



THE CIVIL GUARD AT ADOLFO SUÁREZ MADRID-BARAJAS AIRPORT: ESSENTIAL WORK IN THE HEART OF SPAIN'S AIR TRAFFIC

INTRODUCTION: SECURITY THAT PREVENTS HARM

A few days ago, we had the opportunity to visit the Civil Guard facilities at Adolfo Suárez Madrid-Barajas Airport (MAD) and see first-hand the extraordinary work carried out by the team of this detachment.

During the visit, we were able to observe at close quarters what is undoubtedly the first – and probably the most crucial – line of defense against the risks that, inevitably, end up affecting our clients' operations sometimes. What we found was an exemplary display of commitment and professionalism that left us with a deep sense of reassurance.

At PionAirLaw, we would like to pay sincere tribute to their work, which is often silent but always essential, and that is why this edition of our newsletter is dedicated to the Civil Guard team at MAD, whose daily professionalism represents the commitment of so many members of law enforcement who, both within and beyond our borders, make it possible for millions of people to travel safely.

THE RISK SCENARIO: MAD FROM A LEGAL PERSPECTIVE

To illustrate the challenge of protecting Madrid's main airport, one need only look at the figures to discover that it is not just a transit terminal, but an actual town with a hectic pace.

The airport generates 10% of the Community of Madrid's GDP and 2% of the national GDP, underscoring its strategic importance for the country. In 2024, it shattered its historical record with more than 66 million passengers, and the forecasts in its Master Plan point to a future capacity of 80 million¹.

In this highly demanding environment, where almost 700 companies operate every day and more than 7,500 authorised vehicles circulate, safety is not an option: it is the foundation of everything.

With an area of 46 km², larger than the M-30 motorway that surrounds the city of Madrid (42 km²), the Spanish capital's airport has 64 km of tunnels and an automated baggage handling system that includes 135 km of conveyor belts with different technologies,

capable of moving 1.5 million bags per month. It is also one of the best-connected airport infrastructures in Europe, linked to the centre of Madrid by up to three different modes of public transport, with journeys taking as little as 15 minutes.

Also, it is essential to understand the jurisdictional complexity involved in its management, which requires constant coordination with four neighbouring municipalities in the Community of Madrid². Managing security in such an environment is a major legal and operational challenge.

The main responsibility for comprehensive security lies with the Civil Guard, which acts in coordination with the National Police –responsible, among other functions, for carrying out the initial document checks on people crossing our borders– and with private security companies that also do their bit. On top of this, there is constant dialogue with multiple public administrations and companies, which adds new layers of complexity to an already demanding operation.

Those of us who work in the airport sector are used to perceiving airports as risk ecosystems, full of critical variables. But at MAD, the figures and dimensions allow us to completely rethink this perception. We are not just talking about a place of transit, but about a system of overwhelming complexity. Each one of the 66+ million passengers per year is not just a traveller: they are a potential source of incidents, and the Civil Guard faces this challenge day after day.

THE INSTITUTION OF THE CIVIL GUARD

The Civil Guard was created in 1844 during the reign of Isabel II, with the initial aim of ensuring public order in rural areas of the Kingdom of Spain. Since then, it has become a fundamental pillar of Spain's security, recognised for its military nature, dedication to service and its emblematic tricorn hat³.

The Civil Guard's relationship with aviation safety is almost as old as aviation itself in Spain. It began in 1911 at the Cuatro Vientos Aerodrome and, since then, has evolved constantly, specialising to meet the new challenges of the airport environment. Highlights include the creation of the first airport unit at Barajas (1936), the Special Airport

¹ On peak days, such as 21 June 2024, a record high of 1,291 operations in a single day was achieved; and on 30 June of the same year, 208,714 passengers were recorded. These figures are expected to be surpassed this summer, as June 2025 has set a new record with 5,825,078 passengers.

² Madrid, Alcobendas, San Sebastián de los Reyes and Paracuellos del Jarama.

