Foreigners in the Spanish Armed Forces: An Assessment of Fifteen Years of Recruitment (2001-2016)

By Beatriz Frieyro de Lara & Carlos Navajas Zubeldia

Fifteen years have passed since the Ministry of Defence first allowed foreigners to join the Spanish Armed Forces (hereinafter, FAS): the time seems ripe to assess the effects of this reform. The main objectives of the present study are to analyze the reasons that led the Spanish Government to take and implement such a decision, the successive modifications that have been applied to the initial plan, and the impact that the entry of foreigners has had on Spain’s all-volunteer force as a whole.

To date, the subject of this article has not been researched in Spain, with the exception of the following two publications. On the one hand, an article by Beatriz Frieyro de Lara can be found in the prestigious periodical Convergencia, entitled “Latinoamérica, fuente de recursos humanos para las Fuerzas Armadas españolas” (Latin America: Human Resources for the Spanish Armed Forces). Published in 2004, it is a detailed analysis of the causes that led the Spanish Government to admit foreigners into the military and how this reform was received in its beginnings.1 On the other hand, issue 95 of Monografías del CESEDEN, published in 2007 under the title “Integración de extranjeros en las Fuerzas Armadas españolas”, offers a fairly complete – albeit completely uncritical – view of the course taken up to that point in the integration process of foreigners into the Spanish military, with special attention to its normative development and the specific issue of foreign women.2 Other studies have touched upon this topic passim. A case in point is Juan López Díaz’s English-language article (2006) titled “The All-Volunteer Spanish Armed Forces”, which only devotes less than a paragraph to foreign soldiers.3 Similarly, in a contribution to a volume published under the auspices of NATO in 2007 and titled “Recruiting and Retention of Military Personnel: Spain”, José Puente and Santos Blanco briefly described legislation regarding non-nationals between 2002 and 2006 and cited recruiting figures as well as the countries represented among foreign soldiers, without actually making any assessment of these figures.4

3 López Díaz, 2006. In his words (p.348) : “To improve the supply of potential recruits, the government has expanded eligibility so that immigrants from South America and Equatorial Guinea can join the Spanish armed forces, up to a maximum of 7 percent of the total force (roughly equivalent to the immigrant proportion of Spain’s population)”.  

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From a methodological perspective, these authors should highlight the fact that they are specialists in contemporary history and consequently have used the methodology typical of this historiographical speciality, which in the study of ‘Armed Forces and Society’ is closely related to other social sciences (sociology, political science, etc.) and exposed to their influence. Moreover, when compared with the rest of the historiographical specialisms, contemporary history (especially when recounting years which the historians themselves lived through) is an observational science, and therefore participant observation has been part of the panoply of methods employed in this research.

Our sources have been varied: they include statistical data from the Ministry of Defence, made available by the Sub-Directorate of Recruitment and Career Counselling (SDG.RECLUYOL) and its Statistical Unit; the national and international press for analysis of public opinion and that of foreign soldiers; official periodicals (the Revista Española de Defensa chief among them)\(^5\); electronic sources (notably the MoD’s website and that of the Congress of Representatives, in which the proceedings of the Defence Committee are of particular interest); other official publications (periodic MoD reports to the Legislative branch,\(^6\) for example); the Boletín Oficial del Estado; and other secondary sources that will be cited in subsequent footnotes and in the bibliography, including reports by recent Defence Ministers such as the conservative Federico Trillo (2000-2004) and the Social Democrat José Bono (2004-2006).

For the purpose of this study, the process under examination will be divided into four periods. (1) An initial phase runs from 1996 to the end of 2001 and encompasses the sequence which led from the approval of the shift to an all-volunteer force (AVF) to the decision of admitting foreigners into the Army and Navy.\(^7\) (2) The 2001-2004 bracket saw the first implementation measures regarding entry of non-native personnel into the military, subject to greater limitations imposed upon them in terms of career prospects than on their native Spanish counterparts. (3) The following period spans the years 2004-2008 and is characterized by the introduction of a series of emergency measures intended to remedy the scarcity of applicants when it came to filling the ranks of the AVF, and therefore the progressive elimination of aforementioned restrictions. (4) The last period begins at the outbreak of the Great Recession in 2008, which has had a devastating impact on Spain to this day. Over the course of these periods, the reasons behind the admission of foreigners to the FAS will be analyzed, as well as the way the provisions governing it have evolved over time. A final section will attempt to profile the foreign soldiers currently serving in Spain – not least Muslim soldiers, sailors and airmen who, though Spanish by birth, make up a specific social minority among other all-volunteer service members.

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\(^7\) In traditional usage in Spain, the phrases “Army and Navy” and “Army and Navy Military Personnel” (ANMP) implicitly also refer to the Air Force (“Ejército del Aire”) and its personnel.
The Origins of the Reform (1996-2001)

In 1996, the conservative People’s Party (PP), with José María Aznar at the helm, won the elections by a relative majority after almost fourteen years of Government under the social democratic Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party (PSOE), led by Felipe González. In those days, a mixed recruitment system prevailed which combined Obligatory Military Service (SMO) for men with a limited number of volunteer soldiers. It is true that whereas neither of the two major parties vying for power had included a shift to a different organizational format in their electoral platform, the governing pacts established by the PP with Convergencia i Unió, a Catalan nationalist party, resulted in the approval of a reform of the aforementioned recruitment system. It was then decided that the old SMO would gradually be “suspended” and volunteer accessions promoted within the FAS, a process which was finally completed in 2001.

While it seemed uninterested in the details of these decisions, Spanish society was thrilled at the news of the suspension of a recruitment system that had generated much social disapproval throughout its history. However, since the very start of the AVF, there was a marked lack of enthusiasm among youth to join the military. Recruitment rates were so low at that time that the Government had to revise its projections downwards on repeated occasions regarding the number of troops that would make up the new military. In fact, at first the Cabinet estimated that in order to meet its defence manpower requirements, it would need some 130,000 volunteer military troops, although it soon reduced those numbers to between 120,000 and 102,000 troops, a number which would initially need to be met by the end of 2002. Despite this substantial decrease, in March of 2002 the Government was forced to admit that its manpower goals were out of reach and thus established 86,000 as the new official volume of troops to be attained. This was because of far too few enlistment applications in 2001 and 2002 (specifically 0.7 applicants per vacancy), in despite the enormous sums of money spent on advertising campaigns and the gradual lowering of admission requirements.

