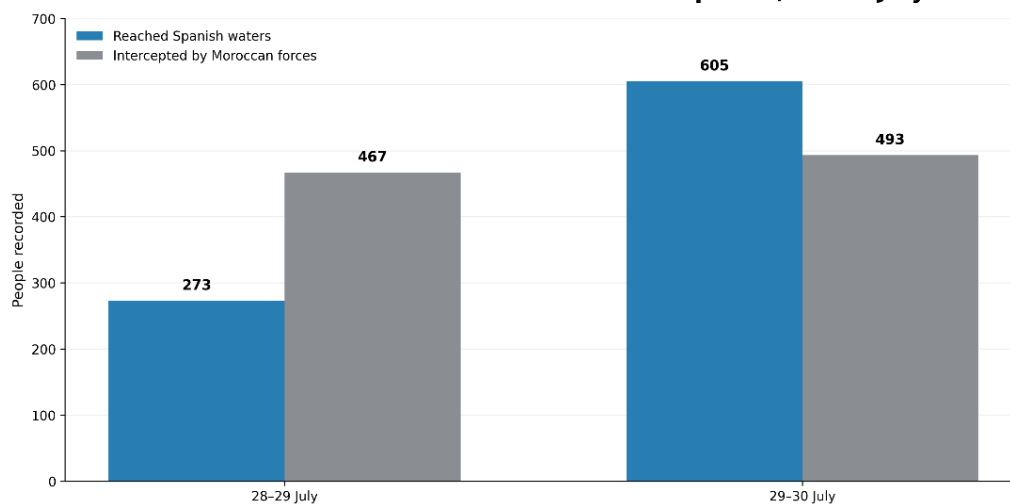
Irregular Land Arrivals to Ceuta, 2020-2026



Source: Spanish Ministry of the Interior, biweekly irregular-immigration reports.
 * 2021 excludes the exceptional irregular entries into Ceuta on 17-18 May 2021, as explicitly noted by the Ministry.
 † 2026 is year-to-date through 31 August and excludes the exceptional entries of 30-31 July 2026, as explicitly noted by the Ministry.

Image 1: Irregular Land Arrivals to Ceuta, 2020-2026

Recorded Cross-Border Movement and Interceptions, 28-30 July 2026



Source: Spanish security reporting cited in the report (see note 13).
 Figures distinguish people recorded as reaching Spanish waters from interceptions by Moroccan forces.

Image 2: Recorded Cross-Border Movement and Interceptions, 28-30 July 2026

That pattern changed during the critical period. *Guardia Civil* reporting on 30 July stated that Moroccan authorities were showing “passivity,” contrasting this explicitly with the “proactivity and adequate cooperation” observed until the previous day.²⁶ Other reporting described up to 6,000 people approaching Tarajal (Ceuta) through the Moroccan beach amid “apparent inactivity” by Moroccan forces, whereas in preceding days those forces had prevented prospective entrants from reaching the coast.²⁷ Later reporting based on

the declassified material similarly concluded that Moroccan authorities largely did not respond proactively during the mass crossing despite having received advance warning from Spain.²⁸

The documents are more definitive about what changed than why it changed. But the political context matters because the possible explanations considered by Spanish services are not necessarily independent of one another.

Ten days earlier, on 20 July, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez had travelled to Algiers and publicly described Algeria as a “strategic partner” and “friendly nation,” announcing a new phase in bilateral relations that would deepen cooperation not only on energy and trade but also on migration management and CT.²⁹ Algeria is Morocco's principal regional rival and the main state supporter of the Polisario Front in the Western Sahara dispute. Contemporary reporting noted that Sánchez's visit was viewed negatively in Rabat, and the declassified assessments themselves considered the possibility that dissatisfaction within the Moroccan political establishment contributed to the Moroccan border-enforcement behaviour subsequently observed at the border.³⁰

A separate Spanish domestic development may also have contributed to the conditions under which the crisis emerged. In a ruling issued shortly before the July surge, Spain's Supreme Court held that people intercepted after entering Spanish waters could not be subjected to immediate “*rechazo en frontera*” (refusal of entry), but instead had to undergo the applicable individualised return procedure, including identification and procedural safeguards.³¹ *Guardia Civil* warned on 8 July that the court ruling could produce a pull factor (“*efecto llamada*”), increase attempted entries by sea and place additional pressure on already limited operational resources. The possibility was subsequently amplified online as successful crossings circulated on social media. However, the evidence does not establish the ruling as a direct cause of the mass movement: CENIF itself concluded on 29 July that no direct causal relationship could be demonstrated.³² The court decision is better understood as one factor that may have altered both the operational environment and migrants' perceptions of the likelihood of successfully entering and remaining in Ceuta.

