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## THE PROBLEM OF MIGRATION FROM SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA TO ALGERIA IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

### INTRODUCTION

African countries have undergone profound political and economic changes since the end of World War II. The African continent is considered the most mobile region in the world (Curtin, 1997: 63–94). The mobility of Africans in many respects was shaped during the colonial period. The “race for Africa” and cutting the “African cake” in the nineteenth century into political and administrative units separated the existing nations, which in turn contributed to the fact that members of one ethnic group became citizens of different countries. During the period of decolonization, this led to numerous conflicts and wars. Contemporary media have contributed to the emergence of many stereotypes and to the creation of the current image of Africa as a “continent on the move.” Such stereotyping has led to the emergence of many myths about the mass influx of illegal migrants from the Sahel region, sub-Saharan Africa through the Sahara to the north of the African continent and from there across the Mediterranean Sea to Europe (Castles, Miller, 2011: 187–188). In fact, most Africans move within the African continent and rarely leave it (Brachet, 2021). The only exceptions here are the Maghreb countries – Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, (Table 1) (Haas, Castles, Miller, 2020: 198). The table shows that the poorer a country is, the less likely it is that its inhabitants will migrate to distant countries, and especially to Europe. Typically, Africans (except for the Maghreb countries) migrate to neighbouring countries that are equally poor.

Table 1

African emigration in 2015

Region and subregion of origin	Number of migrants (in millions)	Emigration rate (%)	Percentage of migrants who remained in the region (%)
1	2	3	4
<b>Sub-Saharan Africa</b>	<b>29.3</b>	<b>2.8</b>	<b>70</b>
Southern Africa	3.3	2.6	58
West Africa	10.0	2.7	73
Central Africa	3.9	2.9	81
East Africa	8.5	2.8	74
Horn of Africa (4 countries)	3.5	2.8	48

1	2	3	4
<b>North Africa</b>	<b>9.3</b>	<b>4.8</b>	<b>1</b>
Egypt and Libya	3.6	3.5	1
Maghreb (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia)	5.7	6.4	1

Source: Héran, 2018: 2.

People from West Africa are the most mobile population on the continent. Within the framework of the Agreement of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) citizens from countries belonging to this organization may travel within the region without a visa. For this reason, travel from the Sahel region to the south does not cause major problems, because the population migrates within the current visa-free zone. The northern direction leads to Algeria and other North African countries. To cross the border with Algeria, a visa is required for most sub-Saharan African citizens. An exception is made for Mali citizens, who do not need a visa to enter Algeria.<sup>1</sup>

The aim of the article is to try to assess the scale of the problem of irregular immigration in Algeria based on available statistical data and their periodisation. For the purposes of the article, the following hypotheses were put forward: 1) Algeria is mainly a transit country for migrants from sub-Saharan Africa; 2) The main irregular migration routes lead from the Sahel zone; 3) There is unequal treatment of people in terms of violations of Algerian law (division into Algerians and others). The following research methods will be used in the article – analysis and synthesis, comparative method, statistical method, and systemic approach.

## TRANS-SAHARAN MIGRATION ROUTE

After the Arab Spring, Algeria became one of the main migration routes that led to Europe. Southern Algeria has increasingly become a strategic gateway for migrants traveling to the north of the country, whether they are looking for work or shelter, or trying to reach Europe via the Western Mediterranean route, and previously the Central Mediterranean route (Farrah, 2020). The Trans-Saharan migration route runs through the territory of Algeria and is divided into two main threads – western and central. The western branch leads to Morocco and the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla; the central one – to Libya, and from there to Malta or the Italian islands (e.g., Lampedusa). Most migrants who head towards Morocco first cross the Algerian-Niger or Algerian-Malian borders, with far fewer migrants moving across the border with Mauritania.

