The Dynamics of Foreign Labor Migration in Algeria: Historical, Quantitative, and Regulatory Perspectives

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Abstract:
The dynamics of foreign labor migration to Algeria have gained increasing attention in recent years, reflecting the country's unique position in the Maghreb as a host nation. This paper explores the historical evolution, regulatory framework, and statistical profiles of foreign workers in Algeria from 1962 to 2022. It provides a dual analysis: one based on quantitative trends from official data, and the other focused on the development and implications of employment legislation. Particular attention is given to labor market integration, nationality acquisition policies, and the challenges faced by undocumented migrants.
Keywords: *Employment regulation; Work permits; Immigration policy; Quantitative analysis.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of foreign workers immigrating to Algeria is a subject of crucial importance in both legal and statistical terms. While Algeria has historically been a country of emigration, recent sociological studies highlight the emergence of reverse mobility toward the national territory. Within the Maghreb, the country has established itself as a particularly attractive space, registering significant flows over the last two decades (MUSETTE & KHALED, 2012; HAFID, 2019). These migratory dynamics, accentuated by the reconfigurations of the post-COVID-19 period (Algeria Presse Service, 2021), contrast nonetheless with the fact that none of the national reports on the Millennium Development Project has accorded explicit attention to this issue in its objectives.

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This attractiveness and the evolution of the flows render indispensable the analysis of specific immigrant pathways. It is within this perspective that several foundational works have examined the forms of migration in Algeria, focusing notably on the trajectories of immigrants originating from Sub-Saharan countries (KHALED, MUSETTE & HAMMOUDA, 2007; BUREAU, 2019). While this literature demonstrates a marked interest in this category, a comprehensive analysis now requires expanding the scope to the diversity of statuses, regulatory frameworks, and nationalities that compose the current migratory landscape.

In order to regulate this market and protect the local labor force, the Algerian government has introduced a strict regulatory framework governing the employment of foreigners. Consequently, to understand the evolution of this presence, it is appropriate to mobilize the theoretical model of push and pull factors conceived by LEE (1966). The objective is to analyze how the rigidity or flexibility of national legal obligations, combined with economic circumstances, shapes the trajectories and the evolution of flows within the territory.

In light of these elements, and to satisfy the required structural adjustments, the central research question is formulated as follows:

To what extent do the regulatory framework and labor market dynamics in Algeria shape the push and pull factors of foreign labor, and how do recent statistical trends reveal the mutations of this presence within the territory?

From this main question, two specific sub-questions arise:

To what extent do current Algerian regulations shape the presence and integration of foreign workers?

How have the statistical trends of foreign labor evolved after COVID-19 in Algeria?

2. Methodological Approach:

To address these questions, this study adopts a dual methodology combining:

1. Quantitative Analysis: Compilation and processing of data from official Algerian databases (ANEM, CNRC) to identify trends in foreign labor

distribution between 2000 and 2022, with special attention to the post-pandemic period;

2. Legal and Regulatory Review: Examination of official laws, presidential decrees, and ministerial ordinances from 1966 to 2023 regulating entry, residence, employment, and access to professional activities for foreign nationals in Algeria.

This mixed-method approach allows a nuanced understanding of how labor migration to Algeria has been shaped not only by socio-economic demand but also by evolving national policies and legal instruments.

For reasons of methodological consistency, the quantitative scope of this study is restricted to the 2000-2022 timeframe. This period represents a stabilized economic cycle, including the structural disruptions induced by the COVID-19 pandemic, whereas fully consolidated institutional registries for the subsequent years remain unreleased for academic exploitation.

3. Etymology: migrant worker:

The concept of "foreign worker", or "migrant worker", refers to a foreigner who engages in a remunerated activity, formally or informally, in a country other than his or her country of birth, where he or she resides for a given period.

According to Article 11 of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), revised in 1999 at its 87th session, "migrant worker" excludes two categories of persons: frontier workers and artists or self-employed persons.

Algerian law defines a "foreigner in Algeria" as a person who does not have Algerian nationality, either because he or she has another nationality or because he or she has no nationality at all (stateless person).

With reference to the ILO criteria and Algerian legislation, a "foreign worker" is defined as any person who does not have Algerian nationality and who carries out a paid activity on Algerian territory. This definition includes individuals from other countries, whether working formally or informally in Algeria. In the framework of our study, this encompasses both regularized and irregular workers, whose structural presence constitutes an immigrant community in Algeria (LABDELAOUI, 2009).

