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Immigration Across The Strait of Gibraltar

I started to read the book Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits as soon as I saw it was on our book list before the semester started. I was over halfway through it before I had to start reading Things Fall Apart and I was immediately disappointed that I had to stop reading it! I fell in love with the book and I knew I wanted to do my I-Search paper on it. When I read the first chapter of the book I was surprised this was actually happening in Africa. In America we hear a lot about this kind of thing happening from Cuba to Florida and from Mexico into the southern states on the border but I never really thought about it happening in other countries. So after the assignment for the I-Search paper was announced I began looking online for possible topics to write about. I decided I wanted to write about the immigration across the Strait of Gibraltar from Morocco to Spain.

To start my research I started on something easy like Google so I could play around with the topic to see what I could get. I tried to search “Immigration in North Africa” but I did not find anything specific enough to what I wanted. A quick look in the back of my book said the line “illegally cross the Strait of Gibraltar” and I knew I had exactly what I needed. So I typed “immigration across the strait of Gibraltar” and found several things news articles. Azcentral.com talked about how Spain was cracking down on security which would force immigrants to reroute. In the first paragraph Daniel González, who is a writer for The Arizona Republic, describes almost exactly what happens in the book. Daniel writes, “…smugglers have exploited the narrow ocean passageway, ferrying illegal immigrants from Morocco into Spain by the boatload. From there, the migrants were practically free to travel to any one of the other 27 countries that make up the virtually borderless European Union…”( González). He relates this to what is happening in the Arizona desert. The article went on to say that between 2005 and 2007 tens of thousands of illegal immigrants travelled the waters to get to Spain and hundreds drowned. Most of the European countries backed Spain financially so they could get stronger more efficient security. Now that security has been so solid not as many people are trying to immigrate illegally through the Strait.

In another article called, “Spain’s woes fail to deter Africans from life-threatening crossing” Guy Hedgecoe writes about how even though the Spanish economy is not doing well, people are still trying to go to the country illegally. Ana Trías Diez who is a legal advisor for illegal immigrants states, “What really motivates all immigrants, not just African immigrants, to make the decision to move to another country is they’re basically pursuing a dream, just like people used to pursue the American dream” (Guy). She also mentions that many of these people are having a hard time financially and some are even homeless on the streets.

I was finding some great information on Google but I really wanted to get into the library early to find a good book. So I looked up a few different books online and found a couple that we had in the library. So I wrote down the information for the books and went to the Waldo Library. I found a librarian right away and she was able to show me to the two books I found online instantly, which actually really surprised me since it would have taken me at least two times longer to find them. I grabbed both of the books and found a table to start looking through them. I ended up not getting a lot of information out of one of the books so I decided not to use it at all. The second book, called Border Identities was exactly what I needed. An article in the book, written by Henk Driessen, gives a good history of immigration into Spain. He comments that in 1992 the number of people travelling was so high that it broke all the records. He also mentions that in the late 1970s and early 1980s Spain was at an economic high and how most illegal immigrants came to the country and were working in the “booming service sector and in agriculture” (Henk). Unfortunately because they were employed off the books and employers did not have to follow standard protocols that they would with legal citizens that were employed, they were able to under pay and take advantage of the immigrants. The article also provided a map of the trip the immigrates would have taken across the Strait, which was really nice to get a better idea in my head of what it would have looked like and how far it actually was. I was really happy to find this book so easily because it provided me with a lot of information.

Although as much information as the book gave me it was a little too historical and since it was written in the late 1990’s I was not sure how much of it would be outdated or irrelevant so I did not want to use too much of it so I moved on to WMU’s Waldo Library online database where I found several articles. One article came from the Project Muse journal called, “Burning the Past: Moroccan Cinema of Illegal Immigration.” The articles states:

By 2002, as many as one hundred thousand were attempting to cross the Strait illegally each year, even though its waters are some of the most dangerous, unpredictable, and heavily policed in the world. Also by 2002, Spanish authorities had arrested well over thirty thousand immigrants trying to cross the Strait, and the treacherous journey had resulted in at least three thousand five hundred deaths. The actual death toll is probably much higher. The most common method of illegal immigration through the Strait is the *patera*, a small, fragile fishing boat precariously crammed with some twenty-five immigrants. As established through interviews, few who attempt the perilous crossing know how to swim. Despite widespread media reports of attempts ending in disaster, advertising campaigns by the Moroccan government, and the astronomical smugglers’ fees, the number of illegal emigrants remains at alarming levels. (Smolin)

Reading this really put things into perspective for me. It was not about a few people traveling in this boat to Spain like in Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits, it is about how many people get caught and die during this travel and it really makes me wonder if it is worth it. Would it really be worth it to travel in such a dangerous way to get somewhere where you *might* have a chance at a better life? In my personal opinion it really is not because most people, like we saw in Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits, are not able to make a better life for themselves or they end up getting caught trying to cross the border and sent back. So the money and time they spend on the trip is gone and they are left with less than what they had when they first decided to leave.