Nor can the legal change alone explain the scale of what followed. There is a recent precedent for migration pressure becoming entangled with bilateral political disputes in

the absence of such judicial action. In May 2021, approximately 8,000–10,000 people entered Ceuta after Moroccan authorities appeared to relax border controls during the diplomatic crisis triggered by Spain's decision to admit Polisario Front leader Brahim Ghali for COVID-19 medical treatment.³³ The episode was widely interpreted as Moroccan retaliation and contributed to a severe deterioration of bilateral relations. The subsequent rapprochement culminated in Spain's 2022 decision to support Morocco's autonomy proposal for Western Sahara as the basis for resolving the dispute, a major change in Spanish policy.³⁴

The 2026 episode cannot directly be equated with 2021. There is no available evidence establishing that Rabat centrally ordered the July mass crossing, and Moroccan officials have rejected the suggestion that political motives determined their response.³⁵ But the comparison is analytically relevant because it demonstrates that migration control has previously become entangled with political leverage in the Spain-Morocco relationship. The July documents show that Spanish institutions themselves considered that possibility again.

The timing of subsequent events further reinforces the relevance of the territorial dimension. Following the July crisis, senior Moroccan ministers publicly renewed the country's longstanding claims over Ceuta and Melilla. Justice Minister Abdellatif Ouahbi referred to Morocco's "historical" claims to the cities, while Islamic Affairs Minister Ahmed Toufiq spoke of the need to "liberate the occupied cities," prompting a formal Spanish diplomatic protest.³⁶ Morocco's sovereignty claims are longstanding and their re-emergence does not demonstrate that the July crossing was engineered for that purpose. It does, however, place the observed breakdown in border cooperation within a wider bilateral context in which migration control, political disputes and territorial claims have previously intersected. The precise motivation behind Morocco's conduct remains unresolved; for the purposes of this brief, the more consequential fact is that effective border-management cooperation ceased to function at the point when Spain was least able to absorb its loss.

The shift in Moroccan enforcement exposed a structural dependency in the wider security environment. Counterterrorism liaison, migration management, policing and border enforcement are institutionally distinct, but their effectiveness is not independent. Moroccan upstream enforcement did not constitute a Spanish CT capability; it helped

preserve the operating conditions under which Spanish capabilities could function prospectively. Once those conditions changed, Spain still possessed its intelligence, databases, legal powers and investigative services, but had to apply them against a far larger and less channelled population after entry had already occurred.

This does not require attributing the scale of the subsequent overload exclusively to the deterioration in Moroccan enforcement. The mass mobilisation, legal environment, Spanish surge capacity and exceptional compression of arrivals all affected the outcome. The narrower dependency claim is sufficient: Moroccan interception had been materially reducing the volume reaching Spanish-controlled space, and when that constraint weakened, Spanish systems had to absorb a substantially larger share of the same pressure directly. The security significance therefore lies not in treating upstream enforcement as the sole cause of overload, but in recognising it as one of the conditions determining the scale and tempo at which downstream Spanish capabilities had to operate.

Ceuta demonstrates that a CT capability can remain institutionally intact while losing part of its prospective effect because the conditions required to connect information to people at the point of entry have changed.

2. When Border Security Becomes Counterterrorism Security

The CT-relevant consequences of the July crossing continued to emerge well after the acute phase had ended. By 1 September, CT sources had confirmed the expulsion of three individuals identified in Ceuta as security-relevant because of links to jihadist radicalisation, while police representatives reported that the broader number of individuals requiring terrorism-related checks exceeded ten.³⁷ Separate reporting identified ten Moroccan nationals who had previously been expelled from Spain in connection with jihadist radicalisation and were subject to entry prohibitions before they participated in the mass crossing.³⁸ These categories overlap and should not be aggregated.

Further cases continued to emerge. On 10 September, *Guardia Civil* Information specialists located a Moroccan national with a firm conviction for jihadist terrorism and an active prohibition on entering Spain during one of the controls established after the July crossing. Investigators were working on the hypothesis that he had remained in Ceuta since the 30–31 July mass entry. Once located, his identity was verified against police databases and the existing entry ban triggered the applicable enforcement procedure.³⁹ In late August, *Guardia Civil* had already detected and expelled another individual who had entered during 30–31 July despite a previous conviction for terrorist indoctrination and an active entry prohibition. He remained in Ceuta for several weeks before being located and expelled.⁴⁰



Selected Spanish and European press headlines on terrorism-related cases identified after the crossing. Full citations appear in the references.

The significance of the two documented re-entry cases goes beyond the fact that known subjects crossed a border despite entry bans. In both instances, the Spanish state had already completed much of the difficult CT work: the individuals had been identified, subjected to judicial action and prohibited from returning to Spanish territory. The July crossing temporarily severed the connection between that prior security action and its territorial enforcement. The information had not disappeared, the legal restriction remained valid, and the relevant databases continued to contain it. However, what was temporarily lost was continuity between the security status already attached to the person and the state's knowledge that the same person was again physically present in Spain.

That distinction changes how expulsion should be understood as a CT measure. Removing a terrorism-related subject from Spain does not necessarily terminate the underlying security concern; it transfers the subject outside Spanish territorial jurisdiction. The continuing preventive value of an entry prohibition therefore depends on a chain extending beyond removal itself: sufficient awareness of subsequent movement, the capacity to detect attempted return and the ability to reconnect the individual with the security status already attached to him. Under ordinary conditions, an active prohibition can translate prior CT action into a territorial restriction. During the July crossing, that restriction continued to exist legally but, for at least some individuals, did not operate effectively upon re-entry.

