

Irregular Migration in Algeria: A Demographic-Social Analysis in the Context of Future Threats

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Abstract:

Irregular migration in Algeria represents a multidimensional phenomenon involving complex interactions between demographic, economic, social, and security factors. Algeria is no longer merely a transit country for irregular migration toward Europe; it has simultaneously become a source and receiving country, complicating the landscape and intensifying challenges for policymakers. This research aims to analyze the structural determinants of this phenomenon, assess its demographic and socio-economic impacts, and anticipate its future implications for Algeria's stability. The study employs an analytical approach based on available official data and statistics from national and international institutions. The findings indicate that irregular migration represents a demographic and structural challenge affecting Algeria's future social stability, population policies, and national security. The study recommends transitioning from a narrow security perspective to an integrated developmental-regional approach that addresses the root causes of the phenomenon.

Keywords: Irregular migration; Algeria; Demographic analysis; National security; Harraga; Population policies.

1. INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of irregular migration in Algeria has undergone a

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qualitative transformation over the past two decades. Historically a transit corridor for sub-Saharan African migrants heading to Europe, Algeria now faces a dual challenge: a marked increase in its own citizens ("Harraga") attempting irregular migration to European shores, alongside growing numbers of African migrants settling within Algerian territory. This transformation has created a complex demographic and social equation with far-reaching implications.

This multidimensional phenomenon affects Algeria across several domains: demographically, through brain drain of skilled youth and influx of sub-Saharan populations; economically, via labor market distortions and strain on public resources; socially, through tensions between host communities and migrants; and security-wise, through vulnerabilities exploited by transnational criminal networks. The shift reflects broader regional dynamics, including intensified border controls in Libya, Sahel instability, and the European Union's externalization of border management, positioning Algeria as a buffer zone with limited developmental support.

This study addresses a critical research question: **What are the structural determinants of irregular migration in Algeria, and what are its current and future implications for the state's demographic, social, and security stability?** Through rigorous analysis of available data, theoretical frameworks, and policy responses, this research moves beyond security-focused narratives to understand irregular migration as a structural challenge requiring integrated developmental solutions, examining push-pull factors alongside systemic failures in economic development, youth integration, and regional cooperation.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

2.1 Push and Pull Theory

Everett Lee (1966) developed the push and pull theory, which

explains migration through the interaction of two sets of factors⁽¹⁾: push factors in the country of origin (such as unemployment, poverty, lack of prospects, and conflicts) and pull factors in the destination country (such as employment opportunities and economic and security stability). This theory helps understand the economic and social motivations behind migration decisions among Algerian youth and African migrants alike. In the Algerian context, push factors include structural unemployment, particularly among educated youth, limited economic opportunities outside major coastal cities, and a perceived lack of political participation and social mobility. Pull factors encompass not only the attraction of European labor markets and social welfare systems but also Algeria's relative stability and economic opportunities compared to conflict-affected Sahel countries, making it both a transit point and destination.

2.2 Social Networks Theory

Massey et al⁽²⁾ proposed the social networks theory, which focuses on the role of social ties and previous migrant communities in facilitating and sustaining irregular migration processes. The presence of networks of previous migrants in receiving countries reduces the costs and risks of migration for new migrants and provides information, logistical, and financial support. These networks create self-perpetuating migration systems where each successful migrant reduces barriers for subsequent migrants from the same community. In Algeria, diaspora networks in Europe facilitate information flows about routes, costs, and opportunities, while transnational networks connecting sub-Saharan migrants create knowledge channels that guide transit migration decisions.

2.3 Migration Systems Theory

This approach views migration as a complex system linking

(1) Lee, Everett S. "A Theory of Migration." *Demography*, Springer on behalf of the Population Association of America, vol. 3, no. 1, USA, 1966, pp. 47-57.

(2) Massey, Douglas S., et al. (1993). "Theories of International Migration: A Review and Appraisal." *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 19, No. 3, pp. 431–466.

countries of origin, transit, and destination, influenced by political, economic, cultural, and historical factors. In Algeria's case, this system is positioned within a South-North axis linking sub-Saharan Africa to Europe, with Algeria playing a multidimensional role simultaneously as a transit country, source country, and receiving country. This theoretical lens highlights how historical colonial relationships, linguistic ties, economic interdependencies, and evolving security dynamics shape contemporary migration patterns. The migration system involving Algeria is particularly complex due to the country's position at the intersection of Mediterranean, Saharan, and Sahelian migration dynamics⁽³⁾.

