RESEARCH REPORT



A GERIA'S MIGRATION DILEMINA

Migration and human smuggling in southern Algeria

RAOUF FARRAH

DECEMBER 2020



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Cover: Algerian security officers patrol in the Tamanrasset Desert, 2 July 2018. © Ryad Kramdi/AFP via Getty Images Cartography: Rudi de Lange

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Since 2015, Algeria has expelled or repatriated an unprecedented number of migrants to Niger and, to a lesser extent, Mali.¹ National and international advocacy groups and organizations have expressed grave concerns that these operations are tainted by human rights violations, such as physical violence and abuse during detention and deportation.²

The Algerian government has rejected these allegations, arguing that migrants are treated with respect and are provided with humanitarian support.³ Algerian officials underscore the country's struggle against organized crime and its efforts to limit human displacement in the Sahel by supporting peacebuilding and stabilization.⁴

Algeria's recent policies around migration are indelibly linked to the growing challenge faced by Algeria since the so-called 2011 Arab Spring uprisings. The fall of the Muammar Gaddafi regime in Libya that year, and the eruption of upheavals in northern Mali a year later, escalated the challenges faced by Algerian security forces along the country's southern and eastern borders.⁵ The government has responded largely to this by ramping up security measures, for example, closing its borders with Mali, Niger and Libya and constructing a sand berm along its frontiers.⁶ Algeria's approach mirrors other security efforts and crackdowns on human smuggling across the region.⁷ These measures have significantly affected the routes, prices and modus operandi of human smuggling and migration between the Sahel and the Sahara.

Algerian policies, with increased instability and violence in Mali and Niger, have made the journey more difficult and perilous for migrants. However, regional smuggling networks have adapted, often transporting migrants along off-roads, raising prices and changing their cross-border strategies.⁸ Despite the risks, Algeria continues to attract thousands of sub-Saharan migrants journeying north along the Central Sahara route.

This report details current migration and human-smuggling dynamics in the extreme south of Algeria. The study assesses how Algerian authorities manage migration flows and human smuggling along the borders with Niger and Mali. Although the focus is on migration and human smuggling, these activities take place within the broader frameworks of illicit economies in central Sahara, Algeria's domestic politics and the regional geopolitical environment. The resulting analysis reflects this.

Smugglers make their way along the Algeria–Niger border. © Raouf Farrah



Thousands of migrants have travelled from this departure point in In Guezzam to get to Tamanrasset. © Raouf Farrah

The report comprises three sections. The first offers a brief history of the evolution of migration from sub-Saharan Africa to Algeria, and migrants' experiences there.⁹ The second details the practicalities of human smuggling (strategies, prices, modus operandi and routes) in Algeria's borderlands with northern Mali and northern Niger (Bordj Badji Mokhtar, Timiaouine, Tinzaouatine, In Guezzam). The third section assesses how the Algerian authorities address irregular migration, scrutinizing recent policy developments, including the 2015 repatriation deal between Algeria and Niger and its effects.¹⁰ The study concludes with a number of policy recommendations on how Algeria can better cope with irregular migration in the future.¹¹

Key points

- Migration to Algeria is not a new phenomenon. However, the number of migrants entering the country has increased significantly since 2016. Southern Algeria has become a strategic gateway for migrants journeying north, whether they are seeking jobs or refuge in Algeria, or trying to reach Europe via the Western Mediterranean route. Algeria is more than a country of destination. It is a *pays-étape* (a stepping-stone country) that plays a major role in migrants' pathways.
- Human smugglers operating in central Sahara have directed an ever-greater number of migrants towards Algeria, partly as a consequence of the criminalization of migration along the Niger-Libya corridor.
- Human-smuggling strategies and operations differ significantly along the borders with Mali

and Niger. The village of Timiaouine (Algeria) is the least difficult entry point from northern Mali, while Tinzaouatine is a good access point for Malian nationals. Most smuggling along the Niger-Algeria border occurs in the triangle connecting In Guezzam, Assamaka and El Akla, a smuggling market in the desert.

- Smugglers active along the borders with Mali and Niger fear the treatment meted out by lawenforcement units. The militarization of the border pushed most human-smuggling networks to transfer the risks by dropping migrants far from the border, compelling them to climb alone the sand berm separating Algeria from Niger and Mali. Crossing the berm is a dangerous experience.
- The city of Tamanrasset has been the main reception point for migrants crossing the southern

borders from Niger and Mali. The growing concentration of sub-Saharan migrants in some neighbourhoods makes the question of settlement a pressing challenge.

- The tough security lens through which Algeria views migration is closely linked to concerns about instability along its southern borders. Algerian authorities fear massive influxes of migrants from Libya and the Sahel.
- Algeria's approach to migration has been hamstrung by its lack of a clearly defined vision or strategy on the issue. Algiers has not found a way to reconcile its security concerns with an agile and well-thought-out migration policy driven by pragmatism, coherence and respect for human rights.

Methodology

This report is based on a mixed methodology. Interviews were conducted in the extreme south of Algeria and Algiers, notably in the city of Tamanrasset and borderland towns and villages of Bordj Badji Mokhtar, In Guezzam, Tinzaouatine and Timiaouine between September 2018 and December 2019. This fieldwork was complemented by phone interviews with migrants, activists and former smugglers throughout 2020. Names of interviewees have been withheld or changed in line with their requests.

Field and remote interviews were complemented by a review of more than 150 documents, including policy reports, international and local media articles, academic papers, as well as grey data on migration and human smuggling in southern Algeria. These documents are written in French, Arabic and English. A research stream model was applied on opensource platforms and authoritative databases, and was complemented by a set of 45 interviews with migrants, smugglers, local journalists, civil-society groups, law-enforcement officers and international experts.

Care was taken to triangulate and verify data and interviewee accounts. However, this report investigates complex, often opaque issues in an environment that is highly volatile, with limited accessibility.



Smugglers take a break at a well in El Bir along the In Guezzam-El Akla route on the Algeria-Niger border. © Raouf Farrah

THE DEVELOPMENT OF MIGRATION IN SOUTHERN ALGERIA

igration from sub-Saharan Africa to southern Algeria is not a new phenomenon. Long-standing communal, cultural and trade bonds connect the peoples of the Sahara; contemporary migration is built on this foundation.

Throughout the second half of the 20th century, movement of people increased significantly across the Sahara-Sahel region. The emergence of motorized transportation, natural disasters, trade of basic commodities and other political developments contributed to growing Saharan mobility. An ecosystem emerged connecting ancient trading hubs (*cité-carrefours*) such as Kidal and Gao in Mali, Agadez in Niger, and Ghat in Libya to newly established centres, such as the former military posts of Tamanrasset in Algeria.¹² However, mobility in the Sahara has not involved real freedom of movement. Regulating the travel of people across the desert offered communities – and later on smugglers – the power to control movement, restrict access to opponents and accumulate wealth.

The 1950s–1990s: Small–scale trans-Saharan migration

Before the independence of Algeria, Mali and Niger in the early 1960s, migrants from northern Mali and, to a lesser degree, Niger, headed to southern Algeria for work on construction sites and in agriculture, often on a seasonal basis. Many settled in the Touat region (southwest of Algeria), others clustered near the cities of Tamanrasset, Djanet and Ghardaïa.¹³

Several migratory and commercial routes existed at that time, with the most important connecting the regions of Gao in Mali to Adrar in Algeria.¹⁴ At first, migrants traversed

 Migrants from Niger stop on the road as their convoy heads to a transit centre in Tamanrasset, in southern Algeria. © AFP via Getty Images



FIGURE 1 Algeria and the surrounding region

these routes with camel caravans organized by Tuareg communities of Kel Ahaggar in Algeria to their brothers in Kal Adagh (northern Mali) and Kel Ajjer (northern Niger).¹⁵

This movement pattern was intensified by the independence of Algeria, Mali and Niger. For many local communities in central Sahara, the new borders were an economic boon, enabling smuggling and trade in contraband merchandise, and the provision of occasional cross-border transportation services for migrants. Although historically, northern Niger and northern Mali had been dependent on illicit trade from Algeria and Libya, these borders – and greater access to motor vehicles in the 1970s – revolutionized such activities, intensifying cross-border contraband trading and human smuggling.

Increased migration to southern Algeria was driven in part by recurrent droughts in the Sahel.¹⁶ These natural disasters have, since the late 1960s, led significant numbers of Malian refugees to settle around the borderlands of Timiaouine and Tinzaouatine, where Algerian Tuareg provided strong support to their Tuareg cousins.¹⁷ The continued threat of drought meant that some migrants started to establish themselves permanently in southern Algeria, mainly in Tamanrasset.¹⁸

Migrants, however, were also drawn by a general uptick in economic development and activity in southern Algeria. Since 1971, the country launched massive agricultural and industrial programmes in its southern region.¹⁹ Despite the failure of agrarian reforms, such construction and agricultural projects drew hundreds of Malians and Nigeriens to Tamanrasset, Adrar and Djanet. For most, this was seasonal, with migrants working in Algeria only during the dry seasons in their country. At the time, the presence of sub-Saharan migrants was well-accepted by locals, notably because communities shared common dialects (Tamasheq or Arabic), and had long-standing family and commercial ties.

Migration in times of crisis

Algeria began to experience an economic downturn in the early 1980s, which led to the slow choking of its socio-economic model.²⁰ This decline caused a shortage in state funding, lowering the number of economic opportunities for migrants.

The country's economic difficulties devolved into a serious economic crisis in 1986.²¹ Amid the crisis, some local authorities began to portray the 'southern brothers' differently, as poor, and victims of natural disaster or political turmoil.²² In what would come to be a recurring trend, changed rhetoric was matched by harsher government policies targeting migrants. Between 1986 and 1988, police raids targeted migrant neighbourhoods in southern Algerian cities, such as Tamanrasset and Ouargla, leading to the deportation of large numbers of sub-Saharans who had worked in Algeria on a seasonal basis for years.²³ On Algeria's southern frontiers, security forces implemented robust controls to limit irregular migration and smuggling.

By the early 1990s, Algeria's policy towards migration shifted again as 'civil war' broke out both in Algeria and in northern Mali. The latter conflict, a rebellion by Malian Tuaregs, led to significant forced displacement into Algeria. Many refugees settled on the outskirts of Tamanrasset and Bordj Badji Mokhtar, on the Malian border. Some leveraged communal ties and well-known Algerian Tuareg and Arab families to obtain Algerian citizenship, and hence access to government services and permanent right of residency.²⁴

A number of Malian rebels maintained connections with southern Algeria. The rebel leader lyad Ag Ghaly, for example, was married to an Algerian woman from Tamanrasset.²⁵ Other notables from northern Mali, and to a lesser extent northern Niger, also married Algerian women, living in or maintaining connections with Tamanrasset and the southern parts of Algeria.²⁶

The government of Algeria tolerated the presence of these Malians and Nigeriens for political reasons. It determined that to avoid a spill over of violence from northern Mali at a time when Algerian security forces were stretched thin by their own 'civil war', the best policy was to maintain good relationships with both the Malian government and the Tuareg rebels.²⁷

The extension and diversification of human mobility in central Sahara

The end of the 1990s marked a new period for migration in the central Sahara.²⁸ Rising demand for mobility among people living in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) bolstered the development of an integrated, well-structured trans-Saharan human-smuggling system.²⁹

Cross-border transportation from northern Niger and Mali towards Algeria had traditionally been

offered by freight truckers, who transported migrants on top of their load as an extra source of revenue. In the late 1990s, human smugglers began to supplant this, professionalizing their modus operandi and offering migrants full-package services for the journey north.

In northern Niger, pioneering smugglers used tourist agencies operating in the Ténéré Desert as a legal cover to acquire vehicles and fuel, work with regional



Migrants wait for friends and family to arrive at the bus station in Agadez, Niger. This city has become the capital of human smuggling in Niger. Thousands of migrants travel here each month searching for a smuggler to drive them to Libya, Algeria and Morocco as part of their journey to Europe. © The Washington Post *via Getty Images*

intermediaries, and recruit local youth for human smuggling. This business flourished in the city of Agadez, building upon the know-how of desert guides and young drivers.