³ The tricorn is the traditional hat of the Civil Guard, adopted since its foundation in 1844 as part of its official uniform. Inspired by the military bicorne of the Napoleonic era, its design met the criteria of elegance and functionality. Over time, it has become one of the most recognisable symbols of the force.



Unit (1989) and the Fiscal and Airport Unit (1998), demonstrating a firm commitment to excellence and operational adaptation.

This evolution was further strengthened in 2020 with the reform of the Ministry of Home Affairs, which established the Border and Maritime Police Command⁴ and culminated in 2022 with the definitive consolidation of the Tax and Border Speciality⁵: a dual role –customs and security– which, at international level, is only found in similar corps such as the Brazilian one.

The Civil Guard's current system of specialities is highly versatile, covering functions ranging from airport and border security to arms control, counterterrorism, combating smuggling and protecting the environment, enabling it to provide comprehensive and coordinated responses to a host of challenges.

THE CIVIL GUARD AT NATIONAL AIRPORTS. ADOLFO SUÁREZ MADRID-BARAJAS AIRPORT

As we have seen, in the context of national airports, the Civil Guard represents the first line of protection in multiple areas. Its powers range from border security to the protection of the State's tax interests, in close coordination with the Tax Agency and other bodies. This operational presence is translated into specialised high-performance units, whose actions maintain the balance between operational efficiency and legal compliance. Below, we mention some of the most relevant units in the MAD team.

Firstly, Prosecutorial Analysis and Investigation Units in the field of illicit trafficking, which carry out their work with the support of an intelligence team that analyse patterns and dismantle the strategies of criminal organisations. This is how, in 2024, they seized more than 6.7 tonnes of narcotic substances and arrested 149 people at Madrid's airport, in addition to intercepting 230,000 packets of smuggled tobacco. These figures are not mere headlines: each foiled operation represents a prevented act of unlawful interference and a neutralised risk to the safety of cargo and flights and to Spanish society as a whole.

Then there is the Ícaro Group, made up of expert behavioural analysis agents, which carry out covertly among passengers with the aim of detecting abnormal behaviour. This specialised unit not only identifies potential criminals, but also acts preventively to anticipate threats before they materialise. Thanks to their training in interpreting non-verbal language –micro-expressions, gestures, evasive behaviour– these agents are able to identify critical situations such as human trafficking or the illegal transport of substances. Their effectiveness is measured in the incidents that do not occur, and their presence is a clear example of proactive prevention.

Third and last but not least, the Pegaso Team represents the technological barrier against an emerging threat: drones. These devices, although small and accessible, have the capacity to disrupt the operations of a large airport if used negligently or with malicious intent. The work of this team goes beyond simply disabling the device: its key capability lies in the simultaneous detection and location of the operator. Their work, supported by high-precision tools and advanced technical training, directly protects the aviation sector from serious disruptions and the economic impact they could cause.



OUR THANKS TO THE CIVIL GUARD

Our visit to the Civil Guard's facilities at Adolfo Suárez Madrid-Barajas Airport has given us a first-hand understanding of the true scale of their work: rigorous, silent and highly professional. The safety with which we fly is not a spontaneous effect or a coincidence, but the result of a carefully designed preventive network supported by specialised professionals.

As legal operators in the aviation sector, observing the structure and methodology of these teams has been deeply enlightening. We therefore extend our recognition and gratitude to the Civil Guard, whose dedication is key to maintaining the legal and operational integrity of our airport infrastructure

PionAirLaw

Ioana Istrate
Diego Olmedo de Cáceres

⁴ Order PCM/509/2020, of 3 June, regulating specialities in the Civil Guard and structuring the corps into its different technical functions.

⁵ Resolution of 10 November 2022, of the Undersecretary, publishing the Agreement between the Secretary of State for Security and the Commissioner for the Tobacco Market, on the surveillance, inspection and control of the tobacco market.