2.4 Conceptual Definitions

✓ **Irregular Migration:** Refers to the movement of persons across international borders in ways that violate immigration laws in the receiving state, whether through illegal entry or overstaying after the expiration of residence permits. This definition encompasses various modalities including clandestine border crossings, visa overstays, fraudulent documentation, and irregular employment⁽⁴⁾.

✓ **Harraga:** A local Algerian term applied to youth who attempt irregular migration to Europe by sea. The term derives from the verb "to burn" (*haraqa*), referring to the burning of identity documents to prevent deportation and symbolizing the burning of bridges to past lives. This phenomenon has become deeply embedded in Algerian popular culture, reflecting the desperation and determination of youth who see no viable future within the country⁽⁵⁾.

3. Structural Determinants of Irregular Migration in Algeria

3.1 Internal Demographic and Economic determinants (Push Factors)

(3) Bel harbi, Nawal, Theoretical Approaches to Irregular Migration, Algerian Journal of Public Policy, vol. 12, no. 2, Algiers university, Algeria 2024, p. 57.

(4) Hachouf, Yassin, Irregular Migration: Towards a Conceptual Theoretical Approach, Journal of Economics and Law, no. 9, Suk ahras university, Algeria, 2021, p. 5.

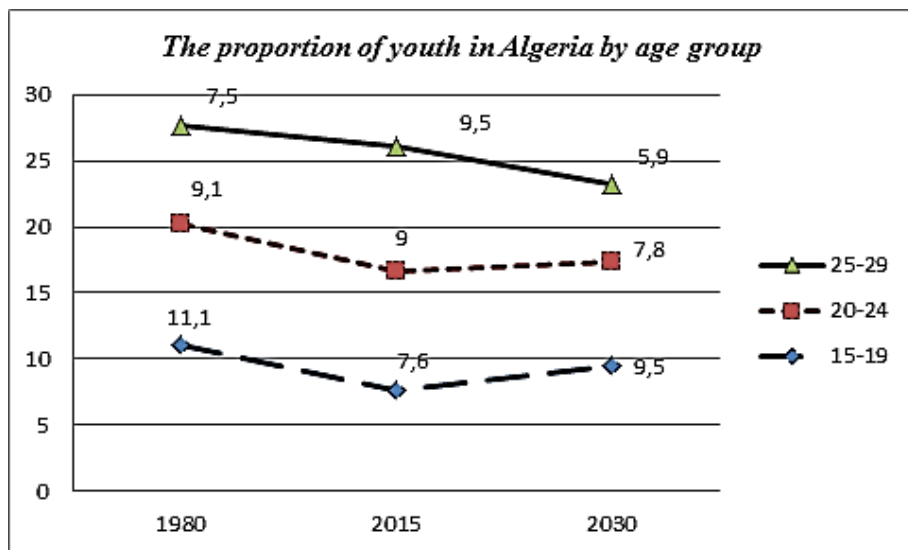
(5) Hachouf Yassin, Op.cit, p. 6.

✓ Youth Bulge and Population Pressure

Algeria is characterized by a youthful population structure, with youth aged 15-24 still representing approximately 16.5% of the total population of 45.6 million⁽⁶⁾.

This demographic youth represents an opportunity in terms of productive capacity; however, it becomes a major challenge given the national economy's inability to create sufficient employment opportunities to absorb new entrants into the labor market.

Figure 1: Evolution of Youth Population Percentage in Algeria (1980-2030)



Source: United Nations ESCWA, (2017), p.6/26.

Data showing the evolution of youth percentages in Algeria between 1980 and 2030 reveal the continuation of the demographic challenge as a deep structural reality. While the 15-19 age group shows a steady increase reaching approximately 20% of the population by 2030—reflecting continuous expansion of the population pyramid base—the 20-24 age group records a relative decline. This dynamic is

(6) National Office of Statistics, Algeria, 2023 at the website : www.ons.dz

not merely statistical; it embodies a massive human wave preparing to join the labor market and society with all its aspirations and needs. This "demographic youth bulge" translates into increasing and direct pressure on education, employment, and housing systems, feeding feelings of despair among segments of youth who see irregular migration as an exit from dead ends. Consequently, Algeria's future—its security, social stability, and capacity for development—depends on the ability of national policies to transform this human mass from a demographic burden into effective human capital through bold investment in quality education and a productive economy that creates hope and opportunities domestically before seeking them abroad.