Other factors enabled the extension and diversification of migratory flows. First, ECOWAS spurred the development of regional mass transportation systems until the end of 1990. Transnational buses circuit connected West African capitals to northern Sahelian hubs, such as Agadez and Gao. The two cities became the two main departure points for North Africa. Second, the ease with which smugglers could bribe law-enforcement personnel facilitated cross-border vehicle movement. Third, the low price of gas in Algeria and Libya simplified smugglers' ability to extend their business by drastically reducing the cost of transport.

In turn, demand for migration was heightened by economic challenges in West Africa. These included the devaluation of the CFA franc in 1994, which severely affected West Africa's middle and lower classes and successive structural adjustment programmes, imposed by the International Monetary Fund, which had a negative effect on the capacity of regional states, including their ability to provide services to their populations.³⁰ In the first decade of the 2000s, Algeria experienced its largest influx of migrant flows since independence. Between 2000 and 2010, the number of sub-Saharan irregular migrants living in Algeria was estimated to have doubled to 50 000.³¹ The main factor driving the increase in migration to Algeria was economic. High oil prices between 2000 and 2020 generated an estimated US\$ 1 000 billion in revenue for the Algerian state, leading to rapid gross domestic product growth.³² The Algerian government launched major development programmes targeting infrastructure, transportation and housing, including in the southern regions.³³

This economic boom drew migrants from all parts of the Sahel and West Africa. Many were Malians, who enjoyed a visa-free entry and a three-month stay, though many who arrived legally overstayed their visas. However, the rising number of migrants to southern Algeria was no longer overwhelmingly dominated by Malian and Nigerien nationals as in previous years. Rather, migrants came from a number of Western and Central African states, including Senegal, Benin, Togo, Burkina Faso, Cameroun and Congo.³⁴

Most migrants occupied low-skilled, daily and precarious jobs working on construction sites and in restaurants. There was limited job competition with young Algerians, because of their general unwillingness to occupy such positions.

Also, in the 2000s, the pattern of irregular migrant settlement changed. Previously sub-Saharan migrants had mostly lived in the south, in cities such as Tamanrasset, Adrar and Ourgla. However, Algeria's growing economy and the implementation of large government development programmes (including infrastructure, housing and agriculture) drew migrants north. They started to settle in the largest cities of northern Algeria, such as Algiers, Oran, Annaba and Béjaïa. However, the Algerian economy, which is heavily dependent on hydrocarbon exports, has experienced a significant slowdown since 2014 because of the fall in international oil prices. This has had a significant negative effect on public social spending. Jobs availability in the southern hubs of Tamanrasset and Adrar, as well as in Algeria's north, have declined significantly. Development projects, such as the Hotel of Tamanrasset, which used to employ many migrants, have been frozen. Migrants claim that it is now much harder to find a lifeline to finance their stay in Tamanrasset. Despite this, many migrants continue to head to Algeria looking for opportunities.

The fall of the central Mediterranean route and the 'clandestinization' of human smuggling in the Sahara-Sahel

In the aftermath of the 2011 revolution in Libya and the 2012 northern rebellion in Mali, regional human smuggling developed exponentially. The stateless environment in Libya and the protection given by militia to human-smuggling networks facilitated this trend. Demand for migration was extremely high and hundreds of thousands of Middle Eastern and sub-Saharan migrants fleeing conflicts, instability and poverty were trying to reach Libya and then Europe through the Central Mediterranean route, a long journey from central Sahel to the northwest shores of Libya and the Mediterranean.³⁵

Moving along the Central Mediterranean route is a risky journey.³⁶ Many migrants have been victims of trafficking, sexual exploitation, physical aggression or other forms of abuse.³⁷ In 2019, one person died for every six people arriving in Europe by boat after leaving Libya. In 2014, the ratio was one migrant in 14, and in 2018 one death occurred for every 38 arrivals in 2017.³⁸

Crossing the Sahara is an ever-dangerous experience. More than 7 000 deaths of migrants in Africa have been recorded in the past five years.³⁹ These numbers are considered conservative by many observers. The IOM estimates that for every known death in the Mediterranean, there are up to two lives lost in the desert.⁴⁰ Since 2018, the number of migrants reaching Europe through the Central Mediterranean route has decreased significantly. Since 2016, crackdowns on migrant-smuggling economies in Libya, Niger and Sudan, directly or indirectly backed by the EU, combined with regional militarization and the rising banditry in the Sahel have significantly limited the human-smuggling industry. In northern Niger, dozens of smugglers were arrested and hundreds of vehicles seized. The government's decision to close the Djado gold mine in February 2017, a strategic gold site in northern Niger on the Sahara-Sahel migratory route, reduced migrant flows across the Niger–Libya corridor.⁴¹

Moreover, counter-trafficking and border security regional programmes contributed to displace routes, including routes towards Algeria. Human smuggling has become more clandestine and professional. Smugglers began to use longer and more dangerous off-road desert routes. Along the route connecting Arlit (Niger) to the Algerian border, smugglers carefully select their timing and location departures to avoid law-enforcement presence. Prices have risen significantly as the number of human-smuggling players lowered and routes became longer and riskier.⁴²



Mohmammed, who would not disclose his surname, is one of many human and drug smugglers in Agadez. The city has become known as 'the temple of smuggling'. © The Washington Post

via Getty Images

Central Sahara: Shifting routes towards southern Algeria

While migration to Algeria is not new, the number of migrants crossing into the country has increased significantly since 2016. According to official Algerian statistics, about 500 migrants arrived daily at the country's southern borders in 2018.⁴³ Although the veracity of such figures is unclear, field interviews with journalists, civil-society actors and law-enforcement personnel in southern Algeria suggest the number of arrivals is significant. 'Human smugglers operating in the central Sahara have directed an ever-greater number of migrants towards Algeria,' said a law-enforcement officer in Tamanrasset. 'The number of crossing attempts has risen exponentially. There are days when we return more than 200 migrants a day.⁴⁴

The city of Tamanrasset has been the most important recipient of migrants crossing the southern borders from Niger and Mali. 'Suwadin [black people] have arrived massively since 2017 in Tam [Tamanrasset]. Now, whether at the corner of streets, restaurants and cafés, you can find them everywhere,' said a local politician.⁴⁵

For some arriving migrants, Tamanrasset, and Algeria more broadly, is simply a stepping stone to Morocco and from there to Spain. The collapse of the human-smuggling industry between Niger and Libya is partially responsible for this. A small number of non-Algerian migrants have attempted to cross the Mediterranean departing from the Algerian coast.⁴⁶

But for other migrants, Algeria is the destination. Although the government does not publish official data on irregular migrant flows, civil-society organizations estimate that there are fewer than 100 000 irregular migrants from 30 countries in Algeria.⁴⁷ Most are believed to be spread between the southern hubs of Tamanrasset, Adrar and Ouargla, and northern cities (with more than half in the latter). More than half of irregular migrants in Algeria do not stay in the south.

The average length of stay for migrants in Algeria has increased in recent years, now reaching about three years.⁴⁸ Sub-Saharan migrants who previously lived in Sahelian

countries are more likely to stay for longer periods, and find it easier to adapt to life in southern Algeria, especially if they find jobs within the first months of arrival. However, most migrants interviewed had no plan to stay permanently in Algeria.

Counterintuitively, worsening economic conditions in Algeria since 2014 have led to a prolongation of migrants' stays in the country. Previously, migrants came to southern Algeria to work for some months, returning home when they had earned a predetermined amount of income. Most would then return in the following years to repeat the process. From 2014 to 2020, declining economic opportunities have compelled migrants to stay longer to collect enough money to take back home.

For those who live in southern Algeria, this means finding a job in the south, or taking a greater risk and travelling north. Ultimately, they will have more working opportunities in southern Algeria than in their home countries. This is especially the case for young Malians and Nigeriens.

Moussa, a mason from Timbuktu who has lived in Algeria for seven years, said:

There was a time when I never had to wait at the corner of the street for a daily job in Tamanrasset. Now, I can spend days waiting with my brothers in Gat El Oued [a neighbourhood] for nothing. What can I do? I take more risks. If a brother in the north needs a construction worker in Oran or Algiers, I travel there for a few weeks even if police surveil-lance is high, but I don't have any choice.⁴⁹

As migration through southern Algeria has grown, government authorities there have tightened their border enforcement. The Algerian army has deployed more than 50 000 personnel along the borders with Mali, Niger and Libya, increased the number of border point controls, put in place massive border surveillance systems, and built a sand berm. The borders with the three countries have been closed since 2013.⁵⁰

However, despite the tough anti-migration measures, there is a significant gap between the narrative of the security measures taken and the reality of continued cross-border movement. Interviews with Algerian officials and local community members conducted at the borders with Niger and Mali underscore that human smuggling is not the priority for Algeria's military. Rather, the army is focused on countering terrorism and arms trafficking.

The limited prioritization of migration and human smuggling has led to an uneven approach by security forces. Often, the treatment of migrants depends on which security forces they encounter. This contrasts sharply with the irregular migration position adopted in the north, which is more aggressive.

Several migrants interviewed testified that they were able to cross borders and continue their journey even after they were caught by security forces. Nasser, a migrant from Niger working in Tamanrasset said:

I crossed the sand berm near El Akla by night with two Nigeriens and three Ivorians, but after a one kilometre walk we were arrested by a patrol. They stopped us, then searched closely. They found that I had an Algerian phone chip and phone numbers. I replied to them in Algerian dialect that I am a painter working in Tamanrasset, that I am a good man who needed to provide livelihood for my family. They let me go with the Nigeriens and turned back the Ivorians on the other side.⁵¹

Mohamed, a Peul from Niger, said:

I have crossed the borders several times over the last five years. It is very risky, as no smugglers want to accompany you to the border, but if you know where and at what time to cross, and especially how to deal with the security officers if they arrest you, you'll have a chance.⁵²

Algerian law enforcement are less keen to enter into collusive practices with smugglers than migrants. Smugglers active along the borders with Mali and Niger fear the treatment meted out by law-enforcement units, especially when the army units accompany border police forces. To avoid surveillance, smugglers use multiple strategies, such as the daily collection of information on the location of patrols. They constantly shift their routes, moving through the desert near In Guezzam from Niger, and Bordj Badji Mokhtar, Timiaouine and Tinzaouatine from Mali.



The long and dusty road leading to In Guezzam in Algeria. © Raouf Farrah Intallah, a Tuareg smuggler based in Tamanrasset who transports migrants in a Toyota FJ 80 between northern Niger and southern Algeria, acknowledged that:

Every navigable sand track in southern Algeria is a potential route that you can drive. What is essential is to know where the security forces are posted and how to hide from the patrolling units. Discretion is key for a good driver. I fear the Algerian security forces as you never know who you will deal with.⁵³

On the Malian border, Algerian forces engage in strict control, particularly around Bordj Badji Mokhtar, a declining trafficking hub for the region. On the Nigerien border, from the east of In Guezzam to Libya, security force surveillance is high, particularly in Algerian territory facing the Nigerien gold mine at Tchibarakatene. From the west of In Guezzam to the Malian border, security force pressure is less intense and a limited number of businessmen were allowed to trade in selected, largely legal, commodities and goods before the closure of the borders due to COVID-19.

Traditionally, Algerian security forces attempted to play a balancing act in pursuing state objectives without significantly harming the socioeconomic interests of southern communities, especially those involved in small-scale contraband. The attack by terrorists at Tingentourine in 2013 undermined this fragile balance.

Since then, Algeria has massively militarized its borders in the name of fighting terrorism and organized crime, but functionally mainly to affect the flow of people and goods. Young transporters of basic commodities, and to a lesser extent, migrant transporters, have been the hardest hit by the militarization of borders and its effect on mobility. Contraband between southern Algeria and northern Mali and Niger is a critical source of livelihood for thousands of families. The hard approach to border security adopted by the army has significantly affected and worsened an already precarious situation in many of these communities.



Cosmopolitan Tamanrasset

Tamanrasset is at the heart of southern Algeria's growing role as a destination point for migratory flows. In 60 years, it has been transformed from a tiny military post into a modern city of 120 000 inhabitants.⁵⁴ Its population is composed of a mix of Tuaregs and Arabs from the south, northern Algerians (locally called Nass el Til, 'the people of the north') and a large community of irregular migrants (referred as 'Suwadin').