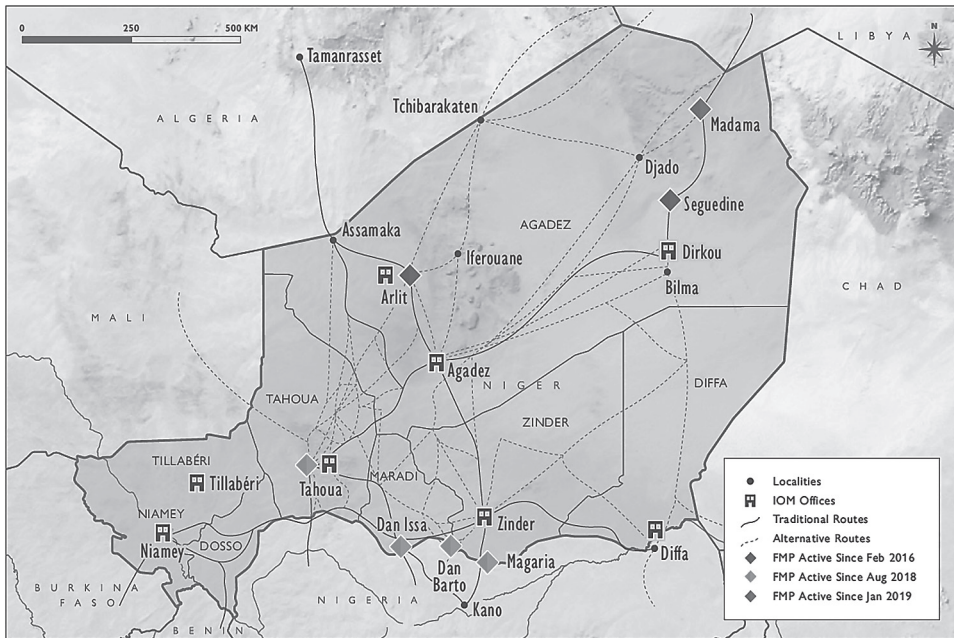
Niger, located in the Sahel range, acts as a link between the countries of North and Sub-Saharan Africa. Important communication and migration routes run through the territory of Niger, making it a centre of interregional trade and cultural exchange (Gabriel, 2020: 1). In the context of migration, the Nigerien cities of Agadez and Arlit play a vital role. The city of Agadez is an important regional centre of trade, and in

<sup>1</sup> The ECOWAS Community includes the following countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Ivory Coast, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo.

recent decades the first destination for African migrants traveling north towards Libya and Algeria (Teevan, 2020: 4).

Since 2011, after the crises in Mali and Libya, the number of migrants transiting through Niger has increased, and as a result, smuggling networks have also begun to multiply. Human smuggling on the Niger-Algerian border is dominated by Nigerien Tuaregs, who have strong social ties on both sides of the border along the route connecting Assamaka with In Guezzam and Tamanrasset. Along the length of the 951 km Niger-Algerian border, there are three areas suitable for crossing it: the first is in the triangle connecting Assamaka, In Guezzam and El-Akla; the other two are located around the Tchibarakaten gold mine and the area connecting the extreme south of Algeria with the border of Mali and Niger (map 2) (Farrah, 2020: 20).

