

Irregular Migration of Moroccan Minors to Spain

A Sociological Study of Religious and Cultural Identity

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ABSTRACT

Irregular migration is one of today's most complex social phenomena and has recently attracted significant media attention. Among its most urgent manifestations is the irregular migration of Moroccan minors to Spain, driven largely by geographic proximity and the search for better living conditions for themselves and their families. This phenomenon calls for an in-depth examination of the challenges these minors face upon arrival in the European context, particularly during their reception in Spain.

This study analyzes the erosion of religious and cultural identity among Moroccan minors during the reception period and investigates the main factors that contribute to weakening their attachment to the foundations of Moroccan religiosity. Migration is not merely a geographical shift but a social act involving numerous variables, including the risk of identity loss.

The research draws on questionnaires administered to minors who experienced irregular migration and resided in Spanish reception centers, as well as interviews with officials and specialists working in these institutions. Because this topic remains insufficiently studied in academic literature, the present work aims to fill part of this gap by highlighting overlooked dimensions of how irregular migration affects the religious and cultural identity of Moroccan minors in Spain.

KEYWORDS:

Irregular Migration; Minors; Religious Identity; Cultural Identity; Moroccan Religiosity.

الهجرة غير النظامية للقاصرين المغاربة إلى إسبانيا

دراسة سوسيولوجية للهوية الدينية والثقافية



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الملخص:

تعد الهجرة غير النظامية من أكثر الظواهر الاجتماعية تعقيدا في الوقت الراهن، وقد حظيت خلال السنوات الأخيرة باهتمام واسع في التقارير الصحفية ووسائل الإعلام. ويبرز من بين تجلياتها الأكثر إلحاحا ملف هجرة القاصرين المغاربة إلى إسبانيا، مدفوعين بقرىها الجغرافي من المغرب وبسعيهم لتحسين ظروف حياتهم ومعيشة أسرهم. ويستلزم هذا الواقع دراسة معمقة للتحديات التي يواجهها هؤلاء القاصرون عند وصولهم إلى السياق الأوروبي، لاسيما خلال فترة الاستقبال بإسبانيا. يهدف هذا البحث إلى تحليل تآكل الهوية الدينية والثقافية لدى القاصرين المغاربة خلال مرحلة الاستقبال، مع تحديد أبرز العوامل التي تسهم في إضعاف ارتباطهم بمقومات الدين المغربي. فالهجرة ليست انتقالا جغرافيا فحسب، بل فعل اجتماعي معقد تتداخل فيه متغيرات عدة، من بينها خطر فقدان الهوية.

يعتمد البحث على استبيانات وجهت إلى شباب خاضوا تجربة الهجرة غير النظامية وأقاموا في مراكز الاستقبال الإسبانية، إضافة إلى مقابلات مع مسؤولين ومتخصصين يعملون داخل هذه المراكز. ونظرا لقلّة الدراسات الأكاديمية التي تناولت هذا الموضوع، يسعى هذا العمل إلى سد جزء من هذا الفراغ عبر إبراز الجوانب المهملة لتأثير الهجرة غير النظامية في الهوية الدينية والثقافية للقاصرين المغاربة في إسبانيا.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

الهجرة غير النظامية؛ القاصرون؛ الهوية الدينية؛ الهوية الثقافية؛ الدين المغربي.

INTRODUCTION¹

This article derives its uniqueness, relevance, and scientific substance from the graduation research submitted for the completion of the master's degree in Religion, Culture, and Migration at Mohammed V University in Rabat by the researcher Dounia Sfiani. The study focused on examining the experiences of Moroccan youth who passed through irregular migration pathways, specifically those who lived in accommodation centers for minors in the Cádiz region in southern Spain. The specificity of the topic and the sensitivity of the target group required adopting a dual methodological approach that combines both quantitative and qualitative tools, in line with the nature of the phenomenon and in pursuit of building a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding.

At the quantitative level, the research relied on an online questionnaire administered to a sample of Moroccan youth aged between 18 and 26, all of whom had previously lived in Spanish accommodation centers for minors. All responses were received from male participants, at a rate of 100%, which constitutes an important sociological indicator reflecting the nature of irregular migration and its predominantly male character within this age group.

At the qualitative level, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a number of educators and staff working in accommodation centers for minors, given that Spanish regulations do not permit conducting direct interviews with minors. These interviews enabled a closer understanding of the institutional environment of the centers, the care system, and the daily dynamics that structure the relationship between the supervisors and the minors.

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This methodological combination of quantitative and qualitative data made it possible to construct a more balanced and accurate perspective on the trajectories of these young people, their perceptions, and the challenges they encountered both inside and outside the accommodation centers. It ultimately provides the study with analytical and scholarly value that aligns with the requirements of academic research specializing in contemporary migration issues.

Since the late 1990s, the phenomenon of illegal migration, also referred to as clandestine migration or more recently as irregular migration has emerged as a complex social, economic, political, and cultural reality. Dr. Abdellah Boussouf, Secretary-General of the Council of the Moroccan Community Abroad, defines migration as a constantly renewed form of creativity that reflects human agency in its diverse and positive negotiations with realities and circumstances. Migration, in his view, is necessarily the locus of multiple expressions of creativity that unfold in the lives of individuals and communities, manifesting across spaces, cultures, intellectual, and social structures in various ways that both captivate and convince. Migration is inherently linked to creativity, as it represents experimentation, inquiry, and continuous engagement with the self, the other, and the world. It also embodies socio-cultural resistances and expressions through which the migrant rewrites the histories of places, times, persons, relations, and structures¹.

