

The Problem of Irregular Migration among Children: A Study of Its Causes and Risks

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Abstract:

The phenomenon of irregular migration among children represents one of the most significant contemporary issues at the forefront of international and national concerns. It may be said that the past century was preeminently the century of migration from the south to the north, undertaken with a view to improving economic and social conditions, particularly in light of the global trend towards economic globalisation and the liberalisation of trade restrictions. This requires the opening of borders and the easing of restrictions on goods and the movement of capital, with the consequent economic and social effects on developing and poor states. These negative repercussions have contributed substantially, on the one hand, to the emergence and crystallisation of the concept of human security and, on the other hand, to the acceleration of illegal migration to create better living conditions for individuals.

Keywords: Irregular migration; migrant children; unaccompanied minors; human trafficking and smuggling; migration risks

Introduction:

The phenomenon of irregular, unlawful, or clandestine migration has assumed different dimensions across the political, economic, social, and security spheres. It has imposed on states, whether those receiving large numbers of irregular migrants or those from which these human groups depart, the latter often being developing states or states in the process of development, the necessity of adopting a range of security mechanisms as one of the most important solutions for confronting clandestine migration.

The recent increase in the number of migrants has led various states worldwide to take an interest in the phenomenon and to make it one of their priorities because of its close connection with other phenomena, foremost terrorism. Children themselves have not been spared this phenomenon. The facts and reports relating to the spread of irregular migration among this category indicate a marked and rapid increase, which makes it necessary for all specialists in their various fields to grasp the social, economic, and security aspects related to the phenomenon and to examine them carefully to limit the growing indicators of the attraction of such vulnerable groups to these scourges and phenomena, which may lead them toward an obscure and tragic path.

Importance of the Subject:

Through this study, we attempt to focus on the subject of irregular migration in view of the alarming rise and spread of the phenomenon, which has made it an issue of the hour, and in view of the other complex repercussions it has produced, such as suicide, fighting, being drawn into criminal groups, and others. Although one may speak of the entitlement of this vulnerable category, as well as other members of the same society, to live a dignified life and enjoy minimum rights, which have not been available to the peoples of migrant-sending states, this has affected their behaviour and intellectual orientations and has narrowed their freedoms so that migration has become their only option in search of a better life. The matter, however, has not stopped there; rather, it has gone beyond that to attract children into the ranks of migrants without considering the consequences.

Research Problem:

Our attempt to address the subject of irregular migration among children is intended to demonstrate the danger of the phenomenon and its negative effects on this vulnerable category, as well as the future repercussions that result from it, because of the phenomenon's association with complex and dangerous factors, foremost including terrorism and organised crime.

On this basis, through this paper, we attempt to do the following:

- Determine the nature of the phenomenon of irregular migration and the factors involved in its spread.
- The risks underlying irregular migration and its repercussions for children should be highlighted.

Section One: A Conceptual Introduction to the Study

Subsection One: The Concept of Irregular Migration

The Al-Kafi Dictionary of Arabic states that migration means estrangement, departure from one land to another, or moving from one land to another in pursuit of livelihood.¹

Several designations, such as 'irregular' or 'illegal' migration, refer to clandestine migration. According to the Algerian legislature, it is a departure from the national territory by means contrary to law, whether through border posts, using fraudulent means such as forged documents or impersonation to avoid legal procedures, or through unofficial outlets.² Thus, it may be said that an individual performs irregular migration by following unlawful methods (forgery, travel by boat, and so forth) or by circumventing a lawful method and then transforming it into an unlawful one.³

Numerous definitions of irregular migration have been given, but they do not appear to differ greatly in substance. According to one definition, "irregular migration means that migrants enter the country without visas or prior authorisations"; according to another, "irregular

¹ Al-Kafi Dictionary, 3rd ed. (Beirut: Al-Matbouat Company for Distribution and Publishing, 1994), 1055.

² Rabah Tayebi, Irregular Migration (al-Harga) in Algeria through the Written Press: An Analytical Study of the Daily Newspaper Echourouk, 1 January 2017-31 December 2007, master's thesis, Faculty of Political Science and Media, University of Algiers, 2008-9, 21.