Migrant numbers have grown significantly in the past decade, enriching the multicultural face of the city. But this development has brought new challenges for local authorities, including the rapid urban development of Tamanrasset, rising petty crime and social tension between migrants of different nationalities and between migrants and locals. Although acute in Tamanrasset, these dynamics are increasingly reflected in other areas of Algeria.

Between 20 000 and 25 000 migrants are believed to live in 'Tam', representing the largest sub-Saharan migrant community in Algeria.⁵⁵ Research by a local NGO, Green Tea, underscores the diversity of sub-Saharan migrants in the city, including individuals hailing from francophone and anglophone countries in West and Central Africa (see Figure 2). Most report having emigrated to Algeria for economic reasons (see Figure 3). The entrance to the city of Tamanrasset in southern Algeria, which has become a destination point for migratory flows. © Raouf Farrah

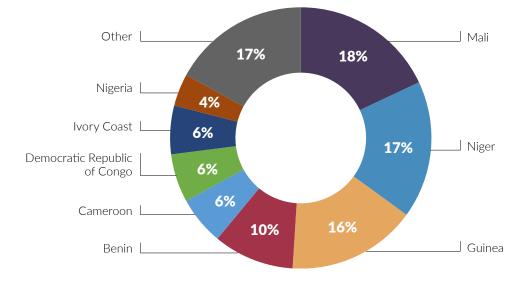


FIGURE 2 Migration nationalities in Tamanrasset

SOURCE: The data is based on 3 722 questionnaires collected by NGO Green Tea working with migrants living in Tamanrasset between 1 January 2016 and 31 December 2018. These numbers should be seen as indicative.

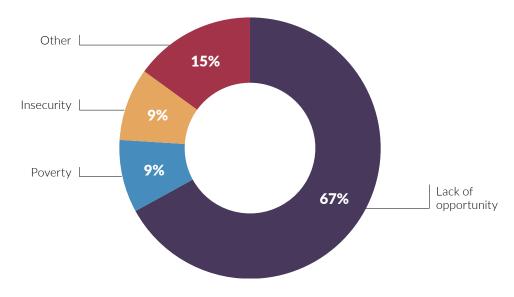


FIGURE 3 Reasons cited by migrants for emigration to Algeria

SOURCE: The data is based on 3 722 questionnaires collected by NGO Green Tea working with migrants living in Tamanrasset between 1 January 2016 and 31 December 2018. These numbers should be seen as indicative.

For most migrants interviewed for this study by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) in Tamanrasset, particularly those originating from Niger and Mali, Algeria is more than a country of destination. Rather it is a *pays-étape* (a stepping-stone country), a stable place where migrants can find decent jobs, save some money and send remittances to family members in their home countries. Aissa, an 18-year-old Nigerien from Agadez living in Tamanrasset, said:

My father worked in Tamanrasset as a metalworker for two decades while we [the family] were living in Agadez. My brother has been in Tamanrasset for the last five years. He collects zoubia [scrap metal] and sells it in Arlit. I knew Tamanrasset way before I decided to make my journey here. For our family, it has always been our land.⁵⁶

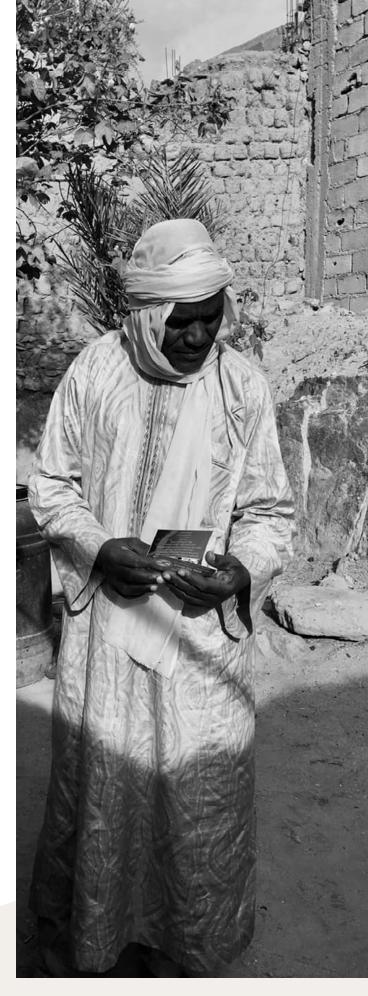
In Tamanrasset, more than 80% of sub-Saharans settle in three neighbourhoods, Gat El Oued, Tahaggart and Sersouf Ferraille. These areas host relatively high concentrations of migrants, accounting for roughly 41% of the residents in Gat El Oued, for example.⁵⁷

In these neighbourhoods, most migrants live in basic or substandard houses, especially makeshift group houses called 'foyers'. Rented by migrant groups, often composed of a single nationality, foyers are relatively cheap, costing each migrant between 1 000 DZD to 2 000 DZD (\in 5 to \in 10) a month depending on the number of people housed in each.⁵⁸ Up to 40 migrants can live in some foyers, often in poor conditions with limited sanitation. Discipline is enforced and the rent is collected by foyer chiefs, who are typically the most experienced people in the group.

As part of the human-smuggling chain, intermediaries in Tamanrasset contact foyer chiefs to place migrants in these foyers immediately upon their arrival in the city. Intermediaries usually charge 2 000 DZD (€10) per migrant for each transaction. Migrants who are unable to pay the fee and the first month of rent begin working as house cleaners or in the foyers' kitchens.

Renting to migrant workers has become a profitable business. Some are run by top members of the human-smuggling networks operating along the northern Niger-southern Algeria border.⁵⁹ The number of foyers, along with restaurants, some run by Nigerien smugglers in Gat El Oued and other neighbourhoods, has expanded significantly in the past five years.⁶⁰

Since the closure of the border with Niger in 2013, some smugglers have shifted their operations to offering rental housing to migrants.⁶¹ Although somewhat less lucrative than cross-border transporting, running foyers is still profitable and is considerably less risky in terms of arrest or interference by authorities. Ahmadou, a former Nigerien smuggler who used to transport migrants from Niger to Algeria, now runs a small foyer in the slums of the upper Gaat-el Oued neighbourhood: 'There is not much money in the transport of migrants



A foyer chief in Tamanrasset. Foyers are makeshift houses that are rented out to migrants. © Raouf Farrah



Scenes of migrants in Tamanrasset. © Louiza Ammi/Raouf Farrah

nowadays. It is risky for us [smugglers] and costly for them [migrants] ... I make a sustainable revenue by lodging my people [Nigeriens] here. It is my own way to help them.^{'62}

Similar to Ahmadou, other foyer owners described their activities as ones intended to help newly arriving migrants. Mamadou, a Malian who has been living in Algeria for 20 years, runs a foyer in the upper Gat El Oued:

I can live just by hosting people here. I make less money, but I am happy with that. I don't see it as a business. It is a way for me to help my children [young migrants]. Here, they have a roof. They are well treated and the police know that I am not a troublesome person.⁶³

The growing concentration of sub-Saharan migrants in these few neighbourhoods makes the question of settlement in Tamanrasset a pressing challenge. Migrant neighbourhoods have expanded dramatically, further propelling the rapid urbanization of the city. To date, little of this growth has been properly planned by local authorities, leading to a proliferation of basic and substandard housing, particularly in Gat El Oued and Sersouf Ferraille. Algerian residents increasingly perceive these neighbourhoods to be dangerous, and with significant crime. In October 2019, a man from Tamanrasset was found dead in Gat El Oued. According to locals, the man had been reportedly mugged and killed by a gang of Nigeriens after refusing to hand over his wallet. Although these episodes are not common, according to residents of the neighbourhood, they colour how locals in Tamanrasset perceive migrants and have fuelled tension between the communities.⁶⁴

The dynamics between migrant communities and locals, and between migrants themselves are complex. Northern Nigeriens and Malians have fewer troubles with the local community and authorities than other migrant communities, because of the shared culture, experience and norms specific to the central Sahara.

However, anglophone and Christian majority West African communities face barriers, including in their relations with other migrants, such as language, lodging and mobility-knowledge issues. These barriers complicate already tense relationships with local authorities, who rarely speak English. Many Muslim Sahelians interviewed by the GI-TOC reported more clashes with anglophone newcomers from Nigeria, Liberia or



Sierra-Leone than with locals. Nasser, a Nigerien Housa from Arlit, said:

Nigerians are very different from us [Nigeriens]. They don't know anything about the desert life. In Sersouf Ferraille [a neighbourhood], they are buying houses and employing sisters for dirty work (prostitution). Others are practisng mendicity in the name of Nigeriens.⁶⁵

Conclusion

Although Algeria has long been a destination country for sub-Saharan migrants, human smuggling in the south is relatively new and has expanded significantly in past decades. Algeria has become an important destination and transit country for migrants transiting the central Sahara.

Most migrants travelling to Algeria typically seek employment in the country itself, whether in southern or northern hubs. Some continue their journey north towards Morocco and Europe. In the south, the city of Tamanrasset continues to be the most important gathering point for migrant communities coming from the Sahel, West and Central Africa. Its popularity has brought new challenges, such as increased petty crime Authorities have adopted a tough law-enforcement approach to this situation. Police units patrol frequently in these neighbourhoods, while the Bureau of Research and Investigation (BRI), a counter-crime elite police unit, conducts regular anti-crime operations in these neighbourhoods. Their reputation is fierce among migrants and locals. According to locals living in Gaat el Oued, more than a hundred slums and squatter settlements have been demolished over the last 3 years.⁶⁶

and rapid, unplanned urban development, which local authorities have failed to cope. Tamanrasset is a strategic city for human-smuggling networks, from which they organize the logistics, lodging and transportation for migrants.

The intensive security measures at the borders in the name of fighting terrorism and criminal networks has not materially affected migrants' interest in transiting to Algeria, partly because security forces are perceived to target mainly terrorism and arms trafficking, rather than migration. However, Algeria's border security measures have significantly shaped how migrants enter the country, increasing the demand for human-smuggling networks, experienced in subverting state controls.

ACTORS, ROUTES AND RISKS

uman smuggling in the region encompassing northern Mali and Niger and southern Algeria relies on small-scale, horizontal networks with smugglers occupying multiple roles and providing diverse services (such as transporting, hosting, guiding and accommodating migrants). In northern Niger, since the enforcement of a law criminalizing human smuggling in mid-2016 and 2017, this economy has been controlled by a smaller number of experienced players. They have adapted notably by using clandestine routes and raising smuggling prices.⁶⁷

Along the northern Mali-southern Algeria corridor, the clandestinization of smuggling started in the end of 2012 after the Algerian authorities closed borders with Mali. The frontier has been highly securitized and border monitoring strengthened. The construction of the sand berm in 2013 in some parts of the 2 200km border with Niger (951km) and Mali (1 329km) has made human smuggling riskier and more complicated.⁶⁸ Smugglers keep a low profile to avoid being detected by security forces, charge higher prices and drop off and pick up migrants further from the borders, in attempt to make it less risky.⁶⁹

The following section aims to portray the practicalities of human smuggling along Algeria's southern borders with Niger and Mali. It covers the routes, prices and modus operandi of human smuggling, as well as the roles played by the borderland villages and cities of In Guezzam (border with Niger), Bordj Badji Mokhtar, Timiaouine and Tinzaouatine (border with Mali). It shows that human smuggling is a not homogeneous, but rather a complex activity that mobilizes multiple techniques, navigation strategies and skills.

A truck carrying migrants as they leave Gao, northern Mali, headed for the Algerian border. © Georges Gobet/AFP via Getty Images



A tent is erected in the desert for a group of mostly Nigeriens who arrived at dusk after a journey across the Sahara Desert from Algeria. They had been forcibly repatriated by Algerian police.

© Scott Peterson/Getty Images

The Nigerien–Algerian border: The terrifying experience of climbing the berm

Human-smuggling networks operating along the Algerian–Nigerien border have been dominated by Nigerien Tuaregs who have strong social ties in both countries and along the route connecting Assamaka to In Guezzam and Tamanrasset. Migrants and smugglers interviewed by the GI-TOC reported three border-crossing areas along the 950km Algeria–Niger border. The first and most important zone is in the triangle connecting Assamaka, In Guezzam and EI-Akla; the other two are around the Tchibarakaten goldfield in Niger and the area connecting the extreme south of Algeria to the borders with Niger and Mali (see map).