The demographic dividend that could theoretically propel Algeria's development remains unrealized due to structural economic constraints. The annual entry of approximately 400,000 young people into the labor market far exceeds the economy's job creation capacity, particularly in productive sectors offering decent wages and career progression. This mismatch between demographic supply and economic demand creates a reservoir of frustrated aspirations that fuels migration pressures. Moreover, the concentration of youth populations in urban areas intensifies competition for limited opportunities while rural areas face depopulation and abandonment, creating spatial imbalances that further complicate development efforts.

✓ **Structural Unemployment, Particularly Youth Unemployment**

Unemployment, especially among youth and university graduates, remains the greatest challenge to social and economic stability. Official figures indicate that the overall unemployment rate reached 12.3% in 2023, while youth unemployment (16-24 years) rose to 26.4%⁽⁷⁾. These official figures may not reflect the complete reality, as some independent estimates suggest higher rates reaching 30% in certain provinces, particularly in interior and southern regions.

(7) National Office of Statistics, Algeria, 2023 at the websit : www.ons.dz

This structural unemployment creates a fertile environment for frustration and despair about the future, pushing youth to seek solutions beyond borders, even through illegal and risky means. The situation is particularly acute among university graduates, who face a paradox: despite investing years in higher education, they find limited employment opportunities matching their qualifications. Many are forced into informal sector work, underemployment, or extended periods of joblessness while living with parents, creating psychological pressures and delaying life transitions such as marriage and household formation. The disconnect between educational outputs and labor market needs reflects deeper failures in economic planning, industrial development, and skills alignment.

✓ **Socio-Economic Pressure and Widening Disparities**

Algerian society suffers from worsening social and regional inequalities, with development opportunities and basic services concentrated in major coastal cities (Algiers, Oran, Annaba), while interior and southern regions suffer from marginalization and weak infrastructure. Youth also face weak integration into economic and political life and the absence of effective mechanisms for participation in decision-making, reinforcing feelings of exclusion and deprivation.

Add to this the repercussions of the economic crisis resulting from the decline in hydrocarbon prices since 2014, which negatively affected citizens' purchasing power and increased poverty and unemployment rates. The rentier economy's dependence on hydrocarbon revenues has created vulnerability to price fluctuations while discouraging economic diversification. Despite rhetoric about reducing oil dependency, the economy remains overwhelmingly reliant on energy exports, limiting opportunities in manufacturing, services, and knowledge-based sectors where youth could find meaningful employment. Regional disparities are particularly stark, with southern provinces and interior highlands experiencing significantly lower development indicators, poorer infrastructure, and limited access to quality education and healthcare compared to northern coastal regions.

4. Regional and Transborder Determinants (Pull and Transit Factors)

4.1 Geostrategic Location and Extended Borders

Algeria possesses a distinguished geostrategic position in the North African region, forming a connecting link between sub-Saharan Africa and Europe. Algeria's land borders extend over 6,734 kilometers with seven countries (Tunisia, Libya, Niger, Mali, Mauritania, Western Sahara, and Morocco), and it has a coastline of 1,622 kilometers directly opposite European coasts (Spain, Italy, France).

This geographical position and extended borders, especially in vast Saharan areas that are difficult to fully monitor, make Algeria a principal transit route for irregular migration flows from West and Central Africa toward Europe⁽⁸⁾.

Map 1: Major Border Distances and Irregular Migrant Transit Routes Through Algeria



Source: Prepared by the researchers

(8) Merah, Yamina, Irregular Migration from Africa to Europe, National Higher School of Political Science, Algiers1 university, Algeria, 2011.p. 53.

Based on the geographical data illustrated in the map and available information, transit routes from Algeria to Europe via neighboring countries are divided into land and maritime routes, noting that land borders with Morocco are currently closed. The most important of these routes are as follows⁽⁹⁾ :

a. Transit via Tunisia (Eastern Land Route)

This represents the most active route for land transit from Algeria, with several official border crossings connecting eastern Algeria to Tunisia, from which one can proceed to Tunisian ports for maritime passage to Italy (Sicily or Genoa) or France (Marseille).

Major border crossings:

- **Oum Teboul/Melloulet crossing:** Connects Tarf Province to Tunisian Tabarka, the most active tourist crossing

- **El Ayoun/Babouch crossing:** Connects Tarf Province to Jendouba Province in Tunisia

- **Bouchebka crossing:** Connects Tébessa Province to the Tunisian side, used for individual movement and trade

- **Sakiet Sidi Youssef crossing:** Connects Souk Ahras Province to Kef Province

b. Transit via Morocco (Western Route)

The map shows 1,559 km of shared borders; however, it should be noted that land borders between Algeria and Morocco have been officially closed since 1994.

