



Security and Demographic Implications of Illegal Migration in Algeria and Response Strategy

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Abstract

Like other North African countries, Algeria faces significant challenges in addressing the rising phenomenon of irregular migration from Sub-Saharan African countries. This phenomenon has witnessed a notable increase in recent years. It has attracted scholarly attention from various disciplines due to its serious political, economic, and security implications at local, regional, and international levels. Interconnected factors, including political conflicts, economic deprivation, demographic growth, and climate change, have driven migration flows from the African Sahel, transforming Algerian Saharan cities into settlement areas for migrants seeking better living conditions and exposing the region to numerous security challenges.

The Algerian state has promptly adopted a multifaceted strategy combining political, diplomatic, economic, social, cultural, and developmental mechanisms. Algeria's approach emphasizes humanitarian diplomacy principles, regional cooperation, and international collaboration to manage security threats and migration risks through comprehensive measures, including flow monitoring, international agreements, and strengthened border control.

This paper aims to examine the security and demographic implications of irregular migration and response strategies in Algeria, demonstrating that sustainable solutions require coordinated international efforts addressing root causes while respecting human rights.

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, Algeria has witnessed a noticeable increase in migration flows from Sub-Saharan African countries across its southern borders, which stretch for thousands of kilometers with its neighboring states. Migrants have crossed the Sahara and used Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Morocco as transit hubs to reach the European continent and fulfill their goal of arriving in Europe. However, some of these African adventurers have been unable to reach their ultimate objective—the “European dream”—and have settled in transit areas due to the stringency of European laws and procedures to deter such migration, in addition to the policies that Maghrebi states are compelled to adopt to prevent migration across their borders.

The transformation of transit countries into countries of settlement for irregular migrants from the African Sahel has generated security, economic, demographic, legal, and humanitarian concerns. Migration from Sahelian countries has become a multifaceted phenomenon with wide-ranging effects encompassing issues of international security and international relations between, on the one hand, the European Union and, on the other, the Maghreb and Sahel countries, as well as matters of economy and development, and the humanitarian dimension of this phenomenon. It has become a central precondition for discussing Euro–Maghreb and African relations.

Accordingly, this article seeks to answer the following questions:

- What are the security and demographic effects of irregular migration from the Sahel to Algeria?
- What response strategies has the Algerian state adopted?

To answer these questions, we rely on two sections: the first is devoted to the theoretical and conceptual framework of

irregular migration and its causes. The second section addresses the effects of irregular migration from the Sahel on transit countries and the response strategies adopted by Algeria.

1. The theoretical and conceptual framework of the phenomenon of irregular migration

1.1. Migration:

In general linguistic usage, migration (al-hijra) means “leaving and departing.” It is said that he “abandoned” something when he left it. The concept of migration appears in numerous dictionaries, such as *The Glossary of Geographical Terms*, which notes it as the movement of individuals from one place to another to settle there permanently or temporarily. The *Demographic Dictionary* issued by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs defines it as a form of population movement from a land called the place of origin, or place of departure, to another called the place of arrival, or destination, followed by a change in the place of residence.

The statistical definition of migration considers that any movement across international borders—except for tourist movements—falls within migration statistics. If this movement lasts one year or more, it is counted as permanent migration; if it is less than a year, it is considered temporary (International Organization for Migration).

According to the UN Population Division, migration is a geographical phenomenon denoting the movement of a population from one geographical area to another, which results in a change in the individual’s usual place of residence, that is, a change in this place across geographically bounded units with clear international borders.

Migration is also defined as movement under basic, fundamental conditions that allow individuals and groups to achieve a degree of equilibrium or to continue existing by satisfying various human needs—biological, social, psychological, cultural, political, etc. In

short, it is a process of rebalancing the social and cultural systems.

From the various definitions of migration across different sources, it is clear that two important criteria determine the concept of migration: temporal and spatial.