The means by which migrants journey from northern Niger to southern Algeria is a long-standing system. Smugglers transport migrants to the Algerian border in 4x4 vehicles, such as Toyota FJ80–FJ60s, Land Cruisers and Land Rovers, avoiding cities, such as Agadez and Arlit. They use clandestine routes to dodge security forces and the rising number of bandits (*coupeurs de route*) who plunder vehicles heading north.⁷⁰

Usually, smugglers drop migrants off at night at a remove of one to five kilometres from the Algerian border, which is marked by a large sand berm. The height of the barrier varies from 2m to 4m depending on the area. Smugglers do not cross the berm with migrants, but give them instructions on how to cross and meet up with another smuggler on the Algerian side.

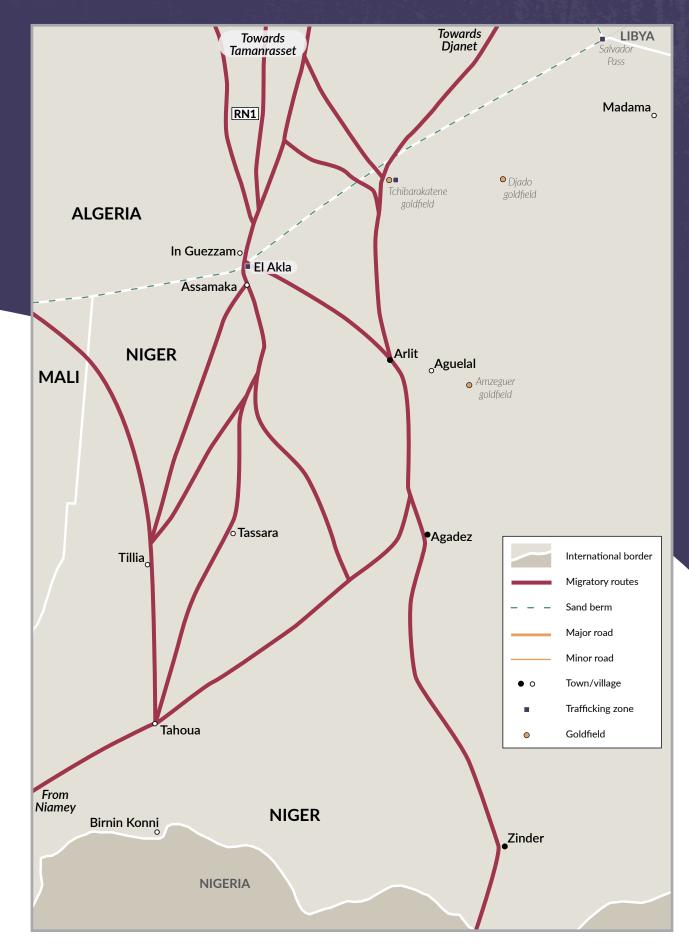


FIGURE 4 The Algerian–Nigerien border region, showing migratory routes

'Crossing the sand berm was the scariest moment in my life.' Crossing the sand berm can be a terrifying experience because of the unknown and heavy security surveillance. Mouhamadou, a migrant from Arlit who crossed the border in June 2019, recounted his experience:

Crossing the sand berm was the scariest moment in my life. The 'coxeur' [smuggler or *passeur*] dropped us at night in the middle of the Sahara. He pointed to a vague destination and everything was dark. We were six Nigeriens and two Cameroonians ... and we ran fast for about 2km in the total darkness. Then we suddenly faced a dune [the berm]. I climbed the dune as quickly as possible. Some of my brothers were paralyzed by fear. We helped each other, but no 'coxeur' was waiting for us on the other side of the dune. ... We walked all night long before reaching In Guezzam without food and water. We could have died at any time.⁷¹

In most cases, once across the sand berm, migrants do not find the other smuggler at the border. Rather, many have to walk until they reach In Guezzam if they cross at the Assamaka area. Those who cross around the Tchibarakaten area (Niger) have to reach road NA3, which goes to the city of Djanet. This is a long and often hard journey. Smugglers sometimes justify this by pointing to the heightened Algerian security presence in the area encompassing the Assamaka–In Guezzam route. Many smugglers will not pick up migrants before they reach In Guezzam because the risk of arrest is higher. They prefer to offer transport from In Guezzam north to Tamanrasset.⁷² Smugglers charge around 8 000 DZD (€40) and can earn up to 70 000 DZD (€350) per trip.

Samir, an Algerian Tuareg, runs an informal transport service with his cousin based in In Guezzam:

My cousin calls me when he regroups migrants in northern Niger seeking to move to Tamanrasset. Their number has been on the rise in the past . We communicate via WhatsApp and we fix a GPS point around 25km outside In Guezzam at night. Then I drive for seven hours non-stop towards Tamanrasset. This is a risky job and I constantly need to coordinate my journey, as there are regular security patrols.⁷³

Some migrants interviewed in Tamanrasset who crossed at the Nigerien border reported theft and robbery by local bandits along their way, while others were trafficked until they could pay back the smuggling fee. A migrant from Cameroon said:

I paid the smuggler a lump-sum amount covering transport, food and water from Agadez to In Guezzam. When we reached Assamaka [Niger], the coxeur asked each of us to pay an extra 10 000 CFA (€15), which we hadn't planned for. I couldn't provide this money so the 'coxeur' sold my debt to a friend of his, for whom I worked for three months carrying boxes in El Akla.⁷⁴

While many migrants reported that the most difficult part of the journey was crossing the berm, others reported harsh stories of being abandoned in the middle of the desert on the Algerian side of the border. A migrant from Senegal recounted:

We were heading towards Tamanrasset when he [the *passeur*] received a call and suddenly forced us to get out of the vehicle. We were left alone in the middle of the Sahara on a cold night. I thought that I would die.⁷⁵



Migrants working in the El Akla Market (Niger–Algeria border). © Raouf Farrah

Smuggling at the In Guezzam–El Akla–Assamaka triangle

Most smuggling and trafficking along the Niger-Algeria border occurs in the triangle connecting In Guezzam, Assamaka and El Akla, a smuggling market in the middle of the desert.

The land border between the countries has been nominally closed since 2013 because of security threats. However, this closure is not complete, with a discrete flow of people and goods continuing across the border until the border was fully closed because of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020.

The border post at In Guezzam, for example, remained open for a small number of Algerian exporters, who were allowed to cross the border into Niger twice a month, exporting basic commodities such as dates, pasta and cement, and importing an equivalent value of bartered goods from Nigerien suppliers.⁷⁶ The list of businessmen was fixed according to many criteria, including the types of products they exported, the location of the business and the number of employees.

Three kilometres from In Guezzam is an ad-hoc border post, effectively a checkpoint, that is jointly controlled by the army, police, gendarmerie and customs. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Algerians with family in Niger were able to obtain a *passe-avant* (an administrative document) from the customs office in In Guezzam that allowed them to cross the frontier or send limited quantities of food.

However, most of the goods transported to Niger are sold at the open-air market in El Akla. Although the

smuggling market of El Akla has existed since early 2000, it has grown significantly since 2013. '[It] is unique in the region. It works like a dry port where all Algerian products found in In Guezzam and Tamanrasset are traded,' said a restaurant owner in the market.⁷⁷

A smuggler working in the market noted: 'Akla is no man's land and that's its biggest asset. No one controls this market. Also, more than staples and basic goods come here; arms and hashish are available and prices are competitive.'⁷⁸

El Akla has become increasingly important for irregular migrants heading north. At the entrance of the market, dozens of sub-Saharans pool, seeking work loading trucks with Algerian merchandise, fuel and staples. Musa, a Nigerian migrant from Maiduguri, said:⁷⁹

I have been here [El Akla] for a month, sleeping on the sand and [loading] Algerian semolina in trucks. The cash I make I use to buy food and pay the smuggler to help me crossing the border. Up to now, the monitoring has been high and we're waiting for the right opportunity.

Staples and goods smugglers working between In Guezzam and El Akla never transport migrants. Because they need to pass along routes controlled by successive checkpoints, they consider migrant smuggling too risky, fearing both arrest and the seizure of their vehicles.

Violence and exploitation of migrants

The distinction between human smuggling and human trafficking along Algeria's borders with Niger and Mali is becoming increasingly blurred. Migrants moving through the area are extremely vulnerable to violence and abuses and can become victims of human trafficking, especially in northern Mali.⁸⁰ Some smugglers operating along the Mali–Algeria border in particular have a reputation for exploiting migrants' vulnerability, forcing them into labour or sexual servitude, or for extortion under threat of violence.

Some well-known traffickers have longstanding connections with armed perpetrators and bandits who target migrants' vehicles, threatening and torturing them until they or their family members provide payments through mobile money-transfer operations. In 2018, the United Nations Panel of Experts on Mali reported that a Guinean national named 'Rasta' ran a trafficking business between northern Mali and Timiaouine (Algeria). He held migrants against their will, 'claiming outstanding payments and forcing family members to wire money using Orange Money [a mobile money service] for their release'.⁸¹ Algerian authorities have not commented on this affair.

Some migrants interviewed by the GI-TOC in Bordj Badji Mokhtar reported being exploited by violent smugglers between Talhandak and In-Khalil in northern Mali:

We were in a desert route heading towards Algeria when an armed convoy stopped our vehicle. Armed with Kalashnikov, they asked us to step out of the car and sit on the ground. The 'coxeur' had to obey. They took everything we had – mobiles, jackets and backpacks and a few thousand franc CFA. They beat a brother because he resisted them. After a long discussion with the smuggler, they took the only women in the vehicle with them.

Other worrying trends concern interregional trafficking. The city of Tamanrasset has become a destination for women and children from Niger, particularly from the region of Zinder, begging for money in the streets. The victims are generally recruited from the community and, in the case of children, from madrasas (schools for Islamic instruction). In Tamanrasset, Nigeriens from Zinder and other sub-Saharans dominate the human-trafficking market.

Limited policy progress in the fight against human trafficking

Although human trafficking has been historically a limited issue in Algeria, the development of humantrafficking rings based in the central Sahel, especially the begging industry in Niger, have rendered migrant communities vulnerable, and multiplied the number of labour and sex-trafficking victims in Algeria. Algerian security forces report that victims are mostly West African nationals. Sub-Saharan migrants are most vulnerable to labour and sex trafficking in Algeria, mainly because of their irregular migration status, fear of deportation and penalization and other barriers. Unaccompanied women and children are particularly vulnerable to begging, sexual exploitation and forced domestic labour.

In 2020, Algerian authorities reportedly prosecuted 'three cases involving 13 alleged traffickers; of these, two involved sexual exploitation and one involved both sexual exploitation and forced labour'. However, no convictions were made. This represented a decrease compared with 2018, when the government investigated and prosecuted 16 alleged perpetrators and convicted two traffickers.⁸² In 2017, Algerian authorities conducted 26 trafficking investigations, 22 prosecutions and convicted 14 traffickers.⁸³

More than 13 000 women and children who have been exploited by organized begging rings have reached Algeria since 2014, according to the Ministry of the Interior.⁸⁴ Many Nigerien women identified as trafficking victims were subject to debt bondage and forced into labour to repay their smuggling debts, often by domestic servitude, forced begging or forced prostitution. Few victims of human trafficking in Algeria report their trafficking to the security forces because they fear deportation. Many victims avoid the use of medical services for the same reasons.

Algeria's penal code criminalizes several forms of sex and labour trafficking. In 2004, Algeria ratified the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children (TIP Protocol) and the Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air were ratified.

In 2018, the Algerian government started to implement its first national anti-trafficking action plan (2019–2021) which aims to holistically combat all forms of human trafficking in Algeria.⁸⁵ The government reportedly spent 12 million euros to take in child and women victims of trafficking networks.⁸⁶ The government established an official inter-ministerial anti-trafficking committee aimed at deploying policy efforts to prevent, prosecute and convict those caught human trafficking. Mourad Adjabi, the former head of the anti-trafficking committee, announced that 'a project law on the fight against human trafficking has been prepared and will be submitted to Parliament in 2020'.⁸⁷ The plan provides for the launch of an inter-ministerial database on human trafficking, raising awareness of trafficking issues among law enforcement and other government officials, including prevention activities.⁸⁸ Successful implementation of this plan would mark significant progress towards combating trafficking in Algeria.