4. History of the presence of foreigners in Algeria between 1830 and 2022

Algeria is often considered a country of departure. On the other hand, as its history attests, it has been a "country of settlers", starting with the arrival of the Phoenicians, followed by the Carthaginians, the Romans, the Vandals, the Byzantines, the Arabs, the Ottomans, and the French. From 1830 to 1962, Algeria was home to over a million foreigners. During this period, Algeria recorded a strong presence of European immigrants, rising from 160,000 in 1836 to 750,000 in 1911. According to the 1948 census, the French population was estimated at 932,000, 95% of whom were French immigrants, with the remainder (5%) made up of several nationalities. The most important were English, German, Spanish, Italian, Belgian, Swiss, and British (MUSETTE, 2021: 30-31).

After 1962, Algeria saw a significant drop in its foreign population, mainly due to the departure of Europeans following the country's independence. This reduction led to a predominance of Moroccan and Tunisian workers, with a few Europeans choosing to remain in the country where they had long been residing (LABDELAOUI, 2005).

Between 1970 and 1980, Algeria experienced a notable increase in the number of foreign workers. This increase was motivated by the recruitment of qualified foreigners to meet the needs of the national economy, mainly managed by the ONMO (National Employment Office). These workers included managers from the Middle East, skilled workers from the former Soviet Union, as well as Egyptian and Syrian teachers in the national education system and French teachers in higher education (MUSETTE & KHALED, 2012).

This historical phase shows how the Algerian state relied on targeted contractual migration to address specific skill shortages, linking economic development goals with the international mobility of qualified professionals and academics.

Foreign companies make use of skilled and unskilled workers under specific procedures enshrined in partnership contracts between the Algerian government and those of European, Asian, and North American countries.

This practice is particularly prevalent in the hydrocarbons and public works sectors (LABDELAOUI, 2005).

Since 1980, Algeria has seen a further decline in the number of foreign workers on its territory. This decline can be explained by the gradual replacement of the foreign workforce by Algerian university graduates and managers trained abroad (LABDELAOUI, 2005), as well as by the return of former Algerian migrants (MUSETTE, LABDELAOUI, BELHOUARI, 2007). During this period, Algeria introduced strict regulations for granting work permits to foreigners, excluding them from applying for positions that could be filled by Algerians, in accordance with Law 81-10 and decree 82-510 (Jeune Afrique, 2018).

In 1990, the reduction in the number of foreign workers became increasingly apparent due to the Algerianization and Arabization of the services project, which had been prepared well before that time, coupled with the deterioration of the country's security and economic situation (MUSETTE & KHALED, 2012). This situation not only prompted foreigners to leave Algeria but also led to the flight of skilled Algerian labor to other countries.

Since the 2000s, the return of security stimulated a structurally segmented Algerian labor market where the movement of foreigners gained momentum, with more individuals settling to live and work (MUSETTE, 2010). On one hand, the influx of Asian professionals, notably Chinese in public works and Indians in the steel industry (MUSETTE, 2012: 56), reflects a formal, contract-based migration driven by state-funded infrastructure plans. On the other hand, sub-Saharan labor, though often administratively irregular, responds to a structural dependency in sectors like private construction and seasonal agriculture.

However, this trend has not been linear. In 2004, a decline in numbers led the Algerian government to tighten entry controls and enact a new law governing the conditions of entry, residence, and movement of foreigners. Specific control measures and bilateral adjustments were planned, particularly to regulate Chinese corporate activities and compliance within the country (LABDELAOUI, 2009).

In 2006, the presence of foreign workers rose sharply to 32,000, encompassing Chinese, Egyptian, Turkish, British, Italian, French, Syrian, Moroccan, American and Filipino nationalities. Recruited foreign labor generally held technical positions or higher to avoid duplication in the domestic job market. Concurrently, registered French nationals—predominantly dual citizens-grew fivefold to over 40,000 individuals compared to the early 2000s (MUSETTE, 2010).

According to the same study, irregular migration reached 26,000 people from Arab, Asian, and African countries, posing a specific challenge within the informal sector. Irregular entries remained concentrated along the borders with Mali and Niger, embedded in the socio-economic mobility of the Saharan region, with Tamanrasset acting as the primary hub for sub-Saharan workers active in southern wilayas (MUSETTE, 2010).

