

# CEUTA AND MELILLA - TWO MUSLIM CITIES IN SPAIN

**IMPACT:** Ceuta and Melilla are autonomous Spanish cities in North Africa. Both cities act as the border between Spain and Morocco. Although they each have autonomous governments from Spain, their educational systems are managed by the regional Spanish government of Andalusia and institutions such as the Catholic church and the judiciary are under the jurisdiction of Andalusia. While Ceuta and Melilla are majority Muslim, their neighborhoods are separated between Muslims and Christians from the Iberian Peninsula. The Muslim populations of both cities face discrimination.

- The city of Ceuta was ruled by Portugal until 1580, when Portugal joined the Spanish Crown. In 1688, the union between the two kingdoms ended and Ceuta remained under Spanish rule and integrated into the Spanish Crown, where it remains today. **Ceuta is an autonomous city with its own government, according to the fifth transitional provision and Article 144 of the 1978 Spanish Constitution.** However, some institutions such as the university, the judicial system and the Catholic religious authority remain under the jurisdiction of Andalusia.
- **In 2019, Ceuta's population was 84,959, of whom around 43 percent were Muslim.** Of this 43 percent, approximately 5,300 were foreigners, mainly Moroccan nationals. **In addition to Spanish, many Muslims in Ceuta also speak Darija—a Moroccan dialect of Arabic not recognised as an official language in Ceuta.** Other minorities represented in Ceuta include Hindus and Sephardic Jews. The latter also speak Haketia, a dialect of Ladino.
- The city of Melilla was incorporated into the Spanish Duchy of Medina Sidonia in 1497; however, it did not formally join Spain until 1556. **Although Melilla has enjoyed political autonomy since 1995, like Ceuta its university, Catholic religious authority, and judicial system are under the jurisdiction of Andalusia.**
- **In 2019, Melilla's population was 86,487 and it is expected to grow in the coming years as Melilla has the highest birth rate and the lowest death rate in Spain. Approximately 46 percent of Melilla's population is Christian and 52 percent is Muslim.** The latter population generally speaks Tamazight or one of the Berber languages as their mother tongue. There is also a small but active Jewish community of approximately one thousand members.
- **Muslims in Ceuta and Melilla have faced discrimination in three main areas: language, foreignization, and criminalization.**

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- **Although Muslims make up approximately half of both cities, neither classical Arabic (*Fusha*), Darija, nor Tamazight are recognized as official languages.** In both cities, it is difficult to find signs in Arabic and the Berber languages. Furthermore, **compulsory education, which is still regulated by the central government, is conducted exclusively in Spanish.** The fact that half of the population cannot study in their mother tongue is one explanation of the high drop-out rate—54.8 percent—across the two cities.
- In the case of Melilla, Article 5.3 of the Statutes of Autonomy states that the Berber language (Tamazight) should be promoted and enhanced by the authorities. However, **in 2017, the Government of Melilla rejected an initiative proposed by the Coalition for Melilla—the party representing the Muslim population—to have a Tamazight translator at official events.** In the case of Ceuta, the main Muslim party, the Democratic Union of Ceuta, has requested a greater presence of Darija in Ceuta society, although the party has never advocated for an official status of this Arabic dialect.
- The second problem is the social and geographic marginalization of the Muslim population. At the end of the 1980s, following major street protests, a law was approved by the *Cortes Generales* (Spanish Parliament) allowing most of Ceuta and Melilla's Muslims to obtain Spanish citizenship. However, **despite holding Spanish passports, the Muslim population continues to be considered migrants in terms of the segregation of the city, salary, and travel to Morocco to buy lamb to celebrate the Eid el Kabir.** Ceuta and Melilla are clearly divided between Muslim outlying districts (the Prince Alfonso and Benzú neighborhoods in Ceuta, and the Cañada de Hidum and Reina Regente neighborhoods in Melilla) and Christian districts located downtown. Muslims residents of Ceuta are faced with socioeconomic inequalities related to this neighborhood segregation—falsely attributed to cultural differences.
- The third form of discrimination faced by Muslims in Ceuta and Melilla is criminalization and false accusations of lack of loyalty to Spain. **While the Muslim population has long been stigmatized, the emergence of the Spanish political party VOX has heightened this prejudice.** Two former VOX members of the Spanish parliament—María del Carmen Vázquez and José María Rodríguez—accused the Secretary General of VOX-Ceuta, Sergio Redondo, of disseminating Islamophobic WhatsApp messages in January 2020. Among the messages were accusations that the Muslim population was seeking to Islamize Ceuta and claims that the Third World War would be against Islam.
- **In Melilla, the creation of a WhatsApp group against “Undesirables and Traitors” in January 2020 was also denounced. The group was created in an attempt to restrict communication to only trusted individuals after an audio of VOX-Melilla president Jesús Delgado Aboy was leaked the same month.** Among the conversations within the group was a suggestion by an unidentified member that VOX link rising crime rates to MENAs (Unaccompanied Minors, mainly Moroccan immigrants), in particular, those provided refuge in the “El Real” center. According to November 2019 reporting in *El País*, the acronym MENAs is “often used negatively by far-right parties such as VOX, which want to portray these minors as foreign delinquents who should go back to their countries of origin.”

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- VOX has proposed that “fundamentalist mosques” be closed and the construction of those financed by “foreigners” be banned. Mohammed Ali, leader of the political coalition Caballas, Ceuta, recorded a video response dedicated to “the VOX ultras” that stated: 1) the Muley el-Mehdi Mosque belonged to Ceuta and was not Moroccan, and 2) the mosque did not proclaim support for terrorism. The video was a significant part of a larger social media campaign to defend the mosques from VOX accusations, hashtagged #MezquitasdeCeuta.
- During the municipal elections of May 2019, VOX requested the annulment of the Hadú Polling Location in Ceuta because the president of the polling station—Latifa Dailal—was wearing a niqab. VOX claimed that the niqab prevented her identification. The President of VOX-Spain, Santiago Abascal, supported the proposal and described Dailal as hooded.
- In **December 2019, VOX requested that a wall be built in Ceuta and Melilla to physically separate the cities from Morocco.** This North African country has been a regular target of VOX’s criticism and insults, as evidenced by the leaked messages from the WhatsApp group “Gestora de VOX en Ceuta” in which Sergio Redondo, Secretary General of VOX-Ceuta, described Morocco as a “blackmailer state” and referred to Moroccans with expletives.