³ Sahnoun Oum El Kheir, "Irregular Migration among Algerian Youth: Causes and Factors," Studies in Development and Society 4, no. 1, Hassiba Benbouali University of Chlef, Algeria, June 2017, 312.

migration is migration conducted by illegal methods, owing to the difficulty of travel and the difficulty of legal migration, since travel procedures have become complicated and legal migration has become almost impossible. "4

It is difficult to determine an exact international concept of migration. In general, however, irregular migration is defined as a set of cases that includes the entry or residence of persons in a state in a manner contrary to its laws, such as entry without authorisation, victims of trafficking in persons, rejected asylum seekers, or circumvention of migration laws by means such as sham marriage.⁵

Subsection Two: Drivers of the Growth of Irregular Migration

Irregular migration among children is experiencing marked escalation because of the interaction of several factors, among which are the influence of technology and social media, which reinforce the image of migration as a means of welfare. Minors often do not understand the risks associated with this decision, which requires states to establish protective mechanisms and study the reasons for the phenomenon's spread to limit its dangerous effects on children.

The phenomenon of irregular migration is attributable to several causes, despite the economic factor emerging as a principal driver of the pursuit of improved living conditions and the willingness to bear risks to achieve them. This phenomenon, however, is also affected by other factors that are no less important, such as social, political, security, and even religious conditions, as well as various factors that contribute to its spread.⁶

The continuous increase in irregular migration has transformed it from a mere phenomenon into a serious problem, especially with the spread of human-smuggling networks across land and sea. The economic factor is among the most prominent causes of this phenomenon, along with other factors, which are clarified below.⁷

First: Drivers Related to the Economic and Social Aspect

Some refer to these causes as classical, since they constitute the original factor in the emergence of migration. The economic motive for migration is characterised by its considerable capacity to influence the decision to migrate, as well as the type of migration, whether permanent or temporary.⁸

These causes may be summarised as unemployment, low wages, and a declining standard of living, from which these migrants suffer in their homelands. Conversely, they aspire to the ideal life in countries of migration, represented by rewarding wages, facilities for scientific research, recognition, and other factors and material incentives that attract individuals and competencies to those countries.⁹

⁴ Abdullah Ali Abbo, "International Efforts to Combat Illegal Migration," Journal of Sharia and Law, Faculty of Law, no. 65, United Arab Emirates University, April 2016, 181-82.

⁵ Saad Rashid, The Reality of Irregular Migration in Algeria from the Perspective of Human Security, master's thesis, Mohamed Khider University of Biskra, Algeria, 2011-12, 15-16.

⁶ Abbo, "International Efforts to Combat Illegal Migration," 222.

⁷ Security and Life, special issue on combating illegal migration, no. 357, Naif Arab University for Security Sciences, Safar 1433, 59.

⁸ Rashid, Reality of Irregular Migration in Algeria, 55.

⁹ Hamdi Shaaban, "Illegal Migration: Necessity and Need," research paper, Security Media Centre, Arab Republic of Egypt, 6.

The social reasons driving irregular migration include the following:

- Weak loyalty and belonging to the state, family disintegration, and poor social relations.¹⁰
- Religious persecution in the states from which people infiltrate.
- The pursuit of imposing the sectarian ideology of the state, through which people are infiltrated.¹¹

Second: Drivers Related to the Political and Security Aspect

Security and political reasons are among the most important factors that have accelerated the pace of irregular migration. International migration has become increasingly affected over time by political factors, and these political factors are represented as follows:

- The phenomenon of population migration that takes place in response to armed invasion, threats, seizure, and any external military intervention that may lead to external migration as a result of political instability.
- Local political pressure resulting from the absence of democracy, the entrenchment of dictatorial regimes, internal revolutions, military coups, or certain exceptional circumstances such as international sanctions imposed on states,¹² as well as the confiscation of freedoms and political persecution, which drive migrants to seek safety in other states.¹³

Third: Drivers Related to Geographical Location and the Environmental Sphere

Geographical and environmental location plays an important role in accelerating irregular migration among children, as some states become transit or departure zones because of proximity or weak oversight, which also facilitates smuggling activities. Climate change and the deterioration of natural resources also promote migration in search of better living conditions.

Natural or environmental factors have a significant effect on migration rates abroad. A harsh environment, characterised by heat, drought, and natural disasters, creates areas that force populations to relocate, such as those associated with volcanic eruptions and epidemics. These and other causes have led individuals to leave their places, whether on a small scale or through social movements.¹⁴ Added to this is the factor of geographical proximity, as indicated above, which explains, for example, the migration of Mexicans to America and Indonesians to Malaysia... and Europe, since Europe is only 14 km from the Moroccan coast, particularly the Spanish coast.¹⁵

Fourth: Drivers Related to the Demographic Factors

Demographic factors are among the most prominent causes of the increase in irregular migration, especially among children, as a result of weak opportunities and poor living conditions, which reinforce the feeling of marginalisation and lead them to regard it as a way out. Population growth, a decline in living standards, political instability, and a youthful age structure in developing states are all factors that increase unemployment and drive people

¹⁰ Abbo, "International Efforts to Combat Illegal Migration," 192.