**Map 1. Main migration routes from Niger to Algeria**



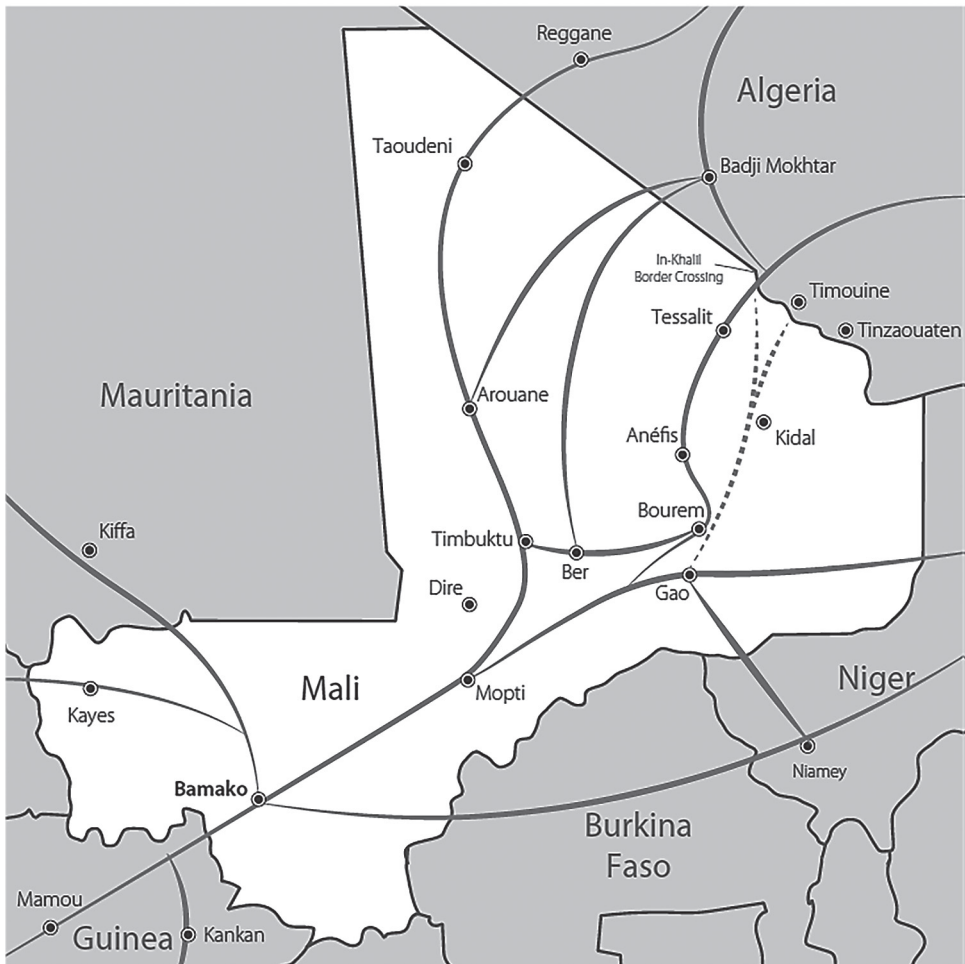
Source: Gabriel, 2020: 2.

People smuggling in northern Niger towards southern Algeria is based on small, horizontal networks in which smugglers play distinct roles and provide a variety of services (such as transport, guidance, and reception of migrants). Since the introduction of laws criminalising human smuggling in mid-2016 and 2017, the number of illegal routes and smugglers has increased, as well as the price for such services (Micallef, Horsley, Bish, 2019). Usually, smugglers leave migrants at night at a distance of one to five kilometres from the Algerian border, on a large sand embankment. The height of the barrier varies from 2 m to 4 m depending on the area. Fearing arrest, the smugglers do not cross the embankment with the migrants but give them instructions on how to pass and meet another smuggler on the Algerian side. However, migrants

very often are left on their own after crossing the border, even though they pay for all logistics (Farrah, 2020: 23).

No less important in recent times were the smuggling routes from Mali. Many routes to the north start in the Malian city of Gao and connect to the Algerian cities of Tamanrasset or Bordj Badji Mokhtar, then Ghardaia and Adrar. From there, the route leads towards Oran, where migrants prepare to cross the border with Morocco (Hanlon, Herbert, 2015). The city of Tammanrasset is a major transshipment point for both illegal migrants from Mali and Niger (Algeria Press Service, 2020). The Malian-Algerian border, like the Niger-Algerian border, is inhabited by Tuaregs. The border areas of Mali are more populated than Niger. On the Algerian side of the border is the town of Bordj Badji Mokhtar and the two villages of Tinzaouatine and Timiaouine (map 3).

**Map 3. Main migration routes from Mali to Algeria**



Source: Micallef, Horsley, Bish, 2019.