Regarding commercial activities, approximately 4,400 foreigners were engaged in them in 2006, with French, Syrian, and Chinese nationals predominating (LABDELAOUI, 2009). By 2010, CNRC data showed that registered foreign traders were mostly Tunisian (31.14%), Moroccan (25.55%), Syrian (16.54%), and Egyptian (6.81%). While Moroccans focused on wholesale trade, Tunisians dominated retail, traditional pastries, and fast food, representing 6.5% of legal corporate entities compared to only 1% for Moroccan firms (MUSETTE & KHALED, 2012: 65).

The results of our recent study identified two distinct profiles among foreign workers in Algeria. On the one hand, there is a significant presence of new migrants, whose length of stay is less than five years. These migrants are mainly from sub-Saharan African countries and generally have a low level of education, limited work experience, and are financially disadvantaged. They tend to be poorly integrated into society, often relying on the informal economy. This divide reflects the segmentation of Algeria's labor market, where informal sectors depend on undocumented workers to generally address seasonal labor demands.

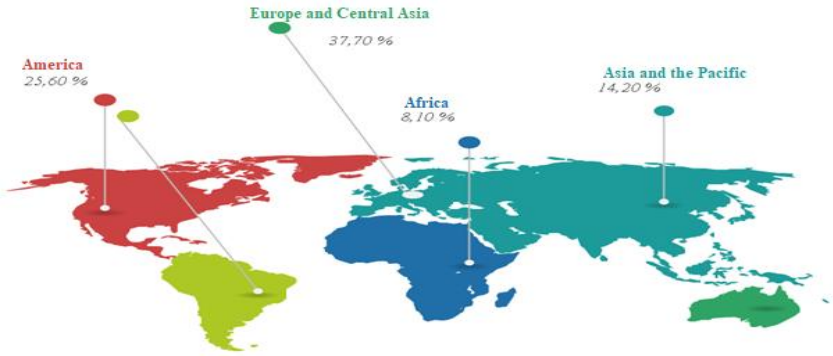
On the other hand, it is important to recognize the presence of older migrants, mainly from Arab and Asian countries. They have a higher level

of education and professional experience, and are better integrated into the Algerian market (MUSETTE et al., 2023).

5. Distribution of migrant workers worldwide

Statistics from the latest IOM report (2019) put the global stock of the world's migrant population at 272 million, of whom 245 million are over the age of 15. The number of migrant workers is estimated at 169 million, of whom 58.5% are men and 41.5% women (ILO, 2021). A large proportion of migrant workers are destined for Europe, followed by America, Asia, and lastly Africa, which remains the destination for only 8.1% of migrants. The following map shows the distribution of migrant workers by destination:

Figure N° (1): Distribution of migrant workers worldwide



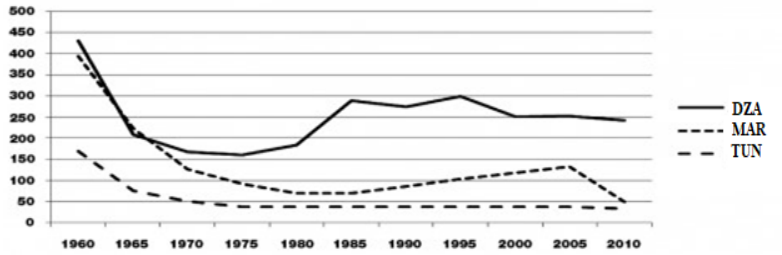
Source: ILO, 2021.

5.1 The Share of Central African Countries

Trends have changed significantly since the independence of Algeria and its neighboring countries. There has been a regression, especially in three countries: Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. While in 1960, the foreign population in the region reached nearly one million people, it had declined to about 324,000 migrants in 2010, according to United Nations data. This decrease is neither fixed nor linear, particularly for Algeria, which experienced a considerable influx of refugees from Western Sahara in the 1970s. According to UNDESA data, Algeria ranks first in hosting the largest number of foreigners, representing about 75% of its total population, followed by Morocco with 31% and Tunisia with only 9%. However, estimates vary depending on the sources, with notable differences in

refugee counts between data from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and those from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (MUSETTE & KHALED, 2012: 54-69).