In recent years, irregular migration from Morocco to Europe, particularly Spain has intensified, due to its geographical proximity to Morocco and as a result of a set of factors that will be addressed in the first chapter of the theoretical framework of this study. This chapter examines the issue of irregular migration, the reasons and factors contributing to illegal mobility, which oscillate between push factors concerning Morocco as a country of origin and pull factors concerning Spain as the host country.

The choice of irregular migration as the subject of this research stems from the noticeable increase of this phenomenon in the last two decades, with a particular focus on the case of unaccompanied Moroccan minors migrating to

¹ Al-Marzouq, Abdelkarim, Abderrahim Al-Atri, and Jamal Boutib, editors. *Migration Dynamics and Socio-Cultural Expressions: Texts and Approaches*. Konrad Adenauer Foundation and Ibn Khaldoun Center for Migration and Citizenship Studies, 2022, p. 9.

Spain. This specific category has witnessed a sharp rise and is subject to multiple forms of hardship and exploitation that directly impact their identity, lifestyle, and socio-legal conditions, factors that could negatively influence their future.

The research questions are as follows: How does irregular migration of Moroccan minors to Spain during the period of institutional accommodation affect the loss of their religious and cultural identity? Furthermore, what are the contributing factors behind this identity loss and the weakening of their connection with the foundations of Moroccan religiosity?

I. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 Theories Explaining the Phenomenon of Irregular Migration

Before delving into the analysis of the theories explaining irregular migration, it is essential to emphasize that, to date, there is no single universally agreed-upon theory among migration studies scholars that fully explains migration in its comprehensive definition and scope. Each theory of migration relies on one or more specific factors associated with migration, focusing primarily on analyzing the extent of their impact. Moreover, every theory addressing irregular migration stems from a particular specialization within the social sciences. Consequently, these theories do not provide an integrated perspective capable of analyzing the complex phenomenon of human migration as a whole. Migration studies, however, have long benefited from being a multidisciplinary field intersecting with anthropology, sociology, geography, demography, economics, and political science. Although comprehensive theories of migration are lacking, the migration literature remains rich with theoretical approaches that attempt to explain and analyze this phenomenon, from Ravenstein's well-known "Laws of Migration" up to the present day¹.

1.1.1 Ernst Ravenstein's Theory

Ernst Ravenstein's theory represents one of the earliest and most significant contributions to the development and renewal of migration theory. Ravenstein, a British statistician, presented his ideas in a paper entitled "Laws of

¹ Zohry, Ayman. *Introduction to Migration Studies (Moqaddima fi Dirasat al-Hijra)*. The Anglo Egyptian Bookshop, 2023, p. 51.

Migration”. In this work, he highlighted several key principles: migration between locations decreases as the distance between them increases; migration flows are generally directed toward larger urban centers; and each migration stream is often accompanied by a counter-stream of returning migrants.

Ravenstein also noted that technological development is a major factor increasing migration rates. Most migrants travel short distances, urban residents migrate less frequently than rural inhabitants, and females migrate more than males within the United Kingdom. The majority of migrants are adults, and it is rare for entire families to migrate outside their county of origin. Large cities grow more through migration than through natural population increase, and migration volumes rise with industrial and commercial development and improvements in transportation. The main migration direction tends to be from agricultural areas to industrial and commercial centers, with economic motives being the predominant driving factors.¹

Ravenstein is considered a pioneer among migration theorists. He relied on population statistics from England and Wales to develop his theory of the “laws of migration” in 1889. He was the first to introduce the concept of push and pull factors, which explains that unfavorable conditions in countries of origin, such as unjust laws, unsuitable economic policies, and scarcity of employment opportunities push people to migrate, while countries with better economic conditions and improved living opportunities attract them.

Ravenstein also identified several key principles of migration: the importance of favorable economic conditions and better life opportunities in destination countries; the decline of migration with increasing distance; the staged nature of migration rather than a single long-distance move; the occurrence of migration in two directions; and the influence of migrant characteristics, such as gender, age, and social class, on migration patterns. Notably, Ravenstein revealed an intriguing fact: women are often more willing

¹ Fayad, Hashim Nimah. “Theoretical Concepts in Population Migration: A Comparative Analytical Study.” *Omran for Social Sciences*, vol. 7, no. 26, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Autumn 2018, p. 17.

to undertake the risks of migration than expected, sometimes even surpassing men in mobility.¹

1.1.2 Push and Pull Factors: Everett Lee's Theory

Everett Lee revisited Ravenstein's Laws of Migration and introduced several important enhancements and additional insights. He expanded on Ravenstein's work by observing that the volume of migration varies positively with the diversity of welfare or recreational opportunities in a region, the diversity of population structure particularly professional, ethnic, and racial composition, economic fluctuations, technological development, and the level of regional development.²

The push and pull theory provides a model to explain migration patterns by identifying the factors that drive individuals to leave their home country (push factors) and those that attract them to a more developed location (pull factors). This theory highlights how certain conditions, such as economic hardship or conflict in the country of origin, can compel people to migrate, while opportunities for employment or better living conditions elsewhere can attract them.

Understanding this theory helps differentiate between forced migration and voluntary migration, as well as evaluate the broader impacts of migration on both sending and receiving regions. Proposed and developed by sociologist Everett Lee in 1966, this theory analyzes why people migrate and how various factors influence their decisions. Push factors often include adverse conditions such as natural disasters, economic instability, or persecution, whereas pull factors may include better living conditions or improved educational opportunities³.

Lee's theory emphasizes that migration is not solely dependent on individual choice but is influenced by external circumstances. It provides a

¹ Author(s). "Title of the Chapter." *Why Arab Youth Migrate? Research on Migration and Youth Prospects in the Region*, edited by Morad Diani, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2020, p. 56. Doha.