One of the newly adopted initiatives was the inclusion of foreigners into the meagre supply of new recruits. Although it was presented as a sign of solidarity with the immigrant population, it was obvious that the real driving force behind this reform was none other than the poor showing of new troops to fill the ranks of military units.

In point of fact, the participation of foreign citizens in the FAS was not a completely new concept. There had been a precedent: ‘La Legión’, initially called the Foreign Regiment (‘Tercio de Extranjeros’), an all-volunteer Army formation partly comprised of

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8 Report drawn up by the Defence Deputy Secretary (Subsecretaría de Defensa), entitled Nuevo modelo de Fuerzas Armadas, which later served as a basis for the development of the judgment by the Joint Congress-Senate Committee (Comisión Mixta Congreso-Senado). Text presented by the new minister, Eduardo Serra, before parliament in December 1996.

9 Such was the time frame set by the Comisión Mixta Congreso-Senado on 28 May 1998 for completion of the shift to an all-volunteer force (“proceso de profesionalización”), which later would result in the Law (n°17) of 18 May 1999 on the Armed Forces’ Personnel Regime.

foreigners from diverse backgrounds, founded in 1920 to relieve the conscript contingents then fighting as part of successive military crackdowns on rebels in Morocco (1909-1927). This programme had been suspended in 1986, and access to the military by foreigners had remained vetoed until the aforementioned reform by J.M. Aznar’s Government in 2002. However, such a precedent could not entirely be relied on: originally modelled on the French Foreign Legion, it had in essence been a mercenary corps, which completely sets it apart from the current model of integration of foreign soldiers into the Spanish military.

The First Steps (2001-2004)

In March of 2000, the second mandate of José María Aznar as Prime Minister began, this time with an absolute majority. His second Defence Minister, Federico Trillo, was in charge of applying the reform that finally resulted in the integration of foreigners into the FAS. The first step was the development of a pilot experiment in Argentina and Uruguay, with the goal of evaluating the appeal that a military career in Spain could have on Latin-American youths, since they were a recruitment target from the beginning. This experiment, which consisted in recruiting descendants of Spanish emigrants to Latin America through the local embassies, could not have had worse results: thousands of letters were sent, no end of informative meetings were held, and entrance tests passed by over 600 people (who were also offered the possibility to have their trip to Spain paid for in advance) – but to little avail: only 44 new service members were admitted.

Given the failure of the attempt to transfer part of the accession process to Latin America, the following recruitment programme focused on foreign residents in Spain. This was summarized by the approval of the aforementioned Law (n°32) on 5 July 2002, which established basic requirements for foreign applicants: they would have to be legal residents in Spain and hold a clean criminal record. A Royal Decree (n°1244) of 29 November 2002 approved the principle of granting foreigners access to professional military positions and specified the detailed provisions applying to them. This regulation laid down the condition that non-native military personnel must not exceed 2% of the Spanish military’s total strength, as well as the age range of prospective applicants (over 18 and under 28) along with other conditions that turned out to be very restrictive, not least strict limitations on contract duration and available vacancies. The fact that only citizens from 19 countries were eligible, all of them Latin-American except for the old former Spanish colony of Equatorial Guinea, drew harsh criticism from day one. The Argentinean press branded the reform as “imperialist”; groups of immigrants, not least Moroccans, complained that this measure was exclusionary. Additionally, the opposition parties warned that the reform did

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11 The regulations established by Royal Decree 611/1986, which put into practice the Law (19/1984) on Military Service, introduced the requirement of Spanish citizenship in order to serve in the Armed Forces (Boletín Oficial del Estado [BOE], n°79).
12 The Law (n°32) of 5 July 2002 amended the Act (n°17) of 18 May 1999 on regulations for volunteer military personnel, with the aim to allow foreigners access to the AVF (BOE, n°161).
not take into account the pre-eminence that citizens from the European Union would presumably enjoy when it comes to employment. They argued that the limitation to Latin Americans conflicted with EU regulations. This did not prevent the majority PP from passing this measure in Congress on March 14, 2002, despite the fact that it took place during Spain’s European presidency and the strong debate about the Union’s expansion. None of the amendments proposed by the opposition were approved, and it became certain that the future law would only allow access to the Spanish military for citizens from the 19 aforementioned countries, and prospective recruits would only be offered a one-time “commitment” of three years maximum duration, with no promotion prospects. These short-term contracts, alongside conditions of access to Spanish citizenship (which these provisions would not accelerate), were the most criticized aspects of this reform in its early days. In the words of Felipe Alcaraz from the United Left Party (‘Izquierda Unida’), it was “a desperate reform” enacted by people in whose eyes the right type of recruitment could only consist of “submissive, poor, Catholic, Spanish-speaking soldiers”.

Another noteworthy aspect was the restriction which was to govern the assignment of foreign recruits to units and specialties. Non-native personnel could only be enlisted into combat formations which were usually least in demand from native applicants: the Parachute Brigade (BRIPAC) and La Legión within the Army, the Marine Corps (‘Tercio de la Armada’) and the Air Force Paratrooper Squadron (‘Escuadrón de Zapadores Paracaidistas del Ejército del Aire’) – i.e. those most likely to be deployed first to overseas theatres. This resort to immigrant recruits also coincided with NATO’s notification to its European member-States of the need to send three thousand new troops to Macedonia. Further proof of the special role devoted to La Legión as well as the BRIPAC within the FAS can be found in their majority presence in Spain’s troop contribution to the Iraq War. This raises an interesting question: could it be that one central reason behind this reform was to transfer the risks inherent in military missions from native to non-native service members with a view to minimizing the impact on Spanish public opinion of possible combat deaths or injuries? Yet, this was not without drawbacks for the reformers in that it generated fears among the general public of “divided loyalties” on the part of foreign soldiers.

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15 The Act (n°17) of 23 December 1993 (BOE, n°307), modified by the Act (n°55) of 29 December 1999 (BOE, n°312), on access to certain public sector positions by foreign nationals from the rest of the European Union member-States provides that citizens from EU countries enjoy the same rights as Spanish citizens when it comes to public employment. However, the Royal Decree (n°543) of 18 May 2001 (BOE, n°130), eliminated the Armed Forces and State Security Forces and Bodies from this scenario.