Figure N° (2): Evolution of the Foreign Population in the Maghreb

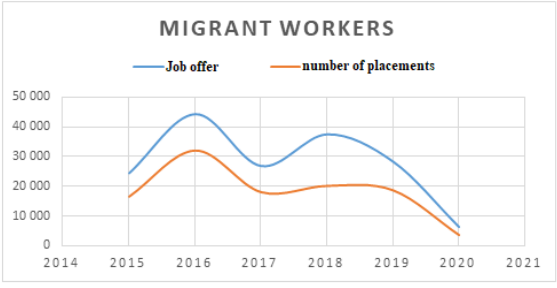


Source: Summary of UNDESA, UN, 2012 in: (MUSETTE & KHALED, 2012)

5.2 Presence of Foreign Workers in Algeria

In this section, we present the findings from two databases: ANEM and CNRC, to capture the migratory flow present in Algeria. As a result, nearly 72.8% of immigrants are of working age and meet the requirements set by the Algerian state policy to grant a visa or residency permit. ANEM's data, made public on its website, shows the results of job offers and placements it has made from 2015 to 2020.

Figure N° (3): Distribution of immigrant workers according to job offers and placements made by ANEM



Source: summary of data from ANEM (official website).

In the second stage, we present data provided by the CNRC in 2020 regarding the allocation of commercial registers. There are 108 foreign nationalities present in Algeria that have managed to obtain a commercial register, accounting for a modest rate of 0.71% of the total registers allocated, which is 14,942 out of 2,097,283. The following table summarizes this distribution by Wilaya (province):

Table N° (1): Distribution of commercial registers allocated to immigrants by the CNRC

Wilaya	**Individual Person**	**Legal Entity**	**Total**	**Wilaya**	**Individual Person**	**Legal Entity**	**Total**
Adrar	08	22	**30**	Constantine	118	323	**441**
Chlef	55	79	**134**	Médéa	21	40	**61**
Laghouat	36	28	**64**	Mostaganem	23	96	**119**
Oum el Bouaghi	34	55	**89**	M'sila	20	42	**62**
Batna	42	81	**123**	Mascara	26	35	**61**
Bejaia	40	146	**186**	Ouargla	12	179	**191**
Biskra	30	62	**92**	Oran	305	1099	**1404**
Bechar	35	18	**53**	El Bayadh	15	10	**25**
Blida	185	597	**782**	Illizi	2	4	**6**
Bouira	20	53	**73**	B.B.A	25	97	**122**
Tamanrasset	26	7	**33**	Boumerdes	46	388	**434**
Tébessa	22	42	**64**	El Tarf	54	69	**123**
Tlemcen	28	95	**123**	Tindouf	18	3	**21**
Tiaret	21	32	**53**	Tissemsilt	6	17	**23**
Tizi Ouzou	25	77	**102**	El oued	22	40	**62**
Alger	777	6927	**7704**	Khenchela	15	33	**48**
Djelfa	40	38	**78**	Souk Ahras	29	22	**51**
Jijel	15	55	**70**	Tipaza	47	185	**232**
Sétif	84	311	**395**	Mila	15	46	**61**
Saida	24	11	**35**	Ain defla	26	48	**74**
Skikda	11	107	**118**	Naama	27	8	**35**
Sidi bel Abbes	73	69	**142**	Ain Temouchent	48	41	**89**
Annaba	49	398	**447**	Ghardaia	38	40	**78**
Guelma	12	37	**49**	Relizane	37	42	**79**

Source: summary of commercial registers allocated by CNRC (official website).

However, these trends cannot be fully understood without considering the role of state policies. This calls for an examination of the legal and regulary framework governing access to formal economic activity in Algeria.

6. Immigration regulation in Algeria

The legislation on immigration in Algeria aims to protect the rights of foreigners while regulating their presence within the country. The Algerian law prohibits extraditions except under international agreements and protects political refugees from any extradition (Algerian Government 2020: P.14). The principal law, dating from 2008, governs the entry, stay, and movement of foreigners (Algerian Government 2008). Law No. 23-04 (Algerian Government 2023) is designed to prevent and combat human trafficking within the framework of institutional and international cooperation.

To stay in Algeria, foreigners must have a valid travel document and visa, as well as the necessary administrative authorizations. They are required to respect movement regulations and report any change of permanent residence. Foreign residents must possess valid travel documents and visas, along with sufficient financial means. They are obligated to leave Algerian territory at the expiration of their visa, resident card, or authorized stay. Foreign residents must return their residence card upon leaving (Algerian Government 2008). The conditions for visa issuance observed from 1966 to 2003 are detailed in three fundamental texts published in official journals.

Algerian nationality can be acquired after seven years of residence or by marriage with an Algerian, subject to strict conditions and the possibility of revocation. According to Article 12, Algerian nationality can be revoked for certain individuals who acquired it (Algerian Government 2005).