Since 2012, the Malian-Algerian border has been heavily militarized due to the high activity of terrorist groups in the region (Lutte, 2019). Smuggling of humans from northern Mali to Algeria usually begins in Timbuktu and Gao, as these are the main routes for human smuggling in the north of the country. From there, many routes run northward through the desert. Two main corridors lead from Anéfif to the Algerian border. The first route leads to the *Adrar des Ifoghas* mountains, and then to the villages of Tinzaouatine (Mali), less often to Boughessa. The second corridor runs from Gao to the villages of Talhandak and Tindiska, and Tessalit via Aguelhok. Other long desert routes, which are increasingly being used by smugglers, go from Timbuktu to Talhandak. At the border, most of the smuggling takes place from In-Khalil east to Tinzaouatine. For smugglers, navigating the harsh and uninhabited Tanezrouft Desert and the north-western Ergs Chech and the sandy Desert of El Khnachich is a challenge. West of In-Khalil, smuggling is limited because of the presence of the Algerian military, with surveillance of the region quite high (Farrah, 2020: 26).

Since 2013, the Algerian military has surrounded the city of Bordj Badji Mokhtar with a sand embankment and has significantly intensified observation and patrols. Borg Badji Mokhtar is a strategic area for various illegal activities, including the smuggling of people. The Algerian army takes a particularly strict, zero-tolerance approach to migrants between Bordj Badji Mokhtar and In Khalil (Mali), with any unrecognized movement considered suspicious. The militarization of the area has contributed to a decline in human smuggling between Bordj Badji Mokhtar and In Khalil (Micallef, Farrah, Bish, Tanner, 2019: 44). Bordja Badji Mokhtar has historically been dominated by Malian migrants. Since the closing of the border in 2013, migration has decreased significantly. Malians who have Algerian citizenship moved to Tamanrasset in search of a better life, and “El Borj” has become a military zone (Farrah, 2020: 28). Although migration flows in Mali have decreased significantly since the beginning of the armed conflict in the north of the country in 2012, the route between Mali and Algeria is important for many West African migrants. The popularity of this route is confirmed by smugglers who transport migrants from southern to northern Algeria (Farrah, 2020: 28). Smugglers operating between In-Khalil and Bordj Badji Mokhtar, as well as on the Niger border, leave migrants at night near In-Khalil, about 5 km from the border with Algeria, forcing them to cross deserts and sand embankments on their own, at their own risk. Smuggling networks operating between Gao and the Algerian-Malian border work with armed groups that facilitate the movement of smugglers and collect tolls. Direct involvement of armed groups in human smuggling is rare, as profits are not high (Farrah, 2020: 28).

The differences between human smuggling and human trafficking along Algeria's borders with Niger and Mali are blurring. Crossing both the Malian and Niger borders is becoming increasingly dangerous as migrants moving through the area are extremely vulnerable to violence and can become victims of human trafficking. Very often, migrants who move along the Malian-Algerian border are detained against their will by smugglers who have links to armed perpetrators and bandits. Sometimes, migrants are enslaved by armed crime groups, and are forced to work for them, or their family members are forced to transfer money to the groups to free the victims (Letter, 2018: 35).

According to statistics provided by the Global Immigration Detention Observatory, in 2019 Algeria had about 249,075 migrants from 30 countries in 2019, accounting for 0.6% of the country's total population (UN DESA, 2020). By contrast, the number of asylum seekers was 2,275 and the number of refugees was 98,599 (Algeria, 2020). According to official Algerian statistics, about 500 migrants reached the country's southern borders every day in 2018 (Près de 500, 2020). Of course, the information provided is not complete, because it is impossible to accurately count the number of illegal migrants crossing the southern borders of Algeria. Most of the migrants continue towards Morocco via the Trans-Saharan route. This is an extremely dangerous route. Between 2015 and 2019, more than 7,000 migrant deaths were recorded in the Sahara. The IOM estimates that: for every known death in the Mediterranean, there are two lives lost in the desert (IOM, *Missing migrants*, 2022).