16 The initiators of the reform would at all times speak of “commitment” rather than of contracts or labour agreements. This was presumably because this term connotes allegiance more than employment status and conditions, thus emphasizes the need to promote as much loyalty as possible among these non-native soldiers in order to strengthen their motivation to defend a country that was not originally their own.


words, the integration of foreigners into the Spanish military raised doubt about whether they would unreservedly accept to kill and possibly be killed for a country not theirs by birth. Faced with this dilemma and keeping in mind that elite combat units are not precisely the most in demand, the reformers’ response was to try and foster loyalty through corporatism. In this regard, La Legión is undoubtedly the unit with the strongest cohesion culture in Spain.

In reality, the Ministry of Defence never gave a precise explanation for the mandatory funnelling of foreign recruits into combat units and slots – other than that it was necessary in order to fill vacancies for which young Spaniards showed little taste. An internal report leaked to the press from the MoD Office of Recruitment and Education (which, among other things, suggested establishing more selective physical tests for these soldiers) supported this assignment restriction on the grounds that combat formations had “their own personality, capable of instilling specific traditions and energy in their troops”. This report warned of certain risks to recruiting foreigners into the FAS. The first was that it would be interpreted as a failure of the new AVF and consequently dissuade the already dismal numbers of potential Spanish applicants from joining up. The second risk was the possibility of a surge in xenophobic reactions on the part of certain groups within or outside the FAS. Additionally, the text specifically mentioned that this kind of measures would result in social and organizational problems in the military. Addressing the social problems looming on the horizon, the report as cited in the press article alluded to the fact that foreigners were “of a noticeably inferior cultural level”, which could weaken the military’s public image and even result in coexistence issues within some units. This issue will be discussed infra in light of a decade and a half of foreign presence in the FAS: enough time, surely, to allow us to evaluate whether or not these initial fears – to avoid the word ‘prejudice’ – from Trillo’s MoD office came to be realized. We will also take up the subject of access to Spanish citizenship, which from the beginning was at the centre of the debate and raised irate criticisms against a reform that entrusted national defence to foreign citizens, to whom what others consider to be a basic right was not granted.

The initial implementation measure of such a restrictive regulation came in December 2002, when for the first (and last) time a series of vacancies were opened to foreigners alone. This move, governed by Resolution 452/38231 of 16 December 2002 (BOE, n°304), certainly produced very positive results as some 66.3% of the 300 slots offered were filled. However, it quickly revealed the kind of difficulties the MoD would run into regarding foreign personnel recruitment. In the first place, out of 800 applicants, only 202 had legal status in the country; yet, with three-quarters of all foreign applications rejected on that ground, the applicant-to-vacancy ratio still remained higher for foreigners than was the case elsewhere with Spanish nationals. The Ministry soon concluded that there was no need to be overly selective and that all those who met the minimum legal requirements for admission would be accepted. As a result, only three people ended up being rejected during

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19 “Defensa necesita 2.000 inmigrantes al año para paliar el déficit de tropa”, El País, art. cit.
20 Frieyro de Lara, 2004, p.158.
the entire accession process. There has never since been such high numbers of irregular foreign applicants, which leads us to conclude that word spread in this group that joining the FAS, far from being a sure route to legal status, was just a temporary job offer meant for those who already had their papers in order.

It should be borne in mind that foreigners’ access to positions within the FAS was not merely one of many programmes initiated in that period in order to cover troop vacancies: given the sheer scarcity of applicants, it was central to the Government’s game plan. Chief among the varied motives at work were the country’s poor demographic prospects, and most importantly the reluctance of Spanish youth to voluntarily join the military and endorse the policy of cheap soldiers self-consciously brought about by Aznar’s Cabinet. Such a situation had to remedied, and indeed, every year after 1999 saw improvements in pay and labour conditions for this socio-professional group who had previously been earning a miserable living and was still serving in reduced circumstances more suited to replacement soldiers than to defence professionals.

In summary, it could be argued that during this first period, three large segments of the reform plans were implemented: in the first place, military entry requirements were significantly lowered in late 1999. Among the most significant measures were the reduction of the minimum IQ for entry to 70, or the disappearance from the military scene of a high school diploma as a requirement (in fact, around 45% of recruits in the 2001 accession cohort had not graduated from high school). Similarly, physical standards became less demanding for enlistment, and pass-or-fail psycho-technical tests were removed, which produced recruits scoring a mere 0.5 out of 10 on general aptitude scales. On the other hand, in late 2000 and early 2001 there was an attempt to target recruitment pools hitherto untapped. Simultaneously with the aforementioned recruitment drive in Argentina and Uruguay, campaigns directed at women in Spain were launched and beefed up in short order. Moreover, a new Continuous Selection and Aptitude System, still in use today, was introduced in January of 2002, that theoretically matches skills, preferences and merits of applicants with the military’s needs and keeps rank-and-file recruitment channels open all year round. This accelerates the process and reduces waiting times for applicants.

Despite everything, the application rate was still much below the Government’s recruitment goals, which had repeatedly led it to revise its force level ambitions downwards from an initial 130,000 to some 80,000 in March 2004, when a new change of Government took place in Spain. Having won the general election, the social democratic left took over, with José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero as Prime Minister.

Contingency Measures and the “Secular Miracle” (2004-2008)

Given the insignificant number of volunteers in the ranks, the incoming Defence Minister, José Bono, was aware of the enormous difficulties involved in bolstering the military’s proceso de profesionalización. Among other measures, his Office took it upon

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21 Ibid., pp.143-145.
itself to reform the basic regulations governing the enlistment of foreigners, by eliminating the highly restrictive conditions previously imposed by the PP Government.\(^{23}\) This regulation finally led to the passing of Act 8/2006 pertaining to Military Personnel.\(^{24}\)

The first measures taken in this respect by the Government of Rodríguez Zapatero removed the constraints affecting the profession as regards two crucial aspects. Firstly, Royal Decree 2266/2004 increased the maximum number of foreigners in the services from 2 to 7\%, in addition to substantially improving the pay and job stability of professional servicemen and women. As already mentioned, this ceiling no longer applied to specific combat formations solely comprised of foreigners, as was formerly the case with La Legión and others, but to all vacancies (with the aforementioned restrictions) with foreigners thus now assigned to units alongside Spaniards. For its part, Order 217/2004 significantly raised the number of slots to which foreigners could be posted, which henceforth would cover all Army occupational specialties and the greater majority of them in the Navy and Air Force.