6.1 Entry and exit requirements for foreign nationals

In Algeria's initial report to the Committee on Migrant Workers, several more specific texts are listed concerning the employment conditions of foreign workers, social insurance, work accidents, health protection, and so on.

From its first appearance, Decree No. 69-148, dated October 2nd, establishes the recruitment conditions for foreign personnel in state services, local authorities, public institutions, and organizations in Algeria. This decree authorizes the hiring of foreign nationals as contractual agents,

particularly in the fields of higher and secondary education, administrative teaching roles, and technical positions equivalent to those of technicians (Algerian Government 1969).

Ordinance No. 71-60 of August 5th, 1971 defines the employment conditions of foreigners in Algeria. Any foreigner wishing to engage in salaried work in the country must obtain a work permit issued by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (Algerian Government 1971).

The specificity of Decree No. 72-33 of January 21st, 1972 lies in the precision of the declaration period stipulated in Article E of the previous ordinance No. 71-60 of August 5th, 1971. This declaration must be made to the Employment and Labor Directorate of the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs within 30 days from the foreigner's start date. This declaration must include civil status, nationality, professional qualifications, the job held, the duration and location of the employment contract, as well as the social security affiliation regime (Algerian Government 1972).

Like Algerian nationals, all foreign workers must be affiliated with social security (Algerian Government 1983). These foreign workers, particularly the French, can benefit from family allowances, social security protection, and school allowances as per Articles 45 to 51 of the General Convention of October 1st, 1980 (Algerian Government 1981).

Under the 2008 law, to obtain permanent residency in Algeria, a foreigner must acquire a residence card valid for two years, issued by the Wilaya where they reside. This legislation outlines the criteria for obtaining this card, whether for foreigners seeking to work or students pursuing academic stays.

To obtain this card, a foreigner wishing to work in Algeria must hold a work permit, a temporary work authorization, or an employment declaration. In the case of an extended stay, an application for a residence card must be submitted fifteen days before the expiration of the visa (Algerian government, 2008).

From a sociological perspective, the progressive tightening of this legal framework has significantly altered the status of foreign labor, driving a substantial segment of sub-Saharan migrants into the informal economy.

This regulatory rigidity produces a state of legal precarity that limits formal socio-professional integration, thereby reinforcing a dual labor market divided between regularized, highly skilled professionals and undocumented, vulnerable workers.

6.2 The Work Contract

Obtaining a work contract involves specifying several elements: the contract duration, which cannot exceed two years or be less than three months; the job position; the allocated salary, as well as any bonuses, allowances, and benefits; the workplace location; and the social security affiliation regime. The work contract must also include the opinion of the works council or, failing that, the employee delegates or the management committee in self-managed enterprises (Algerian Government 1969).

6. 3 The Work Permit

The work permit, as defined by Decree No. 72-33 of January 21st, 1972, implementing Ordinance No. 71-60 of August 5th, must contain several details, including: personal information of the foreigner, such as civil status and nationality; the date of the work contract; the name and address of the employer; the position held; the validity period of the permit; the territorial validity, which can be extended to the administrative limits of a Wilaya; and finally, the workplace (Algerian Government 1969).

To obtain this permit during the 1960s, the applicant had to present documents proving their legal status in the territory, as well as an employment contract. The work permit was temporary, corresponding to the duration of the employment contract, which could not exceed two years or be less than three months. This duration could be renewed multiple times. Additionally, foreigners could only be employed in the wilayas specified in their work permit. Any violation of these provisions was subject to penalties as stipulated by law (Algerian government, 1969). Ordinance No. 9 of February 1972 further specified that a worker not subject to a work permit could obtain a renewable declaration receipt, valid for two years (Algerian government, 1972).

In the 1980s, the conditions and procedures for obtaining a work permit or temporary work authorization became much more stringent. The

criteria often required strict justification of the non-availability of national workers for the position, as well as proof of the necessary qualifications and compliance with health requirements. The application file had to be accompanied by a motivated report from the employer and the opinion of workers' representatives to be considered by the competent services of the Ministry of Labor. Specific provisions applied to foreign spouses of Algerian citizens and foreign workers with Algerian children under their care. Sanctions were provided for non-compliance with the legislation. The law also imposed obligations on employers, including the declaration of contract terminations and the preparation of a nominal list of foreign personnel (Algerian government, 1981).