The mass crossing also changed the nature of the security task. At a functioning border, encounter, identification, checking of existing police and security information and enforcement can form part of the same operational sequence. Once large numbers of people enter before those checks and determinations can be completed, those functions separate. Authorities must reconstruct who entered, determine whether known security-relevant subjects are among that population, locate them after entry, verify their identities and only then act on security information or measures that may already have existed before the crossing. A prospective border-control problem is thereby converted into a retrospective internal-security problem.

The mass crossing shifted part of the security task from prospective border control to retrospective internal-security reconstruction.

The shift changes not only the timing but the object of the security task. Border processing operates against a flow: individuals are encountered as they arrive. Retrospective resolution operates against an accumulated stock whose identities, locations and possible security relevance must be reconstructed after the event. The crossing therefore converted part of a prospective border workload into a residual internal-security workload that persisted after the mass

movement itself had ended. The continued location of terrorism-related subjects weeks later demonstrates that the CT consequences of 30–31 July were not confined to those two days.

This helps explain why the small absolute number of CT-relevant cases does not make the vulnerability analytically insignificant. CT is concerned precisely with identifying exceptional cases within overwhelmingly non-threatening populations. The relevant denominator is therefore not simply the number of terrorism-related subjects divided by approximately 80,000 entries. At the point of entry, authorities did not know which individuals constituted those exceptional cases. The operational burden lay in restoring sufficient individual resolution across a vastly larger population to determine who required CT attention and who did not.

The proposition is important because it cuts in both directions. It does not justify treating irregular migration as a terrorism threat. On the contrary, the overwhelming majority of entrants may have no CT relevance whatsoever, while the state still requires enough

discriminatory capacity to isolate the very small number who do. The security requirement is therefore differentiation, not securitisation of the wider population.

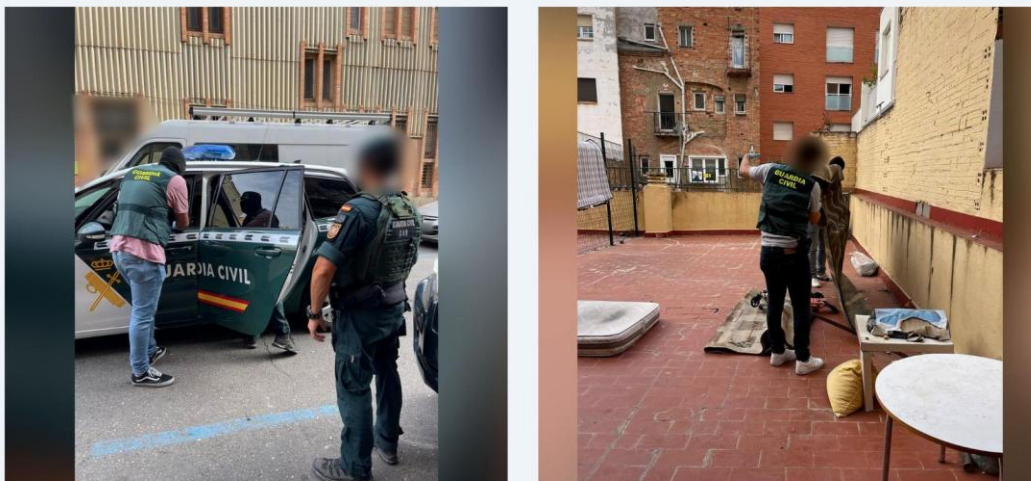
What bilateral CT cooperation preserves across jurisdictional boundaries

The Ceuta cases also clarify a distinct but related function of Spanish-Moroccan CT cooperation. Since 2014, cooperation between *Policía Nacional* and Morocco's DGST alone has produced 31 joint counterterrorism operations and 150 arrests, 83 in Spain and 67 in Morocco.⁴¹ Operational targets include foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs), networks spanning Spanish and Moroccan territory and individuals assessed as presenting a potential threat of violence.^{42 43 44}

The conventional explanation is that liaison allows one service to obtain information held by another. That is true, but it understates the importance of bilateral CT cooperation in the Ceuta context. A more consequential function of that cooperation is continuity across changes of jurisdiction. A subject may be investigated in Spain, expelled to Morocco, remain relevant to Spanish security, move again and subsequently attempt to return. A network may operate simultaneously in Ceuta and Castillejos while investigative and coercive authority remain divided by the border. A foreign terrorist fighter may generate one part of his intelligence history in an external theatre, another in Morocco and another in Spain. Bilateral cooperation allows those episodes to be treated as parts of the same security trajectory rather than as disconnected national events.

The May 2025 Guadalajara case illustrates that function. *Guardia Civil* located and arrested a foreign terrorist fighter who joined ISIS in the Syria-Iraq conflict zone and was subject to a Moroccan international arrest warrant; the operation was conducted jointly with the DGST.⁴⁵ In January 2025, *Guardia Civil* intercepted in Ceuta a Tunisian FTF who had travelled to Syria and was attempting to enter Spain irregularly. In describing the operation, Interior explicitly situated surveillance of national entry and exit points within its response to the returnee threat.⁴⁶ The operational value in both cases lay in connecting movement, identity and previously generated security information across territorial transitions.

