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Irregular Migration and the Media: Media Coverage from a Historical Perspective

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Abstract:

Irregular migration is a multifaceted global issue influenced by economic, social, political, and environmental dynamics. The media plays a decisive role in shaping how societies perceive this phenomenon, often framing it through lenses that reflect broader ideological and political contexts. Historically, traditional media such as newspapers, radio, and television portrayed irregular migration with dramatic emphasis on mass movements, humanitarian crises, and state responses. These narratives oscillated between representing migrants as victims of poverty and conflict, and framing them as threats to security, identity, or economic stability.

The rise of digital and social media has transformed these portrayals, making coverage more immediate, participatory, and polarized. While humanitarian discourses highlight empathy and solidarity, exclusionary narratives reinforce fear, xenophobia, and restrictive policies.

This study examines irregular migration and media coverage from a historical perspective, emphasizing continuities and changes in media narratives. It argues that critical analysis of these transformations is vital for developing balanced communication strategies that respect human dignity while addressing the complex realities of irregular migration.

Keywords: Irregular Migration; Media; Coverage; History.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Human migration across history, from one region to another, is an ancient phenomenon and one of the major driving forces of human development. The Arab region, in particular, serves as a striking example, having witnessed successive waves of migration since the dawn of time. These include the Semitic migrations from the Arabian Peninsula toward surrounding areas, such as the Canaanite and Amorite movements. The Islamic expansion represented the latest Semitic migration in this context. While its primary motivation was religious, earlier Semitic migrations were primarily economic. Indeed, whenever livelihoods became scarce in one area, its inhabitants sought new horizons elsewhere.

Life conditions and environmental factors have frequently compelled individuals to relocate, with famine, poverty, earthquakes, floods, disease outbreaks, wars, and especially civil wars acting as key drivers of migration.

In contemporary times, a recent United Nations report identified four primary factors behind mass, irregular youth migration: (1) the rapid growth of youth populations in developing countries, (2) the decline in employment opportunities, (3) the widening disparities between rich and poor countries and the growing awareness of these gaps, and (4) the increasing ease of travel, facilitated by advances in international communications and transportation.

While irregular migration essentially refers to individuals crossing borders clandestinely, it has since the early 1990s gradually evolved into an organized activity managed by networks and groups that manipulate and circumvent legal systems at minimal risk. This development prompted the United Nations to adopt the Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and its supplementary protocols, notably the Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea, and Air, and the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children.

2. Definition of Migration and Categories of Irregular Migrants

In demographic studies, migration is defined as the individual or collective movement from one location to another in search of improved social, economic, religious, or political conditions. From a sociological perspective, migration reflects a change in social status, such as a shift in profession or social class.

Irregular migrants may be classified into three categories:(1)

1. Individuals who enter host countries illegally and fail to regularize their legal status.

2. Individuals who enter legally but remain after their residence permits expire.

3. Individuals who engage in unauthorized employment while holding valid residence permits.

The International Labour Organization estimates that irregular migration constitutes between 10–15% of the global migrant population, which the United Nations most recently estimated at around 180 million people a figure also confirmed by the International Organization for Migration.

3. Push and Pull Factors Behind Migration, Especially Irregular Migration

Push factors, prevalent in migrant-sending countries, include unemployment, underemployment, poverty, and population growth, accompanied by an expansion of the labor force.

Pull factors, found in destination countries, include increased demand for labor in specific sectors, demographic aging and rising life expectancy (leading to labor shortages), and relatively small domestic workforces compared with available resources. This compels some countries, such as those in the Gulf region, to import foreign labor. Another factor is the unwillingness of citizens to work in certain

(1) Ahmad Al-Rabay'ah. Studies in the Theory of Migration and Its Social and Cultural Problems, Dar Al-Thaqafa wal-Funun, Amman ,1987, pp. 12–13.

occupations typically those considered dirty or dangerous which creates opportunities for foreign workers willing to accept such jobs.(2)