¹¹ Security and Life, special issue on combating illegal migration, 60.

¹² Rashid, Reality of Irregular Migration in Algeria, 62.

¹³ Abbo, "International Efforts to Combat Illegal Migration," 193.

¹⁴ Rashid, Reality of Irregular Migration in Algeria, 66.

¹⁵ Abbo, "International Efforts to Combat Illegal Migration," 193-94.

toward illegal migration, particularly in comparison with receiving states that suffer from population aging.¹⁶

Section Two: Risks of Irregular Migration for Children: A Reading of Indicators and Challenges

Smugglers have not excluded children and women; they are transported in unsafe boats, leading to tragic drowning incidents. Statistics from the United Nations show that approximately 55,700 children arrived in Europe by sea in 2023, an increase of 58 per cent over 2022. A large proportion of them were unaccompanied, at approximately 69 per cent (35,500 children), with the highest arrival rates recorded in Italy and Spain.¹⁷

In this regard, Farwiz Jamal, Professor of Psychiatry at Cairo University, attributed the use of children in irregular migration to two reasons:

- First, to elicit sympathy from the country to which they migrate because children are revered in European states;
- Second: A migrant who has children has priority in work and in admission to refugee camps.

Subsection One: Indicators of Irregular Migration among Children

The world is witnessing a dangerous increase in irregular migration among children, including infants, which constitutes a challenge for sending and receiving states. In Spain, the entry of more than 5,100 irregular migrant children was recorded in 2023, with a noticeable subsequent increase; Moroccans represent a significant proportion, alongside Algerians. Despite the availability of facilities for obtaining work and residence, their integration remains difficult, as a large proportion of them neither work nor contribute to social security.¹⁸

The Algerian League for the Defence of Human Rights confirms that the available statistics do not reflect the real number of Algerian irregular migrants, as some manage to reach their destination, while others die at sea. Ghazaouet is the closest point to Spain, while Mostaganem and Sidi Salem in Annaba are the principal departure points for Spain and Italy. Smuggling operations are often carried out through simple, unorganised networks.¹⁹

The phenomenon of irregular migration among children is not limited to Algeria alone; it extends to other states, such as Libya, where unstable security and political conditions and weak oversight bodies have contributed to the aggravation and spread of the phenomenon.²⁰

¹⁶ Rashid, Reality of Irregular Migration in Algeria, 67.

¹⁷ See the website: [https://www.migrationdataportal.org/themes/child-and-young-migrants#:~:text=Approximately%2055%2C700%20children%20\(23%25%20girls,Guatemala%20\(CBP%2C%202023\).](https://www.migrationdataportal.org/themes/child-and-young-migrants#:~:text=Approximately%2055%2C700%20children%20(23%25%20girls,Guatemala%20(CBP%2C%202023).)

¹⁸ See the website: [https://www.humanium.org/en/the-current-struggle-of-migrant-children-in-spain/#:~:text=Rising%20numbers%20and%20the%20most,additionally%20\(InfoMigrants%2C%202024\).](https://www.humanium.org/en/the-current-struggle-of-migrant-children-in-spain/#:~:text=Rising%20numbers%20and%20the%20most,additionally%20(InfoMigrants%2C%202024).)

¹⁹ Sahnoun, "Irregular Migration among Algerian Youth," 10-11.

²⁰ UNICEF report, A Deadly Journey for Children: The Central Mediterranean Migration Route, Child Alert, February 2017, 2. See the website:

<https://www.unicef.org/ar/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D8%AD%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%A9/%D8%B1%D8%AD%D9%84%D8%A9-%D9%85%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%AA%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B7%D9%81%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%B7%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%82->

Morocco is experiencing an increase in the migration of minor children, which has shifted from individual cases to large numbers because of its position as a link between Africa and Europe. With respect to sex, the majority of Moroccan children who migrate clandestinely are male.²¹

Subsection Two: Effects and Repercussions of Irregular Migration on Children

Most studies consider that irregular migration among children entails psychological and social risks such as exploitation, violence, ill-treatment, sexual assault, death, trafficking, extortion, kidnapping, theft, and others.²²

States receiving irregular migrants now face a challenge that requires careful handling, alongside the need to balance humanitarian considerations with the protection of their societies' stability. With the increasing flow of migrants, especially children, the need for concerted international efforts to combat this phenomenon has emerged; it is no longer a local or regional phenomenon but has become a global problem.²³

This tragic situation reflects great suffering for the Moroccan childhood, as civil society organisations, especially in Spain, have begun to warn of the worsening of the phenomenon and the accompanying risks to the lives of minor children, including exploitation. This phenomenon also presents serious internal and external challenges affecting the rights of the child, which constitute an international obligation.²⁴ for the states from which groups of migrants infiltrate.