JOINT COUNTERTERRORISM COOPERATION



Official imagery: Spanish Ministry of the Interior / Guardia Civil.

Arrest and search activity in a joint Guardia Civil-DGST counterterrorism investigation, July 2023. Spanish Ministry of the Interior.

This is also why the July problem cannot be reduced to missed formal alerts. Convictions and entry prohibitions represent the clearest cases because the subject's significance has already been resolved into an operationally usable status. Other CT information can be less definitive: an individual may be relevant through an alias, association with another subject, an ongoing investigation or partner reporting that has not matured into an arrest warrant or formal alert. Reliable identity data therefore do more than generate a binary database response; they provide the anchor through which disparate information can be attached to the same physical individual.

The consequence of losing that connection between identity and existing intelligence is more significant than the familiar observation that intelligence is distributed among services. When authorities cannot reliably establish who has entered, the state risks temporarily losing not only known prohibited persons but also awareness of which individuals relevant to its wider intelligence picture have entered Spanish territory. The first category can be measured retrospectively because authorities already know the subjects they are looking for. The second is inherently harder to measure because an entrant's significance may emerge only after identity, aliases, associations and partner holdings have been reconciled.

The known post-crossing cases, therefore, establish the existence of a measurable problem but not necessarily its full extent. They tell us that recognised subjects were able

to re-enter and were subsequently recovered. The cases cannot tell us, by themselves, how much CT-relevant information remained temporarily unattached to individuals within the entrant population. The uncertainty generated by the crossing was therefore not only “who entered?” but also “which existing security relationships, histories and intelligence holdings became operationally relevant because that person was now inside Spain?”

From prevention to recovery

The consequences of that uncertainty depend heavily on the threat stage of the individual concerned. Spanish-Moroccan cooperation has repeatedly supported operations involving subjects whose activity had progressed well beyond general extremist interest. Operation Chacal in 2015 targeted a four-person Ceuta cell assessed as posing a potential attack threat in Spain.⁴⁷ A 2018 *Policía Nacional*-DGST operation targeted a network promoting ISIS's attack strategy in Spain and elsewhere in Europe, including systematic incitement to violence.⁴⁸ In 2024, another joint investigation dismantled an ISIS-aligned structure operating along the Ceuta-Castillejos axis whose members issued direct threats, incited violence and included individuals assessed as willing to engage in violent action.⁴⁹

The relevance of those cases to July is not simply that intelligence becomes less useful when acted upon late. The same unresolved-entry problem has radically different consequences depending on where the unidentified individual sits on the threat trajectory, while the post-crossing system initially lacks the resolution necessary to make that distinction. A previously convicted propagandist, a subject associated with a broader investigation and an individual already progressing towards violence may all initially form part of the same unresolved population until identity and intelligence are reconnected.

The resulting problem is, therefore, one of triage under uncertainty. The state does not merely search for a predetermined number of known terrorism subjects among thousands of irregular entrants. It is attempting to restore enough resolution to determine which cases require immediate CT escalation, which warrant continued investigation and which carry no CT relevance at all. Until that differentiation is restored, existing intelligence cannot perform its normal priori function as quickly.

This is why the July episode is better understood as a partial shift from prevention towards recovery. CT systems designed to prevent prohibited entry, generate alerts and permit action at or close to the border had to be supplemented by retrospective activity aimed at rebuilding the security picture after individuals were already inside Spanish territory. Prevention did not disappear, but part of the CT burden became the recovery of a picture that normal border processing is intended to establish before territorial entry becomes an internal-security problem.

That is a materially different analytical proposition from suggesting that irregular migration itself constitutes a terrorist threat. Indeed, the logic depends on the opposite assumption: the security challenge arises precisely because a tiny number of exceptional cases must be distinguished from a population overwhelmingly irrelevant to counterterrorism.

What Ceuta adds to the CT picture

The key dependency was not that Moroccan border units were performing Spanish counterterrorism functions (they were not). The contribution of Moroccan border enforcement was to help preserve the operating conditions under which Spanish CT mechanisms could be applied effectively at the border: manageable volumes of movement, identifiable points of encounter and sufficient opportunity to connect people crossing the frontier with information already held about them. When that upstream volume-reduction function deteriorated, Spanish CT capability did not disappear. The scale, location and sequencing of the task to which that capability had to be applied changed.

This creates an operational dependency across otherwise distinct institutional domains: border enforcement, migration processing and CT liaison remain separate functions, but disruption in the first two can determine whether the third converts existing information into timely territorial action.

The July episode, therefore, suggests that CT resilience cannot be assessed solely by asking whether intelligence collection, liaison relationships, databases or investigative units remain functional. It also requires identifying the enabling conditions on which

those capabilities rely for preventive effect and the point at which disruption elsewhere forces them into a different mode of operation.

Spain's National Counterterrorism Strategy already situates border controls, information exchange, interoperable systems and international cooperation within the wider prevention architecture,⁵⁰ while the EU Screening Regulation, applicable since June 2026, requires identity and security screening for third-country nationals apprehended in connection with unauthorised external-border crossings.⁵¹ Ceuta, therefore, does not reveal an absence of mechanisms connecting border management and internal security. It emphasises a question of operating tolerance: how much disruption can those mechanisms absorb before part of their function changes from prospective prevention to retrospective recovery?