Traditional routes (currently suspended by land): Crossings such as Maghnia (Algeria)/Oujda (Morocco) were the main route to reach northern Moroccan ports like Tangier-Med for crossing to Spain (Algeciras).

c. Direct Maritime Transit (Northern Maritime Routes)

As arrows indicate on the map, there are relatively short distances

(9) Merah, Yamina, OP.cit. p. 54.

connecting Algerian coasts to Europe:

- **To Spain (238-257 km):** Regular maritime trips depart from Oran and Ghazaouet to Alicante and Almeria in Spain
- **To France (approximately 700-800 km):** Ships depart from Algiers, Bejaia, Skikda, and Annaba to Marseille, France
- **To Italy:** Maritime lines sometimes connect Algeria (the capital and Annaba) to Genoa or Civitavecchia

d. Transit via Libya (Southeastern Route)

Some migration and transit routes use the land route via the Algerian-Libyan border (such as Debdeb or Djanet area) to reach Libyan coasts, then cross by sea to Italy (Lampedusa Island). This route is fraught with security risks and is largely unofficial for ordinary travelers.

The proximity of European shores—some points being less than 250 kilometers away—creates powerful pull factors and makes maritime crossing attempts feasible despite significant risks. The Mediterranean serves simultaneously as barrier and bridge, with seasonal weather patterns influencing crossing attempts and success rates. Criminal networks exploit these geographical realities, offering smuggling services that prey upon migrants' desperation while generating substantial illicit profits.

5.Scale and Trends of Irregular Migration in Algeria

5.1 Evolution of Arrests and Repatriation

Table 1: Evolution of Arrested Irregular Migrants in Algeria (2018-2023)

Year	Total Arrested Irregular Migrants	From Sub-Saharan Africa	Algerians (Harraga)	Repatriation Operations
2018	35,750	28,600	7,150	23,795
2019	38,240	29,440	8,800	25,890

Year	Total Arrested Irregular Migrants	From Sub- Saharan Africa	Algerians (Harraga)	Repatriation Operations
2020	21,100	15,850	5,250	12,660
2021	33,680	24,570	9,110	18,520
2022	41,350	29,780	11,570	26,060
2023	~45,000*	~31,500*	~13,500*	~28,000*

Source :*Preliminary estimates based on partial data from the Ministry of Interior and Directorate General of National Security.

Annual reports from the Directorate General of National Security (DGSN) and Algerian Ministry of Interior.

The figures in the table reveal several important trends:

First: Continuous increase in numbers of arrested persons, except for 2020, which witnessed a notable decrease due to precautionary measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic and border closures. Since 2021, numbers have returned to escalating increases, reaching approximately 45,000 arrested in 2023.

Second: Continued dominance of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa representing the largest share of arrested persons (approximately 70%), confirming Algeria's role as a major transit country. The consistency of this proportion over time suggests established migration routes and networks that prove resilient despite enforcement efforts.

Third: Alarming increase in numbers of Algerian migrants (Harraga), with numbers nearly doubling from 7,150 in 2018 to approximately 13,500 in 2023, reflecting the worsening internal crisis and loss of hope among a growing segment of Algerian youth. This trend is particularly concerning as it represents domestic citizens rejecting available opportunities and willing to risk death at sea for uncertain prospects abroad.

Fourth: Repatriation rates range between 60-70% of total arrested persons, raising questions about the effectiveness of security policy

based on deportation, especially given that many returned migrants attempt crossing again. The "revolving door" phenomenon suggests that enforcement-only approaches fail to address underlying motivations and that some individuals attempt crossing multiple times despite previous failures. Repatriation operations also create diplomatic tensions with origin countries and raise human rights concerns regarding conditions of deportation.

These arrest figures likely represent only a fraction of total irregular migration flows, as many migrants successfully transit without detection or settle without coming to authorities' attention. The vast Saharan territories and long Mediterranean coastline make comprehensive surveillance practically impossible despite technological investments in monitoring systems.

5.2 Distribution by Nationality and Age Group

Table 2: Approximate Distribution of Arrested Irregular Migrants by Nationality and Age Group (Sample from 2022)

Nationality	Approximate Percentage	Predominant Age Group
Niger	28%	20-35 years
Mali	25%	20-35 years
Guinea	11%	18-30 years
Ivory Coast	9%	18-30 years
Algeria (Harraga)	28%	18-30 years
Total	100%	-

Source: (IOM), Geneva, Switzerland, 2023.