Despite this, as of 2020 Algeria was downgraded under Tier 3 (does not meet the full standards to eliminate human trafficking) of the US State Department Trafficking in Persons Report, notably due to major remaining gaps.⁸⁹ Among persistent weaknesses and deficiencies is the lack of an efficient mechanism to proactively identify victims of human trafficking. There is no official process to decriminalize trafficking victims who are at risk of being prosecuted as a result of being forced to engage in illegal acts such as prostitution.⁹⁰



The position of the sand berm adjacent to the Algeria–Mali border (left) and the sand wall surrounding the city of Bordj Badji Mokhtar. © *Raouf Farrah*

The Malian–Algerian border: Militarization and differentiated smuggling strategies

The Mali–Algeria border is inhabited overwhelmingly by Tuareg communities and it is more densely populated than the Niger–Algeria frontier. On the Algerian side of the border is the city of Bordj Badji Mokhtar and the two villages of Tinzaouatine and Timiaouine.

The frontier is heavily militarized. In Algeria, the army maintains border posts, conducts regular checkpoints and runs frequent patrols. Since 2013, the city of Bordj Badji Mokhtar has been surrounded by a sand berm, separate from that on the border, which encircles the city. A driver of this securitization is the active presence of terrorist groups in the region and the recovery of arms caches in recent years.⁹¹ The Algerian army applies a particularly severe, zero-tolerance approach between Bordj Badji Mokhtar and In Khalil (Mali), with all unrecognized movement considered suspect. This militarization has resulted in a drop in human smuggling along the Bordj Badji Mokhtar-In Khalil corridor.⁹²

On the Malian side of the border, functional control is exercised by mobile armed units of the Coordination des Mouvements de l'Azawad (CMA), a coalition of rebel groups in northern Mali. CMA units control the advance posts of Tinzaouatine (Mali) and In-Khalil and operate several checkpoints in the Adrar des Ifoghas Desert. Human smuggling from northern Mali towards Algeria usually starts from Timbuktu and Gao, the main northern Malian smuggling hub. From there, a number of routes branch off north through the desert. There is relatively high traffic on the route from Gao to Anéfif.⁹³ From Anéfif there are two main corridors to the Algerian border. The first goes to the Adrar des Ifoghas mountains and then to the villages of Tinzaouatine (Mali) or, less frequently, Boughessa. The second corridor runs from Gao to the villages of Talhandak and Tindiska in Tessalit via Aguelhok.⁹⁴ Other long desert routes used increasingly by human smugglers start from Timbuktu up to Talhandak.

The route from Timbuktu to the northwest via the remote village of Taoudenni is rarely used. On the border, most smuggling occurs from In-Khalil east to Tinzaouatine. For smugglers, navigating the harsh and uninhabited Tanezrouft desert and the northwest Ergs Chech and the El Khnachich sandy desert is challenging. West of In-Khalil, smuggling is limited, as Algerian military surveillance in the region is high and there are few services for migrants in the region of Taoudenni.

On the Algerian side of the border, most human smuggling occurs from Bordj Badji Mokhtar and up to the

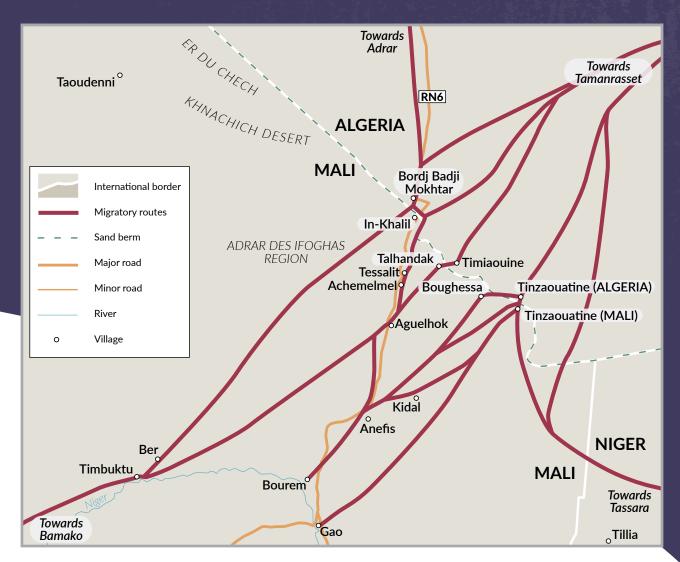


FIGURE 5 The Algeria-Mali border region, showing migratory routes

points where the Algerian, Malian and Niger borders intersect. It is particularly intense in the 200km area between Tinzaouatine (Algeria) and east of Bordj Badji Mokhtar, where at least 30 human smugglers operate.⁹⁵

Smuggling is less frequent to the west of Bordj Badji Mokhtar. Smugglers operating between In-Khalil and Bordj Badji Mokhtar typically drop off migrants at night near In-Khalil, about 5km from Algeria's sand berm border. They do not risk going beyond that point. Migrants have to walk through the desert and cross the berm on foot at their own peril.

Human-smuggling networks active between Gao and the Algeria–Mali border need to have the protection of armed groups, who facilitate the movement of smugglers and levy passage fees. Direct involvement by armed groups in human smuggling is infrequent, as profits are not high. Nonetheless, some members of the CMA and the Platform, the two coalitions of armed groups in northern Mali, are more directly engaged. One example is Mahamadou Ag Rhissa, (aka Mohamed Talhandak), a trafficker who denied being part of the Haut Conseil pour l'Unité de l'Azawad and running foyers for 600 migrants in Talhandak. In 2018, the United Nations flagged Ag Rhissa as a key figure in the control of migrant transport between Talhandak and the Algerian border. He is also accused of human trafficking, including the exploitation of women and detention for ransom.⁹⁶ Ag Rhissa knows southern Algeria well, having stayed in Algeria between 2017 and February 2018 before returning to Kidal.⁹⁷

Bordj Badji Mokhtar and the Guinean ghetto

In addition to the militarization of the border, Bordj Badji Mokhtar experienced violent intercommunal fighting in 2013 between the Idnan Tuareg and the Arab Berabiche, which led to the death of at least six people.⁹⁸ While tension in Mali between the Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad and the Mouvement Arabe de l'Azawad threatened to spill over into Algeria, the root drivers of these clashes are the socioeconomic marginalization of young Tuareg and the shrinking of smuggling and contraband activities.⁹⁹

In Bordj Badji Mokhtar, the presence of migrants, historically dominated by Malians, has decreased significantly in recent years, according to locals.¹⁰⁰ According to Yazid, an Algerian smuggler in Bordj Badji Mokhtar:

There are not many people from Mali here now. Since the closure of the border, their number has dropped. Malians who have Algerian citizenship moved to cities such as Tamanrasset to find better lives. This is also because there is not much trafficking in In-Khalil [a major contraband and trafficking hub]. 'El Borj' has almost become a military zone.¹⁰¹

However, new migrant communities are growing in the city. A slum in the west of 'Borj', called the Guinean neighbourhood, has flourished in the past five years. It is inhabited by migrants from Guinea, Burkina Faso and Cameroon and nationals from other West and Central African countries. Many of these migrants reached the border via routes starting from Timbuktu. Although border control and patrolling are intense, this raises the question of how they crossed the border and why their presence seems to be relatively tolerated.

According to locals, one of the explanations for this development is that a Tuareg from the Idnan community, Abbi Lakhdar, runs a smuggling network connecting Timbuktu to Bordj Badji Mokhtar. Also, he reportedly runs few 'foyers' in the Guinean neighbourhood. Moreover, non-Malians in the city, especially Guineans, are often in transit to points further north. It seems that this trend is related to the rising popularity of the Western Mediterranean route since 2016. Most Guineans living in Bordj Badji Mokhtar travel north to the city of Adrar, according to locals, before they head northwest towards Oran, and ultimately Morocco.

The popularity of this route has been confirmed by smugglers who transport migrants from southern to northern Algeria. Mohammed, a smuggler who transports people from Bordj Badji Mokhtar to the north noted:

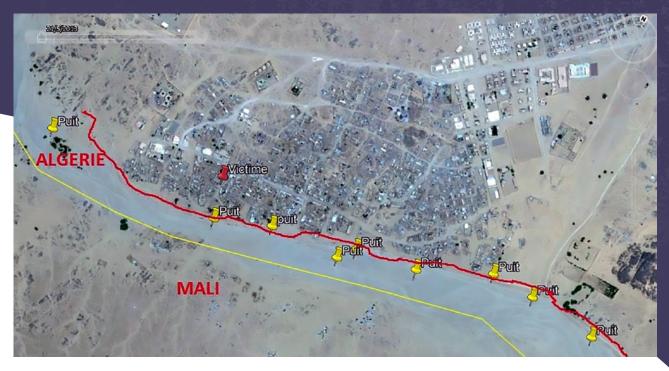
Most Guineans in [the city] don't want to stay here. They want to pursue their way towards Europe. I drive up to eight migrants per trip to Adrar. I charge $8\ 000\ DZD\ [{\mbox{e}40}]$ for each. I know the dangers of this job, but this is the only way for me to gain a livelihood.¹⁰²

Tinzaouatine: 'The twin Algerian-Malian villages'

Tinzaouatine is a Tuareg-dominated village straddling the Algeria–Mali border. The two sides are separated, most of the year, by a dry river. On the Malian side is an improvised border post controlled by the CMA which flies the separatist Azawad flag.¹⁰³ The Algerian side of Tinzaouatine is a small town but it has significantly expanded in the past decade. Its population is estimated at 10 000 people; a few dozen families still live on the Mali side. Many Tuaregs from the Malian side, who have Algerian citizenship, moved to Tinzaouatine (Algeria) after the outbreak of the 2012 war.

Tinzaouatine's position, at the frontier between the two countries, and the fact that migrants can cross the

borders by foot makes smuggling practices a special case along the Mali–Algeria frontier. Officially, the border was closed before the outbreak of COVID-19, however in reality, the population of both Tinzaouatines are able to cross the border. 'Malian Tuaregs can enter with ease to Algeria via Tinzaouatine. However, this happens only when the gendarmerie is permissive or when there is a rotation of the security staff,' said a smuggler from Tinzaouatine.¹⁰⁴ Because of this official permissiveness and the increasing difficulty of crossing near In-Khalil, Tinzaouatine has become a popular crossing point for Malian nationals.



Algerian security forces installed a wire fence (red line) along the area separating the twin Algerian–Malian villages of Tinzaouatine. Protests against this action resulted in the death of a young man (*victime*) and many others injured. © Akram Kharief

Unlike border crossings elsewhere on the frontier, the majority of the crossing attempts in Tinzaouatine occur in daylight, as the Algerian gendarmerie intensifies security at night. During the day, individuals move from one side to the other through the dry river, where an ad-hoc crossing point, a checkpoint, is overseen by Algerian security forces.

'Some people are known to the gendarmerie and can enter easily. For foreigners, if you do have a valid Malian passport and you speak decent Arabic or Tamasheq and you don't transport suspicious stuff, such as drugs, then you have a 50 per cent chance of reaching Tinza [Algeria],' said a young Malian from Kidal, who works in the village.¹⁰⁵

Border crossing between the two Tinzaouatines is limited to Malians and Algerians, though even for these individuals control and restriction of mobility has increased drastically since 2018. For other sub-Saharan migrants, the journey is riskier and the crossing does not happen at the crossing point in town. Rather, smugglers drop them off about 15km west of Tinzaouatine. Border crossings are extremely dangerous in the area because of the the zero-tolerance approach beyond Tinzaouatine, the harshness of the desert, the difficulty in crossing the sand berm and the need to walk back to 'Tinza' (Algeria). Most migrants head towards Tamanrasset as soon as they collect enough money to pay for the trip. Transport from Tinzaouatine to Tamanrasset is ubiquitous. Drivers charge foreigners between 8 000 DZD and 12 000 DZD (€40 to €60) per migrant and sometimes mix locals and foreigners.¹⁰⁶ Transporters gather close to the Triq el Hwanit and usually leave early afternoon and sleep in the desert. The journey takes about 12 hours along a tough track.

Most people working in the smuggling economy in Tinzaouatine act as facilitators or transporters and have another occupation, such as running a shop on the Triq el Hwanit road, the village's main street.