Ceuta's CT significance, therefore, lies not in the prevalence of terrorism-related profiles within the mass movement but in the temporary transfer of unresolved security exposure from the border interface into Spanish territory. The intelligence may remain accurate, the database functional and the prohibition legally valid; what changes is whether those capabilities operate before territorial exposure occurs or after the state has already inherited it. Authorities must then manage the possibility that an unresolved entrant is security-relevant while simultaneously establishing who that person is, where they are and whether the threat attached to them remains current.

The resulting exposure cannot be inferred from the number of subjects eventually identified. A single unresolved individual at an advanced stage of attack planning may carry greater immediate risk than multiple subjects whose relevance derives from historical radicalisation or lower-level associations. The relevant exposure is, therefore, a function not simply of the number of unresolved CT-relevant individuals but of three interacting variables: threat acuity, duration of unresolved presence and the operational opportunity available to the individual during that interval.

3. Externalisation, Substitutability and Risk at the EU External Border

Ceuta places a longstanding feature of European migration policy into a wider security context: reliance on third countries to perform functions that materially shape what reaches the EU's territorial border. In the Spanish-Moroccan relationship, Moroccan enforcement does not replace Spanish border control, but it substantially reduces the volume and concentration of movement that Spanish authorities must manage once people reach Ceuta. The July crisis demonstrates why that distinction matters.

The consequences also extended beyond Spain. On 31 July, Italy temporarily reintroduced controls on air and sea arrivals from Spain in response to the Ceuta crossing. On 15 September, the Italian government extended those controls for a further 15 days, citing continuing risks to internal security and the potential for terrorist infiltration.⁵² The Italian measure does not establish that terrorist infiltration occurred, nor does it validate the securitisation of the wider migrant population. Its significance here is different: uncertainty generated at one part of the EU's external border produced a security response at an internal Schengen border. The effects of degraded identification and differentiation at the external frontier can therefore propagate beyond the member state directly exposed to the original movement.

Externalisation does not eliminate a border-management function; it relocates where part of that function is performed. When the external contribution works, downstream systems operate against a reduced and more manageable flow. When it stops, the burden does not simply return to the member state on equivalent terms. It can arrive suddenly at much greater scale and through forms of movement for which ordinary processing capacity was not designed. The vulnerability therefore lies not merely in dependence on a third country but in the asymmetry between how quickly the external partner can alter the operating environment and how quickly the member state or the EU can replace the lost function.

The EU-Turkey relationship during the Syrian displacement crisis provides a particularly useful precedent because it combined large-scale migration management with security concerns associated with movement to and from the Syria-Iraq conflict theatre.⁵³ The

relevant lesson is not that Turkey and Morocco are equivalent partners or acted for equivalent reasons. It is that once an upstream third-country contribution becomes structurally important to the volume reaching an EU border, continuity of that contribution acquires strategic value in its own right.

Turkey and Poland are used here as functional comparators rather than equivalent cases. Each isolates a different condition that Ceuta brought together: Turkey the substitutability of an upstream third-country contribution, and Poland the importance of preserving controlled encounter points under exceptional volume.

Turkey: when upstream capacity becomes leverage

By 2015–2016, EU migration and security policy had come to depend heavily on Turkish cooperation. The EU simultaneously sought a substantial reduction in irregular crossings from Turkey and systematic identification, registration and security checking of those who nevertheless reached European territory. Following the November 2015 Paris attacks, the Council called for systematic registration and fingerprinting of third-country nationals irregularly entering Schengen, systematic security checks against relevant databases and reinforcement of exposed external borders through Frontex and police support.⁵⁴ In February 2016, the European Council was still demanding both a substantial reduction in arrivals from Turkey and full identification, registration and security checking of entrants at European hotspots.⁵⁵

The EU–Turkey Statement of March 2016 formalised the upstream component of that architecture. Turkey undertook to prevent new irregular migration routes towards the EU and accepted specified return arrangements, while the EU made substantial financial and political commitments.⁵⁶ The arrangement therefore divided the problem functionally: Turkey would help reduce the flow before it reached EU territory, while European authorities retained responsibility for processing, screening, protection and enforcement once movement reached the external border.

The strategic weakness of that arrangement became visible in 2020, when Turkey ceased preventing migrants from attempting to reach Europe and the resulting pressure shifted rapidly towards Greece. The Council explicitly rejected Turkey's use of migratory pressure

for political purposes and announced EU support, including Frontex rapid-border intervention.⁵⁷



Syrian refugees waiting at the Greek-Turkish border, March 2020. Charismaniac / CC BY-SA 4.0.

The important analytical point is not simply that migration can be used as leverage, but that externalisation can create a structural surge asymmetry. The upstream partner may be able to alter the volume presented to the EU border within hours or days, while the downstream state requires time to mobilise personnel, infrastructure, reception space, specialised screening capacity and European assistance. The partner, therefore, does not need to control European systems in order to place them under pressure; it can alter the input faster than those systems can expand their processing capacity.

The vulnerability therefore lies not merely in dependence on a third country but in the asymmetry between how quickly the external partner can alter the operating environment and how quickly the member state or the EU can replace the lost function.

