

# UNTIL HE'S BACK

A FILM BY JACQUELINE BAYLON



POV

DISCUSSION GUIDE









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# Film Summary



After learning that his son, Yahya, has died at sea trying to get to Spain, Ahmed Tchiche must find a way to bring his remains back home to Morocco so he and his family can have a proper goodbye. Through interweaving threads, *Until He's Back* explores the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean and the difficulty of returning the bodies of those who drown at sea.

# Using This Guide

This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection and designed for people who want to use *Until He's Back* to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues, and communities. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are right, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening actively.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. And be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit <https://communitynetwork.amdoc.org/>.

# PARTICIPANTS + KEY ISSUES

## Key Participants

- Ahmed Tchiche - Moroccan father waiting for his son Yahya's remains
- Martín Zamora - Spanish mortician
- Faisal Bouhafs - Moroccan volunteer with Centro Internacional para la Identificación de Migrantes Desaparecidos (CIPIMD). Faisal lives in Spain.

## Key Issues

*Until He's Back* is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of special interest to people who want to explore the following topics:

- Immigration/Migration around the world
- North African migration to Spain
- Xenophobia and assimilation
- Government bureaucracy
- Generational trauma
- Mourning and grief rituals; ambiguous loss
- Death work
- Repatriation of remains

# Background Information

## Migration

Migration is a hot-button issue that many global societies are confronting. With the rapid acceleration of climate-related disasters, and the ongoing threats of famine, drought, and war, the number of refugees, migrants, and displaced people is only expected to increase over the next several decades. Most of them will come from highly vulnerable societies that lack disaster-ready infrastructure; their integration with the “Global North” will continue to be a source of debate; and their growing numbers will require societies to develop lasting, economically sustainable, and humane solutions.

Home to more foreign-born residents than any other country, the United States has struggled for decades to implement a cohesive and lasting policy toward migrants. As of 2022, Mexican-origin residents comprised 23% of the total immigrant population. Other major countries of origin include India (6%); China (5%), and the Philippines (4%).



Typically, undocumented migration takes center stage in American immigration debates. The Trump administration (2017-2021) saw an increase of security personnel at the U.S.-Mexico border; attempts to cut funding to “sanctuary cities,” or majority-Democratic jurisdictions that did not enforce federal immigration policy; and a controversial zero-tolerance approach that resulted in mass arrests, deportations, and family separations. In 2017, Trump also banned legal immigration and travel from several Muslim-majority countries, including Syria, Iran, and Somalia.

While the Biden administration (2021-2025) has tried to reverse some of the previous administration’s policies, the administration chose to respond to the surge of migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border with new migration enforcements. For example, asylum requests can be stalled if illegal crossings have gone beyond a certain threshold. Many migrants and their families are currently in limbo, as they anticipate a return to harsher policies with the incoming second Trump administration (2025).

### Sources:

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). “Climate Change and Displacement.” *UNHCR*, [unhcr.org/us/what-we-do/how-we-work/climate-change-and-displacement](https://www.unhcr.org/us/what-we-do/how-we-work/climate-change-and-displacement).

Felter, Claire, et al. “The U.S. Immigration Debate.” *Council on Foreign Relations*, 23 Aug. 2023, [cfr.org/backgrounder/us-immigration-debate-0](https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/us-immigration-debate-0).

## Europe's Migration Crisis

In the last decade, some 29 million migrants from across North Africa and the Middle East have made long and arduous journeys to Europe in search of opportunity and asylum. Many travel through hostile war zones by foot, often encountering human smugglers, while others take unsafe, overcrowded vessels across the Mediterranean Sea. In 2023 alone, more than three thousand migrants died while trying to make the crossing. Those who make it safely to European shores are often met with swift deportation.

Migrants to Europe usually take one of three major sea routes: the Central Mediterranean route from Algeria, Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia to Italy and Malta; the Eastern route from Turkey, Syria, and Egypt to Greece; and the Western route from Algeria and Morocco to France and Spain. Until *He's Back* focuses on the particularly treacherous route from Morocco to Spain, across the Strait of Gibraltar, known for highly unpredictable weather and currents that can easily capsize small boats. Many migrants crowd onto paddle boats, inflatable vessels, and dinghies, paying anywhere from 3,500 to 6,000 euros, as they risk their lives for better opportunities in Spain. As Morocco continues to lose many young men to the perilous journey across the Strait, its government has worked with Spanish authorities to crack down on migrants attempting to leave. Some have felt that this cooperation jeopardizes the health and safety of migrants even further by weaponizing or politicizing their predicaments.



