

# Spain - Defending Overseas Territory and Interests in Africa

This text is a part of the FOI report *Foreign military bases and installations in Africa*. Twelve state actors are included in the report: China, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Russia, Spain, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, and United States.

**Spain has had a long presence in Africa that dates back to the 15th century. Still today, Spain maintains military bases in Ceuta, Melilla, and the Canary Islands. An overriding motive for their presence is territorial defence. In addition to maintaining historical links, they have strategic importance for ensuring maritime security and preventing illegal migration. For the Canary Islands, the protection of maritime routes is crucial, not only for trade, but also for energy supply and communication through undersea cables. There are currently no indications that Spain plans to establish additional bases or military installations in Africa.**

## CEUTA AND MELILLA

Ceuta and Melilla are autonomous Spanish cities that share borders with Morocco. The territories are the two smallest autonomous regions in Spain, despite their location on the African continent. Because of the cities, Spain has been the only European country, since Algeria's independence in 1962, to have a territorial presence in North Africa. The territory of Ceuta (19.48 km<sup>2</sup>) is located on the African coast along the Strait of Gibraltar, some 30 kilometres south of Gibraltar. The territory of Melilla (12.3 km<sup>2</sup>) is 200 kilometres southeast of Ceuta, about 185 kilometres south of the Spanish port city of Malaga.

Both Ceuta and Melilla have a high density of soldiers, around 3,000 each. Both military structures have training facilities, but owing to Melilla's limited size, the military units depend on the Spanish mainland for training that includes heavy weapons fire and larger exercises involving different units. In both cities, the military units are scattered in a number of locations. In order to concentrate Ceuta's various military structures into a single base,

the Ministry of Defence has allocated major funding for 2019-2024. Melilla hosts the most modern military construction in the city, Base Alfonso XIII.

## Maintaining historical ties

Spain seized Melilla by force in 1497, and Portugal conquered Ceuta in 1415. Following Portugal's unification with Spain in 1580, Ceuta passed to Spain, and was formally assigned to it in 1668 via the Treaty of Lisbon. Spain's expansion into North Africa was part of the *Riconquista*, which refers to a series of campaigns by the Christian states of Portugal and Spain, during the 15th to 17th centuries, to recapture territory from the Moors, who had occupied most of the Iberian Peninsula in the early 8th century. Between 1912 and 1956, Morocco's Mediterranean coast, including Ceuta and Melilla, were part of the Spanish Protectorate of Morocco.

The Spanish army has strong links to Ceuta and Melilla. The General Command of Melilla is one of the oldest in the Spanish army. For centuries, the military in Ceuta and Melilla defended the Spanish mainland from invasion by the Moors. Both cities were subject to several Muslim sieges and attacks during the 18th century. Melilla became an important military base and served as a major bridgehead during the colonial war, particularly between 1908 and 1923. During the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), the African Army (mainly local Moroccans) supported General Franco in the rebellion against the legitimate government. About 12,000 military personnel lay at rest in the cemetery of Melilla. Maintaining historical ties with Ceuta and Melilla is thus important for Spain.

## Protecting sovereignty and trade

A main strategic interest is to protect sovereignty. As Spanish territories, the main task of the military installations in Ceuta and Melilla is 'to guarantee the sovereignty and independence of Spain and to defend its territorial integrity'.

An underlying strategic interest is to protect maritime commercial activities. Historically, Ceuta and Melilla were important geopolitical centres of trade and commerce, connecting North Africa and West Africa, via the Saharan trade routes, with Europe. For decades, Ceuta and Melilla were the main commercial harbours that supplied northern Morocco. In recent years, the importance of the harbours has decreased, as Morocco has constructed a large harbour in Tangiers and in 2018 decided to close its commercial border with Melilla. The Ceuta and Melilla harbours are still attractive, due to their geographical situation in the Strait of Gibraltar and their free trade agreement with EU. Both cities also have fishing and tourism businesses.

## Preventing illegal migration?

The two Spanish enclaves represent Europe's only direct border with Africa and are attractive, therefore, as entry points for migration to Europe. Between 2016 and 2017, migration through Spain almost tripled, according to a report from the International Organization for Migration, from about 8,000 arrivals in 2016, to almost 22,000 in 2017. More than 22,000 migrants entered through Spain during the first seven months of 2018, making it the primary point of entry for migrants to Europe.