As the popularity of the Tinzaouatine route has risen, so too has the trade in doctoring and selling Malian passports for sub-Saharan migrants. Members of Malian armed groups such as Baye Coulibaly, who recruit among migrants on behalf of the Groupe Autodéfense des Tuareg Imghad et Alliés, provide travel documents to facilitate the crossing into Algeria for non-Malian migrants. ¹⁰⁷ '[Traffickers] are selling passports as the keystone to enter to the Algerian territory via Tinzaouatine,' according to an intermediary active in Tinzaouatine.¹⁰⁸ However, falsified Malian identity The installation of the barbed-wire border fence was denounced by civil society. documents are expensive and are often difficult to procure for most migrants, making the practice somewhat limited.

In early May 2020, Algerian security forces installed a barbed wire fence along the area separating the two Tinzaouatines, preventing locals, transporters of essential commodities and herders from crossing the border. The reasons for this move were unclear, though they were partly justified by officials as 'securing' the borders in times of a pandemic by limiting human movements.

The installation of the barbed wire was denounced by civil society and protesters, part of a more extensive contestation by populations on both sides of Algeria's southern borders of the militarization of the frontier, which has exacerbated marginalization and social exclusion.

After a month of peaceful protest, violent clashes between young protestors and security forces erupted in Tinzaouatine on 15 June. This led to the death of one young man, Ayoub Ag Adji, and several others being injured, although the army denied opening fire on protestors, and promised an independent investigation.¹⁰⁹ Although the situation calmed in Tinzaouatine in the days following the shooting, and the barbed wire being removed, there was little evident improvement in relations between the security forces and the population.

Interviewees from Tinzaouatine indicate that, in the aftermath of COVID-19 and the June events, almost no Malian migrants now cross the border. Human smuggling and that involving contraband have declined significantly because of the mobility restrictions and heightened security force pressure since the death of Ayoub. Tinzaouatine had been a special entry point to Algeria for Malians for years, but the combination of these events and rigid security appears to have brought this to an end.

Timiaouine: An easier route towards Tamanrasset

The Algerian village of Timiaouine is 12km from the Malian border, east of the Tanezrouft desert. The small, Tuareg-dominated village had crowds of Malian migrants arriving after the outbreak of the 2012 war. In that year alone, more than 11 000 Malians displaced by the conflict fled to the outskirts of the village.¹¹⁰ The Algerian authorities created a temporary refugee camp, run by the Algerian Red Crescent.¹¹¹ At that time, many Malians used smugglers to enter to Algeria, often paying up to 4000 DA (€20).¹¹²

Today, access to Timiaouine is more difficult because of the installation by Algeria of the sand berm. However, migrants continue to cross the border, arriving via desert routes throughout northern Mali via Tessalit, Achemchal and Talhandak (Mali). As in other points on the frontier, while smugglers bring migrants to the border they do not normally aid them in crossing. Rather, migrants are dropped off a few kilometres from the berm, which they must then cross on their own. The Talhandak–Timiaouine corridor was the most frequently used berm crossing in 2019 and early 2020.¹¹³ Timiaouine is less militarized than Bordj Badji Mokhtar. Talhandak has been an

important dropping point for migrants destined for Algeria. Smugglers operating along the border have taken over this route because it is easy to navigate.

There are a few foyers in the 5 Juillet neighbourhood in Timiaouine, run by Malian and Algerian smugglers.¹¹⁴ These foyers have been a source of frustration for local authorities, as unrest has occasionally occurred between locals and migrants, often due to debts owed to local smugglers.¹¹⁵ In 2016, for example, clashes broke out between migrants (mostly Malian, Cameroonian and Gambian nationals) and transporters working along the Timiaouine–Tamanrasset route. Migrants refused demands for additional payments for the smuggling services when they reached Timiaouine, as most reportedly had already made full payment in northern Mali. According to Algerian media, the event was significant enough to require the deployment of Algerian gendarmerie units.¹¹⁶ Tension has eased since 2016, aided in part by the decline in the number of migrants.

Although it is difficult to assess the number of migrants moving through Timiaouine, it is popular for three main reasons. First, it is the least-expensive crossing point, with prices varying between 4 000 and 5 000 DA ($\in 20$ to $\in 25$). Second, it is the shortest route between the border and Tamanrasset. Finally, it is perceived to be the point along Algeria's border with Mali where security is least intense.

Conclusion

Smuggling practices along Algeria's borders with Mali and Niger are many and diverse. Timiaouine is the least difficult entry point and the easiest way to reach Tamanrasset. Tinzaouatine is a good access point for Malian nationals. Bordj Badji Mokhtar has lost some of its popularity because of the high securitization of the area, yet, the so-called Guinean neighbourhood still hosts a migrant community which overwhelmingly aims to travel north and cross the Mediterranean.

For migrants, the Algeria–Niger frontier increased in importance after 2016 because of the collapse of the human-smuggling economy in the north of Niger and the south of Libya. A greater number of migrants have attempted to cross the border by climbing the berm separating the desert route from Assamaka to In Guezzam. Crossing the berm is dangerous but feasible, especially if migrants are well advised by their smugglers.

Beyond the practicalities of human smuggling, Algeria's approach to governing migrant flows influences the nature of cross-border movement. The following section attempts to assess what drives authorities' strategy for governing irregular migrants and how expulsion operations have been mobilized to contain rising numbers of migrants.

ASSESSING ALGERIAS MIGRATION GOVERNANCE

nderstanding the development of irregular migration and human smuggling in southern Algeria requires an understanding of the approach taken by the Algerian government to manage these practices. The country does not have a public strategy for dealing with irregular migrants. Unofficially, the state has attempted in the past six years to mix tough anti-migrant narratives aimed at limiting migrant arrivals. Political deals with neighbouring countries, mainly Niger, are meant to repatriate irregular migrants living in Algeria. But this strategy appears to have been largely ineffective, as evidenced by both the continued influx of irregular migrants and the continuing human-smuggling activities described in the previous sections.

Algeria has ratified a number of international agreements and treaties on the refugee and migration question. These include the 1951 Refugee Convention, the 1990 International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, and the 1967 Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa (OAU Convention).¹¹⁷ More recently, Algeria has been part of the Global Compact for migrants and refugees.¹¹⁸ Although these engagements are not legally binding, many are in stark counterpoint to the current domestic policies and laws functionally implemented in Algeria.¹¹⁹

This is not to say migration law is static in Algeria; some legal texts have been updated fairly recently. In 2008 and 2009, for example, Algeria adopted Law 08-1 and Law 09-01 governing foreign nationals' conditions of entry, stay and circulation.¹²⁰ These laws treat irregular migration as a criminal offence punishable by up to five years in prison and expulsion from the country. The law is severe and makes it extremely difficult for migrants to normalize their status in Algeria, forcing many to leave or to work informally at risk of detention or deportation. Algeria does not have national legislation on the status of refugees and asylum seekers.

However, despite these international agreements and published migration laws, Algerian authorities have not been publically transparent on the migration question. Even for experienced observers in Algerian civil society, it is unclear which government actors control migration governance.

An activist based in Algiers said: 'Practically speaking, the government has been very bad on communication about migration. They don't know how to deal with

Algerian security members on patrol in the Tamanrasset desert 2 000km south of Algiers.
 © Ryad Kramdi/AFP via Getty Images

the fact that they are under the international spotlight. What they know best is fear, division and security language.'¹²¹

For some civil-society activists, the government's opacity in relation to the public management of migration is deliberate. As a member of an alliance of CSOs advocating for the protection of migrants and refugees in Algeria said: 'We [civil society] don't know to whom we should address our queries, and to whom we should reach out. Is it the Ministry of the Interior? Is it the Gendarmerie Nationale? The '*Pouvoir*' keeps the management of migration in Algeria behind closed doors. He cannot tolerate being trapped within a public strategy. This kind of engagement would make them accountable. They don't want to be in this position.'¹²²

Opaque and oscillating migration governance

Algeria's approach to migration has been hamstrung by its lack of clearly defined vision or public strategy on the issue. There is little official clarity on how the country can ensure migrant protections, even as it maximizes its economic and diplomatic interests.

This gap is in large part due to an entrenched perception by Algerian political and military elite that migration is, first and foremost, a security challenge which requires tough responses, rather than a positive opportunity. This has led to hard-line rhetoric towards migrants, as well as regular raids and refoulement operations targeting migrants in northern Algerian cities, such as Algiers and Oran. These operations have led to several human-rights violations by police and gendarmerie officers.¹²³

The hard security lens through which Algeria views migration is intimately linked to concerns about instability on its southern borders. Algerian decision-makers view their strategic position as a functional, militarily powerful state surrounded by fragile, conflict-torn nations in which transnational terrorist groups operate.¹²⁴ The securitization of the southern border – including the deployment of significant military forces, increased surveillance and the construction of the berm – are responses to this strategic position.

However, approaches to migration in the south differ from what is heard at the national level or seen in the north. The government has traditionally shown a more pragmatic approach to human mobility on its frontiers with Niger and Mali. This reflects a groundlevel reality that is more complex than the hard-line rhetoric publicly adopted. Further, in contrast to the roundups of migrants in northern cities, in the south and its borderlands, the state's tolerance for migration is higher. Although there is official determination to control and to limit irregular migration, the presence of migrants is so entrenched in the local economy and society as to render this impractical. This balancing act stems from the understanding that mobility and informal trade play a fundamental economic role in border areas. It is a way for the state to support border communities with strong transnational ties in Mali, Niger and Libya, and to compensate for their underinvestment in Algerian borderlands, as well as the north of Mali and Niger.

Migration policy is highly dependent on the focus of key government officials; when officials change, especially those in the most senior roles, policies can shift significantly. In July 2017, for example, Abdelmadjid Tebboune, the president of Algeria, who was at that time prime minister under Abdelaziz Bouteflika, announced that his government would set a clear agenda to fix the problem of irregular migrants.¹²⁵ Tebboune declared at the National Assembly that 'the presence of our African brothers will be regulated, and the interior ministry, in coordination with the police and gendarmerie, is identifying all migrants'.¹²⁶

He promised that residency cards would be granted to migrants whose presence in Algeria was approved, giving access to work opportunities and basic state services. Tebboune justified this move as an action driven by Algeria's desire to protect the rights of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants.¹²⁷ However, this promise was not realized. A month later, Tebboune was dismissed by Bouteflika.¹²⁸

Tebboune's replacement, Ahmed Ouyahia, was against any regularization of migrants and supported crack-



Algeria's president, Abdelmadjid Tebboune. The country's policy on migration has been hamstrung by lack of a clearly defined strategy on the issue. © Ercin Top/Andalou Agency via Getty Images

downs, including their detention and expulsion to Niger and Mali. During a public appearance in July 2017, Ouyahia declared that 'migrants are a source of criminality, drugs and other scourges'.¹²⁹ His statement went viral on social media, shocking Algerians and mobilizing civil society.¹³⁰ Other officials supported Ouyahia's hard-line stance on the issue, including former minister of foreign affairs Abdelkader Messahel, who declared in July 2017 that migrants were 'a threat to national security' and vowed to step up deportations.¹³¹

However, there was not complete harmony within the high-level leadership on demonizing irregular migrants. The then director-general of national security, Major-General Abdelghani Hamel, stated that while there had been some cases of crimes committed by sub-Saharans, the police had not recorded serious cases of criminality.¹³² Hamel's comment contradicted the campaign led by Ouyahia to justify arbitrary expulsions to Niger and Mali.

In 2017, transport ministry issued an order forbidding the drivers of public buses and taxis to transport irregular migrants.¹³³ The order was denounced by civil-society organizations and some transport directorates, such as the directorate of Mostaganem, which simply refused to apply it.¹³⁴ A suspicious anti-migrant campaign with the slogan 'No to Africans in Algeria' was organized after the declaration by the ministry.¹³⁵ Many activists believe that this campaign was fuelled by the regime to mask dire pollical and socioeconomic challenges. Civil society and young people across the country mobilized against hate speech by launching a successful campaign named #We_are_Africans.¹³⁶

International media often framed the Algerian government's repressive attitude towards migrants as motivated by xenophobic politics.¹³⁷ This is partially wrong. The Bouteflika regime used the migration question to hide its political failures, its inability to cope with the mid-2010s economic downturn and its failure to deal with the influx of migrants observed in the north since 2014.