That asymmetry is directly relevant to Ceuta. The evidence does not establish that Morocco deliberately reproduced the Turkish strategy, and the motivations behind the July change in Moroccan enforcement remain unresolved. But motive is secondary to the structural point. A system can become vulnerable whenever an external actor possesses a faster capacity to increase downstream demand than the receiving state possesses to increase downstream capacity. Ceuta turned that potential dependency into an observable operational problem.

The European substitution problem

The immediate policy question is, therefore, not whether the EU possesses reinforcement instruments (it does). The question is which lost functions those instruments can substitute, and how quickly that substitution can happen.

The post-Ceuta response illustrates the distinction. On 9 September, the European Commission approved €114.7 million in emergency support to Spain, including funding for border surveillance, security infrastructure, additional personnel and equipment, migrant-screening facilities, reception capacity and return. The Commission also coordinated reinforced operational support from Frontex, Europol and the EU Agency for Asylum (EUAA). Spain had requested emergency funding on 24 August and additional agency support on 28 August.⁵⁸ The Commission also stated that it had offered Spain financial and operational assistance from the beginning of the crisis.

The European response was broad but not functionally interchangeable. Frontex can reinforce border-management capacity; Europol can support secondary security checks and criminal or terrorism-related investigations; EUAA can reinforce asylum and reception functions; and emergency funding can expand infrastructure, technology, staffing and facilities.⁵⁹ None, however, reproduces the upstream function of preventing large numbers of people from reaching the border in the first place.

European assistance can therefore reinforce the downstream system without necessarily replacing the lost upstream function at the same point or on the same timescale. Ceuta makes this temporal mismatch unusually visible: the mass crossing occurred on 30–31 July, while the major formal emergency-funding decision followed on 9 September after Spanish requests in late August. The Commission states that assistance was offered from the beginning of the crisis, so the issue is not the absence of EU support. Different forms of reinforcement (political coordination, agency support, physical deployment, infrastructure and emergency financing) become operational at different speeds. The resilience question is therefore how much disruption the national system can absorb before substitute capacity becomes effective, not simply whether such capacity exists.

For resilience analysis, that temporal distinction is more important than the aggregate size of the EU response. A system able to mobilise €114.7 million six weeks after a shock may possess substantial recovery capacity while still facing a vulnerability during the

hours or days in which identity, security, humanitarian and reception functions are simultaneously overloaded. Recovery capacity and shock-absorption capacity are different things.

Poland: the importance of flow geometry, not simply volume

The Polish experience provides a useful comparison because it shows why absolute numbers alone are a poor measure of resilience.

Beginning in 2021, Poland and neighbouring EU states faced a migration route deliberately created and directed by Belarus. Polish authorities characterised the operation as a hybrid attack in which migrants were transported towards the external border and used to generate political and security pressure.⁶⁰ The significance for Ceuta lies not in equating Belarusian orchestration with Moroccan conduct; there is no equivalent evidentiary basis for doing so. The comparison demonstrates instead that population movement can be used to alter the demand placed on an external-border system without the migrants themselves constituting the strategic actor or underlying security threat.

Recovery capacity and shock absorption are different things.

Only months later, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine generated a radically larger movement across the same broad eastern frontier. More than 377,000 people had entered Poland from Ukraine by 1 March 2022 and more than 575,000 by 3 March. Polish authorities kept all eight border crossings operational, increased their capacity and reinforced Border Guard staffing.⁶¹ ⁶² Europol subsequently deployed teams to Poland and other frontline countries to support national authorities with secondary security checks and investigations aimed, among other things, at identifying criminals and terrorists attempting to exploit the refugee flow.⁶³



Migrants at the Belarus-Poland border during the 2021 crisis. Video frame via Wikimedia Commons.

The obvious conclusion would be that Poland processed a far larger movement while continuing security checks. But that is not the analytically useful comparison. The stronger point is that volume is only one dimension of border stress; the geometry of the movement matters just as much.

The Ukrainian flow was overwhelmingly channelled through functioning crossing points at which Polish authorities retained control over the encounter. Border Guard capacity could therefore be increased at known locations, entrants could move onward into a much larger national territory, and European secondary-security support could be layered onto a primary border process that had remained operational.⁶⁴

Ceuta presented a different geometry. Movement occurred by sea, around the perimeter and through extremely compressed simultaneous pressure. The problem was therefore not simply that 80,000 entries exceeded some abstract numerical threshold. It was that the relationship between volume, time and points of encounter changed simultaneously. Scaling a functioning checkpoint system and reconstructing a population after large numbers have crossed outside normal processing conditions are fundamentally different operational problems.

This distinction helps avoid a misleading question: “If Poland could process more than half a million people, why could Spain not process 80,000?” The relevant comparison is not throughput in isolation. It is throughput under a particular degree of channelisation. A high-volume flow moving through controlled crossing points may remain more governable

than a smaller flow that overwhelms or bypasses the points at which identification and differentiation normally occur.