1.2. Irregular migration

Irregular migration has become a major concern for the international community, given its thorny nature for migrant-sending countries, countries that serve as transit points, and countries that receive these migrants. The Mediterranean is a paradigmatic region for observing this phenomenon, functioning as a crossing point between North Africa and the Sahel in Europe.

Theoretically, migration is defined as the movement of individuals, either singly or collectively, from one location to another at two levels: internal, that is, internal migration that does not cross state borders, and external, meaning movement to another homeland by crossing borders in accordance with known international laws. When the law is breached, it is classified as irregular migration.

Irregular migration includes different forms of migrant movement: some migrate for economic reasons in search of work, while others flee from conflict and war. Thus, irregular migration is closely tied to the economic and political structures of the migrant-sending states.

According to most studies, large disparities in development levels are the main drivers of this migration. The poor, migration-sending countries of the Sahel have suffered—and continue to suffer—from acute food shortages due to waves of drought and desertification, in addition to security and political conflict.

In contrast, North-of-the-Sahara countries like Algeria and Libya experienced an upward development trajectory after independence. These dire conditions drove thousands of young people to migrate, a movement also propelled by organized

smuggling networks engaged in the lucrative business of smuggling migrants. (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2023)

1.3. Causes and drivers of irregular migration from the Sahel

Interlocking and intertwined factors converge to push more migratory flows from the African Sahel to North African—particularly Maghrebi—countries, either as a transit region toward Europe, the dream and goal, or to settle there to improve their living conditions. They are driven by numerous political, economic, and social factors arising from structural crises and geopolitical challenges in African states. These drivers are complex because of the overlap between local, regional, and international conditions. These can be summarized as follows:

Political conflicts: The security and political conflicts experienced by many Sahelian states force many of their inhabitants to migrate. Authoritarian and repressive regimes in some African countries restrict fundamental freedoms, contributing to further displacement of people. Instability arising from civil wars, conflicts, and human rights violations on ethnic, religious, and political grounds is the primary engine of the growing flows of African refugees crossing international borders. They depart from conflict zones where the state loses control over large areas of its territory, especially border regions, as in Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia, and the Central African Republic (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2023), which rank among the continent's most significant sources of irregular migration and refugees.

1.3.1. Economic drivers

Many Sahelian countries are experiencing rapid population growth and high unemployment rates, resulting in deteriorating living conditions and widespread poverty. This has left these states unable to provide services and necessities of life, leading to economic decline, industrial stagnation, and deterioration

in health and education. Economic deprivation intensifies, prompting citizens to migrate to improve their living conditions. Youth are the category most affected by these conditions—even those with advanced university qualifications—which drives them to resort, irregularly, to other countries that offer varied and suitable job opportunities and a dignified life.

The African continent still records the lowest per-capita income average in the world. An estimated 35% of the population of Sub-Saharan Africa lives in poverty, creating immense pressure on households to meet basic needs and driving them to consider migration in search of better conditions. (European Center for Counterterrorism and Intelligence Studies, 2021)

The preferred destination is usually the developed world via the Maghrebi countries, which migrants initially treat as transit states but subsequently become places of settlement, especially in light of expectations of a better standard of living.

1.3.2. Demographic and social factors

The Sahelian states are experiencing demographic growth greater than any region in the world, which has led to an inability of governments to meet citizens' basic needs, such as housing, health services, and education, and to rising unemployment and poverty. Estimates indicate that Africa's population is expected to double from 1.2 billion to 2.5 billion by 2050. Between 10 and 12 million African youth join the labor force yearly, which may push further migration. Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Ethiopia are among Africa's most populous countries. (European Center for Counterterrorism and Intelligence Studies, 2021)

1.3.3. Climatic factors

Climate change, characterized by drought, rising temperatures, and desertification, leads to a sharp decline in agricultural production in sub-Saharan Africa,

contributing further to food insecurity. The southern African region is expected to witness the largest increase in irregular northward migratory flows due to the impacts of climate change.