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\text{Table 1: Recruitment of Foreigners (2002-2008)}
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recruitment drive</th>
<th>Vacancies for foreigners</th>
<th>Foreign applicants</th>
<th>Foreigners signing up</th>
<th>Total ANMP*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2002 (extraordinary)</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>1,221</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>ND</td>
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<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>1,696</td>
<td>2,350</td>
<td>517</td>
<td>71,083</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>705</td>
<td>1,842</td>
<td>399</td>
<td>70,632</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>11,244</td>
<td>5,786</td>
<td>1,559</td>
<td>73,641</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>5,158</td>
<td>8,525</td>
<td>1,977</td>
<td>78,058</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>2,603</td>
<td>8,677</td>
<td>1,760</td>
<td>79,128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>2,761</td>
<td>15,081</td>
<td>1,793</td>
<td>81,607</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Source*: Elaborated by the authors using data provided by the SDG.RECLUYOL, Ministry of Defence. *Abbreviations*: ANMP: Army and Navy Military Personnel; ND: no data. * Total strength as of January 1\(^{st}\) of the following year.

After the adoption of these measures, the number of overseas applicants went through a considerable increase, although the definitive step in this regard was taken two years later, with the passing of the aforesaid Act 8/2006 providing for the possibility of longer enlistment contracts. This is not to say that temporary contracts were done away with exactly: these were no longer limited to three years, but extended to six, the interested party also having the option of renewing it for another three years of service if in the process of applying for Spanish citizenship.\(^{25}\) To this legislation must be added an

\(^{23}\) The new regulations basically comprised Royal Decree n°2266 of 3 December 2004 (BOE, n°292), which amended Royal Decree n°1244/2002 (BOE, n°287), Ministerial Order n°217 of 30 December 2004, notably Annexes 2 and 3 governing the enlistment of foreigners (BOE, n°12).

\(^{24}\) BOE, n°98.

\(^{25}\) Article 11.3 of Act 8/2006 provides that “[f]oreigners who have applied for Spanish nationality and who have completed 6 years of service can have their commitment extended by a maximum of three years, but in no case will they be allowed to sign for this longer-term commitment until they acquire such nationality”. 
extensive range of minor reforms keyed to improving the service conditions of Spaniards and foreigners alike, above all with regard to access to the profession, compensation, welfare benefits, educational opportunities and the recognition of qualifications by the general education system, reintegration into the civilian labour market, choice of destinations, etc.\footnote{A number of programmes were initiated by the Defence Ministry’s General Directorate of Recruitment and Military Education to facilitate access for foreigners and make it more attractive: creating helpdesks, specific plans for foreign personnel such as recruitment campaigns, an overall quality of life plan, etc.}

As can be seen in Table 1, the broadening of the number of units that foreigners could join, their proportion \textit{vis-à-vis} the total number of Spaniards admitted and, above all, the longer period of service now allowed immediately led to a greater number of applicants of other nationalities who sat the FAS entrance exam. The table also shows that after the Social Democrats’ return to power in March 2004, there were many more job vacancies available to foreigners, especially in 2005. This produced, on the one hand, a pull effect: the number of overseas applicants increased yearly, to the extent of even surpassing the 15,000 mark in the recruitment drive of 2008; and, on the other, a considerable increase in the total number of military personnel. In 2006, this allowed the Government to increase its end-strength goals, from 80,000 to 86,000, a figure that remained stable until the beginning of 2011. Defence Minister José Bono’s enthusiasm was evident when he went so far as to describe the results as a “\textit{secular miracle}”,\footnote{In his visit to the \textit{Salón del Estudiante Aula 2006}, Minister of Defence Bono said to the press that “\textit{oddly enough it is almost a secular miracle that we now have 5,000 more troops}” (“\textit{El ejército cuenta con 5.000 soldados más}”, \textit{El Mundo}, 9 March 2006).} just before passing the baton to José Antonio Alonso. It was precisely during Alonso’s term of office that the last important provisions of the period were introduced with respect to the military profession in Spain, supplementing the above-mentioned Army and Navy Military Personnel Act with Act 39/2007, of 10 November, pertaining to Military Service (\textit{BOE}, n°278). Before it was passed, specifically in May, the Minister had increased the proportion of foreigners among the rank and file from 7 to 9\%\footnote{“Defensa eleva del 7\% al 9\% el cupo de extranjeros en el Ejército”, \textit{El País}, 15 May 2007.}.\footnote{“Miles de extranjeros defienden la patria española”, \textit{El País}, 30 April 2006.}

But while the number of overseas applicants rocketed during the Government of Rodríguez Zapatero, above all thanks to the gradual increase in the number of units and specialties for which they were eligible as well as in the maximum proportion of FAS vacancies that could be filled by foreign military personnel (now standing at 9\%, as indicated above), what did not change was the disproportion between the number of foreigners and Spaniards in various units. Throughout this period of time, in those combat formations that were initially their sole option, the participation of foreigners by far exceeded the quota for the Armed Forces as a whole.\footnote{“Miles de extranjeros defienden la patria española”, \textit{El País}, 30 April 2006.} Thus, in 2006, their share represented a little over 30\% in the BRIPAC and around 20\% in La Legión. Four years on, there was still an imbalance in the distribution of foreigners among the various units for which they were eligible – now the majority.
In addition, another issue, already addressed at the beginning of this article as one of the virtues of the reform from the perspective of the decision-makers, became apparent: namely, that Spanish public opinion began to show less concern regarding the deaths of foreign citizens on the international missions in which Spain was involved than it did when the lives lost were Spanish citizens. The controversy came to a head (though the media debate fizzled out after a few days) in 2010, after the death of a 21-year-old Colombian soldier during an attack on a Spanish convoy in Afghanistan. At the time, it was estimated that 43% of military casualties in Afghanistan and Lebanon were troops of Latin American extraction. In an appraisal made public with regard to this controversy by Javier García Fernández, the then Director-General of Recruitment, he stated that combat units appealed to both foreigners and younger Spanish applicants because “they know that they are more hazardous postings, but better paid”. In the same context, the Unified Association of the Spanish Military (AUME) warned that the military’s recruitment system encumbered missions with undertrained personnel, insofar as “soldiers under 22 undergo four months of training [only] before being sent abroad on missions like Afghanistan”.  