First: Economic and Social Effects

Among the most important and prominent repercussions in the social sphere are the following:

- The phenomenon of family disintegration and social decay, which has contributed to the increasing migration of women and children, since most migration laws in receiving states work to guarantee the rights of migrant children as a vulnerable category.
- The illegal exploitation of minor migrants, which may lead them to live in a difficult environment that exposes them to the harshest experiences of life, such as their exploitation by criminal networks with diverse objectives. These expose them to unlimited human rights violations, as they are viewed as human commodities and are compelled to perform dangerous activities incompatible with their age and social circumstances.

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²⁰ Karim Mouttaqi, *Clandestine Migration of Moroccan Minor Children towards Europe: A Study in Light of International Covenants and National Legislation*, thesis for the Diploma of Advanced Studies in Private Law, Family and Child Research Unit, Faculty of Legal, Economic, and Social Sciences, Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University, Fez, Morocco. See the website: <https://www.droitentreprise.com/1585/>.

²¹ Karim Mouttaqi, *Clandestine Migration of Moroccan Minor Children towards Europe: A Study in Light of International Covenants and National Legislation*, thesis for the Diploma of Advanced Studies in Private Law, Family and Child Research Unit, Faculty of Legal, Economic, and Social Sciences, Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University, Fez, Morocco. See the website: <https://www.droitentreprise.com/1585/>.

²² UNICEF report, *A Deadly Journey for Children*, 5–13.

²³ Abbo, "International Efforts to Combat Illegal Migration," 199.

²⁴ Mouttaqi, *Clandestine Migration of Moroccan Minor Children*, 14.

With respect to the economic aspect:

Irregular migration has economic repercussions at various levels, especially for the category of children, where one finds the spread of the following:

- Exploitation, smuggling of migrants, and subjecting them to harsh conditions; in many cases, these migrants lose the money paid because smuggling takes place clandestinely and through intermediaries.
- The spread of fictitious projects;
- The increase in money laundering crimes.

Added to this is the economic impact borne by the families of clandestine migrants after the death of the harrag in a foreign country. In addition to paying a sum to obtain the person's body, the cost of DNA testing may exceed it, as may the transport of the body and the value of the coffin...²⁵ Moreover, other economic factors affect work and production, such as labor shortages.

Second: Security Effects

With respect to the security effects of the phenomenon, it may be said that it constitutes a threat both to:

1. Migration-receiving states: With respect to the loss of disciplined guidance for children, which may result in children and young people who are morally and behaviorally deviant and who gradually move toward attempting to assert themselves by pressuring society to recognise them by all means, whether through violence, destruction, demonstrations, or repeated strikes to improve living and working conditions;
 - The exploitation of children by gangs and terrorist groups to destabilise security and increase the crime of trafficking among people.
2. Migration-sending states:
 - The spread of fraud and exploitation;
 - The expansion of the black market and currency crimes and the emergence of crimes such as smuggling, money laundering, and other operations that obstruct development in the country.²⁶

Moreover, security risks are considered the worst, arising from the emergence of terrorist cells and the spread of destructive elements and extremist ideas, to create a generation hostile to the receiving state, destabilise its stability and security, and increase sedition, political disturbances, and disputes among states.²⁷

Migration may be regarded as a source of cultural exchange and rapprochement among civilisations and as a framework for strengthening dialogue and international cooperation. In the absence of organisation, however, it becomes a source of problems requiring intervention to limit its negative effects, making it a priority for global policies because of the economic and security threats it may pose. The matter becomes more dangerous when it includes minor

²⁵ Tayebi, Irregular Migration (al-Harga) in Algeria, 61.

²⁶ Shaaban, "Illegal Migration," 10-11.