² Fayad, Hashim Nimah, p. 17.

³ "Lee's Push-Pull Theory." *Fiveable*, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/FiveablePushPull-push-pull-theory>. Accessed 6 May 2025.

framework for understanding both voluntary migration, where individuals move in search of better opportunities, and forced migration, where individuals flee due to coercive factors such as violence or conflict. Lee's theory has been widely applied in migration studies and policies, helping guide government strategies related to migration and refugee assistance.¹

1.1.3 Abdelmalek Sayad's Theory

Abdelmalek Sayad focused on all sources that could provide a comprehensive understanding of migration as a social phenomenon, addressing the various issues that emerged gradually in the field of migration studies since the early 1960s. Sayad marked a break from previous studies and approaches that treated migration unilaterally, often based on ethnic-centered perspectives, which resulted only in superficial and partial analyses. Such approaches neglected the original circumstances of migrants and provided a fragmented view of migration phenomena, largely framed by ethnic considerations. Sayad replaced this biased unilateral study with a dual approach, examining the trajectory of migrants from their country of origin to the host country, and also within it, taking into account both their cultural heritage and the new, different culture they encounter. This perspective emphasizes understanding migration as a dynamic process shaped by the interaction between migrants' backgrounds and the social, cultural, and structural realities of the receiving society.²

Abdelmalek Sayad emphasizes through his studies that it is difficult to erase the original identity of migrants, particularly those belonging to the first generation. The social identity of the migrant raises questions about cultural pluralism, and host countries have made significant efforts to achieve comprehensive inclusion of diverse communities. However, with the demographic increase of migrants and the insufficient integration that prioritizes the cultural and identity dimensions of migration, specially the weak cohesion in terms of religion and culture, social cohesion has deteriorated, and bridging national identities has become challenging. This has given rise to a

¹ Ibid.

² Group of Researchers. "The Migration Phenomenon According to Abdelmalek Sayad: From Historical Context to the Sociological Model." *Insaniyat: Algerian Journal of Anthropology and Social Sciences*, no. 62, 2013, pp. 25-38. Algiers.

new set of issues, including racism and the political instrumentalization of migration by various political actors across Western European countries.¹

The sociologist Abdelmalek Sayad offered a critical perspective on all existing literature and theories concerning migration, noting that they were largely governed by a unilateral viewpoint, primarily that of the host society. Sayad distinguished between two types of literature: the first focuses exclusively on the economic dimension of migration, examining migrants as a labor force and analyzing the costs and benefits of migration from the perspective of the receiving society; this literature primarily addresses economic aspects. The second type emphasizes the social dimension, focusing on the “integration” of migrants, first in terms of employment, then social, trade union, and political activities. Sayad also criticized the conceptual misuse of the term “migration”², which is sometimes used ambiguously to refer either to emigration or to migration itself. He argued that a radical shift in migration studies is necessary, one that accounts for factors often neglected by the dominant literature. To illustrate this approach, Sayad examined Algerian migration to France. Understanding this phenomenon in all its stages requires a thorough comprehension of the origin society in all its social, economic, and especially cultural aspects that is the Algerian rural society and its history³.

2. The Challenge of the Moroccan Minor’s Transition from a Moroccan Context to a European Spanish Context

Child migration is as old as human history; what is new is its political prominence. The concept of childhood as a stage of innocence requiring protection first emerged after World War II and became firmly established in the following decades with the creation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Furthermore, the protection of minors is recognized under customary international law⁴. Regarding unaccompanied minor

¹ Brody, Hajar. “Migration and the Identity Crisis: The Relationship between Identity and Migration Issues.” *Al-Ma'rifa Journal*, no. 15, May 2024, p. 41, Bahrain.

² Belghrass, Abdelwahab, and Sidi Mohamed Mohmedi. “Presentation.” *Insaniyat: Revue algérienne d'anthropologie et de sciences sociales*, no. 62, 2013, p. 32.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Vives, Luna. “State Violence at the Border: Unaccompanied Migrant Children in Spain.” *Spatial Justice / Justice Spatiale*, no. 18, 2023, p. 5.

migrants, international law defines them as individuals under 18 years of age who are outside their country of origin and separated from their parents or any other adult relatives legally or customarily responsible for their care. However, the concept of the unaccompanied minor migrant poses complex challenges and is difficult to apply in practice.¹

In this context, Professor Aziz Ahlou, a sociologist at Mohammed V University in Rabat, discussed the phenomenon of unaccompanied minor migration, describing it as one of the most complex social issues facing many countries. He explained that this phenomenon, which spans multiple continents, primarily reflects deep-rooted problems ranging from poverty and marginalization to social and cultural changes affecting societies. Professor Aziz emphasized that Moroccan minors themselves decide to migrate to Europe, primarily to countries such as France and Spain, motivated by the desire to achieve a better life².

The number of Moroccan minors migrating irregularly to Spain reached approximately 1,805 out of 3,419 minors from various other nationalities, distributed across reception centers for minors in Spain. These minors arrived in Spain irregularly, without their families, primarily from the city of Tangier. Mr. Mohamed Ben Issa, Director of the North Observatory for Human Rights, explained that these figures only include children apprehended by Spanish authorities; the majority are accommodated in centers in Andalusia, Catalonia, Madrid, as well as in the occupied cities of Ceuta and Melilla. Regarding their fate after crossing the Moroccan-Spanish border and being trafficked by irregular migration networks, Al-Bajouki stated: "Most minors are aware that European laws protect them. Nevertheless, these NGOs report a legal vacuum in dealing with such cases and a lack of reception infrastructure that safeguards the rights of the minors."³

In general, the phenomenon of Moroccan minors migrating to Europe, and Spain in particular, can be analyzed and interpreted by linking it to the

¹ Ibid.