The Great Recession Changes Everything (2008-2016)

In March 2008, the social-democratic Prime Minister, Rodríguez Zapatero, began his second term in office, which would end in November 2011. For the first time in the country’s history a woman, Carme Chacón, was named Minister of Defence, and during this period her staff further developed the programmes designed by her predecessors, maintaining the social-democratic policy geared to providing foreigners with the same opportunities as Spanish citizens in the FAS. Henceforth, merit-based admission requirements became the rule, i.e. both foreign and Spanish applicants competed for the same vacancies under equal conditions. However, around 2008, a global economic crisis erupted which came to affect all levels of Spanish society. In just under a couple of years, the country registered a level of poverty and social inequality hitherto unknown in the democratic period. This deep economic and social crisis, from which today’s Spain is still struggling to recover, changed the equation entirely, first and foremost by generating a political crisis; but also, as regards military recruitment, by making most of the Defence programmes adopted in the previous decade irrelevant. As a consequence of the political crisis, Rodríguez Zapatero decided that the general election, scheduled to be held in 2012, would be brought forward to November 2011. The PP, led by Mariano Rajoy, having won a majority of seats in Parliament, a new Defence Minister, the independent Pedro Morenés, was named, who survived the next election held on 20 December 2015, and even the repeat poll six months later, until 2017.

31 The only remaining differences between nationals and foreigners apply to a small number of specialties and units from which those not born in Spain are still barred, and which involve a (modest) extra burden for them in terms of basic training programmes. Cf. Article 10, paragraph 2, of Royal Decree 1244 of 29 November 2002, and Ministerial Order 1251 of 9 May 2003, which amends Ministerial Order n°42 of 28 February 2000.
One of the rare reforms of the 2008-2016 period has been to raise the non-prior service recruitment age-limit from 27 to 29. At the beginning of the economic crisis and against the backdrop of fast-growing unemployment, Rodríguez Zapatero’s Government attempted to facilitate the reinsertion of older unemployed into the labour market. The fact is that, at the time, the civilian job supply was so depleted that very few people benefited from this measure. But in the military, combined with a drop in the volume of new vacancies as part of austerity measures dictated by the crisis and EU pressures, after a while it entailed a consequence which is at the heart of one of the current problems affecting the FAS: an aging work force.

Table 2: Recruitment of Foreigners (2008-2015)

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>Foreign applicants</th>
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<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>2,761</td>
<td>15,081</td>
<td>1,793</td>
<td>81,607</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>816</td>
<td>18,320</td>
<td>606</td>
<td>88,333</td>
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<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1,498</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>83,769</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>4,464</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>82,182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>No vacancies for foreigners</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>79,321</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>1,400</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>77,349</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>1,719</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>77,939</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>1,142</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>77,941</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Elaborated by the authors using data provided by the SDG.RECLUYOL, Ministry of Defence. * As of January 1st of the following year.

As a matter of fact, the main characteristic of the last eight years resides in the absence of fresh programmes intended to make the FAS more attractive and enhance recruitment. There was indeed a good reason for this: with the advent of the deep recession, long queues soon formed of young applicants eager to sign up, enticed by the prospect of a fixed salary and the possibility of extending their contracts for as long as possible. Applicants were foreigners, owing to the fact that the whole legislative package governing their admission into the FAS was upheld, but more significantly Spaniards, whose precarious financial situation now made a career in the military a lot more appealing to them. The greater demand from Spaniards for these jobs substantially lessened the need for recruitment drives, which entailed reduced spending on advertising campaigns, but most importantly the possibility of carrying out a more thorough selection process, thus bringing about an unquestionable qualitative improvement in the all-volunteer force as a whole. The impact of the crisis on recruitment rates in Spain can be clearly seen in Table 2 above. Most telling is the sharp drop in the number of vacancies offered to foreigners. With total FAS end-strength at an all-time high in the previous period, the Government, now in the grips of a deep recession, felt free to adjust the defence budget downwards year after year,

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32 Fourteenth additional provision of Law 2/2008, of 23 December, on the General State Budget for 2009 (BOE, n°309).
and considerably toned down its recruitment drives, notably (but not exclusively) as regards foreign applicants, now no longer so acutely needed to fill the ranks. From 2010 to this day, the number of vacancies open to them has been purely nominal. This resulted in a steep decrease in the number of foreign applications (though the rate of selection remained extraordinarily high for those whom the very few openings offered had not discouraged: for example, 1,400 applicants for 36 jobs in 2013, and 1,719 for 75 the following year). Another, more general consequence of this policy option has been a distinct decline, also shown in Table 2, in the military’s active-duty strength. It was not, however, as serious as in the opening decade of the all-volunteer force, and did not raise alarm to the same extent.

Table 3: Recruitment of Spaniards vs. Foreigners (2003-2015)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recruitment drive</th>
<th>Vacancies for Spaniards</th>
<th>Vacancies for foreigners</th>
<th>Total ANMP end-strength</th>
<th>Total active-duty foreigners</th>
<th>% foreign ANMP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>71,083</td>
<td>767</td>
<td>1.08%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>705</td>
<td>70,632</td>
<td>1,174</td>
<td>1.66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>24,306</td>
<td>11,244</td>
<td>73,641</td>
<td>2,504</td>
<td>3.41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>18,406</td>
<td>5,163</td>
<td>78,058</td>
<td>4,167</td>
<td>5.34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>22,232</td>
<td>2,603</td>
<td>79,128</td>
<td>5,440</td>
<td>6.87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>20,170</td>
<td>2,761</td>
<td>81,607</td>
<td>6,205</td>
<td>7.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>15,725</td>
<td>816</td>
<td>88,333</td>
<td>5,846</td>
<td>6.62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>319</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>83,769</td>
<td>4,812</td>
<td>5.54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>4,093</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>82,182</td>
<td>3,591</td>
<td>4.37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>79,321</td>
<td>2,613</td>
<td>3.29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>1,464</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>77,349</td>
<td>1,391</td>
<td>1.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>77,939</td>
<td>561</td>
<td>0.72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>77,941</td>
<td>315</td>
<td>0.40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Elaborated by the authors using data provided by the SDG.RECLUYOL, Ministry of Defence. Abbreviations: ANMP: Army and Navy Military Personnel; ND: no data.