In addition to push and pull factors, the development of communication and transportation systems has expanded awareness among populations in poor countries about living standards in more advanced nations, thereby reinforcing migration trends.(3)

4. Causes of Migration

4.1 Economic Causes

Migration has long been a central phenomenon in human history, shaping societies, economies, and cultures across the globe. Among the various factors driving migration, economic causes stand out as the most influential and persistent. In both historical and contemporary contexts, individuals and communities have left their places of origin in search of improved economic opportunities, better living standards, and sustainable livelihoods. Economic migration often reflects the uneven distribution of resources, employment opportunities, and wages between regions, countries, and even within the same nation.(4)

At the macro level, structural economic disparities such as poverty, underdevelopment, unemployment, and income inequality create strong push factors that compel individuals to seek opportunities elsewhere. For example, lack of access to stable employment and low wages in developing regions frequently motivate skilled and unskilled workers alike to migrate toward economically advanced countries. At the same time, globalization, technological advancement, and the liberalization of labor markets have acted as pull factors by creating new demand for labor in host countries,

(2) Mohamed Hussein Sadeq Hassan. External Migration and Its Effects on Social Structure: A Field Study on the Villages of Khuzam and Al-Ayyayesha in Qena Governorate. Unpublished Master's Thesis, Department of Sociology, Faculty of Arts, South Valley University, 1998, pp. 6–7.
(3) Bauer, Zimmermann, Causes of international migration, Regional and Urban Perspectives on International Migration, England; Brookfield, london, 2009, pp. 95.
(4) Mohamed Hussein Sadeq Hassan. previous reference,p19.

particularly in sectors such as construction, healthcare, and information technology.(5)

Moreover, migration driven by economic causes cannot be separated from other interrelated dimensions, such as demographic pressures, political stability, and social networks that facilitate mobility. Remittances sent by migrants to their home countries further reinforce the economic dimension of migration, as they contribute significantly to household income, poverty reduction, and even national development. For many developing nations, remittances represent a critical source of foreign currency and a stabilizing factor for domestic economies.(6)

Understanding the economic causes of migration, therefore, is crucial not only for grasping the motivations behind individual and collective decisions to move but also for shaping policies that balance the needs of sending and receiving countries. Addressing these causes requires nuanced approaches that consider labor market demands, economic inequalities, and the broader challenges of globalization. Economic causes are closely tied to the stagnation of economies in the southern Mediterranean. Despite possessing abundant natural resources, weak industrial development has left agriculture as the main economic reliance. Yet, this sector has proven incapable of meeting people's needs due to desertification, drought, and other challenges. Consequently, widespread poverty and unemployment two major drivers of migration have fueled migration toward European countries. These pressures are further compounded by consistently high demographic growth rates.(7)

4.2 Labor Market Dynamics

Unlike in receiving countries, population growth remains relatively high in sending countries, despite the progress of

(5) Ahmad Al-Rabay'ah. previous reference, p22.
(6) Bauer, Zimmermann, previous referenc, p113
(7) Al-Sheikh Al-Imam Muhammad ibn Abi Bakr Al-Razi. Mukhtar Al-Sihah, Dar Al-Hadith, Cairo, 2003, pp. 368–369.

demographic transition. This contributes to a growing active labor force, which exacerbates pressure on the labor market. Unemployment, especially among young people and university graduates, drives increasing numbers toward irregular migration as an escape from labor market imbalances.(8)

4.3 Social Causes

Irregular migration can be explained by contrasting demographic dynamics: sending countries face rising populations that strain their ability to provide sufficient employment, housing, and social services, while receiving countries face shrinking youth populations. According to UN estimates, the population of Mediterranean countries was more than 300 million in 1997 and is projected to reach 500 million by 2025.(9)

One of the first consequences of this demographic explosion is unemployment. For employed individuals, low wages serve as justification to migrate in pursuit of higher earnings, while for the unemployed, the lack of opportunities offers an even stronger motive. This makes unemployment one of the main causes of outward migration, particularly toward Europe. Importantly, unemployment affects individuals across all educational and professional levels, even those holding advanced degrees.(10)

The perception of migration as a path to social success also contributes, as returning migrants often display symbols of prosperity cars, real estate investments, or consumer goods images amplified by the media and serving to inspire new migration waves.