Poland therefore suggests that border resilience should be assessed not by numerical capacity alone but by at least three variables: volume, compression and channelisation. Ceuta combined extremely high volume relative to local capacity, extreme temporal compression and degradation of the normal encounter structure. That combination, not the headline number alone, helps explain why downstream identification and security functions were so heavily affected.

The Polish case also illustrates the role of European support more precisely. Europol's teams performed secondary security checks at the request of national authorities. That is analytically important: European CT and law-enforcement reinforcement functioned as an additional layer on top of a national border process that was still generating identities and encounters. The implication for Ceuta is that European secondary capability is only as useful as the primary process supplying it with individuals and data to resolve.

Reinforcement can expand analytical depth; it cannot fully compensate for the loss of the front-end encounter itself.

A high-volume flow moving through controlled crossing points may remain more governable than a smaller flow that overwhelms or bypasses the points at which identification and differentiation normally occur.

Security, protection and return: competition for the same front-end capacity

The interaction between migration management, human security and CT becomes clearest at this point.

The EU's post-2026 migration framework requires irregular arrivals to undergo registration, identity checks, security checks, health assessment and vulnerability assessment before being channelled into the relevant asylum, return or other procedure.⁶⁵ Return decisions remain individual decisions subject to international-protection obligations, non-refoulement, judicial safeguards and additional protections for vulnerable persons.⁶⁶

The obvious observation is that both security and protection require individual assessment. The more important analytical point is that security and protection compete for and depend upon the same finite front-end processing capacity during a surge.

Registration, identity resolution and case triage are not merely administrative preliminaries. They are the common inputs from which several different state functions diverge. The same initial process may determine that one person is an unaccompanied minor requiring protection, another has a viable asylum claim, another is eligible for return, and another requires referral for additional security investigation. When that front end becomes overloaded, the state does not acquire one backlog; it acquires several different backlogs from the same unresolved population.

This creates a form of operational coupling. A failure to establish identity promptly can delay a return decision, delay protection assessment and delay the application of CT information to the same physical population. The functions remain legally and conceptually distinct, but their performance becomes correlated because they consume some of the same initial processing capability.

That insight changes how surge capacity should be measured. A system cannot be considered resilient merely because it moves large numbers of people through one output (for example, rapid return) if other necessary determinations remain unresolved. Nor is maximising security screening alone a sufficient measure if protection- and legal-status determinations collapse. The relevant unit of resilience is the system's capacity to preserve differentiation across several simultaneous decision pathways.

Under mass pressure, processing 10,000 people is not equivalent to resolving them.

Ceuta therefore exposes the danger of measuring border performance primarily through aggregate throughput. Under mass pressure, processing 10,000 people is not equivalent to resolving them. The distinction matters because unresolved individuals continue to generate obligations and

risks after the physical crossing has ended. That is precisely what occurred in the CT domain when previously known subjects had to be recovered retrospectively; the same logic applies differently to unresolved protection, asylum and return cases.

The strategic implication is not that migration, protection and CT should be institutionally merged. It is the opposite: because they produce different legal and security outcomes, the shared front-end capacity that allows authorities to distinguish among them becomes a critical point of resilience.

From externalisation to resilience

The concept of a substitution gap is used here not to describe a wholly novel feature of externalised security cooperation, but to make its operational consequences more analytically tractable: the relevant interval begins when an externally supplied function falls below the level required to sustain downstream operations and ends when substitute capacity becomes effective at sufficient scale. Its security significance depends on what accumulates during that interval.

Ceuta therefore suggests a more precise way of assessing European dependence on third-country partners. The relevant question is not simply whether a function is “externalised.” Dependence becomes strategically significant when four conditions coincide:

1. **Criticality:** the external contribution materially determines whether important domestic or EU functions can operate effectively;
2. **Substitutability:** the same effect cannot readily be recreated by national or EU capabilities;
3. **Activation latency:** alternative capacity takes materially longer to mobilise than the external partner takes to withdraw or reduce its contribution; and
4. **Surge elasticity:** the loss of the external function can increase demand on downstream systems faster than those systems can expand.

Moroccan upstream border enforcement displayed all four characteristics during the July crisis: it was operationally critical; not readily substitutable at equivalent speed and scale; capable of changing faster than reinforcement could be activated; and able, when reduced, to generate downstream demand faster than Spanish capacity could expand.

This does not make cooperation with Morocco a policy error. On the contrary, the scale of the July crossing helps demonstrate how valuable that cooperation normally is. The policy

risk lies not in dependence itself, but in dependence on a critical function whose rapid reduction or loss produces effects faster than substitute capacity can be generated.

That is also the lesson connecting Turkey, Poland and Ceuta. Turkey demonstrates how an upstream contribution can acquire political leverage once European systems adapt around its continuation. Poland shows that very large movement can remain more governable when the state preserves channelised encounter points and can layer European reinforcement onto a functioning primary process. Ceuta displays the more difficult case: an upstream function changed abruptly, the flow became both highly compressed and weakly channelised, and downstream systems inherited multiple unresolved tasks at once.

The European resilience question is, therefore, not whether the EU can eventually mobilise money, agencies, personnel and equipment. The Ceuta response shows that it can. The more demanding question is whether critical functions can be preserved during the substitution interval, after an external contribution has fallen below the level required to sustain the relevant function but before national and European alternatives have become operational at sufficient scale.