The implementation of such austerity policies by the Spanish Government did not impact only foreign applicants: it also affected their Spanish counterparts. With the number of vacancies available in each recruitment drive drastically cut down, the selectivity (applicant-to-slot ratio) which applied to all candidates was proportionally even greater than earlier. As shown in Table 3, after 2009 the number of vacancies for both Spaniards and foreigners dropped substantially. In 2012, a point was reached when there was no recruitment drive at all. This owed more to budget cuts than to the fact that foreign active-duty members might have reached their theoretical ceiling of 9% of total FAS strength: they did not, as this threshold was never approached, let alone exceeded. When, in 2008 and 2009, the greatest number of overseas applicants was registered, the economic crisis that led to the drastic reduction in the number of vacancies in each recruitment drive was already underway.

Another of the most striking results presented in Table 3 is the drastic reduction in the number of foreigners serving in the FAS from 2014 onwards. On the whole, it is
possible to state that, in addition to the avalanche of applications associated with the economic hardships of the preceding years, during this last period of our study little changed with respect to the regulations governing the enlistment of foreigners. In our view, the very restrictive initial project was gradually reformed before it was finally enshrined in the Army and Navy Military Personnel Act of 2006 and the Military Service Act of 2007, which can currently be regarded as the legal basis for the enlistment of foreigners in the Armed Forces. The most relevant change since then has to do with the Government’s recent decision to make it easier for foreign military personnel to acquire Spanish citizenship. This has been the underlying cause of such a sharp decline in their numbers (they are no longer counted as foreigners) and, among other things, implies that, pursuant to the Army and Navy Military Personnel Act, after being naturalized they are now eligible for longer contracts and even permanent ones.

The truth is that, contrary to what was the case with the old Tercio de Extranjeros which offered non-native troops the possibility of acquiring Spanish citizenship after two years of service, the Ministry of Defence baulked at implementing measures of this nature for over a decade. Only very recently has it been decided to unblock the situation. The realization that it was a necessity, or at least the desire of most foreign service members, can be clearly seen in the massive response that it has elicited. The data provided by the MoD’s Sub-Directorate of Recruitment and Career Counselling indicate that whereas on 1 January 2015 561 foreigners served in the FAS, by 1 January 2016 there were only 315 of them left, and two months later, on 2 March, 269. In short, at the beginning of March 2016 – our most recent data – there were 4,523 non-native volunteers serving in Spain; among them, 94% of them (a total of 4,254) had acquired Spanish nationality.

This change of tack in governmental policy was the product of the commitment made by the PP during the November 2011 election campaign, whose manifesto literally stated: “We will grant citizenship with naturalization papers to the citizens of those Latin American countries who have completed two years of service in our Armed Forces”, obviating – perhaps by neglect – the need to include Equatorial Guineans in addition to Latin American citizens. Be that as it may, the massive response of this collective to the naturalization programme has led to a dramatic decline in the number of foreigners currently serving in the FAS, not because their contracts have been terminated, but because, as already mentioned, they have been naturalized. Obviously, the renewal of the contracts they sign – as in the case of Spanish-born service members – is subject to review by the MoD, and once they have acquired Spanish citizenship, they are eligible, under the same conditions as native Spaniards, for various job reinsertion programmes that it has designed over the past few years for volunteers transitioning out of the military.

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33 Real Decreto, 1004/2015, de 6 de noviembre (Ministerio de Defensa, 2016, p.251).
34 Anonymous, [2011], p.212.
35 Let us recall that Law 8/2006 establishes that the maximum length of service in the Armed Forces for foreigners is six years. This commitment may also be extended to a total of nine, if the person interested is in the process of applying for Spanish citizenship.
Table 4: Foreigners and Naturalized Foreigners in the FAS, broken down by status and gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Permanent ANMP</th>
<th>Long-term contract</th>
<th>Initial contract</th>
<th>Career service members</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3,087</td>
<td>337</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>3,582</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>873</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>941</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3,960</td>
<td>371</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>4,523</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Elaborated by the authors using data provided by the SDG.RECLUYOL, Ministry of Defence. Data sourced on 2 March 2016. Abbreviations: ANMP: Army and Navy Military Personnel; ND: no data.

It can be assumed therefore, now that recruitment difficulties had been overcome, that these Government measures were meant to address the second major problem familiar to any all-volunteer force, that of retention. From this perspective, another interesting fact can be gleaned from the data provided by the SDG.RECLUYOL on those 4,523 service members born abroad (the greater majority of whom have been naturalized), namely their contractual relationship with the FAS, summarized in Table 4.

In this context, the most remarkable aspect is, without doubt, that no fewer than 3,960 servicemen and women (to wit, 87.5% of the total) have signed long-term contracts with the Ministry of Defence, all of which implies a substantial improvement as regards job stability even though temporary contracts still exist. Specifically, what is involved is a type of contract that was introduced during the first years of the move to an AVF with the aim of encouraging young Spaniards to opt for a career in the military, but which came in for much criticism precisely because of its duration, since it terminated when servicemen or women reached 45 years of age. The controversy revolved around the foreseeable problems that a person of that age and with a career as a professional soldier would have when re-entering the labour market. Whatever the case, what these figures demonstrate is something that had already been addressed in different press articles based on interviews with foreign soldiers, indicating that these people were motivated to join the FAS mainly by job security and a fixed salary, as well as the prospect of securing their position in the host country. Curiously, in the most recent interviewees of this kind, acquiring Spanish citizenship stands out as one of the chief motives. One of the other motivation-related variables revealed by these sources is the appeal that a military career has for them and the fact that for many it is not completely unfamiliar, given that some have performed military service in their native countries. This is the case, for instance, of the Colombians who, as will be seen, have also comprised, along with the Ecuadorians, the largest foreign group serving in the FAS since the beginning of this process.


38 Cf., for example, “Colombia y Ecuador aportan el 4% de los miembros del Ejército”, El País, 6 April 2007.
The Current Profile of Foreign Service Members

We will now attempt to outline the profile of foreign servicemen and women and how this collective has evolved. As already noted, despite allowing access to the FAS to citizens from 19 countries (18 once Cuba was taken off the list) from the word go, in the first recruitment drives citizens from only seven Latin American countries applied. In recent years, the representation of each country has been highly contrasted and, as indicated above, Colombians and Ecuadorians still predominate, as can be seen in Table 5 (see next page).