2. The repercussions of irregular migration on transit countries and the response strategy

2.1. The repercussions of migration on transit countries

Irregular migration constitutes a compound burden on African receiving states, negatively affecting several domains, including:

2.1.1. Demographic and social effects

Irregular migration has numerous negative effects on transit and settlement countries. Migration generally alters the social composition of destination and source countries and contributes substantially to reshaping a region's population map. In the short term, irregular migration pressures the economies of receiving states. In addition, increasing numbers of irregular migrants may threaten national and societal cohesion, as migrants are perceived as posing a threat to culture and national identity, pushing the unraveling of the state's social fabric. There are also health threats, as Sahelian countries are considered sources of many diseases and epidemics. Recently, Algeria and Tunisia have experienced the spread of cholera and typhoid in their border cities, which has disrupted their health systems. (International Organization for Migration, 2022)

2.1.2. Security and political effects

Security challenges are among the most serious repercussions of irregular migration from the African Sahel region. They manifest as border disputes between sending and receiving states, while organized crime networks exploit weak border controls to smuggle migrants and illicit goods. This undermines national sovereignty and increases the risk of cross-border terrorism. Irregular

migration has also become a tool of political pressure, affecting relations between sending and receiving states because of disagreements over migrant return or burden-sharing, which can influence regional cooperation and increase geopolitical tensions.

2.1.3. Economic effects

Irregular migration from Sub-Saharan Africa to the Maghreb harms national economies and increases pressure on public resources. This causes imbalances in labor markets, as large inflows of irregular labor can depress wages and raise unemployment among citizens. At the same time, it fuels a parallel economy that weakens the state's fiscal system, in addition to the burdens borne by receiving countries in accommodating and deporting migrants (2012، بوحنية).

2.1.4. Algeria: from transit country to country of settlement

With rising numbers of African migrants and adventurers from Sahelian countries heading toward Maghrebi desert cities—particularly in Algeria and Libya—in search of work, livelihood, and opportunities for social mobility, and given the difficulty of moving northward to realize the dream of reaching Europe amid tightened controls, Algerian Saharan cities have become sites of migration and settlement for successive groups from Sahelian countries, most of them from Mali and Niger, in addition to migrants from West and Central African states, after previously serving only as transit spaces.

Among the most important cities that currently attract large numbers of these migrants from Mali, Niger, and many other African nationalities are Ouargla, Ghardaia, Illizi, Tamanrasset, Adrar, and Djanet.

Irregular migration has transformed Algerian Saharan cities into areas of settlement for many migrants from the African Sahel seeking better living conditions and fleeing the inferno of security disruptions and tribal wars. This has exposed the region to numerous risks and challenges, especially along the borders

with Niger and Mali, which have become rife with smuggling networks and trafficking of persons, arms, and narcotics. In addition, there is the danger of the spread of diseases and epidemics if migrants do not receive adequate healthcare, which may place pressure on the health system.

2.1.5. Security repercussions of irregular migration for Algeria

The African Sahel constitutes Algeria's southern strategic depth and an important geopolitical circle of national security. The security situation in the Sahel has directly affected Algerian security by geographic proximity, producing security threats in the political, economic, societal, and security dimensions. Terrorist groups and organized crime activities in the Sahel are among the most dangerous threats to security in the region. This has compelled Algeria to address this fraught and risky file wisely and prudently to confront security threats in the Sahel by formulating approaches grounded in the broader Algerian approach and adapting to these threats. This consists of political, diplomatic, economic, social, cultural, and developmental mechanisms, including military mechanisms (2012، بوحنية).

Algeria's security approach in the Sahel relies heavily on the principles of humanitarian diplomacy, based on the protection of human rights and development. Its goal is to confront anything that threatens Algerian national security through the entry point of development, support for democracy, and strengthening human rights protection. It also seeks to bolster regional frameworks for security and intelligence cooperation among the governments of the region to achieve regional security, exclude any external intervention that would complicate matters, and keep regional initiatives within the African Union framework, active and effective, in addition to enhancing international cooperation with partners in this area (2025، زازة).