Due to the increase in migration from sub-Saharan Africa, the Algerian authorities have increased controls at the southern borders. The Algerian army has deployed more than 50,000 workers along the borders with Mali, Niger, and Libya. They have increased the number of checks at border crossings, have introduced powerful border surveillance systems, and have built a sand embankment. The borders with the three countries have been closed since 2013 (Harchaoui, 2018). However, despite tough anti-migration measures, there is a significant gap between the narrative of the security measures taken and the reality of continuous cross-border traffic. Interviews with Algerian officials and members of the local community conducted at the borders with Niger and Mali underscore that the issue of people smuggling is not a priority for the Algerian army stationed in the south of the country. Rather, the army focuses on combating terrorism and the arms trade. Often, the treatment of migrants depends on which security forces they face. This contrasts sharply with the position adopted by Algerian authorities in the north of the country, where the policies are enforced in a much more aggressive manner (Farrah, 2020). Intensive border security measures in the name of the fight against terrorism and criminal networks have not significantly affected illegal migration, partly because security forces are focused on the fight against terrorism and arms trafficking rather than migration. Currently, it is exceedingly difficult to estimate exactly what is the percentage of people illegally crossing the Algerian borders on their own, and how many cross with the help of smugglers. It is believed that most smuggling networks are located between the southern nodes of Tamanrasset, Adrar and Ouargla and the northern cities of Oran, Maghni and Oujda (Chenaoui, Belhadj, 2016). In the northern part of the country, smuggling networks are run by people from sub-Saharan Africa, mainly from Niger. These networks employ Moroccan and Algerian  *passeurs*  (smuggling specialists) to smuggle migrants across the border. The illegal crossing of the Algeria-Morocco border costs between \$36 and \$50 (Hanlon, Herbert, 2015).

## EXPULSION OF MIGRANTS FROM ALGERIA

In 2014, Algeria and Niger signed a controversial agreement to repatriate Nigerien citizens staying illegally on Algerian territory (Massalaki, 2014). The agreement was formulated by Algiers to fight begging in Algeria, dominated by women and children

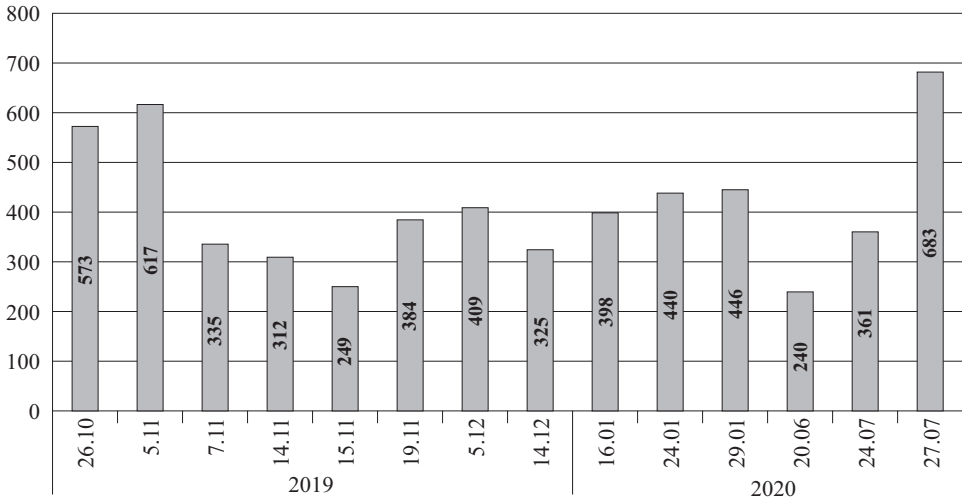
from Niger, mainly from the Zinder region (Massalaki, 2014). As a result of the agreement, 3600 migrants living in Algeria were repatriated to Niger between 2014 and October 2015 (Beratto, 2015). Most people were victims of human trafficking, and at least three-quarters were women and children (Massalaki, 2014). However, there was no official document or public statement explaining what the repatriation agreement contained (Farrah, 2020). While cooperation on illegal migration and repatriation functioned properly until 2015, with regular discussions on the subject between foreign ministers of the two countries, cooperation began to deteriorate in 2015 (Niger-Algérie, 2018). Algeria began to organize convoys of non-Nigeriens to take to the Niger border and expel people from the country. In 2017 and 2018, deportations to Niger increased significantly, including an increase in the number of non-Niger citizens. An estimated 19,500 Nigeriens and 750 sub-Saharan Africans were expelled between August 2017 and December 2018, according to statistics collected by Amnesty International in Niger (2018).