² Al-Tato, Mohamed Adel. "Morocco and Spain Agree on Measures for the Return of Moroccan Minors and Combating Migrant Smuggling Networks." *Al3omk*, June 2023, <https://cutt.ly/Al3omk847346>. Accessed 18 May 2025.

³ Najdi, Adil. "Renewed Moroccan Migration by Swimming to Ceuta Despite the Risk of Death." *Al-Araby*, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/mur4cbxw>. Accessed 29 May 2025.

intersection of multiple economic, social, political, and cultural factors within a sociological framework. Minors' migration constitutes an important component of the broader phenomenon of irregular migration, which encompasses many social groups. Regarding the procedures for placing minors in Spanish reception centers, these are generally carried out in accordance with the interests of the judiciary, the Civil Guard, and the police. Children leave these centers either upon returning to Morocco, being deported, being transferred to other centers, or sometimes by escaping.

Concerning programs aimed at supporting Moroccan minors in reception centers, these initiatives are designed to foster positive interaction with the children and involve various activities, including organized visits to different locations, city tours to familiarize them with schools, and daily Spanish language lessons alongside Arabic language instruction. Religious events are also celebrated to maintain the children's connection to their cultural and religious identity¹. However, despite the availability of these rights and benefits under international laws and conventions, the harsh reality often reveals a different and troubling picture, exposing certain forms of unethical and harsh treatment inflicted upon the minors².

The phenomenon of Moroccan children who attempt to leave their families and render themselves "unaccompanied" in order to be considered eligible for migration highlights broader issues of inequality and underdevelopment in relation to mid-level global economies, as well as the impact on North-South relations. On one hand, integration policies within the European Union create opportunities for certain individuals to meet membership conditions, which are typically linked to wealth or EU citizenship. However, the same integration efforts simultaneously generate exclusion. By constructing both geographic and legal borders, EU states seek to establish buffer zones that are wider than ever between Europe and its peripheries. While Europe aims to facilitate internal mobility, as exemplified by the Schengen Area, which Spain ratified in 1991, alongside commitments to democracy, human rights, and child

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid.

protection, and by expanding its borders eastward, it simultaneously produces what has been termed a “Fortress Europe.”¹

Professor Aziz Ahlou pointed out that the phenomenon of unaccompanied minor migration is not limited primarily to Morocco but extends to other regions, such as North and South America, where the issue of minor migration arises within political debates on border control. Furthermore, academic failure and difficulties accessing the labor market constitute major factors that make these minors feel that their future is constrained by limited options, prompting them to seek alternatives abroad through irregular migration. Ahlou also linked this trend to major social transformations experienced by Moroccan families, which have led to emotional, ethical, and educational disconnections between generations, resulting in a lack of alignment in ideas, desires, and aspirations regarding the future. He emphasized that the current youth’s aspirations differ significantly from those of previous generations, as they are more connected to the world of the internet and social media networks and seek new models of social success. These aspirations often ultimately lead them to decide to migrate, particularly under the country’s challenging economic conditions².

Among the key factors contributing to the marginalization of youth is their cultural level, whether within institutional or non-institutional frameworks, compounded by the absence of a conscious cultural policy that understands and addresses the concerns, interests, aspirations, and value-based, intellectual, ideological, and civilizational challenges faced by young people. Such a policy is expected to raise youth awareness of their social position and leadership role, to strengthen their ideological capacity for positive participation, and to enhance their understanding of their circumstances, duties, and social realities³.

Abdelaziz Dahmani, a researcher in public law, argues that the migration of unaccompanied minors to the occupied enclaves and subsequently to Europe

¹ Empez Vidal, Núria. *Social Construction of Neglect: The Case of Unaccompanied Minors from Morocco to Spain*. Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research, Feb. 2007. p. 4.

² Al-Tato, Mohamed Adel. “Morocco and Spain Agree on Measures for the Return of Moroccan Minors and Combating Migrant Smuggling Networks.”

³ Dachmi, Abdessalam, and El Mostafa Haddiya. *Youth and Integration Challenges (Insertion des jeunes et problèmes d'identité)*. Publications of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Mohammed V University, 1996, p. 34.

has recently become a widespread and tragic reality in the city of Nador. He considers this phenomenon a challenge to the state's policies aimed at mitigating this critical situation, questioning whether effective measures truly exist to address it. Dr. Dahmani adds that any discussion of solutions to this phenomenon must first examine the underlying causes. Simply reviewing the latest report by the High Commission for Planning on the situation of children in Morocco inevitably shocks the observer with the catastrophic conditions affecting childhood in the country¹.

In general, the factors driving the migration of unaccompanied minors can be traced to social causes, such as poverty and vulnerability, on the one hand, and profound dissatisfaction with the social, economic, and political conditions in their country of origin, loss of hope for the future, and lack of trust in the homeland on the other. These sentiments are clearly reflected in the narratives of youth and minors who have migrated from various regions of Morocco. Additionally, there are calls, often from unknown sources on social media, encouraging attempts to reach Ceuta. The second factor relates to the pull of destination countries: the European dream dominates the imagination of these children, reinforced by stories of success from other families, neighborhood peers, or acquaintances who have undertaken similar journeys. This is further strengthened by the legal protection offered to Moroccan minors in Spain, which prevents their deportation if they enter Ceuta or Melilla. The third factor is contextual, linked to environmental and situational conditions. For example, natural conditions such as fog surrounding Ceuta and calm sea states reduce the effectiveness of security monitoring, facilitating clandestine crossings².