So far, the role of the military forces is limited to border patrols. Yet, one of the tasks of the military forces includes 'support and collaboration with civil authorities', in cases of serious risk, catastrophe, or calamity, or in addressing other needs of the public. This collaboration includes the Civil Guard, which is responsible for Spanish border control. The Civil Guard is under increased pressure from migrants, who try to enter the enclaves by force. On different occasions, migrants have entered the enclaves by dashing through the border controls in large groups and by climbing the barbed wired fences surrounding the cities. In February 2014, the Spanish minister of interior acknowledged that the Civil Guard had used riot-control materials

(rubber bullets) to stop several hundred people from entering the city, a response that led to the death of fourteen African migrants. The upshot of this is that an underlying strategic interest for maintaining military bases in Ceuta and Melilla could be to prevent illegal migration.

## THE CANARY ISLANDS

The Canary Islands consist of an archipelago in the Atlantic Ocean, the nearest island being 108 kilometres off the northwest African mainland. Columbus' four expeditions across the Atlantic opened sea routes for European exploration, exploitation, and colonisation of the Americas; the position of the Canaries on some of these routes made them indispensable as Spanish bases. The Treaty of Alcáçovas (1479) recognised Spanish sovereignty over the islands, which became an autonomous community of Spain in 1982.

The Canary Islands currently host three military bases:

the General Aleman Ramirez base, the Arsenal of Las Palmas – the naval base – and the Gando airbase. The brigade in Las Palmas, the capital of Grand Canaria, consists of combat, combat support, and logistics units. One of its main tasks is national defence of Spanish territory. The facilities and military presence on the Canary Islands permit operational activities in other geographical areas: units from

the brigade have participated in international operations in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan.