According to the IOM, Algeria expelled about 40,000 people to Niger between 2014 and 2019 (Algérie: les expulsions de migrants, RFI 2019). Since 2015, the Algerian authorities have organized two types of expulsion convoys (Farrah, 2020). The first type is *convois officiels* (official convoys), which repatriate only Nigerien migrants with an irregular residence status. This process is legal, although the rights of migrants are often violated, especially at the time of arrest. Convoys transport migrants to the village of Assamaka in Niger. These repatriation operations are financed by Algeria.

The second type of excretory *convoys are convois non-officiels* (unofficial convoys). During these operations, the Algerian authorities expel migrants to Niger who are not citizens of Niger. Migrants are transported by truck to the border, specifically to a starting point called “Houfra” (The hole) or Point Zéro. Security officers point in the direction of the village of Assamaki, and migrants are required to walk about 15 km. These operations violate the principle of *non-refoulement* (Farrah, 2020) by putting migrants at risk and thus contributing to serious violations of their fundamental right to life.

In 2018, the IOM estimated that 25,000 people were deported to Niger, including 14,000 Nigeriens, but also 11,238 sub-Saharan Africans from other countries (Pascual, 2019). Even in the context of the political upheavals in Algeria in 2019, Radio France Internationale (RFI) reported the number of 11,000 migrants expelled to Niger, including 358 citizens of other countries (En Algérie, près de 11000 migrants subsahariens RFI, 2020). This practice continued during COVID-19 (Figure 1).

The Covid-19 pandemic affected the intensity of deportations of irregular migrants. On March 17, 2019, all Algerian borders were closed. The last deportation operation before the closing of the border took place on March 15, 2019, when 813 migrants were expelled. The IOM reported that people continued to reach Assamaka in the following weeks (Alarm Phone Sahara, 2020). Expulsions to northern Niger resumed at the end of June 2019, even though the Algerian-Niger border was still closed, and weather conditions were harsh. Algerian authorities carried out three deportation operations between the end of June and the beginning of August 2019, deporting at least 1400 people to Niger, including at least 360 people who were not citizens of Niger.

**Figure 1. Expulsions of migrants from Algeria to Niger between October 2019 and July 2020**

Source: Farrah, 2020.

Data from multiple sources suggest that the actual numbers of people expelled from Algeria in 2019 could be higher, potentially between 15,000 and 20,000 people. More than 2,700 migrants were expelled in April 2019 alone (Mixed Migration Centre, 2019). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, there were significant expulsions, albeit less than in 2019, and between 15 January and 17 January 2020, the Algerian authorities carried out a particularly large expulsion operation to Niger. Dozens of buses departed from the northern cities of Oran, Algiers, Annaba and Béjaïa towards Ghardaïa and then Tamanrasset before migrants were taken to Niger. According to staff data from Red Crescent in Tamanrasset, most migrants were Nigeriens (with a few Malians, some Guineans, and other West Africans) (Farrah, 2020). According to Human Rights Watch, 3400 people were expelled between September 1 and October 9, 2020 (Human Rights Watch, 2020). This suggests that expulsion operations will continue and will be the main means by which the government intends to limit the movement of migrants.