4.4 Political, Security, and Legal Causes

Migration is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that

(8) Ahmad Al-Rabay'ah. previous reference, p29.
(9) Browne, Erik, Drivers of irregular migration in North Africa. GSDRC Helpdesk Research Report 1271, 2015, p625.
(10) Sheikh Ali Miftah Al-Shuwayt. From the Sayings of the Messenger of Allah (Peace Be Upon Him). 1st ed, Dar Rabaḥ, Libya ,2007, p. 5.

extends beyond economic considerations to include political, security, and legal dimensions. While many individuals migrate in search of better economic opportunities, others are compelled to move due to instability, conflict, persecution, or restrictive legal frameworks in their countries of origin. Political, security, and legal causes often operate simultaneously, creating powerful push and pull factors that shape global migration patterns. From a political perspective, authoritarian regimes, weak governance, corruption, and lack of political freedoms often drive individuals to seek safer and more democratic environments. Political persecution, discrimination based on ethnicity, religion, or political opinion, and systemic violations of human rights represent key triggers of forced migration.(11)

Security-related causes are equally significant. Armed conflicts, terrorism, civil wars, and generalized violence create unsafe living conditions, pushing millions to flee their homelands in search of security. Natural disasters exacerbated by weak state responses also contribute to insecurity, further reinforcing the urgency of migration. Refugee crises in different regions of the world illustrate how security threats remain one of the most pressing drivers of mass displacement. Legal causes, on the other hand, highlight the role of laws, policies, and international frameworks in shaping migration. Restrictive immigration laws, lack of legal pathways for employment or asylum, and inadequate protection mechanisms in origin or transit countries force many to resort to irregular migration. Conversely, inclusive legal systems, humanitarian visas, and protective asylum policies in host countries often serve as pull factors that attract migrants seeking stability and recognition of their rights.(12)

Understanding the interplay of political, security, and legal causes of migration is crucial for policymakers and researchers. These factors not only determine the immediate motivations behind migration but also shape the long-term integration and protection of

(11) Browne, Erik, previous reference, p632.
(12) Sheikh Ali Miftah Al-Shuwayt. previous reference, p12.

migrants and refugees. Addressing these causes requires comprehensive strategies that combine conflict resolution, protection of human rights, legal reforms, and international cooperation. The late 20th century witnessed significant refugee movements caused by wars, civil conflicts, and human rights violations linked to ethnic, religious, or political persecution. These conditions forced people to flee unsafe areas for safer ones, in what is known as forced migration or political asylum.(13)

The Arab–Israeli wars significantly influenced migration patterns, displacing Palestinians and Lebanese to the Gulf, the Maghreb, and Europe. Political opposition movements in some Arab countries also sought refuge abroad to escape persecution. Palestinian displacement continues, as communities expelled by Israel have sought refuge in countries with more flexible labor conditions.(14)

4.5 Environmental and Geographic Causes

Geographic proximity to the Mediterranean has facilitated migration, making it a central gateway between Africa and Europe. Harsh environmental conditions such as desertification, drought, and sand encroachment further drive populations from arid regions.

Foreign labor has become a cornerstone of Gulf economies: according to the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, foreigners represent 90% of the workforce in the UAE, 86% in Qatar, 81% in Kuwait, 71% in Bahrain, 59% in Oman, and 50% in Saudi Arabia.

At the international level, several agreements protect migrant workers, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, the Convention on the

(13) Ibid,p19.
(14) Media Department, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Refugees Magazine, No. 2, 1997, p. 18.

Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Convention against Torture, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. These instruments safeguard basic rights, often violated in the case of migrant workers, particularly those subjected to trafficking, debt bondage, or exploitative labor.