3. Migration Policy Strategies to Curb Unaccompanied Minor Migration

The phenomenon of Moroccan children who strive to leave their families and make themselves appear neglected in order to belong to a category accepted for migration reflects very broad issues of inequality and underdevelopment in the face of middle-income global economies, as well as their impact on North–

¹ NadorCity News Team. "Madrid Decides to Transfer Unaccompanied Moroccan Minors from Melilla and Ceuta to Spain." *NadorCity*, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/ycyf8444>. Accessed 19 May 2025.

² Najdi, Adil. "Renewed Moroccan Migration by Swimming to Ceuta Despite the Risk of Death." *Al-Araby*,

South relations. On one hand, this creates an aspect of integration through European Union policies, which set membership conditions that some individuals can fulfill conditions often linked to wealth or EU citizenship. However, the same efforts toward integration also produce exclusion. By establishing geographical and legal borders, EU countries aim to create buffer zones that are wider than ever between Europe and its peripheries. While Europe seeks to facilitate internal mobility, as exemplified by the creation of the Schengen Area, which Spain signed in 1991 alongside principles of democracy, human rights, and child protection, and by expanding its borders eastward, it simultaneously creates what has been called the “Fortress Europe.”¹

To curb the phenomenon of irregular migration, numerous meetings have been held between Moroccan officials and their Spanish counterparts to establish a comprehensive program aimed at containing this issue. This is carried out within the framework of a permanent committee between the Ministries of Interior of both countries, which convenes regularly. Additionally, the Moroccan National Observatory on Migration has been tasked with developing a national strategy in this context. The Observatory focuses on collecting relevant migration-related data, informing administrative bodies of research findings regarding current challenges, and proposing measures to improve methods for combating the risks associated with the irregular migration of Moroccan minors. The strategy emphasizes the preparation of television and radio programs, recognizing the influence of media on children. Civil society also plays a significant role, as organizations active in the field of child welfare can contribute to preventing irregular migration among minors through awareness-raising and educational campaigns².

Morocco and Spain have also agreed on the repatriation of Moroccan minors to their home country, as well as on strengthening mechanisms for coordination and information exchange regarding human smuggling networks,

¹ Empez Vidal, Núria. *Social Construction of Neglect: The Case of Unaccompanied Minors from Morocco to Spain*. p. 4.

² Maghress Editorial Team. “Morocco: Parliament Discusses Tougher Penalties for Encouraging Minor Migration.” *Maghress*, 2025, www.maghress.com. Accessed 19 May 2025.

which often operate violently. Legal, regulated migration has also been reinforced. To address these shared challenges, particularly those arising from the increasingly violent activities of smuggling networks, both countries decided to enhance coordination and information-sharing mechanisms. This includes renewing joint operational procedures at police cooperation centers, through liaison officers, and via joint patrols¹.

Morocco has accelerated its cooperative efforts through various initiatives, including the African Migration and Development Alliance presented to the United Nations General Assembly, reflecting shared regional responsibilities. This complements the national action plan on democracy and human rights². Regarding the evaluation of Morocco's migration policy since 2014, although this assessment is not comprehensive, it is based on the eleven programs that formed the core of this public policy, classified into four main axes: the legislative framework, regularization of migrants' status, social rights, and institutional governance.

This policy is grounded in six guiding principles: a humanitarian approach, a holistic approach, respect for human rights, adherence to international law, renewal of cooperation foundations, and shared responsibility. It is noteworthy that the "National Strategy on Migration and Asylum" emerged from the convergence of agendas of several national and international actors concerned with migration issues, including the National Human Rights Council, associations representing migrants in Morocco, organizations defending their rights, as well as international partners such as the European Union and the United Nations system concerned with migration and asylum, along with donor entities. This policy was introduced in response to a favorable window of opportunity, implemented a few months before its official announcement. Between September and December 2017, a rapid political momentum was observed, culminating in public initiatives targeting migrants. Furthermore,

¹ Al Hamidi, Marwan. "Sociologist Analyzes Reasons Why Moroccan Minors Are Attached to the Dream of Migration." *Al3omk*, 29 Aug. 2024, <https://cutt.ly/Al3omk960823>. Accessed 6 June 2025.

² Dalouh, Mouna. "Governance of Irregular Migration Management in Morocco: Achievements and Expectations." *MIPA Institute*, 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/yc7metj6>. Accessed 6 June 2025.

this strategy sent strategic messages to Morocco's partners across Africa, particularly following its return to the African Union¹.

The National Strategy for Migration and Asylum includes 11 programs, comprising 7 sectoral programs and 4 cross-cutting programs. The sectoral programs cover education, culture, youth and recreation, health, housing, humanitarian assistance, vocational training, and employment. The cross-cutting programs address migration flow management, combating human trafficking, international cooperation and partnerships, as well as the legal, regulatory, governance, and communication frameworks. This strategy was further detailed into 27 specific objectives and 81 practical measures, highlighting the importance of governance through the establishment of multiple organizational bodies, including a joint ministerial committee chaired by the Prime Minister, a central steering committee, three committees dedicated to sectoral programs, and one committee for cross-cutting programs. Despite the ambitious nature of this strategy, the speed with which it was adopted by public authorities without ensuring the conditions necessary for its implementation led to its practical suspension, leaving it confined to official documents with little tangible impact on the ground².

The migration of children is as old as human history; what is new is its political prominence. The idea of childhood as a stage of innocence requiring protection first emerged after World War II and became firmly established in the following decades with the creation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Moreover, the protection of minors is part of customary international law.³

III. METHODOLOGY

To equip this research with multiple theoretical and procedural concepts that illuminate the stages of its implementation and demonstrate the coherence between the research hypotheses and results, the following methodology and tools were adopted:

¹ Al-Muaizzi, Salah Eddine. *Migration Policy in Morocco: Between European Pressures and Moroccan Maneuvers*. Racines AISBL, 2022, p. 14.