²⁷ Abbo, "International Efforts to Combat Illegal Migration," 198.

children who need special care, as they may be exposed to exploitation by organised crime networks.²⁸

Subsection Three: Routes of Irregular Migration among Children: A Mode of Smuggling and Means of Exploitation

The irregular migration of children is among the most dangerous forms of migration at present, not only because of the direct threat it poses to their lives but also because of the possibility of their involvement in irregular transit networks connected with smuggling and various forms of exploitation. Thus, the migration journey becomes an unsafe route that increases their suffering and exposes them to humanitarian violations because of the fragility of their social and economic circumstances. In an attempt to reach the other shore, children resort to multiple illegal methods. Despite the different causes and the common objective, these include the following:

- Semiclegal migration and forgery networks, which entrench organised international crime;
- Migration by wooden and rubber boats, as well as migration by lorries and carriers;
- Migration on fishing vessels, which has its own techniques and distinctive migratory tactics, beginning with brokers who mediate between clients and those responsible for the vessels, because it is costly and organised, and migrant minors rarely resort to it;
- Migration by jet ski, which is one of the new means because it is characterised by speed, especially across the distance separating Moroccan beaches from their Spanish counterparts;
- Migration of sporting talent, particularly in athletics and especially among minors; as soon as signs of excellence appear in some of them, sports traders approach them and work to exploit and influence them.

In addition to these means, there are other methods of migration pursued by women during pregnancy to give birth abroad so that the children benefit from a foreign nationality.²⁹ Other unlawful means may increase as the phenomenon develops and expands.³⁰

Conclusion:

With the increase in irregular migration among children and the negative effects it causes for receiving states, this issue has received broad international attention. Many states have therefore moved to adopt measures to reduce it and to limit its economic, social, security, health, and political repercussions, such as concluding agreements between states; supporting poor states to improve their economic conditions; strengthening border surveillance; and tightening laws on migration, naturalisation, and employment.

In view of the humanitarian aspects associated with this phenomenon, it has received the attention of the United Nations and human rights organisations around the world to preserve the rights of irregular migrants, respect their dignity and humanity, provide the necessary

²⁸ Mouttaqi, *Clandestine Migration of Moroccan Minor Children*, 20.

²⁹ Mouttaqi, *Clandestine Migration of Moroccan Minor Children*, 22.

³⁰ Mohamed Reda Al-Tamimi, "Illegal Migration through National Legislation and International Covenants," *Notebooks of Politics and Law* 3, no. 4, Kasdi Merbah University, Ouargla, Algeria, January 2011, 267-70.

support to them, and monitor the conduct of target states towards them upon their arrival in their territories.

After addressing the definition of irregular migration in general and becoming acquainted with its risks, the following conclusions can be drawn from this study:

1. Irregular migration is no longer limited to a particular category; rather, it now affects sensitive age groups and has extended to infants. This demonstrates the depth of the phenomenon and requires the adoption of a comprehensive, global plan to combat the scourge at all levels.
2. The causes of migration and the drivers of its spread are not recent; rather, they are the result of historical economic, social, security, political, and cultural accumulations. These factors are also interconnected and complementary: economic weakness negatively affects the social situation, which may lead to cultural deterioration that, in turn, undermines political stability and gives rise to multiple crises.
3. The phenomenon of irregular migration among children is steadily increasing and requires concerted national, regional, and international efforts, since it represents a global crisis and problem requiring deep, rather than partial and temporary, solutions that are compatible with the requirements of the phenomenon, including the guarantee of the rights of the migrant child.
4. We also conclude that the phenomenon of irregular migration is linked to development programs that should be reformed radically and effectively.
5. The phenomenon of irregular migration affects the sending and receiving states simultaneously, and its effects extend to the rising generation, which is supposed to grow in a stable and safe environment. However, this phenomenon may push children into economic and social crises and risks that threaten their lives rather than providing the proper conditions for sound development during a sensitive stage of life.

In this context, clear official national and international policies should be adopted to confront and counter the phenomenon, given the problems it causes. We conclude with a set of recommendations, summarised in the following points:

1. Focus on the security aspect, which requires strict regulatory mechanisms and deterrent measures to combat criminal gangs that exploit migrants, especially minors, including the development and modernisation of surveillance methods and the strengthening of international cooperation in this field.
2. Awareness campaigns among children should be supported, especially through child protection centres, and these campaigns should rehabilitate and reintegrate them, particularly those who suffer from homelessness, family disintegration, addiction, and other sensitive cases that are easily influenced and exploited, with the participation of all the actors constituting society.
3. Focus on in-depth research and studies in the field of childhood, in particular, in view of the necessary data, can provide for improving the situation of children and integrating them correctly and soundly as a preventive measure.

4. Cases of children, especially victims of violence, exploitation, and other social phenomena that easily lead to irregular migration, can be followed up by coordinating work among the various sectors.
5. Strengthen the efforts of civil society through its political, economic, social, and cultural institutions, especially associations and the media.
6. On the international level, because the child is considered an essential part of the human rights protection system, a legal treatment of the phenomenon of irregular migration among children should be adopted through a set of integrated and internationally recognised legislation. Efforts must therefore be made to ensure the genuine implementation of the provisions of international conventions relating to children's rights.

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