The data indicate that the phenomenon primarily affects young age groups (18-35 years), the most active and productive segment in any society. This means irregular migration represents not only a security issue but also a significant demographic and economic loss for countries of origin, including Algeria itself.

The concentration of migration among prime working-age populations has profound implications for both sending and receiving

areas. Origin communities lose human capital precisely when individuals could contribute most productively to local development. The gender composition of flows is also significant, with males predominating in irregular migration statistics, though family reunification and female migration for domestic work are growing. The educational backgrounds of migrants vary, from those with minimal schooling seeking any employment to university graduates frustrated by lack of opportunities matching their qualifications. This diversity requires differentiated policy responses rather than uniform security approaches.

6.Resulting Impacts and Challenges: Threats to Security and Social Fabric

6.1 Demographic and Social Challenges

✓ Population Composition Changes and Pressure on Services

The concentration of irregular migrants in major northern cities (Algiers, Oran, Annaba, Constantine) creates increasing pressure on municipal services, housing, and infrastructure. Informal settlements and black labor markets emerge where migrants work for low wages under inhumane conditions, creating unfair competition and negatively affecting local labor markets.⁽¹⁰⁾

This settlement poses long-term demographic challenges regarding naturalization, social integration, and national cohesion. Municipal authorities face resource constraints serving expanding populations including undocumented residents, with acute strain on schools, hospitals, water systems, and waste management generating resentment among local populations perceiving deteriorating service quality. The informal economy's expansion, while providing migrant livelihoods, undermines labor standards and creates downward wage pressure, particularly affecting low-skilled Algerian workers competing for similar employment niches.

(10) Chamama, Boutrara, The Legal and Security Strategy for Combating Irregular Migration in Algeria, Journal of Research in Legal and Political Sciences N°6, Suk Ahras University, Algeria, 2021, p186

✓ **Social Friction and Popular Rejection Discourse**

Recent years have witnessed growth in popular discourse rejecting sub-Saharan African migrants, with incidents of violence and discrimination. This rejection feeds on economic frustration, fear of resource competition, and media discourse sometimes linking irregular migration to crime and terrorism, threatening peaceful coexistence and damaging Algeria's image as a historically hospitable country⁽¹¹⁾.

✓ **Brain Drain and Youth Competency Depletion**

The emigration of Algerian youth, especially university graduates and skilled professionals, represents catastrophic demographic and economic loss. Algeria invests enormous educational resources but loses these investments when youth emigrate seeking better opportunities abroad. This includes engineers, doctors, IT specialists, researchers, and entrepreneurs whose departure represents collective development model failures to retain talent.

Brain drain has multiplier effects: removing potential engines of economic transformation, thinning professional networks, reducing knowledge spillovers, and demoralizing educational institutions. The demonstration effect of successful emigrants encourages cascading departures from certain professions and regions, skewing remaining human capital distribution and potentially concentrating departures from already disadvantaged areas⁽¹²⁾.

6.2 Security and Health Challenges

✓ **Threat to National Security and Organized Crime**

Irregular migration is closely linked to transnational organized crime. Criminal networks exploit migration routes for smuggling,

(11) Karbouch Ahmed. "Illegal Immigration in Algeria: A Study on the Implications of the Phenomenon and Mechanisms for Combatting It." *Al-Mufakkir Journal*, Volume 18, Issue 01, Biskra University, Algeria, 2023, p. 52.

(12) abdel Jabbar Jabbar, Brain Drain in Algeria and the Requirements for Reducing the Waste of Human Resources, Vol. 33, No. 1, *Journal of Humanities*, Constantine 1, Algeria, 2022 p. 15.

human trafficking, money laundering, weapons, and drug trafficking, with extended borders and vast Saharan areas providing fertile ground for terrorist and extremist activities.

Smuggling networks have evolved into sophisticated transnational enterprises generating billions of dollars annually across the Sahel, funding other criminal activities and potentially terrorist operations. Border porosity facilitates arms trafficking, with weapons from destabilized Libya circulating regionally. Corruption enabled by smuggling networks corrodes state institutions and rule of law, with compromised border guards, police, and officials undermining enforcement and creating impunity. The intersection of migration smuggling with drug trafficking routes from South America and West Africa through the Sahel creates particularly dangerous criminal ecosystems⁽¹³⁾.