² Ibid.

³ Vives, Luna. p. 5.

Descriptive-Analytical Method: This method will be used to describe and track the motivations behind irregular migration of minors to Spain and to identify the various contexts responsible for this phenomenon. The analytical component will help explore the main effects and implications of irregular migration for minors, particularly the loss of religious and cultural identity and the weakening of ties with Moroccan religiosity.

Quantitative Method: The quantitative approach focuses on breadth by collecting a small amount of information from a large number of individuals. This allows for results based on precise and comprehensive tracking. Statistical data and figures will be employed to study irregular migration of Moroccan minors to Spain in a comprehensive manner, capturing the phenomenon across multiple dimensions and levels.

Qualitative Method: Complementing the quantitative approach, the qualitative method emphasizes depth, collecting extensive information from a smaller number of individuals. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with officials and educators at minors' reception centers to obtain accurate and realistic insights, particularly regarding the behavioral differences of Moroccan children before and after integration.

Deductive Method: This study also employs a deductive approach, which involves reasoning from one or more premises to reach a conclusion according to logical rules. This does not necessarily imply moving from general to specific, but rather from established premises to inferred results.

This multi-method approach ensures a robust analysis of irregular migration among Moroccan minors to Spain, capturing both statistical trends and lived experiences within the Spanish context¹.

Questionnaire: Electronic questionnaires were distributed, consisting of 25 questions related to the context of minor reception centers. These questionnaires were administered to 22 Moroccan participants to obtain accurate and realistic results from within the studied context.

¹ *Al-Mu'jam al-Falsafi: Arabic Language Dictionary*. General Authority for State Printing, 1983/1403 AH, p. 12. Cairo, Egypt.

Type of Questions: The questionnaire included both closed and open-ended questions. Most questions were closed, covering demographics such as gender, age, and some personal information. Closed questions also included response options like “Yes,” “No,” or “Sometimes.” Open-ended questions were included to allow participants to express their answers in their own words, comprising only four questions. Overall, the questions were direct and understandable, taking into account the varied educational levels of the participants.

Interviews: Four semi-structured interviews were conducted with educators and administrators at minor reception centers in Spain. These interviews aimed to enhance the quality of the research by gathering detailed information from a smaller number of individuals, providing deeper insights into the reception environment. Respondents answered spontaneously and sincerely, helping to clarify the reality of the situation and move beyond common stereotypes.

- **Type of Questions:** The interview questions were semi-structured, largely aligned with the main research themes, and open-ended to allow respondents to answer freely. Each interview lasted up to an hour and included 10 questions, ensuring continuity and coherence in the research process.

Sample: A dual sample was chosen within the same context:

1. Young people who experienced irregular migration from Morocco to Spain.
2. Educators and administrators at minor reception centers in Spain.

This dual sample was approached integratively to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Questionnaire Sample:

A small sample of 22 Moroccan youth who had experienced irregular migration and residence in minors’ reception centers was selected. The sample was chosen randomly from a specific area, with the questionnaires distributed among young people who had stayed in minors’ reception centers in the region of Cádiz.

Sample Criteria:

- Each participant must have migrated irregularly from Morocco to Spain.
- Participants' ages range between 18 and 25 years.
- All participants must have experienced residence in a minors' reception center in the region of Cádiz.

Interview Sample:

This sample consists of a number of officials and educators working in minors' reception centers in Spain. A total of four officials were interviewed by phone as a complementary sample to the main one represented by the questionnaires.

Overall Study Population:

The broader population of this research, as indicated from the outset, is Moroccan unaccompanied minors. The study focuses on the issue of preserving religious identity, given its significant role in the life of every individual, whether minor or adult, especially within a European context that is open and markedly different from the original cultural setting.

Specific Study Population

The electronic questionnaires were distributed to young Moroccans who had previously resided in minors' reception centers in the region of Cádiz. Since it was not feasible to cover all individuals across Spain, focusing on this region was considered a practical and effective solution to obtain reliable results. Moreover, this choice was motivated by the difficulty of reaching Moroccan minors currently residing in Spain's reception centers. Therefore, targeting young people who had already experienced these centers in Cádiz allowed us to gather precise data based on their personal experiences.

IV. FINDINGS

The extent of the minor's commitment to prayer prior to migration



Figure 1: It illustrates the commitment of young people to performing prayers prior to their migration to Spain.

The figure 1, presents the percentages related to whether the minor maintained his regular religious practices, specifically prayer, before migrating from Morocco. This was examined in order to obtain findings concerning the preservation of religious identity. As shown, 68.2% of the respondents (15 out of 22) reported that they were committed to prayer in their home country, a relatively high proportion indicating that the majority of the sample maintained this practice. In contrast, 22.7% of the respondents (5 out of 22) indicated that they prayed only occasionally. Finally, 9.1% (2 out of 22) stated that they did not practice prayer regularly in Morocco.

The extent to which juvenile reception centers respect privacy and diversity

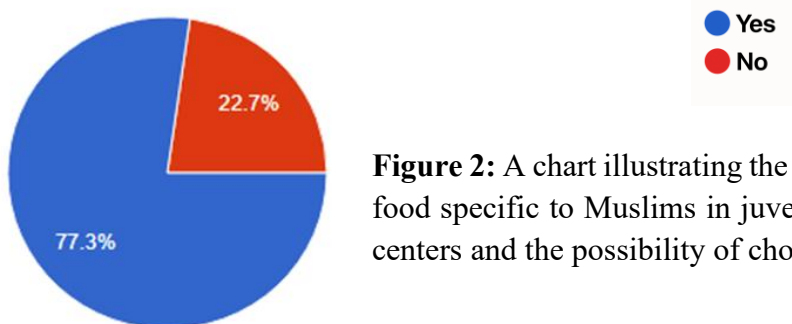


Figure 2: A chart illustrating the availability of food specific to Muslims in juvenile reception centers and the possibility of choosing meals.

