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## American and Israeli Students' Perceptions of African Emigration to Europe

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# American and Israeli Students' Perceptions of African Emigration to Europe

*Boah Kim and Tal Yaar-Waisel*

## Introduction

**I**nternational collaborations in teaching between academic institutions are an opportunity to enrich teaching and learning processes, even if they are challenging. In the spring 2023 semester, the Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) program at BSU initiated an opportunity for international collaboration with Oranim College of Education in Israel. The teaching topic was students' perceptions about African emigration to European countries. Teaching and learning about immigration is imperative for students who are preparing to navigate a world intricately shaped by complex dynamics (Klein & Solem, 2008).

Teaching geopolitical issues involves exploring difficulties and barriers in various places worldwide (O'Reilly, 2019). The subject of immigration enables us to connect human values to geography lessons. The importance of teaching actual geography can be found in two main directions: the first is specific to the field of knowledge and discusses the importance of the geographic knowledge of the behaviour of an adult, while the second is a general assumption that discussing real disputes improves the critical thinking of students (Sziarto, McCarthy, & Padilla, 2014). With this significance in mind, Dr. Boah Kim in the Department of Geography at Bridgewater State University, USA, and Dr. Tal Yaar-Waisel at the Oranim College of Education, Israel, developed an international teaching collaboration which was able to enrich a current issue

based on students' perceptions about immigration. This collaboration aimed to investigate the effects of teaching this topic to students in two different countries, the United States and Israel. More significantly, this study forced students to address the ethical and moral dilemmas of global decision-making. Exploring the ethical dimensions of forced displacement, the responsibilities of nations in offering asylum, and the principles of international humanitarian law brought students to a critical examination of the role of power, justice, and human rights in shaping global affairs.

## The Study

Students in the two institutions learned the same lesson on emigration from Africa to Europe. The following is a summary of answers from both student groups.



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## (USA) Students' Responses

Most of the BSU students were surprised by the number of refugees and the reasons they were fleeing and felt sad and disturbed about this topic by the images and videos of refugees worldwide. BSU students' answers highlighted economic issues and human rights, a description of balancing human rights concerns with domestic security, addressing the underlying causes of displacement, handling the economic impact of refugees, and integrating domestic political concerns with international commitments. Also, many said that the government needs to implement a plan of action to help the immigrants who arrive in the country. Students highlighted the difficulty of immigrants finding a place to live and work in a new country and the potential dangers involved. Also, students were worried about climate change, political instability, and conflict in immigrants' homelands. An emigrant may also be hesitant about moving to other countries due to racism and economic inequality. Student answers noted the challenges of accessing basic necessities such as water, food, and education in different geographical regions. Indeed, individuals from Africa may face challenges in acquiring higher education and job prospects in different fields, leading to a dilemma in choosing where to live.

Students said that the mistreatment of migrants is a heartbreaking issue that needs to be addressed. Also, as a non-involved country, they must step in and help however possible, such as sending

aid. Still, students were also worried about the non-involved country's impact, such as illegal immigration and a structured economy. They also felt bad for those who had to leave their homes and find a better life for themselves. They highlighted the need to plan and create sustainable and livable communities that satisfy the needs of all people.

After the lecture, students said they believed human rights should be a political priority. They also believed there was no need for such aggressive force from the police. The solution to this problem is more complex than letting them into countries with more opportunities and preparing them for professions in creating and administering cities and urban environments. Students said that the involvement of strong (wealthy) countries depends on the situation and whether another country should intervene. Nevertheless, students think wealthy countries have a responsibility to help with humanitarian aid in less developed countries. However, if a wealthy country involves itself in a less developed country because it sees the opportunity to exploit them for resources if it were done correctly, it would work, but if not, it can cause detrimental economic effects for the people living there.

BSU (USA) students think the UN should take control of some situations, and organizations should ensure human rights are being taken care of. Indeed, students said this lecture emphasized the importance of planning for a sustainable future and not leaving anyone behind. Helping people should not be a debate. It is essential to be mindful of the people in these situations and think about ways to help, even from far away. Everyone should have a chance to live a good life.



### (Israel) Students' Responses

Israeli students' answers highlighted an internal conflict; a description of human rights as opposed to security and well-being was maintained. Accepting immigrants comes at the expense of other things. As a student wrote: *"dealing with struggles between the goodwill to help those in need and the routine that changes with the arrival of a population that differs from you in culture and behavior."* Many students used the first-person form of expression and described their feelings: *"How much am I willing to help?"*, *"How compassionate am I?"*