Another article I found was called “Best Practices to Manage Migration: Morocco-Spain” and written by Joaquin Arango. Arango references the unemployment rate in Spain and how in some providences it reaches 30% and out of the two million foreigners, Moroccans make up 20%. I cannot help but think about how much this hits home. We have an incredibly high unemployment rate in Michigan and in the country as a whole and we have the constant threat of our jobs being sent overseas. I feel like if people from another country were coming into the United States, or Michigan, to be more specific, I would be upset as well, so I can understand where the people of Spain are coming from when they increase border control and send illegal immigrants back to Morocco. Drug smuggling has also become an issue from Morocco to Spain and Spain feels some anger towards Morocco for not trying harder to keep it under control.Spain feels like they are doing all the work to keep the migrants out while Morocco does nothing. Arango discusses how if people in Morocco could leave they would. They did a survey in 1998 for Casablanca’s Le Journal, which stated, “54 percent of Moroccans would “certainly” leave if they could, and another 17 percent would “probably” emigrate. Arango says, “Children as young as 10, so-called mice, are reportedly leaving Morocco because they are most likely to receive social services and be allowed to stay abroad” (Arango).

As I looked for more and more articles on the Library’s online database I was having a hard time finding anything new so I decided to go back through Google search to see if I could find any more news type articles. I ended up finding a website call Migration Information Source which is an ‘.org’ website so I knew the information would be credible. The author of the article, Jorgen Carling, mentions similar information to what I had already found but as I read more of the article I realized they talked about things I had not read yet. First it touched a little deeper onto why people that move from Morocco to Spain fail when they get there successfully. The cost of living in Spain is six times higher than that of Morocco which means when people go there to make a life for themselves they are often homeless and on the streets which makes it hard to get and maintain a job. The most important part of the article I read was the difference between the American/Mexican borders and the Morocco/Spain borders. The American/Mexican border is on land so we can build barriers to help deter people but the Morocco/Spain border is a maritime border so they have to rely on people constantly patrolling and physically watching out for people who may be passing the Strait illegally. Effectively watching the border in this manner is what Spain refers to as Integrated System of External Vigilance or SIVE. Carling explains exactly how this system works in six steps:

1. A small boat with migrants on board approaches the coast.
2. A system of fixed and mobile sensors (radars, infrared cameras, and video cameras) detects the vessel 10 to 25 kilometers from the shore.
3. The control center is alerted and can follow the vessel by remote control of the sensors. At a distance of approximately 5 kilometers from the coast, it is possible to estimate the number of people on board.
4. The vessel's course and time of arrival are estimated.
5. One or more interception units (boats, helicopters, and cars) are deployed in order to intercept the vessel close to the shore.
6. The passengers are apprehended and brought to a reception center. (Migration)

This was really interesting to find since I had no idea how intricate the system was to catch illegal immigrants in the action. Carling also touches on how smugglers and migrants have changed the way they smuggle migrants in order to get around the strict routines of SIVE. Smugglers started to build faster boats with motors and make them bigger so they could fit around seventy people on it. Although, crossing the Strait became more dangerous in that smugglers were getting caught more often. The smugglers decided to start sending the migrants off onto the boats without them being there so they could avoid arrest. Carling goes on to say, “Knowing that the boat will be lost is an incentive to build it cheaply, and not having to carry fuel for the return trip allows space for even more migrants. Inexperienced migrants at the helm, poorly constructed or dilapidated boats, crowding on board, and insufficient fuel are all factors that increase the risks of the journey” (Carling). This article surprised me again by talking about why SIVE does not actually work. Carling mentions that it is no longer just Moroccans that migrate to Spain but now there are a lot of sub-Saharan Africans who are migrating from Morocco to Spain as well, and when these people are being captured Spain does not always know where to send them or even if they can send them back to their original country. According to Carling, migrants can only be kept in a reception center for 40 days and if they cannot be returned to their country of origin within those 40 days they are released. Although the illegal immigrants are kept from being able to get jobs but after a while, “some have eventually obtained residence permits due to regularization” (Carling). Carling concludes that SIVE only works through getting the information out there that there is a good chance they will get caught and sent back to their country, which would keep people from even trying to cross the Strait.

Overall I was really satisfied with the information I found concerning the illegal immigration from Morocco to Spain through the Strait of Gibraltar. Before reading Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits I had no idea this was even happening and after doing the research I had no idea how much it happens every day, even today. I was really stunned at how many people attempt to make the trip across the Strait, especially now when Spain’s economy is not at its greatest and the amped up security that is waiting for their arrival. It also makes me look at the immigration issues we have in America and how we handle keeping illegal immigrants out of our country as far as procedures like Spain has, such as SIVE. One thing that I could not find that I was really hoping to find was something from the point of view of someone who lives in Morocco, who wants to try to cross the Strait. I think it would be really interesting to get the other side of the story, not unlike what we read in Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits.

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