When analyzing the characteristics of foreign recruits, one of the most interesting aspects is their level of educational attainment. In these writers’ view, the importance attached to this issue stems from several factors. On the one hand, as already alluded to, it was one of the risks highlighted by those in charge of devising the reform in the Defence Minister’s Office, on the grounds that if foreign applicants had a lower educational level than their Spanish counterparts, this might be cause for conflict. On the other hand, the naked truth is that in the early days of the AVF the shortage of applicants for vacancies in the Armed Forces was so critical that the Ministry had to relax accession requirements in the extreme. During the first recruitments drives open to foreigners, however, it was realized – much to everyone’s surprise – that overseas applicants had in fact higher academic levels on average than Spaniards. This is still the case: on 2 March 2016, of the total number of foreign-born volunteers (naturalized or not) serving in the FAS, nigh on 55% had a high school diploma equivalent to the Spanish Baccalaureate and 4.2% had some college, meaning that the fears of the Ministry of Defence at the beginning of the process were unfounded. In this regard, it is worth noting that the women in this group have a slightly higher level of schooling than their male counterparts (approximately 60% are in possession of a high school diploma and a little over 6% have a higher level of studies). These are patterns similar to those detected among the rank and file as a whole.

The reason behind rising educational levels among volunteers across the board is hardly mysterious: without a shadow of doubt, it resides in the spectacular increase in the number of applicants, doubtlessly driven by the economic hardships imposed on families by the profound recession of the last decade, and the steep rise in selectivity ratios which it has entailed.

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39 This came with the publication of the December 23rd resolution 452/38202/2015 which approved a new procedure for admission to the Army and Navy training centres (BOE, n°6).
40 Colombians account for 35-40% of foreign petitioners each year, followed by Ecuadorians (30-35%), who, however, were the majority until 2007. Next, but with only 3-5%, are Bolivians and Peruvians (data provided by the SDG.RECLUYOL, Ministry of Defence).
41 The incidence of applicants born in Equatorial Guinea, the only eligible non-Latin American country, is rather inconsequential: their share is below 1% of all foreigners aspiring to serve in the FAS. Just as notable is the fact that countries that were initially expected to provide an important contingent of military personnel, such as Argentina and Uruguay, are underrepresented. Moreover, this scant diversity of origins is presumably a factor that is contributing to the cultural adjustment of new foreign servicemen and women.
43 Data provided by the SDG.RECLUYOL, Ministry of Defence.
Table 5: Naturalized Spaniards Who Joined the Forces as Foreigners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Army</th>
<th>Navy</th>
<th>Air Force</th>
<th>Total ANMP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolivia</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chile</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>1,402</td>
<td>417</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>1,912</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costa Rica</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecuador</td>
<td>1,199</td>
<td>311</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>1,591</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equatorial Guinea</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honduras</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicaragua</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraguay</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peru</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominican Republic</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uruguay</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venezuela</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total ANMP</strong></td>
<td>3,136</td>
<td>875</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>4,221</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Elaborated by the authors using data provided by the SDG.RELUYOL, Ministry of Defence. Data sourced on 12 February 2016. Abbreviations: ANMP: Army and Navy Military Personnel; ND: no data.

Another concern that MoD decision-makers voiced more or less openly early on was whether the presence of citizens from other countries would create tensions between them and native Spanish servicemen and women, or whether life in the Armed Forces would be capable of meeting the expectations of this group of immigrants. On this subject, it is important to point out that, since the first recruitment drives, a high degree of acceptance has been perceived on both sides: for one thing, foreign-born service members have seemed to adapt well to, and feel fulfilled by, military life in Spain; for another, Spanish-born superiors and peers have also displayed a high level of satisfaction, both with how immigrants actually serve in the forces and how they relate to native Spanish military personnel. Such a high level of mutual satisfaction makes even more incomprehensible the many impediments they have had to face from day one of the reform. In particular, as already mentioned, the measures keyed to widening the spectrum of units and occupational specialties open to them were not implemented until 2006 (and remain incomplete as of today). What is even more serious is the time it has taken to expedite citizenship application procedures for these people, which, in our eyes, points to the endorsement by policy-makers of a strictly utilitarian approach to immigrant military manpower.
Another indicator of their high level of integration would be the promotion of foreign privates to NCO rank or higher. This is the case of two people who, on 2 March 2016, were promoted to the rank of lieutenant in the Regular Army: specifically, two Colombians, a man and a woman. But, because such promotions are conditional upon their acquisition of Spanish citizenship, and inasmuch as the naturalization process has been eased for them only very recently, such cases have been fairly rare to date.

A related topic worth reflecting briefly upon is the Spanish military’s Muslim minority. As is common knowledge, Spain possesses two cities on the North African coast, Ceuta and Melilla, some 400 km apart by road and surrounded, as if they were islands, by Morocco. Because of their special characteristics, they are also cities with a traditionally strong military presence, and home to the great majority of servicemen professing Islam, most of whom are the children of long-term residents in these enclaves who have become naturalized with time and, therefore, fully-fledged Spaniards.

Whether they were born on Spanish territory or not, Muslims are seen as foreign by many of the members of an institution that constantly boasts about its Catholic faith. In addition, the MoD has frequently emphasized the mistrust they arouse, which has become even sharper over the last few years with the expansion of international jihadist terrorism and the greater danger of arms, human and drug traffickers using the African routes. While both factors are identified as global risks, Spain is especially exposed to them not only because of its geographical location, but also of its history.

The majority of Muslims serving as volunteers in the FAS are garrisoned in Ceuta and Melilla. This concentration of troops of Moroccan extraction in these two cities, which to a great extent explains the Ministry’s concerns, has several causes. Their low average educational level means that nearly all of them are assigned to formations stationed there, which do not insist on academic requirements: primarily La Legión. Of course, the fact that their families reside in North Africa partly accounts for this, but so does the provision (introduced to boost recruitment at a time when the military was beset by applicant shortages) which allows recruits to choose their posting locations.