The chart above shows that 77.3% of the sample selected Yes, indicating that they had access to halal food options in juvenile reception centers. This percentage corresponds to 17 out of 22 respondents, who reported that choosing meals in accordance with their dietary requirements was possible. In contrast, 22.7% of the respondents (5 out of 22) stated that such an option was not available.

The type of training provided to minors during their stay in juvenile reception centers

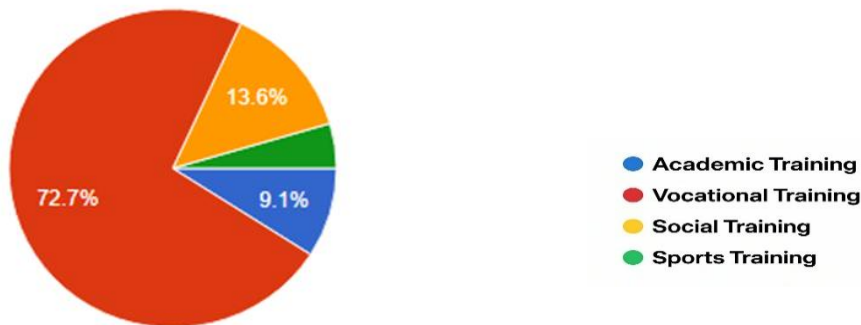


Figure 3: Illustrates the type of training provided to unaccompanied minors during their stay in the reception centers.

The above chart shows that the majority of respondents selected vocational training, accounting for 72.7% (16 out of 22 individuals). Another portion of the sample, 13.6% (3 out of 22), opted for social training. Those who chose academic training represented 9.1% (2 out of 22), while the smallest group, 4.5% (1 out of 22), selected sports training.

V. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

It is not possible to evaluate whether a minor can maintain their religious and cultural identity unless they bring that identity with them from their country of origin. To address this, we asked the sample whether the minors were observant in prayer before migrating. The results show that the majority,

68.2%, maintained regular prayer, 22.7% responded “sometimes,” and 9.1% responded “no.” This indicates that religious identity can be preserved when it is rooted in the country of origin, providing insight into how this identity can be maintained in a new European context, specifically Spain.

The results also show that a large proportion of minors were able to maintain their routine religious practices, such as prayer and fasting, with 95.5% affirming this. The remaining minority responded negatively. Interestingly, the difference between these figures and the previous question suggests that the presence of Moroccan Muslim mentors or peers significantly influences a minor’s ability to uphold religious practices. Such mentors represent an authentic example of Moroccan Muslim identity and values, which helps reinforce these practices.

Regarding the availability of culturally and religiously appropriate meals, 77.3% of respondents indicated that minors’ centers provide halal food, suggesting the presence of at least one Moroccan Muslim mentor or cultural intermediary. The remaining 22.7% reported the absence of such provisions, implying that some centers lack Muslim personnel, which affects the preservation of the minor’s religious and cultural privacy. This highlights the critical role of Muslim mentors in ensuring that minors maintain important religious practices.

Concerning the type of training offered to Moroccan minors during their stay in reception centers, the results indicate a strong focus on vocational training, aimed at ensuring a stable professional future upon leaving the center. Academic, social, and sports training are also provided, but the primary emphasis across most centers is vocational preparation. This approach aims to equip minors with professional skills that can later connect them to companies or factories corresponding to their training.

Discussion of the Quantitative Results:

The results obtained from the questionnaire can be summarized as follows:

- **Preservation of Prayer:** Maintaining prayer practices appears highly feasible, largely depending on the peer group to which the minor is integrated within the center. For instance, some participants who were not observant in Morocco reported being able to maintain their prayers during their stay in the reception center. This highlights the significant

role of positive peer influence within the center, which can either support or hinder religious practice. Overall, 95.5% of respondents maintained their prayer routines in the new reception environment.

- **Religious and Cultural Privacy:** Some reception centers actively strive to respect the religious and cultural needs of Muslim minors, particularly regarding food, with 73.3% of respondents confirming access to halal meals. Conversely, other centers do not adequately consider these aspects of religious and cultural privacy.
- **Type of Training Provided:** Vocational training is the predominant form of education offered to Moroccan minors in reception centers, accounting for 72.7% of responses. This approach aims to guide and prepare minors for their future professional life.

Content from One Interview:

The factors motivating minors to undertake irregular or unauthorized migration to Spain cannot be attributed solely to geographic proximity. Sociologists, however, identify both push and pull factors operating in the country of origin and in the destination context.

Push factors include primarily social and economic conditions related to the minor's situation in Morocco. This represents a strong and fundamental determinant. Another key push factor is the minor's relationship with peers, especially those who have already migrated to Europe, particularly Spain. Connections with family members or acquaintances who have undertaken migration serve as a form of encouragement and motivation for the minor to follow a similar path.

Pull factors are numerous. One significant pull factor is the legal framework in Spain, which provides protection and care for minors, ensuring decent living conditions. Family ties in Spain constitute another pull factor, as minors may be attracted by relatives or acquaintances who can support their integration. Additionally, the broader legal protections and freedoms available to minors within Spanish law contribute to the attractiveness of migration.

