

Melilla: mirage en route to Europe

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Among those who have reached Melilla, there seems to be no consensus as to whether they see themselves as being in transit in Europe or still in Africa.

The exclave of Melilla, a 12-km² piece of Spanish territory located on the Mediterranean coastline of north Africa, has a border with Morocco. For some, this Europe-outside-Europe represents a way to pass through the walls of Europe.

Due to a large number of unauthorised entries, the border is now heavily fortified with three fences, six metre-high constructions with barbed wire on top and guards patrolling at the bottom. The increased reinforcement of the borders has not stopped migrants from crossing it, however. The majority of those who do cross into Melilla stay in a state-run centre known as the Centro de Estancia Temporal de Inmigrantes (CETI), a temporary stay centre

for migrants in transit run by the Spanish Ministry of Employment and Social Security. It is usually there that their cases will first be processed, regardless of whether their case is one of asylum or possible deportation.

The demographics of the centre are diverse. The two largest groups are sub-Saharan Africans and Syrians, with a broad range of inter- and intra-group differences. In spite of this diversity, the major factor we found that bound them all together was their waiting and the consequent all-pervasive uncertainty. No one could tell how long they would have to wait at the CETI, and few knew what would greet them when they left for mainland Spain – a voyage and concept referred to as the *salida*, the exit.

The effect of uncertainty

A result of this uncertainty was the creation of explanations discussed among the migrants. With little transparency as to the processing of cases, theories were common – and occasionally quite elaborate, stories or rumours that allowed our informants to snatch back some degree of awareness of what was happening to them and why. Lack of transparency and information does not leave an empty space without knowledge but rather creates a pool of theories and explanations to fill in the holes in the logic of uncertainty.

While it was agreed that one could do little to speed up the process of waiting, there was a widely shared belief that misbehaviour would prolong the stay. One informant said: “As soon as you misbehave, the authorities will punish you. They can expel you from the CETI, for days or for hours. They take your card so that you are denied access. Making trouble might postpone your *salida*.” Regardless of whether this sanctioning was carried out by the Spanish authorities or not, it was nonetheless a fact in the eyes of the CETI residents, shaping their behaviour in ways which they hoped would lead to a swift *salida*.

Another factor shaping the perception of transit was, not surprisingly, the amount of information they possessed. Those who seemed to have the biggest advantage in terms of knowledge were those who either had networked with other migrants online, or who had families who had already been through the journey to Europe.

While Sub-Saharan informants, excluding those with higher education, expressed that they were simply on their way to places where they could find work, Syrian informants to a much larger degree could point to specific geographic destinations and how they would get there. In line with the Dublin Regulation, the first country of arrival is the one responsible for the Asylum Determination Process – in this case, Spain. In spite of this, not all planned to spend time in Spain once they reached the mainland. Some informants were convinced that some European countries would not send them back to Spain. As one Syrian put it: “Germany doesn’t care about the fingerprints.” This perception of the system

as not rigid, and the possibility of what a young lawyer from Damascus translated as “breaking the fingerprint”, could be seen as a way of maintaining the picture of mobility.

One of our informants admitted that: “It is the pictures we see that make us dream.” All our informants had an idea of the ‘Europe’ they were on their way to. However, Melilla did not represent the Europe they were going to. They were in Africa because they were not in Europe; but Melilla is a part of Spain, not Morocco.

Rejecting Melilla as a European town can be seen as an articulation of hope, as illustrated in an interview we conducted with a Syrian Kurd. He had left his family in Iraqi Kurdistan and travelled alone to enter Europe. His initial attempts to enter through the Bulgarian border had resulted in Bulgarian police officers taking all his belongings and pushing him back. He then flew to Algeria and walked the rest of the way to the Moroccan city of Nador. Crossing the Spanish-Moroccan border took four attempts. As he arrived at the CETI, he described being disappointed by the conditions he faced: “There is no peace. I am treated like a dog by the CETI staff.” However, instead of then being disillusioned by such inhumane treatment in Europe, he explained it by not having reached Europe yet: “Melilla is not Europe.” The hope of ‘Europe’ as a peaceful destination remains as a mirage on the horizon, enabling him to keep looking forward to something which finally might reward him for his struggles.

Adherence to the notion of Melilla as not Europe appeared to serve as an explanation of things not yet being good but holding potential of a better situation once they finally reach the ‘real’ Europe. The demotivating unpredictability of the present can only be endured because of the promise offered by the future.

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