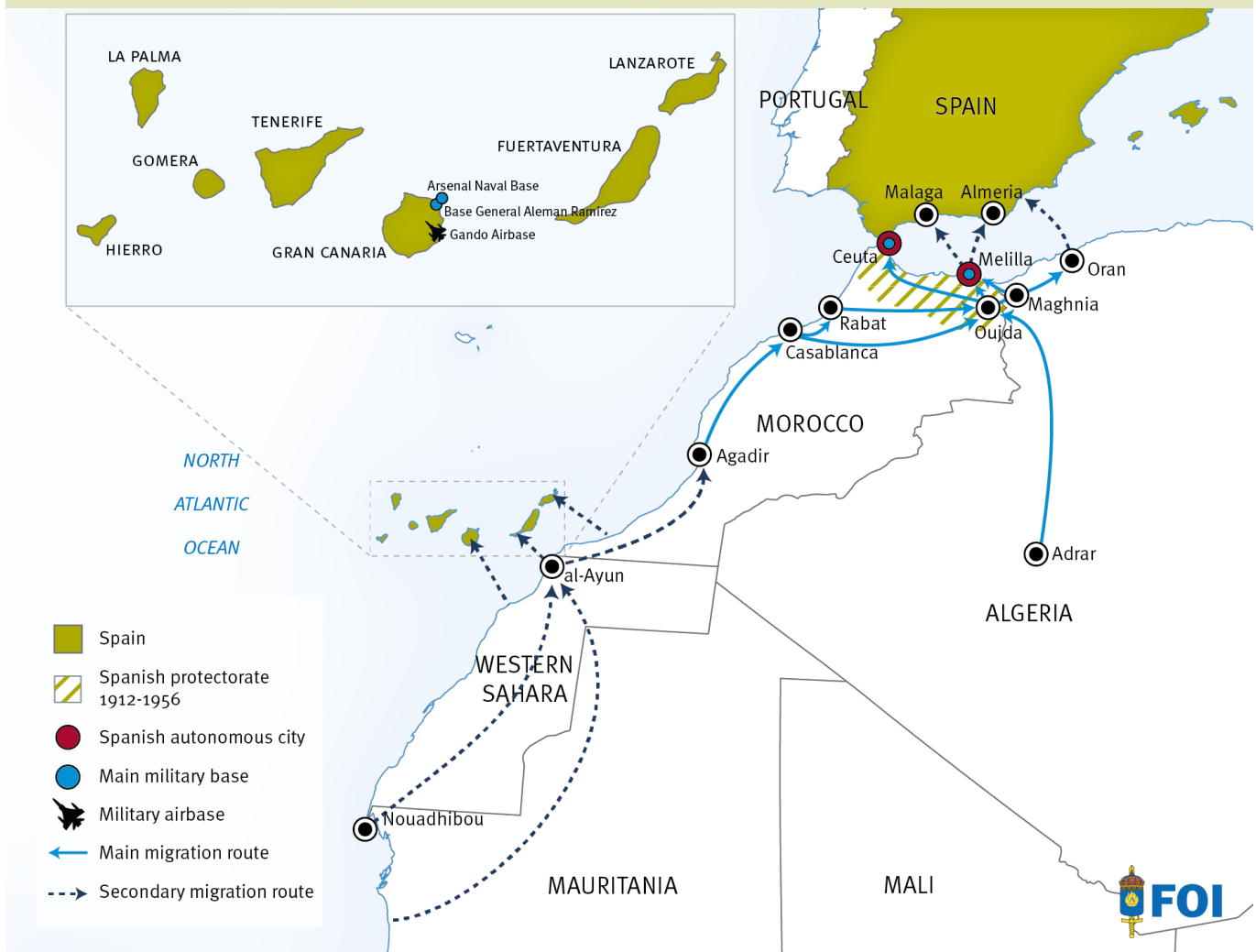
## Ensuring maritime security

Important tasks of the military installations on the Canary Islands include national defence and the protection of major shipping lanes. As a maritime state, Spain is heavily dependent on transportation by sea. The protection of maritime routes is crucial for trading, transportation, and energy supply, as well as for communication through undersea cables. General traffic is heavily concentrated in relatively few of Spain's many ports, among them Las Palmas and Santa Cruz de Tenerife on the Canary Islands. Public officials describe the naval base in Las Palmas as one of the Spanish navy's most important facilities.

The Canary Islands are well located on the maritime route between Spain and the Gulf of Guinea, where Spain has important economic interests. Spain retains important economic exchange with its former colony, Equatorial

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## Assessment of Spanish military bases and installations in Africa



Source: FOI, based on information from the Spanish Ministry of Defence, Encyclopaedia Britannica, and Andersson (2016).

Guinea, which is among the top ten largest oil producers in Africa.

The fishing waters in the eastern Central Atlantic, stretching from Gibraltar to the Gulf of Guinea, represent almost 15 % of Spain's total catch in 2017. Spain holds the largest fishing fleet capacity in the EU, about 14,400 vessels. Half are registered in Galician ports; around 1,100 vessels are registered in the Canary Islands.

The facilities on the Canary Islands provide support not only to the Spanish Navy and other armed ships, but also to other types of vessels, such as customs surveillance ships, or vessels involved in rescue operations. The activities include provision of logistical support to: vessels that are located in the community of the Canary Islands; vessels that are in transit; or that carry out operations in the area. For example, the base supports law enforcement agencies in their anti-drug-trafficking activities.

In addition to maritime patrol and rescue units, the

Gando Air Base in Las Palmas includes combat and transport units. The military airfield of Lanzarote allows a permanent deployment of air force units. In addition, eight civilian airports are accessible for military purposes.

As is the case for Ceuta and Melilla, the Canaries have experienced migration flows. In 2006, the number of arrivals peaked, reaching 32,000 migrants. Spain reversed the trend by establishing regional cooperation through the Seahorse project, which is a network linking European and African border police forces and involving training, deployments, and satellite surveillance.

### CONTINUED PRESENCE

According to the Spanish national security strategy, North Africa is one of four regions in Africa that Spain has prioritised, due to a shared history and geographic proximity, as well as its political, cultural, and economic importance. Aside from the Canary Islands, North Africa



is currently the only area where Spain officially has military postures. The other three prioritised African regions are the Sahel, the Gulf of Guinea, and the Horn of Africa. The Sahel represents a new security threat, with its proximity to Spain and the presence of armed groups and jihadist terrorists. The Gulf of Guinea is an important region for the Spanish economy, but presents threats that include armed robbery and piracy on the high seas, illegal fishing, and illicit trafficking of people, narcotics, and weapons. The waters next to the Horn of Africa concentrate an important share of the trade between Asia and Europe, and oil traffic from the Middle East; the Spanish Government describes it as being 'essential for Spain to participate in protecting the maritime routes criss-crossing this region'.

There are no indications that Spain plans to establish other bases or military installations in Africa in addition to Ceuta, Melilla, and the Canary Islands. Instead, Spain seems to prefer engagement in international operations or cooperation with France, in West Africa.

The Spanish military presence is controversial. Local actors on the Canary Islands oppose the presence of the Spanish naval base, which covers over 15,000 square meters and are of interest for Las Palmas' economic and commercial development. Spain's defence minister said, in November 2017, that the government is considering moving the naval base. Yet, at the same time, she described the base as 'indispensable for the needs of national and EU defence'.

Since the 1960s, Morocco has claimed the territories of Ceuta and Melilla. There are no indications, however, that the territories will cease to be officially under Spanish control in future.

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