Moreover, Algerian authorities fear what they refer to as the *appel d'air*, or a huge influx of migrants, whether from Libya or the Sahel. For now, Algiers has not found a way to reconcile its security concerns with an agile and well-thought-out migration policy driven by pragmatism, coherence and the respect of human rights.



Personnel from the Algerian Red Crescent look on as a bus convoy transporting migrants from Niger arrives at a transit centre in Tamanrasset, 30 June 2018. © AFP via Getty Images Between 2017 and 2020, the director of migration at the interior ministry, Hacene Kacimi, became the informal spokesperson on the migration question. Kacimi continues to emphasize that the influx in migration poses serious threats to the state. He declared that up to 500 migrants arrived daily at the borders with Niger, Mali and Libya. However, independent information and contacts with civil-society groups suggest that these numbers are significantly exaggerated, with data suggesting the number of migrants arriving daily is between 100 and 200.¹³⁸ The exaggeration in numbers is, at any rate, a way to justify the crackdown on and expulsion of migrants, as well as the massive military budget spent in past years (US\$10.33 billion in 2019 alone).

When the fearful anti-migrant narrative is put aside, the authorities argue that refouled migrants are voluntary returnees. The state promotes its humanitarian assistance to the returnees by delivering food and staples through the Red Crescent.

Saïda Benhabylès, president of the Algerian Red Crescent, an organization viewed as close to the regime, has constantly expressed that Algeria has always been exemplary in its treatment of migrants, claiming: 'Migrants are voluntarily repatriated. Before they return home, the Algerian state gives them generous food packages.'¹³⁹

While it is true that Red Crescent teams on the ground help migrants by offering humanitarian assistance, there is a tendency by its leadership to portray migrants as victims requiring support, but only on condition they agree to be repatriated. As a member of the Algerian League for the Defence of Human Rights put it: '[Migrants] are treated outside international standards. The Algerian regime is not democratic. If [it] does not respect the rights and freedoms of Algerians, how can [it] take care of the dignity and rights of sub-Saharan migrants?'¹⁴⁰

In January 2020, the foreign affairs ministry sent a note to 30 *wilayas* (provinces) explaining how the central authorities conduct migrants' expulsions.¹⁴¹ However, the ministry has no official authority over the *wilayas*, as this is the responsibility of the

Interior ministry. This underscores the confusion among Algerian authorities over which ministries wield a functional role in the migration question.

The Algeria–Niger deal at the heart of controversial expulsion operations

In late 2013, 92 migrants, including women and children, died in the middle of the northern Nigerien desert while trying to reach Algeria. This event contributed to a controversial repatriation arrangement of irregular Nigerien nationals between Algeria and Niger in 2014.¹⁴² The arrangement was framed by Algiers as a way to combat the emerging begging industry in Algeria, which had come to be dominated by woman and children from Niger, mainly the Zinder region, and as a request from their Nigerien counterpart to deal with a vulnerable population.¹⁴³ The repatriation programme was negotiated and funded by the Algerian government.¹⁴⁴

As a consequence of the agreement, 3 600 irregular migrants living in Algeria were repatriated to Niger between 2014 and October 2015.¹⁴⁵ Most were victims of trafficking. ¹⁴⁶ At least three-quarters were children and women.¹⁴⁷

However, there has been no official document or public declaration explaining what is included within the repatriation agreement.¹⁴⁸ This has been confirmed by informal and formal declarations made by officials from the two countries. In fact, what has been presented as an official 'agreement' appears to be an informal deal between the two governments. A diplomat posted at Niger's consulate in Tamanrasset stated: 'Who has talked about an official agreement? It is the media, not us [the authorities]. The repatriation of Nigeriens in an irregular situation is an informal promise made by our leaders. It is a gentleman's deal.'¹⁴⁹

While in 2015, cooperation on irregular migration and repatriation was relatively good, with regular discussions on the issue between the two countries' foreign affairs ministries, by the following year cooperation had begun to deteriorate.¹⁵⁰ Algeria started to organize convoys of non-Nigeriens brought to the Niger border and expelled. 'This was not part of the deal,' said a diplomat at the Nigerien consulate in Tamanrasset.¹⁵¹

In 2017 and 2018, Algerian deportations to Niger increased significantly, including growing numbers of non-Nigerien nationals. An estimated 19 500 Nigeriens and 750 sub-Saharan African nationals were expelled between August 2017 and December 2018 to Niger.¹⁵² According to the IOM, Algeria expelled about 40 000 people to Niger between 2014 to 2019.¹⁵³

Algerian authorities also began to intensify arbitrary arrests of migrants, expelling them into northern Niger.¹⁵⁴ Roundups became frequent in northern Algerian cities, especially Oran and Algiers, and in the south, in places such as Tamanrasset. Security forces arrested migrants off streets, from their homes and from construction sites, often without regard to their documents or their status. Some of those expelled were Nigerien. Police also targeted and began to expel migrants from Mali, Ivory Coast, Guinea, Cameroon, Nigeria, Benin, Burkina Faso, Gambia, Liberia and Senegal. Expulsions did not exclude Middle Eastern migrants and refugees. On 31 December Algerian authorities fear a huge influx of migrants. 2018, the Algerian League for the Defence of Human Rights shed light on the deportation of 50 Syrian migrants to Niger.¹⁵⁵ Other Syrians who had crossed the Algeria-Mauritania border were arrested in Tamanrasset in 2018 and 2019. Most were allowed to stay, but some were expelled to northern Niger.¹⁵⁶

The Algerian authorities run centres in the north and south to house migrants during the long repatriation journey. Migrants arrested in northern cities are transported south by bus and taken to the Tamanrasset migrant centre, run by the Red Crescent. They are then transported to the city of In Guezzam. The journey is exhausting, covering more than 2 500km and lasting four days.

From In Guezzam, they are transported in truck convoys to Assamaka. Once there, Nigerien migrants are transported to the IOM Arlit centre, from where they are returned to their regions and communities of origin. A law-enforcement official based in In Guezzam noted: 'What happens [in] Niger is a matter for Nigeriens. We transport migrants to Assamaka.'¹⁵⁷

Since 2015, Algerian authorities have organized two types of expulsion convoys.¹⁵⁸ The first type is called *convois officiels* (official convoys), which repatriate only Nigerien migrants in an irregular situation. This process is legal, although migrants' rights are often violated, especially at the time of arrest. The convoys transport migrants to the village of Assamaka in Niger. These repatriation operations are financed by Algeria.

The second type of expulsion convoys are termed *convois non-officiels* (unofficial convoys). Algerian authorities expel non-Nigerien migrants to Niger during these operations. Migrants are transported in trucks to the border, specifically to an exit point known as 'Houfra' (hole) or Point Zéro. Security officers point out the direction of Assamaka and migrants are obliged to walk about 15km. These operations violate the principle of non-refoulement, as they expose migrants to risks of serious violations of their fundamental right to life.

There is evidence that Algeria has also expelled migrants into northern Mali. Previously, Algerian authorities conducted repatriations of irregular migrants, mostly via the village of Tinzaouatine (Algeria).¹⁵⁹ However, between 2017 and mid-2018, the volume of expulsions increased sharply to 3 100 migrants. The location of expulsions also shifted, with many migrants trucked to the border zone south of Bordj Badji Mokhtar. Migrants were forced to walk 18km in the desert to reach the dangerous zone of In-Khalil (Mali).¹⁶⁰

Since August 2018, deportations to Mali seem to have waned significantly, due to protests in Mali against such acts and increasing scrutiny from the international community. In March 2018, for example, expelled Malians violently protested in front of the Algerian embassy in Bamako.¹⁶¹ This event resonated significantly among Algeria's diplomatic and political elites.

By 2019, refoulement operations from southern Algeria to northern Mali had almost stopped. In Bordj Badji Mokhtar, the migrant centre is now closed. According to local sources, Algerian authorities have not conducted expulsion operations on the Mali border in 2020.¹⁶²

However, expulsions across the Niger border have continued. IOM reported that more than 11 000 migrants were expelled from Algeria to Niger in 2019, including 358 non-Nigerien nationals. ¹⁶³ Data from multiple sources suggest the real numbers for 2019 could be higher, potentially between 15 000 to 20 000.¹⁶⁴ More than 2 700 migrants were expelled in April 2019 alone.¹⁶⁵

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, there were significant expulsions, though fewer than in 2019. Between 15 January and 17 January 2020, Algerian authorities mounted a particularly large refoulement operation to Niger. Dozens of buses departed from the northern cities of Oran, Algiers, Annaba and Béjaïa towards Ghardaia, and then Tamanrasset before their migrant passengers were expelled to Niger. According to Red Crescent personnel in Tamanrasset, most of the migrants were Nigeriens (with a few Malians, some Guineans and other West Africans).¹⁶⁶

There is some evidence that recent arrests and expulsions have been more discrete. An experienced Algerian civil-society observer linked this to political dynamics in Algeria and noted that '[the decline] is certainly because the security forces have to deal with the Hirak [the Algerian protest movement]'.¹⁶⁷ In the north, police continue to organize waves of arrests at night, especially in Oran and Algiers, before migrants are brought south.

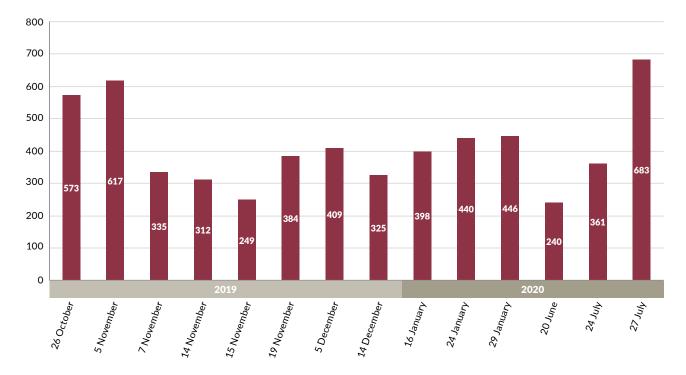


FIGURE 6 Expulsion operations from Algeria to Niger, October 2019 to July 2020

In the extreme south of Algeria, migrants are expelled in smaller groups south of In Guezzam. Mohammed, a journalist monitoring the migrant situation in the south, said that 'law enforcement continues to arrest migrants and organize their departure towards the south. However, they do so in a different way. There [are] no more media and Red Crescent photo-ops.'¹⁶⁸

Expulsions remain highly controversial

Algeria's repatriations to Niger, and expulsions of migrants to both Niger and Mali, have drawn significant international criticism. In October 2018, the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants noted that the 'collective expulsions from Algeria to Niger are in utter violation of international law, including the fundamental principle of non-refoulement and due process guarantees, and must stop immediately'.¹⁶⁹

Severe human rights violations occur between the arrest and the expulsion period. Expelled migrants reported to local civil-society organizations that some were violently treated by the police before their arrest, especially in Oran and Algiers.¹⁷⁰ Many testified that police officers in the north confiscated their phones and their money. Some migrants reported being beaten by the police and the gendarmerie.¹⁷¹

Bilal, a migrant who was expelled from Algeria in 2019 and returned to Tamanrasset, said: 'They [the police] entered our place in the *banlieue* [suburbs] of Algiers in the middle of the night. They yelled at us and hit us with sticks. They didn't give us time to pick up our stuff. I had my passport and the equivalent of 1 500 euros. I lost everything there.'¹⁷²

Most migrants arrested in the north do not go through a case-by-case paper identification process before being transported south. This has resulted in some legal migrants being taken to Tamanrasset without valid reason.¹⁷³ The authorities' strategy has been to empty the north of 'supposedly' irregular migrants by not verifying their identification papers before they reach Tamanrasset.¹⁷⁴

Algerian officials claim this criticism is unfounded, and the result of an international campaign against the country by the IOM and the former UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights of Migrants, Felipe González Morales, following his visit to Niger.¹⁷⁵ The reaction of the Algerian government shows how on edge it is about the subject. The foreign affairs ministry stated in a communiqué that Algiers:

[H]ad noted with astonishment the content of the press conference of Felipe González Morales. ... It totally rejects and in detail the assertions of the latter who didn't go only beyond the limits of his mandate but also believed the allegations of people who were escorted back to the borders for their illegal stay.¹⁷⁶

The former migration director of the interior ministry, Hacene Kacimi, also criticized the declaration and put forward the sovereignty of the country, saying that these operations are not degrading and are in accordance with Algerian law.¹⁷⁷ It is not clear why Nigerien authorities tolerate the overuse of an informal agreement. One explanation is the disequilibrium in terms of power between the two countries. 'Niger is a poor country, of which all borders are threatened by terrorist and criminal groups. Algeria secures our northern border and provides livelihoods for thousands of families working there,' said a Nigerien diplomat interviewed in Tamanrasset.¹⁷⁸ But, over time, the discourse of the Nigerien officials has subtly changed. In February 2018, former Nigerien minister of state Mohamed Bazoum, bluntly condemned Algerian authorities' behaviour during a visit to an IOM transit centre in Agadez, noting that 'Algeria must repatriate these migrants to their homes, not always in Niger'.¹⁷⁹ This condemnation has not, however, led to any major changes on the ground.

