

Group E

Modern Migrations from and across Morocco

In modern times (since World War II). Morocco has been a crossroads of migrations. Moroccan Jews left to settle in Israel; Moroccan Muslims traveled to Europe to find work (sometimes settling there permanently); Sub-Saharan Africans crossed through Morocco en route to Europe (often living for years or even decades in Morocco). These population movements have played an important role in modern Morocco.

The migration of most Moroccan Jews to Israel represented a drastic change in Moroccan society. Jews had lived in the region for several thousand years. Some of the early Jewish migrants had settled in separate communities or neighborhoods; others intermarried with the native Amazigh (Berber) community. Later, when Spanish and Portuguese Christian armies expelled the large Jewish community from the Iberian Peninsula in the 1490s, many Jews came to Morocco. (These ‘Sephardic’ Jews often felt a common bond with Muslims of Spanish origin living in Morocco, sharing common traditions, memories, and the pain of expulsion from their homes in Spain.) Over the next centuries, Jews sometimes rose to prominence, sometimes suffered from persecutions, and sometimes lived under the direct protection of the sultan. The French Protectorate (1911-1956) did nothing to change the position of the Jews.

During World War II, life became especially precarious for Morocco’s Jews, who at that time numbered 250,000-350,000. When France fell to Germany, Morocco came under the rule of the Vichy French (collaborationist) government, which imposed restrictions on the Jews. Luckily, North African Jews were spared the worst Nazi atrocities. This was partly because of their relative distance from the center of persecution (Central/Eastern Europe). However, the Moroccan sultan himself played a role in protecting the Jews, famously telling pro-Nazis who were demanding that Jews be singled out: “There are no Jews in Morocco. There are only Moroccan subjects.”

With the end of the war and the subsequent establishment of the state of Israel, Moroccan Jews began to emigrate. On the one hand, some Jews were attracted by greater job opportunities in Israel and by the chance to be part of a country in which they were not a minority. On the other hand, Arab indignation at the Israeli treatment of Palestinians made Jews living in Arab lands, such as Morocco, feel that they were no longer welcome.

Today, only about 2,000 Jews remain in Morocco. However, Jewish visitors are welcome in the country, and the Moroccan Constitution of 2011 specifically mentions the contributions of Jews to the country’s culture.

Many Moroccan Arabs have also left their country – temporarily or permanently – to find work in Europe. During World War I and World War II, France urgently needed workers and recruited tens of thousands of Moroccan men for factories, mines, and the

French military. Most returned home after the war, but the precedent for ‘circular migration’ – to Europe for a few years, then back to Morocco – was set.

Economic factors (work opportunities) motivated many Moroccans to migrate (often temporarily) to Europe and led many European countries to welcome them. France, of course, was a preferred destination as most Moroccans spoke French as a second or third language. France was eager to recruit Moroccans for work in factories and mines, especially in the 1950s and early 1960s when they stopped recruiting Algerians (who were fighting against them for independence). Between 1949 and 1962, the Moroccan population in France jumped from 20,000 to 53,000.

Between 1965 and 1972, the demand for unskilled labor grew throughout Europe. More than 400,000 Moroccans went to Europe to work – and they went not only to France, but to the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Spain, and Italy as well.

During the oil crisis of 1973, Western Europe stopped accepting guest workers. Ironically, instead of decreasing the number of Moroccans abroad, the new restrictions caused many Moroccans to stay permanently in Europe. Workers feared that if they returned home and had difficulty finding a job there or fitting in with the then-repressive government, they would be unable to return to work in Europe. So they didn’t return to Morocco at all, ending the pattern of circular migration by becoming French citizens.

European countries allowed family reunification, so Moroccans continued to move to Europe in the 1970s and 1980s. There was, however, return migration. Between 1985 and 1995, some 314,000 returned to Morocco.

Up until today, many Moroccans go to France to study. Some of them, who began as ‘temporary migrants,’ ended up becoming permanent ones with jobs and families in Europe. Others continue to arrive in Europe on family visas.

All in all, two million people of Moroccan descent currently live in Western Europe. Many of them continue to send money back home to their families. (In 2003, Morocco was the fourth largest remittance receiver.)

In the past three decades, Morocco has also become a land of transit – and even an unexpected destination – for migrants traveling from sub-Saharan Africa to Western Europe. Many Africans have left their homes fleeing conflict or poverty, hoping to make a better life for themselves and their families in Europe. Frequently, unaccompanied teenagers are among the migrants, hoping for more opportunities and a more stable life in the West. The European Union (EU) feels unable to absorb so many immigrants and has enlisted Moroccan help in patrolling the Mediterranean Sea lanes between Morocco and Spain to prevent migrants from arriving in Europe. Strict border controls are in place in Ceuta and Melilla, two cities in North Africa (in the midst of Morocco) that are officially part of Spain. In addition, the EU has provided some funding to Morocco to help the country resettle some of the migrants.

The result is that many people wait in Morocco for months, years, or even decades along the borders of the Spanish enclaves in North Africa or in areas along the Mediterranean Sea. During this time of waiting, migrants are also living their lives: sometimes studying, marrying and having children, working/contributing to Morocco's economy.

There are many challenges faced by migrants. Language is one barrier since few of the migrants speak darija (Moroccan Arabic) or Amazigh (Berber), the two most widely spoken home languages of Morocco. Those from Francophone (French-speaking) parts of Africa have an easier time than those in which English is the second language as French is the widely-spoken second (or third) language of Moroccans. Teenage migrants and the children of migrants often pick up Morocco's languages quickly, especially as they attend school, while adults struggle to learn the local languages. Religion can be a unifying force or a barrier. Muslim migrants are more easily integrated into society: able to intermarry with locals, fit in more easily at school (where the Muslim religion is one of the subjects studied), etc. Non-Muslims are free to practice their religion but are usually not considered truly 'Moroccan.' Finding employment can also be difficult, and many migrants find themselves working at manual labor. Women, who often flee their home countries because of abusive relationships or violence, are usually unable to get proper health care for resulting physical and psychological problems. Luckily, race doesn't seem to be as much of an issue as it is in the Western world.

The immigration crisis in North Africa is difficult for migrants and Moroccan natives. However, although Morocco is not a wealthy country, it is playing an important role in world affairs as a host nation for people fleeing war, poverty, or abuse.

Research Topics

1. What was the experience of Jews who chose to emigrate from Morocco to Israel? (What were the push-pull factors that led to this migration? When/how did it occur? What challenges did Jews from Morocco face in integrating into Israel?)
2. What is the relationship between Moroccan Arabs and the Jews today? (Look at official attitudes and popular feelings of Moroccans as well as Jews and Israelis.)
3. How has Moroccan migration to France affected that country? (Look at temporary and permanent migration from the end of World War II to the present.)
4. How has Moroccan migration to Spain, the Netherlands, and other European countries (besides France, its former imperial ruler) affected those countries? (What challenges and opportunities would Moroccans face in going to those countries, rather than to France?)
5. How has Moroccan migration to European countries affected Morocco? (Consider the social, financial, and psychological aspects of emigration.)
6. What is Morocco's international role today as a gateway to the West for migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa? (How has this position affected Moroccan relations with West European countries? How has it affected Morocco's status within the African Union?)
7. What challenges and opportunities face migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa who are "waiting" in Morocco? (What linguistic, religious, and social barriers do migrants face? Which groups have an easier or more difficult transition? What efforts has the Moroccan government made to help these people? What further efforts are needed?)