The MoD’s concern, therefore, relates to the religion professed by servicemen stationed in Ceuta and Melilla, as well as to the fact that these two African cities are home

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44 Data provided by the SDG.RECLUYOL, Ministry of Defence.
45 For obvious reasons, the faith that people profess is sensitive information, and thus impossible to obtain. Consequently, we cannot offer official figures on that subject. We rely instead on data gleaned from various media reports, which suggest that 30% of Spanish soldiers serving in Ceuta and Cádiz are Muslim, and that proportion is on the rise on account of immigration and differential birth rates. For instance: “Uno de cada cuatro soldados españoles en Ceuta y Melilla es de origen marroquí”, El País, 31 October 2001; “La presión de nuestro islam”, El País, 12 September 2005; “Militares españoles musulmanes en Ceuta y Melilla”, Época, 16 December 2005; “El 33% de los españoles no quiere ver a soldados musulmanes en las filas de las Fuerzas Armadas”, Infomelilla, 22 December 2006; and “Los soldados musulmanes en el ejército español: marco jurídico, situación actual y futuro próximo”, Webislam (http://www.webislam.com), 13 May 2007.
46 This is not specific to minority Muslim service members: it is a general pattern today in the Spanish military, which has seen the emergence of units emphasizing local (“Galician”, “Andalusian”, etc.) identities. Interestingly, such a development is not a matter of concern for MoD decision-makers, since for the main part the members of such units are not Muslim.
to a large number of military units in which the presence of soldiers of Moroccan extraction is on the increase owing to both immigration and birth rates. It also stems from the fear, made tangible by the exclusion of both cities from the agreements signed at the time of Spain’s accession to NATO, that Morocco might one day reclaim Ceuta and Melilla. Should the need arise, in the absence of a NATO commitment to defend them, their defence promises to be problematic indeed. However, the arguments used, such as the gross indiscipline of Muslim soldiers (which owes much to the fact that they come from the poorest areas of these cities, with exceptionally high levels of unemployment and academic failure), or that their religion obliges the FAS to introduce no end of modifications in military organization, remain very unconvincing. With respect to this second argument, it is important to note that such modifications are much fewer than we are sometimes led to believe, and that the integration of other social groups in the FAS, particularly women, has required a much greater logistical effort, with no one questioning their right to form part of the Armed Forces or their full integration.

Other arguments, in our opinion, are more worthy of consideration. One such points to the risk that Muslim service members could be targeted by international jihadist recruitment networks. Though not impossible, we believe that this could only happen in very rare cases; rather than anything else, such occurrences would reveal the failure of military commanders to control their troops and, even more importantly, gaps in the country’s security systems.47 Support for this assertion is supplied by the statements of company commanders, who insist on the degree of trust that the hundreds of Muslim soldiers serving under them deserve. This seems hardly surprising insofar as the units to which we are referring are La Legión and the Regulars, both of which stress combat readiness and have made esprit de corps one of their hallmark features.48

Conclusions

In 2002, Spain introduced new legislation and MoD regulations governing the enlistment of foreigners in the FAS. Although such a measure was presented to public opinion as a solidarity gesture with the growing number of foreign immigrants in Spain, its real aim was to try and remedy the shortage of Spanish applicants for military jobs. In truth, the new provisions were extraordinarily half-hearted, since – among other markedly restrictive features affecting them – their numbers were limited to 2% of total FAS strength. To add insult to injury, applicants from only 19 countries (18 former Latin American colonies, plus Equatorial Guinea in Africa) were eligible. Thus, it should come as no surprise that this last measure was singled out for heavy criticism for its neo-colonial connotations and the fact that it did not envisage the possibility of applicants from EU countries or Morocco (whose northern part was also a former Spanish colony) – despite the large number of residents originating from those countries. Moreover, foreigners could

47 In fact, the national press only reported the arrest of two former Muslim soldiers in 2014, Jamal Alcalá Damir and Zakaria Said Mohamed, for their involvement in Islamic networks.
only be assigned to combat formations first to deploy on international missions (La Legión and the BRIPAC, to name but two), and thus less popular with Spanish applicants.

With the coming to power of a new social-democratic Government in 2004, the severe limitations imposed by the previous conservative Government on the enlistment of foreign service members were gradually eliminated, and their quota increased from 2 to 7% of the total; their pay and job stability were substantially improved, and the number of specialties and units for which they were eligible was broadened to include all of those of the Army and nearly all of those of the Navy and Air Force. As a result of these reforms, not least the passing of the Army and Military Personnel Act of 2006, there was a notable increase in the number of foreign active-duty personnel, since the new provisions now made longer contracts possible.

Shortly before the effects of the Great Recession hit the FAS and affected their relationship with society, the Social Democrats yet again raised the quota of foreigners in the ranks from 7 to 9%. They also passed the last important legislation to date with respect to the defence establishment: the Military Service Act of 2007. From 2009 until this day, the figures show that the number of vacancies open to foreigners has been at a very low ebb, in consonance with a concomitant reduction in force entailed by severe budget cuts (from which rank-and-file volunteers rather than their command structure have suffered most). Another striking development is that, from 2014 onwards, there has been a drastic decline in the number of foreign active-duty service members, mostly due to the high incidence of naturalizations among them. This move met one of their chief demands and, belying initial misgivings, raised the level of satisfaction elicited by this group.

This study has not only addressed the legal developments pertaining to the enlistment of foreigners in the FAS over the last 15 years, but also their attributes as a socio-professional group. As regards countries of origin, the bet on Latin America has proved right, though the nations that had initially been targeted have by and large failed to deliver: from the start, Colombia and Ecuador have taken up the lion’s share while Argentina or Uruguay have hardly produced any recruits. Their level of schooling is, on the whole, higher than that of Spanish volunteers. Moreover, with respect to gender distinctions, the pattern presented by foreign servicewomen is similar to that of their Spanish counterparts as regards both their rate of participation and their educational level (slightly higher among women than among men).

Finally, the (strong) minority of Muslim soldiers has at times awakened the distrust of the Defence Ministry, mainly because of the security risk that they hypothetically pose in the climate created by international jihadism, and of the large number of Muslim soldiers in the two Spanish enclaves in North Africa. Yet, the suspicion that Muslims serving in the FAS might not identify with Spain and might threaten its national defence has been shown to be unfounded. And in fact there is reason to believe that the presence of this group serves to erode, as did the integration of women earlier, the traditional normative values that, to a large extent, still prevail in the Spanish Armed Forces.49

49 Frieyro de Lara, 2006.
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