'The Europeans are not better than us'

Algeria's defensive posture when it comes to the treatment of the migration issue is inextricable from the broader relationship dynamics between it and European states. For many in the Algerian political-military elite, the so-called 'international campaign' against Algeria and its management of irregular migration, which means every criticism put forward by the UN, independent NGOs and international media, is seen as an interference in its own affairs.

There is significant popular sentiment that the EU puts pressure on Algiers to act as a 'gendarme' against migrant flows reaching Europe.¹⁸⁰ The issue has been particularly acute since French President Emmanuel Macron proposed the creation of so-called 'hotspot' centres where migrants' demands can be treated local-ly.¹⁸¹ Algeria has been clear in its refusal to host such centres. ¹⁸² At the same time, however, its hard stance against irregular migration accommodates Europe.

Kacimi declared that 'southern Algeria will not be the Lampedusa of the Sahara'.¹⁸³ Similarly, the former

foreign affairs minister stated that 'Algeria faces the same problems as Europe. We [the government] have conducted repatriation operations in accordance with arrangements made with neighbouring countries.'¹⁸⁴

For years now, North African countries have been under pressure to ramp up border controls and limit migrants' ability to reach Europe. While capacity building programmes and financial support have gone to Morocco and Tunisia, Algeria has declined to participate, refusing on policy grounds to accept migration-linked assistance.¹⁸⁵

Algiers routinely emphasizes to the international community that it should work on the long-term causes of forced displacement and migrants. Prevailing sentiment among Algerian authorities holds that the migrant crisis is the consequence of the conflict in Libya and instability generated by foreign interventions in the Sahel.¹⁸⁶

Will COVID-19 change the governance of migration?

This report was written before the surge of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, the virus has hit Algeria heavily. As of 20 August 2020, Algeria recorded the sixth-highest number of infections in Africa, with more than 40 000 people contracting the virus and 1 400 deaths.¹⁸⁷

In response to the crisis, the Algerian authorities declared a partial lockdown, limited to provinces which had registered the presence of the coronavirus and implemented measures to lessen the contagion. Inbound and outbound international passenger flights were restricted on 17 March, with land and maritime borders closed to passenger traffic.

According to activists in Algeria, due to COVID-19, security forces did not target migrants or conduct significant arrests of migrants between mid-March and May 2020. The last deportation operation before the closure of the border occurred on 15 March when 813 migrants were expelled. IOM reported that people continued to reach Assamaka in the following weeks.¹⁸⁸

Expulsions to northern Niger resumed at the end of June, even though the Algerian–Niger border was still closed and weather conditions were difficult.¹⁸⁹ Algerian authorities carried out three expulsion operations between late June and early August, deporting at least 1 400 people, including at least 360 non-Nigeriens. This suggests that refoulement operations will continue and be the primary means through which the government aims to limit migrant traffic.

Moreover, the effects of COVID-19 on irregular migrants living in Algeria are high. Many communities live in overcrowded houses with limited sanitation, so confinement and preventive measures to limit contagion are hard to implement. Moreover, many migrants have lost their jobs because of business closures.

Organizations close to the Algerian government, such as the Red Crescent, have so far given only limited assistance to vulnerable migrants, especially children and women. However, citizens and CSOs have been very supportive of migrant communities.¹⁹⁰ Youth groups have distributed food and essential goods in migrant neighbourhoods in Algiers, Oran and Annaba, and many young people have called for help from their 'African brothers' in these difficult times, hoping to expand these initiatives across the country.¹⁹¹

Unfortunately, this has led Algerian authorities to further tighten security measures on the borders with Niger and Mali. According to smugglers operating across the region, security units (army, gendarmerie, border police) have intensified surveillance. The border posts of In Guezzam and Bordj Badji Mokhtar are closed and the full closure of the frontier is strictly applied. As a consequence, cross-border activities, including human smuggling, have effectively ceased. Intallah, an intermediary involved in human smuggling in Timiaouine, stated that 'no more movements are allowed'. Even the demand for migration from northern Niger and northern Mali has steadily dropped.

While the COVID-19 pandemic could be an opportunity for the authorities to challenge the status quo on the situation of migrants, neither the government nor the military have shown any sign that they will do so. It is unlikely that there will be a change in the governance of migration, or even a regularization campaign in the near future. Algeria's migration governance is subsumed within the hard security agenda, despite some attempts not to undermine too heavily the interests of borderland communities.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Southern Algeria has increasingly become a strategic gateway for migrants journeying north, whether they are seeking jobs or refuge in Algeria, or trying to reach Europe via the Western Mediterranean route. The economic importance of migration and cross-border cultural connections in the south of Algeria have influenced how the government has implemented its migration policy.

Authorities in southern Algeria continue to attempt a balancing act as they try to prioritize security concerns without hindering the movement and interests of local communities. The balancing act in the south is unsuccessful, even though its approach contrasts with the more draconian attitude towards migration in northern Algeria, which consists of regular roundups and expulsions.

Functionally, the Algerian government has leveraged the migration question as a political tool. Since 2014, successive governments have inflated the migration issue as a means of distracting from political, social and economic tension. This instrumentalized approach has led to the stigmatization of sub-Saharans in irregular situations and skewed Algeria's domestic debate on migration.

As of the summer of 2020, Algerian authorities had stopped expelling migrants at the Mali border, but continue to deport migrants to Niger. Expulsions are likely to continue, though in a more discrete manner.

This approach will not diminish migratory flows towards Algeria. On the contrary, it encourages clandestine human smuggling, which increases profits for smugglers and puts migrants' lives at greater risk.

Algiers has not found a way to reconcile its security concerns with an agile and wellthought-through migration policy driven by pragmatism, coherence and respect of human rights. Initial signs suggest that the government is unlikely to challenge the status quo. Rather, it has cracked down on NGOs working on the migration issue, as part of a broader targeting of civil society.¹⁹² Therefore, it is unrealistic to expect change on the migratory question when there is no rule of law or democracy.

Algeria's social movement, the Hirak, has been leading the fight for a democratic regime since 22 February 2019. Although the migratory question has not been at the forefront, an increased sense of citizenship and of the necessity to build a new social contract are two essential pillars in reviewing the place of migrants within Algeria's society.

 Night and day, hordes of migrants come and go. At the back of their minds, though, they know they could be caught at any time and repatriated. © Louiza Ammi The following are policy recommendations on how Algeria could improve its approach to migration:

- 1. Cease summary expulsions. Algerian authorities should stop the arbitrary arrests and summary expulsions of irregular migrants. They need to implement a transparent due diligence process that provides individualized assessment of status (regular or irregular, refugees, asylum seekers) before taking decisions that might harm migrants' lives. Algeria has the sovereign right to repatriate irregular migrants, but it should do so in respect to migrants' rights to seek protection and asylum. Algeria has an obligation to ensure the protection and safety of migrants on the basis of the international conventions it has signed. Algeria should prohibit summary expulsion through the implementation of a legal instrument and migrants should have the right to challenge judicial decisions before deportation procedures are engaged. Paperwork control of migrants should happen at the place where they are arrested, not in Tamanrasset as is currently the case.
- 2. Enhance coordination between Algeria, Niger and the IOM throughout the repatriation process from southern Algeria to northern Niger. Repatriation operations should be well planned, with clear and efficient task divisions between the Algerian and Nigerien authorities and the IOM. Algerian authorities should alert their Nigerien counterparts and the IOM in advance of repatriation operations to enable all stakeholders to prepare. Migrants should neither be dropped on the outskirts of the Algerian border, nor in Assamaka. Ideally, migrants should be systematically transported to Arlit or Agadez to reduce risks of human rights violations and stressing resources in Assamaka.
- 3. A complete migration policy strategy should be implemented. Algeria should develop and implement a forward-looking, well-defined and coherent migration governance strategy informed by both the protection of human rights and economic pragmatism. It should be the result of wide-scale consultations with stakeholders (advocacy groups, journalists, researchers, academics, businessmen), international organizations and migrant

communities in Algeria. Such a strategy will provide a common framework upon which state institutions can better coordinate and harmonize efforts, as well as helping civil-society groups to fill existing gaps.

- 4. A multilateral dialogue should be opened with neighbouring countries, especially Niger and Mali, on how to cope with migrant management, human-smuggling and trafficking networks. Such a debate can emerge out of existing dialogue platforms such as the bilateral borders committees between Algeria, Mali and Niger.
- 5. Algeria should amend existing laws and translate its international agreements into national jurisdiction. Algeria should amend the 2009 Law 09.01 and the 2018 Law 08.11 to treat offences related to migration as administrative rather than criminal violations. Algeria is a signatory of international conventions and treaties on refugees, asylum seekers and migrants, including the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1990 International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families.¹⁹³ However, the country still lacks national legislation that reflects such engagement at the international level. It also lacks a national law on asylum in compliance with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and other international standards. A legislative proposal that explicitly guarantees migrants' protection rights is reportedly being prepared. Algeria abstained from voting at the Global Compact for migrants and does not fully endorse its recommendations, arguing that the compact does not give a clear distinction between 'irregular migration and clandestine migration'.194
- 6. Improve training of security forces on migration. Relevant security force authorities need to strengthen efforts to better understand the realities of migration and need to increase the capacity of their personnel by applying a human-rights-driven approach. This is particularly true for the national police forces who have committed abuses during the arrest of migrants and for mixed security units posted at the borders. Modules should be offered in both basic- and career-training systems and should cover the mitigation of risks for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers' rights under

international law, norms and best practices in due diligence procedure.

- 7. Move forward with the regularization of vulnerable and undocumented migrants in Algeria. As this was previously planned in 2017, Algeria could launch an innovative pilot project to provide residency cards to economic migrants living in specific wilayas. This would integrate economic migrants into the labour force, particularly in targeted sectors, such as construction, where labour gaps exist. Employment sectors for which migrants are eligible could be chosen and delimited by the state. Such a policy could fill an important labour shortage, better protecting migrants and allowing the state to record the legal entrance and departure of migrants. This project could provide the state with a more accurate idea of the number of undocumented migrants living in Algeria. In the long term, this pilot project could be scaled up throughout the country and become a key piece in Algeria's future vision.
- 8. Fight against human smuggling and trafficking networks without hindering borderland communities. Algeria's hard approach in borderlands has hit small players active in the smuggling of basic commodities heavily, without undermining the activities of organized criminal networks. Human-smuggling networks

operating between southern Algeria and northern Sahel have simply transferred the risk to migrants themselves. Although Algiers' concerns about regional instability are legitimate, it needs to find an equilibrium between law enforcement efforts and community-driven ways to isolate criminal networks from their social basis. This requires better economic opportunities for borderland communities and more public services delivered to impoverished youth. In the absence of viable socioeconomic alternatives, any securitization approach is unlikely to succeed.

9. Launch of an observatory on migration. Research on the political economy of human smuggling and migration remains scarce. Algiers should support the implementation of an independent observatory which disseminates knowledge on migration through robust and evidence-based methods. Such an observatory could offer training and capacity-building to a variety of stakeholders, including journalists and policy decision-makers. This initiative could build upon the work conducted by Algeria's civil society groups such as the Algerian League of Human Rights, Rassemblement Action Jeunesse and 'Plateforme Migration', a former national collective of independent and civil-society actors working on migration in Algeria.¹⁹⁵



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