In the Arab context, some provisions have been incorporated into the Arab Charter on Human Rights, adopted in 1994 and enforced in 2008 after ratification by seven Arab states. The Charter was welcomed internationally as a positive step toward enhancing protection of individuals in the Arab region, ensuring equality and freedom from discrimination on grounds of race, gender, language, religion, political opinion, national or social origin, or wealth.(15)

5. Legal Frameworks Penalizing Migrant Smuggling

5.1 Defining and Criminalizing Smuggling

Article 3 of the Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants defines smuggling as the procurement of a person's illegal entry into a state of which they are not a national or permanent resident, in exchange for financial or material benefit. Article 6 obliges state parties to criminalize migrant smuggling, including participation, facilitation, or aiding in its commission.

Lebanese criminal law regulates entry, stay, and departure under the Foreigners Law of 1962, penalizing unauthorized entry with imprisonment from one month to three years, fines, and deportation. It further criminalizes false identity declarations or forged documents.(16)

Additionally, Decision No. 2115 of 1923 penalizes clandestine boarding of vessels and those assisting migrants with imprisonment ranging from six days to six months.

(15) Abdullah Abdel-Ghani Ghanem. The Migrants: A Socio-Anthropological Study. 2nd ed. The Modern University Office, Alexandria , 2002, p. 15.
(16) Abdelkader Al-Qasir. Rural-to-Urban Migration: A Social Field Study on Migration from Villages to Cities in Morocco. Dar Al-Nahda Al-Arabiya, Beirut , 2006, p. 105.

5.2 Forgery of Identity and Travel Documents

Article 463 of the Lebanese Penal Code criminalizes forging passports, identity documents, or entry visas with imprisonment from six months to three years. This aligns with Article 6(b) of the Protocol, requiring states to criminalize the production, procurement, or possession of fraudulent travel documents for smuggling purposes.(17)

6. Media Coverage of the Phenomenon

The revolution in communications and globalization has made the world a small village, enabling youth in developing countries to compare their living conditions with those in developed nations. This awareness, combined with Europe's geographic proximity, declining populations, and demand for labor in sectors shunned by Europeans (such as agriculture, construction, and low-skilled services), has further fueled migration aspirations.(18)

7. Possible Solutions and Policy Directions

Addressing irregular migration cannot be achieved through quick fixes; rather, it requires long-term international strategies that integrate security, legal, and media dimensions. Among the key measures proposed are:(19)

1. Developing national labor databases and studies.
2. Providing international support for governments and researchers to forecast migration trends.
3. Creating academic and research exchange networks between sending and receiving countries.
4. Identifying labor market needs in receiving countries.

(17) Tillin Smith. Fundamentals of Demography. Translated by Mohamed El-Sayed Ghallab et al. Dar Al-Fikr Al-Arabi, Cairo, 2001, p. 499.
(18) Anwar Atiya Al-Adl. Population and Development, Dar Al-Ma'rifa Al-Jami'iya, Alexandria , 2007, pp. 241–242.
(19) Mohamed Hussein Sadeq Hassan. External Migration and Its Effects on Class Structure, previously cited reference, p. 71.

5. Enhancing judicial, security, and legislative cooperation while respecting migrant rights.
6. Strengthening border control capacities.
7. Conducting awareness campaigns to inform youth of the risks of irregular migration.
8. Expanding domestic job opportunities through education, vocational training, and alignment of labor policies with current and future market needs.
9. Fostering Arab regional cooperation to combat smuggling networks.(20)
10. Ratifying international conventions protecting human rights.
11. Enforcing stricter monitoring of labor rights violations and ensuring accountability.(21)

Conclusion

The issue of irregular migration, like other pressing global challenges, reflects humanity's struggle to manage crises tied to dignity and basic rights. Humanity was created in honor, entrusted with the mission of stewardship on Earth, and endowed with the means for survival and prosperity. These rights belong to all individuals by virtue of their humanity: "And He has subjected to you whatever is in the heavens and whatever is in the earth—all from Him" (Qur'an 45:13).

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(20) Anwar Atiya Al-Adl. Population and Development, previously cited reference, p 246.
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