✓ **Public Health Security Challenges**

Irregular migrant influx poses significant public health challenges. Poor conditions in informal reception centers, weak healthcare access, and difficulties in comprehensive medical screening increase infectious disease spread risks. The World Health Organization⁽¹⁴⁾ warned of migration-related health challenges in the Maghreb, particularly regarding tuberculosis, malaria, and sexually transmitted diseases, with COVID-19 demonstrating health system fragility in dealing with vulnerable groups.

6.3 Diplomatic and Regional Challenges

✓ **Tensions with Neighboring Countries**

Algeria's mass deportation policy has caused diplomatic tensions

(13) Karbouch Ahmed. "Illegal Immigration in Algeria: A Study on the Implications of the Phenomenon and Mechanisms for Combatting It." *Al-Mufakkir Journal*, Volume 18, Issue 01, Biskra University, Algeria, 2023, p53

(14) World Health Organization (WHO), *Public Health and Migration in the Maghreb Region: Situation Analysis*, WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, Cairo, Egypt 2021.

with neighboring countries, especially Niger and Mali. Mass expulsions conducted under difficult conditions without adequate coordination draw criticism from these countries and international human rights organizations, negatively affecting bilateral relations and regional cooperation in counterterrorism, economic development, and border security⁽¹⁵⁾.

✓ Relationship with the European Union: Between Pressure and Partnership

The European Union exerts increasing pressure on Algeria to act as a "border guard" preventing migrant flows toward Europe while providing insufficient developmental support to address root causes⁽¹⁶⁾.

This imbalance places Algeria in an awkward position, bearing enormous security and financial burdens without fair compensation in developmental investments or legal migration facilitation.

European funding focuses overwhelmingly on security equipment and surveillance rather than addressing structural economic challenges driving emigration, prioritizing European migration containment interests over Algerian or African development needs. The EU's reluctance to open legal migration pathways proportional to enforcement cooperation creates frustration. The conditionality linking development aid to migration control creates perverse incentives, potentially encouraging harsh enforcement measures regardless of human rights implications, undermining genuine partnership and transforming developmental challenges into transactional security arrangements.

7. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that irregular migration in Algeria represents a complex demographic and structural challenge rather than

(15) Chamama, Boutrara, The Legal and Security Strategy for Combating Irregular Migration in Algeria, Journal of Research in Legal and Political Sciences N°6, Suk Ahras University, Algeria, 2021, p173.

(16) Chamama Boutrara, op. cit, p174.

merely a security issue, with profound implications for social stability, population policies, national security, and regional standing. Algeria's transformation from transit state to simultaneously source, transit, and destination country fundamentally complicates policymaking across multiple dimensions.

This dual transformation manifests through Algerian youth emigrating via perilous Mediterranean journeys—reflecting failures to provide domestic opportunities—while sub-Saharan migrants flow toward Algerian territory, creating pressures straining state capacity and social cohesion. Statistical analysis reveals alarming upward trends dominated by youth aged 18-35 years, signifying catastrophic human resource losses during prime productive years following substantial educational investments.

Ramified impacts span multiple dimensions: demographically and socially through population changes, service pressures, and brain drain; security and health-wise via organized crime exploitation and public health vulnerabilities; and diplomatically through strained African relations from mass deportations and asymmetric European partnerships lacking commensurate developmental support. Current security-focused policy of prevention and deportation remains inadequate, failing to address root causes including unemployment, poverty, and regional Sahel instability, with enforcement-only approaches demonstrating limitations through high recidivism, route displacement, and continued flow growth.

Algeria must transition toward integrated developmental-regional approaches addressing migration root causes through economic opportunity creation, human development, regional cooperation, and balanced EU partnerships. This requires reconceptualizing migration as symptom of deeper developmental challenges demanding structural solutions within broader youth employment, economic diversification, and regional integration strategies. The path forward demands political courage, resource redirection from enforcement toward development,

regional solidarity addressing shared Sahel threats, and honest European relationship renegotiation toward genuine partnerships.

Ultimately, sustainable migration management requires addressing fundamental questions about development models, economic structures, governance quality, and international partnership. Policymakers face a stark choice: continuing inadequate security responses managing symptoms, or embracing transformative developmental approaches tackling root causes. The stakes—Algeria's demographic dividend, youth prospects, social cohesion, regional stability, and development trajectory—demand decisive action before crisis scenarios materialize and options narrow.

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