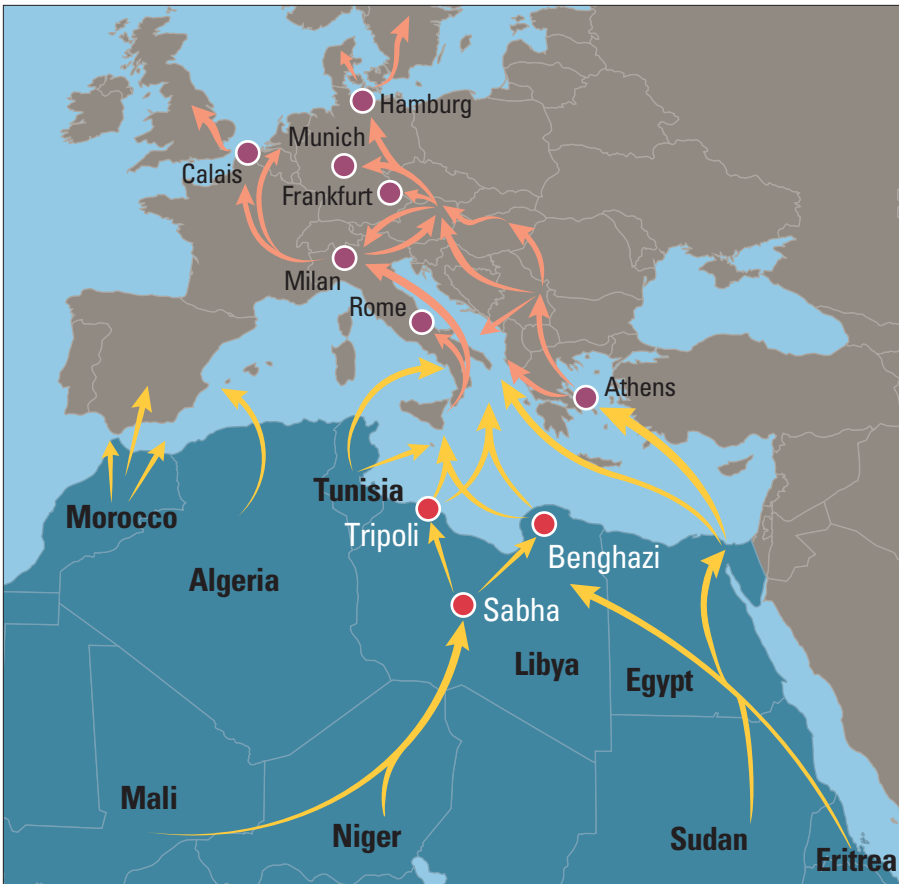
Although using the term "dilemma," as was mentioned in the question, many of the answers found it clear that a person should save his/her life; it is a survival issue – *"He has no dilemma!"* even with the cost of risk and family breakup. The main issues Israelis expressed are leaving their families, risking life-threatening situations along the way, and choosing to face the unknown. Israeli students used extreme terms: *"It is life-threatening," "Desire to survive,"* or *"Existential questions."*

When asked to describe their dilemmas as non-involved country citizens in the situation they have learned today, students answered this question in two parallel circuits. On the one hand, they stressed Israel as a country built by immigrants, the history of the Jewish people, and the emigration of Jews from all over the world to the Land of Israel. Students said that the State of Israel was founded by persecuted people who experienced being refugees on many occasions: *"I believe that our role is to be a beacon for the refugees who arrive at our door, the same way we would like to be treated."* A second circle is Israel, located on the physical border with Africa, dealing with the policy of not accepting African immigrants into its territory today. Students said, *"It makes me understand what immigrants in our country feel."*

Description of feelings and thoughts was the most exciting part of the responses: frustration and pain. At the same time, students describe the 'other side' of their feelings, *"the lesson gives proportions on our situation in our country."* Students in their teaching training describe their thoughts as future teachers: *"I think that humanism education is required at all times and should be strengthened."* When asked what they think about the involvement of "strong" (wealthy) countries in non-developed countries, Israeli students understood it was not a right or wrong situation. The words *complexity* or *dilemma* arise a few times. Students understand this is a complex issue, as *"powerful countries*

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This collaboration aimed to investigate the effects of teaching this topic to students in two different countries, the United States and Israel. More significantly, this study forced students to address the ethical and moral dilemmas of global decision-making.



Migration routes from Africa to Europe.

have the ability to help and save many lives, and I think they should do it”; “The ideal way is that strong countries would support weak countries... but it seems that this is not the case in today’s reality; it seems that most countries care about their own interests.” Discussion of dilemmas was significant in this learning, as reflected in the students’ comments.

## Discussion

Although the students’ geographical location, origins, and culture varied, students utilized common terms and different ones to reflect their view of their study. When describing a person’s dilemmas from Spain or Italy, Americans raised *Security* while Israelis wrote *Culture* and *Fear*. It can be a result of the Israelis’ point of view of the African immigrants to the Land of Israel, accompanied by fear of losing the Jewish majority in the Jewish state: “On the one hand, we want to maintain a majority in the country and keep the Italian/Spanish culture; on the other hand, these are

people we are obligated to provide a roof over their head.”

When commenting on the feelings of the immigrants, the Americans referred to *Better Life*, *Change*, and *Home*. Israelis also use the words *Life* and *Family*, which can be a direct consequence of Jewish immigration, which made life possible, while non-immigration meant death. For the third question about the students’ dilemmas as non-involved country citizens, BSU students used the words *Involved*, *Need*, and *Help* most, while Oranim students used *Human* the most. BSU students seem more intended to be a “third-party perception,” but Israelis are *more involved*. Similarities were found in the need for the *Help* of strong countries, as those who can solve this situation. Almost none describes a *non-intervention* policy. Understanding the complexity of this situation was similar for all students – “I think the issue of immigration is complex and I see myself on both sides of the fence.”

Students from both groups mentioned the importance of this lesson. From these results, this research confirmed that despite different countries, cultures, and backgrounds, they have similar opinions about immigration and refugees, besides differences evolving from a nation’s heritage. Lastly, many students said they feel *lucky*, such as “A great sense of gratitude that luck favors my family and me.”

The lecturers were impressed that students found themselves debating and thinking. The request from the students to respond, to take part, and to check their feelings of belonging motivated them to learn. Many students noted that the topic was interesting, especially because it was not easy!

## Acknowledgments

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