In general, the migration of Moroccan minors to Spain is largely driven by economic reasons. Most migrating minors come from disadvantaged social and economic backgrounds, particularly rural areas ("Morocco deep") and urban centers such as Tangier and Tetouan, with a smaller proportion from

Casablanca. Some minors are also influenced by observing the perceived success of relatives or neighbors who have returned from Spain with improved economic conditions, creating an aspirational image of Spain as a land of opportunity. While these emotional motivations exist, economic hardship remains the primary driver of migration.

Qualitative Analysis and Discussion of Interview Results:

The interviews revealed a consistent pattern in the responses of all participants. They indicated that a Moroccan minor migrating to Spain does not necessarily lose their religious or cultural identity, provided they receive proper guidance in the reception center from Moroccan staff and facilitators. Moreover, the child's upbringing and education within their family prior to migration play a crucial role. It raises an important question: did the child bring a religious and cultural identity from their home country to maintain in the new European context, or did they arrive without such awareness? Therefore, the preservation of identity, particularly religious identity, is closely tied to family socialization and education.

The interviews also highlighted that the factors driving the migration of Moroccan minors fluctuate between push factors in the country of origin and pull factors in the destination context. This underscores the importance of employing Moroccan staff and facilitators within Spanish reception centers to create a familiar cultural environment, especially during religious holidays and ceremonies. Such guidance is essential for providing religious and cultural orientation. The absence of Moroccan facilitators can leave minors vulnerable to identity loss, particularly in centers characterized by religious and cultural diversity and potential experiences of discrimination or prejudice from peers of other nationalities. This raises a critical concern: in what kind of environment will the minor live, one that accepts diversity or one marked by high levels of racism?

Abdessalam referred to the idea that many Moroccan minors migrating to Spain have detached from the components of Moroccan religiosity; some turned to Salafism, while others joined various Islamic movements and currents. However, the majority of minors retained the Moroccan style of religiosity. This situation is very complex because the minor cannot distinguish between different styles of religiosity, even though they are aware of diversity

and plurality. When a minor is placed in a group with a different style of religiosity, entering a community with its own structure, principles, and sources, it naturally affects their identity and detaches them from the components of Moroccan religiosity.

Nevertheless, most children maintain their Moroccan religiosity due to two main factors that safeguard the minor in this regard: the first is the emotional, organic, and intellectual connection with their mother and father; the second is that there are 2.5 million Muslims legally residing in Spain, with over 1.5 million of them being Moroccan. This means that most Islamic institutions, organizations, and religious centers are managed by Moroccans. Consequently, the minor does not differentiate between Moroccan religiosity and the principles of religion per se, but rather knows how to defend the Moroccan style of religiosity without necessarily understanding it as the correct form of religion. From the above, it becomes clear that a minor can lose their religious and cultural identity in the following cases:

- Severing communication with the parents, mother and father, or their guardians.
- Absence of Moroccan Muslim supervisors, officials, and educators in the minors' reception centers.
- High religious and cultural diversity in some centers.
- Lack of guidance and upbringing by the child's family before migration.
- Association with groups having a different style of religiosity.
- Detachment from family and friends in Morocco through severed communication.
- Failure to practice habitual religious practices such as prayer and fasting.
- Feeling of loneliness and exposure to racism and discrimination by peers of different nationalities.

Otherwise, the identity of the Moroccan minor migrating to Spain cannot be erased, and it became evident that the first research hypothesis was correct. These findings can also be supported by the first, third, fourth, and fifth hypotheses.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study focused on highlighting the issue of irregular migration from Morocco to Spain, particularly concerning Moroccan minors due to the geographical factor. This phenomenon is considered both a social and humanitarian issue, having witnessed a significant increase, especially in the recent period between 2022 and 2025. This phenomenon revealed a complex problem, which lies in how the irregular migration of Moroccan minors to Spain during the period of sheltering may affect the loss of their religious and cultural identity, and what factors contribute to the erosion of this identity and the disconnection from the components of Moroccan religiosity. This phenomenon presents significant challenges at both the international and national levels.

Our research addressed various aspects of this phenomenon, including the factors and reasons contributing to minors' decisions to migrate, which fluctuate between push and pull factors. Specifically, the pull factors related to the future context and the push factors related to the origin or source context were identified. Given the apparent importance of this topic and considering that we study a vulnerable age group, we deemed it necessary to address certain aspects that previous researchers had not explored in this specific area concerning Moroccan minors. It can be summarized that Moroccan minors decide to migrate for several reasons, the most important of which is to improve difficult family conditions by achieving a better standard of living, as well as reasons related to family breakdown, parental unemployment, marginalization, extreme poverty, and others.

Given the proximity of Spain to Morocco, Moroccan minors find no obstacle in risking and sacrificing their lives to achieve their goals and those of their families. We then examined the issue of the Moroccan minor's transition from the context of their country of origin to a new European context, concluding that this transition significantly contributes to changes in certain forms of religiosity among Moroccan minors in the absence of Moroccan specialists and supervisors in the new context to guide and instruct them. The study also addressed the issue of religious and cultural pluralism in Spanish shelter centers for minors, which creates a form of conflict between groups, each seeking to defend its beliefs by rejecting or criticizing those of other

groups. Consequently, this conflict sometimes leads to confusion and loss of identity among Moroccan minors regarding the preservation of their identity.

The study further summarized findings related to the challenges faced by Moroccan minors in practicing certain religious rituals such as prayer and fasting, particularly since these centers lack designated places of worship. Although Spanish law does not prohibit the practice of religious rituals and everyone has the right to practice their religion freely without harming others, another issue arises from the groups and factions created by minors within the center, which result in conflicts manifested in violence, racism, and sometimes intolerance toward others. In such cases, the problem of losing religious and cultural identity and disconnecting from the components of Moroccan religiosity occurs.

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