The Key Drivers of North African Illegal Migration to Europe

Migrants stranded on a boat, thirty miles off the Libyan coast as they are rescued by Royal Marines, on 7 June 2015. Photo Rowan Griffith/Daily Mirror.

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), as of 12 June 2015, an estimated 1,865 people had died crossing the Mediterranean to Europe and nearly 50,000 migrants had been rescued so far in 2015 in the waters between Libya and Italy. Migrating for the sake of a better life is not exclusive to any region of the world. Instability, be it political, economic, or social, has forced millions to flee their countries in quest of a more stable place to live. As of 2014, about 50 million people had fled their countries, including Africans and Middle Easterners entering Europe, Rohingya Muslims escaping Burma, Central Americans smuggled to the United States, civilians fleeing violence in Afghanistan, Burundi, Iraq, Pakistan, Palestine, Syria, Somalia, Yemen, and more. With the exception of Libya, North Africa may seem at first more stable and prosperous than the previously mentioned places. Driven by economic, socio-cultural, political, and geographical-historical motives, North Africans risk uncertain journeys to Europe.

Pure Economics

Unemployment is apparently a major driver of illegal immigration (Algeria 9.2 percent, Morocco 9.3 percent, Egypt 13.3 percent, Libya 15 percent, and Tunisia 15.3 percent). One-tenth of North Africans are unemployed, one of the world's highest rates, and youth unemployment in the region has reached 30 percent. Many well-educated young North Africans who are employed are working either in the informal sector or in low-paying jobs under difficult conditions.

Given the currency exchange rates, low wages in Europe are still considered significant by many desperate immigrants when their earnings are transferred to North Africa. The rigid currency laws of most North African countries have made it possible for black markets in money to prosper. On 28 April 2015, Algerians converted the euro to 165 Algerian dinars(DZD) on the black market, while the official rate was only DZD 107.

The International Labour Organization estimates that 20 percent of employed North Africans and their families live on less than $2 a day. North African societal norms lead many young North African immigrants to feel responsible for providing for their families, mostly parents and younger siblings. Social pressure can sometimes push them to endanger their own lives for the well-being of their families. According to the International Fund for Agricultural Development(IFAD), migrant workers living in Europe sent $109.4 billion back to their home countries in 2014. North Africa and Central Asia are the regions most reliant on the transfer of European funds, originating from France and Russia, respectively.

Socio-cultural Factors

Another social element involves appearances. For the least exposed North Africans, being an immigrant in Europe, regardless of job and legal status, is a sign of prestige. Immigrants often return to their home countries for vacations, showing off an apparently comfortable life style: often a new car, a new language, a beach holiday package, and sometimes a wife. This leads those less familiar with reality to buy into the theory of Europe as paradise.

As the French say, "a beau mentir qui vient de loin," beautiful lies come from afar: some immigrants tell distorted stories to their naïve friends and relatives. The North African tendency to hide suffering, except from their loved ones, means

that immigrants may exaggerate their comfort in Europe for their distant family and friends. It is difficult for wannabe immigrants to believe otherwise, given the inadequate media coverage and awareness campaigns on the hardships of illegal immigration.

The notion of harraga, the Maghribi term for illegal immigration, is thus incorporated into North African songs and sayings, many of which encourage the act, arguing that even death is better when one is in Europe. Such songs are often shared by football fans or even shown in video clips on TV. Sayings such as "to sleep in Rome's streets is better than staying in our old neighbourhood", "I'd rather be devoured by a shark than by corrupt officials," and many more imply that frustrated young people trust the sea more than their own countries.

Politics

Political instability and repression in North Africa throughout the years have pressured many ambitious educated people to seek better alternatives. Some have taken advantage of the instability and fabricated stories to support their asylum requests. Authoritarian regimes and violence have facilitated their acceptance as asylum seekers in Europe. The lack of democracy and freedom in most of these countries is still pushing many to contemplate migrating in any possible way. More recently, the lack of government control in Libya has contributed greatly to the increase in illegal immigration from many countries in Africa and the Middle East through Libya in their attempt to reach Europe.

Geo-historical Factors

The proximity of North Africa to southern Europe, the liberal mobility policies of most European countries, and the historical links between northern and southern Mediterranean countries are all key factors encouraging people to migrate to Europe. For instance, a boat journey from the Libyan coast to the Italian island of Lampedusa takes less than a day. Many of those who make it to Italy choose to smuggle themselves further, into other European countries.

There are currently 12 million first- and second-generation immigrants living in France, many of whom are from France's former African colonies. The history of European colonialism in North Africa during the 19th and 20th centuries means that many North Africans have relatives living legally in Europe. Many were

recruited as workers in post–World War II Europe, which suffered labour shortages during the 1950s and 1960s. Immigrants today rely on these relatives in the early days after their arrival in Europe for accommodation and job searches. It also means that many European countries have some responsibility to take in these immigrants.

Organized Illegality

None of these factors would make someone migrate were there no organized networks to facilitate the process. Illegal immigration is a flourishing business in North Africa. Crossing the Mediterranean alone costs hundreds or thousands of dollars. While the less privileged save up to risk their lives on the sea voyage, those better off can afford to pay agents who specialize in document falsification or smuggle them in cargo vessels, making their journeys physically safer than those of the less well-off. Social-media networks have made it easier for these agencies to find their prey and for the immigrants to plan their travel.

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