2.2. Algeria's strategy to curb irregular African migration flows.

Worldwide efforts to confront irregular migration and limit its flows have varied between legal measures that criminalize such migration and impose penalties, on the one hand, and multilateral cooperative efforts between sending, destination, and transit countries, on the other.

Nevertheless, this phenomenon continues to trouble the governments affected by it, given its gravity for the national security of both sending and receiving states. The migration file now tops any discussions between Sahelian states and other countries amid the political and economic challenges and security tensions afflicting the African continent, which drive further migration. Within its security approach to the Sahel, Algeria seeks to prioritize political, diplomatic, and development mechanisms over military ones in addressing security threats in this space and to manage risks through a vision that combines the ideas of securitization and humanization (2013، بلحماش).

Algeria is gradually becoming a country of reception for migrants after having long been a country of transit for this type of migration, because of the growing numbers of migrants from Sahelian countries and the lengthening of their stay due to the closure of the European space and tighter controls.

There are no official statistics on which to determine the actual number or proportion of these migrants, apart from some estimates issued by humanitarian organizations such as the Algerian Red Crescent or by security authorities that specify the numbers of detainees or those implicated in various violations.

The High Commissioner for Refugees reports a figure for irregular migrants of African nationality of 21,500 refugees, of whom 40% consider Algeria their final destination. In contrast, another 40% consider themselves merely in transit toward their

destination, Europe. The remaining 20% represent varied positions, most lacking the means to return to their countries. (International Organization for Migration report, 2022)

Algeria has confronted these waves of migration by adopting a multi-pronged strategy that can be summarized as follows:

1. Monitoring and understanding flows by issuing periodic bulletins since 2000 to record statistics on the movements of foreign populations on Algerian territory and establishing a documentation and statistics center on migration flows under the supervision of the Ministry of the Interior and Local Authorities.
2. Concluding several international cooperation agreements with the European Union or individual countries (France, Spain, Italy) to repatriate irregular migrants and strengthen the capacity to confront the phenomenon. Algeria has also involved Sahelian countries within the regional cooperation framework under NEPAD and security cooperation with Mali. It has worked to step up the fight against networks engaged in smuggling and trafficking in persons, equip border surveillance, and encourage readmission agreements for migrants (2012، بوحنية).
3. International cooperation to promote joint development and enable Africans to enjoy decent living and working conditions in their countries. Successful international cooperation to stimulate Africa's economy will depend on adequate financing for the continental development strategy, the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), including increased aid and solutions to the continent's debt burdens.
4. Updating laws concerning irregular migration, including the entry, residence, and movement of foreigners in the country. This has enshrined an approach to deal with the phenomenon through legislation appropriate to current conditions and has specified the conditions for foreigners' entry and movement under international agreements of

which Algeria is a signatory. Foreigners who violate these laws are deported to their countries of origin. The law considers Algeria's economic and strategic interests and security priorities.

5. Granting new powers to local authorities in the southern provinces affected by irregular migration to monitor foreigners and adjudicate their status within their jurisdictions.

6. Establishing collection centers for irregular migrants and refugees of various nationalities ("waiting centers") in the concerned provinces, which are dismantled and from which migrants are repatriated to their countries through agreements with their national authorities, as has occurred with citizens of Niger and Mali.

7. Tightening and intensifying border control with Sahelian and neighboring states and raising the level of border-security vigilance to prevent irregular entry and confront human-smuggling networks that have become an active trade along the Saharan rim, with the need for joint coordination and cooperation among states to face security threats in the Sahel, given that Algeria's security is inseparable from that of its neighbors.