Though they've fluctuated in the last couple of decades, Spanish attitudes toward migrants are not unlike the rest of the EU, which considers the issue to be at a crisis point. The rise of far-right, anti-immigrant groups like Sweden Democrats, the Alternative for Germany, and France's National Rally propose greater barriers for entry to Europe and mass deportations of immigrants. In Spain, the VOX party used particularly divisive and anti-Muslim rhetoric in its 2018 election platform. Unlike Spanish-speaking immigrants from Latin America, who are perceived to share cultural values with Spaniards, North Africans are often viewed with greater suspicion. No doubt affected by deeply entrenched Islamophobia and the postcolonial hangover of xenophobia, many working-class Spaniards absorb this suspicion into a larger misperception about the rights and benefits that are extended to immigrants.

#### Sources:

Finotelli, Claudia, and Sebastian Rinken. "A Pragmatic Bet: The Evolution of Spain's Immigration System." *Migration Policy Institute*, Apr. 2023, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/spain-immigration-system-evolution>.

Kamali Dehghan, Saeed. "'We Would Rather Die than Stay There': The Refugees Crossing from Morocco to Spain." *The Guardian*, 23 Aug. 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/aug/23/we-would-rather-die-than-stay-there-the-refugees-crossing-from-morocco-to-spain>.

Robinson, Kali, et al. "Europe's Migration Dilemma." *Council on Foreign Relations*, May 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/article/europes-migration-dilemma>.



## Governments, Humanitarian Aid, and NGOs

According to a 2022 survey, Moroccan-origin people account for the highest number of migrants in Spain, at roughly 13%. While many of these migrants have legal status, illegal migration and perceived failures in border control are often cited as major areas of public concern. In 2022, the Spanish government applauded Morocco's violent response to an attempted border encroachment at Melilla, a small city on the African continent across the Alboran Sea from mainland Spain. Leaving 18 dead, the incident was heavily censured by NGOs and largely dismissed by both governments. Organizations have also been concerned by Spain's continued pushback of unauthorized migrants from Morocco because, as a consequence, asylum seekers face tougher obstacles.

CIPIMD - Centro Internacional para la Identificación de Migrantes Desaparecidos - is just one of several organizations that aim to locate missing migrants. According to the NGO's mission statement, migration has always been a part of human history, and border enforcement is not a viable long-term solution. Volunteers field missing persons reports from family members and then dispatch search and rescue teams on boats across the Strait. Groups like CIPIMD were founded as a response to EU governments' inadequate resources to deal with the human toll of cross-Mediterranean migration. Many bodies remain at the bottom of the sea, rendering the passageway a solemn, watery gravesite.

The sheer enormity of the crisis has led to a small but thriving mortuary cottage industry along Spain's southern shores. In addition to running their day-to-day funeral operations, some morticians will offer to repatriate missing migrants' recovered remains. But because Morocco doesn't pay for repatriation, families of the deceased will shoulder the hefty costs.

## Sources:

“La Ruta del Mediterráneo.” *Centro Internacional para la Identificación de Migrantes Desaparecidos*, 2024, <https://cipimigrantesdesaparecidos.org/>.

Ponce-Blandón, José Antonio, et al. “Lived Experiences of African Migrants Crossing the Strait of Gibraltar to Europe.” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, vol. 18, no. 17, Sep. 2021. *National Library of Medicine*, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18179379>.

“Spain/Morocco: No Justice for Deaths at Melilla Border.” *Human Rights Watch*, June 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/06/22/spain/morocco-no-justice-deaths-melilla-border>.

## Repatriation and Grief

Families who search for missing migrants often report having a lack of access to information, resources, and support, particularly when it comes to repatriation, or the return of a living or deceased person to their country of origin. Family members’ devastation only grows when they’re informed of a loved one’s death but are unable to identify the body. Sometimes family members will be asked to supply DNA samples as a means of identifying dead bodies, but sample collection can be challenging for those outside major cities.

Psychiatrists call the emotional purgatory of not knowing whether a loved one is dead “ambiguous loss.” Ambiguous loss can manifest physical symptoms: trouble sleeping and eating, nightmares, paranoia, obsessive ideation, and even physical aches and pains. Ambiguous loss can also lead to depression and alcoholism and has been linked to cancer, gastrointestinal disorders, and immunological diseases. In many cases, family members likely know a loved one is dead, but they are unable to receive closure through the acts of ritualized mourning and burial. Per Islamic rites, a dead body must be washed, shrouded, and buried within a sanctioned period of mourning.

## Sources:

Okeowo, Alexis. “The Crisis of Missing Migrants.” *The New Yorker*, Jan. 2023, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/01/16/the-crisis-of-missing-migrants>.

“Spain/Morocco: No Justice for Deaths at Melilla Border.” *Human Rights Watch*, June 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/06/22/spain/morocco-no-justice-deaths-melilla-border>.

# DISCUSSION PROMPTS

Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen. You could pose a general question (examples below) and give people some time to themselves to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion. Alternatively, you could ask participants to share their thoughts with a partner before starting a group discussion.

