

The crossing of the Spanish border by swimming.

You've probably already heard about the story of a Moroccan influencer, Chaimae El Grini, who crossed the Mediterranean Sea to join the Spanish coast by swimming. Since 2020, many Moroccan people have tried to reach the Spanish coast by swimming from Fnideq to Ceuta, a Spanish self-governing town, that shares a border with Morocco. In the past few years, the European Union has largely reinforced its terrestrial borders. Since 2005, they haven't stopped increasing the wire fence which is now 6 meters high, making it impossible to cross the land border from north Morocco to Ceuta. This policy has increased the number of new ways illegal migrants can cross borders, like swimming.



Photo credit : screenshot from the TikTok page of Chaimae El Grini.

The phenomenon of Harraga and the Harraga 2.0 on social media ...

In an extended way, this phenomenon is part of the «Harraga» phenomenon, which literally means «those who burn». This phenomenon designates migrants from North Africa who are trying to migrate to Europe since the 2000's. They call themselves «Harraga» because they burn their identity papers to not be identified by authorities.

This phenomenon has grown until it became viral on social media, especially on TikTok with the «#Harraga». Some influencers shared their journey and how they crossed this border by swimming. For Moroccans, this new way of crossing the border has cost much less money. Only around a hundred euros, to buy a wetsuit, some flippers, and a buoy, instead of 2 000 to 3 000 euros for a «classic» crossing the border with a makeshift boat. Some of them don't even use buoys but just empty bottles all over their waist for better flotation. This new way of crossing the border is not only a way of bypassing land borders but also a more financially accessible way to flee the country. This is how we can see that the phenomenon of «harraga» has evolved since the 2000's.

Crossing by swimming, how ?

To go from Morocco to Ceuta, there are only a few kilometers, approximately 5. Even though, it can be much longer with tides and currents. Concerning the influencer, Chaimae El Grini, it took her 5 hours to attain Ceuta safely. Previously, she made 5 failed attempts before actually crossing this border. Before succeeding, it's regular to fail at least 5 to 7 times.



Photo credit : French Press Agency

Many young people are going for it due to the low cost of this new migratory route. When the «Harraga» phenomenon mainly concerned men before, this new way of migrating includes more and more women now. Since it has become more popular and some girls shared their stories about it, women are also increasingly trying. However, this migration is also getting controlled a lot and this is not as easy as it seems on social media.

Firstly, you have to succeed in leaving the Moroccan coast because, since this practice has emerged, authorities have been keeping this area under high surveillance. And a lot of people are getting internally repressed, authorities are driving them hundreds of kilometers inside the country.

Secondly, you need to succeed in reaching Ceuta by swimming. Most of the time, it lasts around 5 hours in the sea. Most people try several times before succeeding in swimming this long. Plus, the sea can be with you or totally against you depending on the currents and tide. Thousands of people already have died trying this new way of crossing. Moroccan coastguards are also searching for these people in the sea, which makes it harder to intercept. This is why most of the crossings are happening during the night, from 1 am and when the sea is agitated. These two conditions make the presence of coastguards rarer, but the crossing harder. Lots of people decide to try it even with a highly agitated sea, and some wind gusts reaching 100km/h during the Karlotta storm. If the coastguard intercepts you, they also drive you back inside Morocco, and might also confiscate your wetsuit and flippers so that you do not attempt the crossing again.

Finally, you need to not be expelled by Spanish authorities. Even though, Spain has ratified the Geneva Convention of 1951, the draft amendment to the Aliens Act in 2015 has established a special regime for Ceuta and Melilla which allows the immediate return of migrants who did not enter Ceuta and Melilla through a regular border post. In other words, this act legalise push-backs at the border. This is why, most people, after swimming for 5 hours straight, get rejected at the border.

Why would Moroccan flee the country ?

This new way of crossing borders is a way to get around the barrier which European Union tries to create with the recent policies. The economic situation in Morocco made people want to leave for Europe, and this is what created the « Harraga » phenomenon in the 2000s. According to the latest report of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in september, nearly 30% of 15-24 year-olds are unemployed in 2022. This economic distress leads young people from Morocco to take high risks to join Europe.



Jeanne Flamencourt

Master student in Political Science and International Relations, specialized in Analysis and Global Security in Galatasaray university & Bordeaux university.