8. Relying on diplomacy, international cooperation, and mutual responsibility among Sahelian and neighboring states, particularly as Algeria recognizes that its neighborhood forms a ring of fire threatening it across borders that stretch for more than 6,343 km—an area rent by tribal conflicts and rife with all forms of crime, especially serious ones such as arms and drug trafficking.

9. Studying and monitoring security conditions in the Sahel while adhering to non-interference in states' internal affairs and privileging dialogue and reason over the language of arms, with the need to pursue an economic approach to peacebuilding in the region and to resolve conflicts by peaceful means.

10. Combating international terrorism and preventing its spread; rejecting ransom payments to terrorists; rejecting foreign intervention; and seeking to resolve African problems with African hands. Algeria's war against terrorism during what is known as the "Black Decade" conferred legitimacy, especially in light of the fragility of conditions in Sahelian states.

11. The Algerian state has adopted a studied strategy to confront irregular migration, centered on understanding the scale of flows to manage them, with the National Police regularly issuing statistical bulletins on the movements of foreign populations on Algerian soil since 2000.

12. Cooperation and intensification of efforts among the various national bodies—the Ministries of Interior and Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Solidarity, and the security agencies (army, police, gendarmerie, and customs)—to confront irregular migration by controlling flows through arrests, imprisonment, and expulsion of those implicated in various violations, followed by lenient rulings that have allowed certain categories of migrants and refugees to remain on Algerian territory for humanitarian reasons and to gather them in monitored areas (2012، بوحنية).

13. The Algerian authorities attach great importance to regional cooperation in combating migration. In this context, they participate in NEPAD and cooperate with the security bodies of neighboring states through a security cooperation agreement.

3. Proposals and recommendations to reduce irregular African migration flows.

The irregular migration file is thorny and complex, enveloped by numerous security tensions across the African continent, especially in Sahelian states, which face economic, political, and security challenges that drive further migration and asylum. This file must therefore be addressed through international cooperation and earnest

coordination with Sahelian migrant-sending states and transit states that have become places of settlement within a framework of mutual responsibility to find solutions to reduce these flows and their intricate ramifications in a manner consistent with respect for human rights. From this perspective, we propose the following:

- Irregular migration is a complex and dangerous phenomenon in all its legal, social, and economic dimensions; it cannot be eradicated by security measures alone. To eliminate it, the causes must be addressed from all angles, focusing on development and international cooperation to enable Africans to enjoy decent living and working conditions in their own countries through successful cooperation to stimulate Africa's economy and formulate strategies for Africa's development (NEPAD).
- Encouraging further initiatives by developed countries to extend a helping hand to the African continent, as in the so-called "Mattei Plan," held in Italy in 2024, which allocated €5.5 billion for joint development in Africa.
- Regional cooperation among the recipient states for African migration from the Sahel and the need for coordination among them to set strategic plans to protect their borders, which have become exposed to the dangers of terrorism, human trafficking, and drug smuggling.

4. Conclusion

This research has demonstrated that Algeria's role in regional migration has undergone a fundamental paradigm shift. From a mere conduit to Europe, it has become a de facto destination country, confronting complex security, demographic, and humanitarian realities on its soil.

This transformation was not a choice but a consequence of converging geopolitical pressures: the sealing of European borders to the north and the deepening arc of instability across the Sahel to the south. Algeria has forged a remarkably comprehensive and nuanced strategy that eschews simplistic, security-first solutions. Its 14-point plan prioritizes diplomacy, regional cooperation through NEPAD, and developmental aid, and asserts strategic autonomy. By balancing national interests with humanitarian principles and championing "African solutions to African problems," Algeria is not merely managing migration but positioning itself as a key regional actor in migration governance.

Looking ahead, the drivers of this migration are set to intensify. Algeria's experience is a critical case study, proving that unilateral border control is an insufficient and unsustainable policy. Long-term stability will hinge not on building higher walls, but on fostering a genuine international partnership to address the root causes of displacement, ensuring that the pursuit of a dignified life is a possibility at home, not a perilous journey.

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