That interval is where externalisation becomes security exposure.

Conclusion

The July 2026 crisis in Ceuta was neither simply a migration-management failure nor a counterterrorism failure. Spain possessed advance warning of escalating pressure, established border and security mechanisms and an extensive, operationally productive CT partnership with Morocco. Those capabilities did not disappear on 30 July. What changed was the environment in which they had to operate. When Moroccan upstream enforcement deteriorated and an estimated 80,000 entries occurred over approximately two days, functions normally performed prospectively and at manageable volume had to be reconstructed retrospectively and at exceptional scale.

That distinction is central to what Ceuta exposed. Security capability is not defined only by whether an institution, database, intelligence relationship or legal power exists; it also depends on whether the operating conditions allow that capability to produce its intended effect. Spanish CT holdings remained available, bilateral intelligence cooperation remained functional and existing entry prohibitions remained valid. Yet previously identified terrorism-related subjects were able to re-enter Spain and remained there until subsequently located. For those cases, prior CT action had not disappeared but had temporarily lost its prospective territorial effect, shifting part of the security task from prevention towards recovery. The resulting exposure cannot be measured simply by the number or proportion of CT-relevant subjects eventually identified: its significance depends on the threat acuity of whoever remains unresolved, the duration of that unresolved presence and the operational opportunity available during that interval.

Ceuta also demonstrates why the relevant unit of analysis for security dependence is not the bilateral relationship as a whole, but the specific function on which another capability depends. Moroccan border enforcement was not a Spanish CT capability, nor were Moroccan border personnel performing Spanish security screening. Their upstream activity nevertheless helped preserve the volume, tempo and points of encounter within which Spanish capabilities could operate prospectively. Spain-Morocco CT liaison could therefore remain productive while deterioration in a separate component of the relationship reduced the preventive effect of still-functioning capabilities. A function outside the CT architecture can condition the effectiveness of CT without itself becoming a counterterrorism function.

The European comparison extends that finding. Turkey demonstrates how an upstream contribution can acquire strategic leverage once European systems adapt around its continued provision, while Poland demonstrates that even very large movements can remain more governable where encounter points remain controlled and reinforcement can be layered onto a functioning primary process. Ceuta combined a more difficult set of conditions: abrupt loss of upstream control, exceptional volume, extreme temporal compression and weak channelisation. The vulnerability, therefore, did not result from volume alone but from the interaction between volume, compression and the structure through which individuals could be encountered and differentiated.

This also provides a more precise way to understand the risks of externalisation. Externalisation does not eliminate a border-management function; it changes where part of that function is performed. Dependence becomes strategically consequential when the external contribution is critical, cannot be substituted at equivalent speed and scale, can be reduced faster than alternative capacity can be activated, and can thereby increase downstream demand faster than the receiving system can expand. Ceuta exhibited precisely this asymmetry. European instruments could reinforce specific downstream functions, but they could not immediately reproduce the volume-reduction effect previously supplied upstream. The resulting substitution gap is the interval during which the consequences of the lost function must be absorbed before alternative capacity becomes effective.

That interval also exposes the difference between recovery capacity and shock-absorption capacity. The EU's subsequent mobilisation of agency support and substantial emergency financing demonstrates considerable capacity to reinforce a member state after an external-border shock. The more demanding test of resilience is whether critical functions can be preserved before that reinforcement reaches sufficient scale. This matters across migration management, human security and counterterrorism because these institutionally distinct functions depend at an early stage on a common operational capacity: the ability to establish identity, differentiate individual circumstances and route people into the appropriate legal, protection or security process. When that front end fails, the state does not inherit one backlog but several different forms of unresolved exposure from the same population.

Ceuta therefore suggests a more demanding definition of external-border resilience than the continued existence of institutions, plans or reinforcement mechanisms. A resilient system must be able to preserve differentiation when the conditions under which it normally differentiates people deteriorate, or restore it before accumulated uncertainty becomes consequential. The lesson is neither that Europe should reduce cooperation with Morocco and other neighbouring states nor that irregular migration should be treated through a CT lens. Such cooperation can materially increase European capacity. The policy requirement is instead to identify which critical functions depend on externally supplied operating conditions, how rapidly disruption transfers demand downstream, and whether substitute capacity can become effective before unresolved cases translate into humanitarian, legal or security harm.

Ceuta ultimately exposed a gap not between intelligence and ignorance, or between cooperation and non-cooperation, but between capability and control over the conditions required to use that capability. The implications extend beyond Spain. An external-border shock originating in the deterioration of an upstream third-country contribution generated downstream demands on EU financial and operational support and,

That is the central resilience problem raised by Ceuta: not whether the state can eventually recover control, but how much legal, humanitarian and security exposure accumulates before it does.

ultimately, security responses elsewhere within Schengen, including Italy's temporary reintroduction of controls on arrivals from Spain. The resilience question is therefore European as well as national: where border control depends partly on functions performed outside EU territory, the consequences of their disruption can be transmitted across institutions, jurisdictions and internal borders. That is the central resilience problem raised by Ceuta: not whether the state can eventually recover control, but how much legal, humanitarian and security exposure accumulates before it does.

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