6. 4 The Work visa

Presidential Decree No. 03-251, dated July 19, 2003, amends Decree No. 66-212, dated July 21, 1966, concerning the procedures for obtaining a work visa for foreigners. According to these amendments, a foreigner can obtain a work visa if they have a valid employment contract and a provisional work authorization issued by the competent employment authorities. The employer must also provide a certificate guaranteeing the repatriation of the foreign worker at the end of their contract. Additionally, a temporary work visa may be granted for contracts with a maximum duration of three months, accompanied by a temporary work authorization. These provisions also apply to foreigners with assistance or service contracts with entities operating in Algeria (Algerian government, 2023).

7. Commercial, industrial, craft, and liberal professions

Decree No. 75-11 of September 26, 1975, regulates the commercial, industrial, craft, and liberal activities of foreign residents in Algeria (Algerian government, 1975). A foreign trader, industrialist, or artisan card is established, containing the holder's personal information and valid for two years. The card can be revoked in case of false declarations or conviction for a crime or offense. Foreigners must return their card upon leaving the territory. The card application is submitted to the Wali and the police station, with stamp fees. Foreigners can only engage in activities that align with their card and within the wilaya of issuance. A register is

maintained in each wilaya to record foreigners holding the card. Authorities can consult this register to monitor the activities of foreigners.

About previous decrees and ordinances, the Algerian government issued a new decree in 2006 establishing the conditions and procedures for issuing a professional card to foreigners legally residing in Algeria and working in various sectors, such as commerce, industry, crafts, liberal professions, as well as members of the governing bodies of commercial companies. The professional card is valid for two years, renewable, and the application must be submitted within sixty days before its expiration. To obtain this card, the foreigner must be registered in the register corresponding to their activity. Additionally, holders are required to apply for a foreign resident card within ninety days of obtaining their professional card. Each wilaya maintains a register of cardholders, which can be consulted by the authorities responsible for oversight. The affected foreigners have one year from the publication of the decree to comply with its provisions (Algerian government, 2006).

From an economic perspective, this regulatory framework reflects a structural dependency within specific sectors under pressure. While official registries show a high concentration of foreign operators in trade and services, infrastructure projects and agricultural activities remain reliant on international labor to mitigate local workforce shortages, establishing a direct link between national economic demands and migration dynamics.

In parallel with these legal provisions, Algerian institutions have also engaged in a process of modernization of their management tools. For instance, while the technological upgrade of the Customs Administration (Medjoudja & Benhamed, 2025) represents a positive step toward administrative efficiency, it might simultaneously function as a rigid framework. By strictly formalizing commercial flows, this digital transition could inadvertently create barriers to entry, potentially hindering the country’s economic attractiveness for foreign operators.

8. CONCLUSION

Algeria is a country that has experienced a significant evolution in the presence of foreign workers over the centuries. Several legal frameworks have been implemented to regulate these migratory flows in a balanced manner, while safeguarding the rights of foreign workers and preserving national interests. Strengthening social and professional integration remains essential in order to promote harmonious coexistence and to enhance the benefits of cultural and economic diversity.

The findings of this study show an evolving migratory trajectory in Algeria, shaped by economic needs, fluctuations in global markets, and migration policies. From the colonial period to 2022, this trajectory has shifted from a phase of strong inflows to a period of restriction, and finally to a more tightly regulated admission system.

From a socio-economic perspective, these dynamics reveal a segmented labor market structured around two main logics. On the one hand, the formal migration of Asian and Middle Eastern workers, particularly in public works and the steel industry, is closely linked to state-funded modernization programs and large-scale infrastructure projects. On the other hand, the presence of sub-Saharan migrants, often in irregular situations, reflects structural adjustment mechanisms in specific sectors of the local economy, particularly construction and seasonal agriculture, where they are integrated into the informal economy. This phenomenon operates within a rigid regulatory framework that indirectly contributes to the consolidation of informal forms of employment.

The findings also highlight the volatility of migration flows, the rigidity of the legal framework, and the differentiation between skilled and precarious migrants. In this regard, several lines of reflection can be proposed: targeted facilitation of access to nationality for high-value profiles, the establishment of a post-employment support framework, and the development of a comprehensive national multisectoral migration strategy.

Finally, future research should more systematically incorporate recent statistical and administrative data (work permits, residence permits,

commercial registries, and labor market data), particularly from the post-2022 period. This would allow for a more precise understanding of contemporary shifts in migration patterns and a deeper analysis of the socio-economic integration mechanisms of foreign workers in Algeria.

Overall, this study demonstrates that foreign labor migration in Algeria is structured by the interaction between the regulatory framework, economic modernization processes, and the segmentation of the labor market.

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