Which part(s) of the film impacted or moved you the most?

Did the film challenge any beliefs you may have held about migrants and illegal migration from North Africa to Europe?

How is migration perceived in your state? County? Local community?

## GOVERNMENTS AND RESPONSIBILITY

1. How does the film depict the volunteers who work with CIPIMD?
2. Who do you believe is responsible for the survival and safety of Moroccan migrants to Spain? The Spanish authorities, or the Moroccan government?
3. How do you think governments and NGOs might work together to alleviate the migrant crisis?

## CYCLES OF POVERTY

1. What do you think is the calculus that migrants must make in order to leave home for a highly risky journey across harsh terrain, like the Mediterranean, or the desert?
2. How does the film depict Ahmed's village?



3. What are the long-term effects of men leaving Ahmed's village?
4. At the film's end, two young men at Yahya's funeral procession quip that they could migrate to Spain in a coffin. Why do you believe the director chose to include this moment?

## GRIEF AND DEATH WORK

1. How does the film depict Martín's work as a mortician? Were you surprised to learn that he is a convert to Islam?
2. How is "ambiguous loss" explored in the film? Which moments or scenes bear out the complexities of this particular kind of loss?
3. How does the sea serve as a metaphor for the disappeared or dead in this crisis?



# CLOSING QUESTION/ ACTIVITY

Notice the tension that may have built in your body after watching scenes of burial and grief.

*Until He's Back* is about giving dignity to the many faceless and often unidentifiable people who have made perilous migration journeys in search of better outcomes for their families. In watching this film and participating in this discussion, you are honoring them as individuals with families and personal histories, not as statistics and political flashpoints.

Take time to reflect on a meaningful ritual around death, loss, and grief that moves you - from within your own culture, or another culture. Consider this as an offering to the many families who are still waiting to hear about their missing relatives, or are dealing with the aftermath of finally knowing.

## TAKING ACTION

Here are some ways you can get involved in your own communities to address the issues expressed in the film:

1. Organize a community screening of the film to educate audiences about missing migrants. The film may have special relevance now, as we contend with this issue at our own southern border.
2. Research international NGOs who have on-the-ground search and rescue teams for missing migrants. Are there any organizations that do similar work within the US?
3. Look into community-based groups that provide resources and assistance to grieving families of undocumented migrants.

# Resources

## International Organization for

**Migration** An intergovernmental organization part of the United Nations system. IOM responds in emergency situations and serves as a source of advice on migration policy and practice.

## UN High Commissioner for

**Refugees** A global organization providing aid, including access to health care, education, and livelihoods, to people displaced by conflict and persecution. As the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR advocates internationally for the protection of refugees, forcibly displaced communities, and stateless people.

**Migration Policy Institute** An independent organization addressing migration policy questions by providing research, analysis, and a space for dialogue.

**Amnesty International** An independent, international organization advocating for human rights worldwide. Through research and campaigning, Amnesty International works to prevent and end human rights abuses.

**Human Rights Watch** A nonprofit that investigates and reports on human rights abuses occurring around the world; advocacy is directed toward governments,

armed groups, and businesses to push for change or the upholding of laws, policies, and practices.

## Center for American Progress

Independent policy institute focused on improving the lives of all Americans through the development of policy ideas, the critical examination of media coverage, and conducting national conversation.

## Lutheran Social Services of the

**North Capitol Area** A human services and immigration relief and refugee welcome agency providing support to families, youth, children, and individuals rebuilding their lives in the D.C., Maryland, and Virginia area. Serves refugees, forced migrants, immigrants, children and youth, and underserved communities through participant-informed programs.

**Red Cross** A nonprofit organization providing shelter, food, and comfort to people impacted by disasters. Red Cross also provides life-saving learning opportunities, international humanitarian aid, and support to veterans, military members and their families.

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# Credits & Acknowledgments



## About the Author, Swetha Regunathan

SWETHA REGUNATHAN is a writer and filmmaker with an MFA from NYU's graduate film program and a PhD in English literature from Brown University. Her films as a writer, director, and producer have played festivals like Tribeca, True/False, New Orleans Film Festival, MDFF, Big Sky, and HollyShorts, and on platforms like NOWNESS, Hulu, Short of the Week, and NoBudge. Her scripts were selected for the 2023 NYU Purple List, 2023 NYU Production Lab Development Studio, 2020 Cine Qua Non Lab, and 1497 South Asian writers lab. She was a finalist for the Showtime® Tony Cox Screenplay Competition, and she's received awards from the BlueCat Screenplay Competition, Peter S. Reed Foundation, Rhode Island Foundation, and Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. She was also a 2020–21 Gotham (IFP) Marcie Bloom Fellow. Regunathan has published in *Huffington Post*, *n+1*, *Guernica*, and other publications. In 2009 she was nominated for a Pushcart Prize for best American essay.

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