There is evidence that Algeria also expelled migrants to northern Mali. Initially, the Algerian authorities carried out repatriations of irregular migrants, mainly through the village of Tinzaouatine (Algeria) (Farrah, 2020: 30). From 2017 to mid-2018, the number of expulsions rose sharply to 3100 migrants. The location of the expulsions also changed, and many migrants were transported by truck to the border area south of Bordja Badji Mokhtar. Migrants were forced to walk 18 km through the desert to reach the danger zone of In-Khalil (Mali) (Forced to Leave, Amnesty International, 2018). Since August 2018, deportations to Mali have weakened significantly due to protests in Mali against such acts and increasing scrutiny by the international community. By 2019, displacement operations from southern Algeria to northern Mali had almost ceased. In Bordja Badji Mokhtar, the migrant centre has closed. According to local sources, the Algerian authorities did not carry out any displacement operations on the border with Mali in 2020 (Farrah, 2020).



The expulsion of migrants from Algeria to Mali and Niger has faced serious international criticism as a violation of international law, including the fundamental principle of *non-refoulement* (Farrah, 2020). Serious human rights violations occurred during arrests and expulsions from the country. Migrants in the north of the country – in Annaba, Oran, and Algiers – were particularly brutally treated during raids on migrants carried out by special services. Very often, migrants were subjected to force, documents were not properly checked, and people were often expelled from the country regardless of visa or legal status of residence. As a result of such actions by the Algerian authorities, most migrants arrested in the north did not undergo an individual identification process before being transported to the south. This led to some legal migrants being taken to Tamanrasset for no reason (Farrah, 2020). Some of the expelled people came from neighbouring countries – Niger and Mali, and the rest from Côte d’Ivoire, Guinea, Cameroon, Nigeria, Benin, Burkina Faso, Gambia, Liberia, and Senegal. Migrants and refugees from the Middle East, such as Syrians, were also captured during such raids (Algerian League of Human Rights, 2018). The government’s strategy was to empty the north of “allegedly” irregular migrants by not verifying their identity documents before reaching Tamanrasset. Algeria has been repeatedly condemned for such actions, yet Algerian authorities believe that these operations are not degrading and comply with Algerian law (RFI, 2020). Algeria’s defensive attitude on this issue of migration is inextricably linked to the dynamics of relations between Algeria and European countries. Any criticism of Algeria by the EU, the UN or an international NGO is seen by the Algerian political and military elite as interference in their internal affairs. There is widespread belief that the EU is putting pressure on Algiers to act as a “gendarme” against migrant flows to Europe (Meddi, 2019). The issue has become particularly acute since French President Emmanuel Macron proposed the creation of so-called “hotspot” centres where migrants’ demands can be treated locally (Algerian Press Service, 2018). Algeria has explicitly refused to host such centres (Algerian Press Service, 2018). And then-Foreign Minister Kassimi declared that “southern Algeria will not be the Lampedusa of the Sahara” (Alilat, 2018).

## CONCLUSIONS

Migration from the Sahel to Algeria is not a new phenomenon. The most intense migrations are between Algeria, Mali, and Niger, which is explained by the fact that in the south of Algeria live Tuaregs, who are connected by social ties with the Tuaregs of Mali and Niger. At the beginning of the twenty-first century new migration trends emerged, and the intensity of migration from sub-Saharan Africa and the Sahel region began to increase. Niger and Mali became transit points on the way to North Africa. From Mali, some of the migrants crossed the Algerian-Malian border legally, and some irregularly, alone or with the help of smugglers, and the situation was similar in Niger. For most irregular migrants, Algeria was the destination. Only a few migrants made their way to Morocco or Libya to travel on to Europe. Very often, the data are estimates or inaccurate, which do not allow for a full assessment of the scale of the problem of irregular immigration to Algeria. In addition, Algeria

did not recognize the problem for quite some time and pretended that people who crossed its borders irregularly were in transit in the country, and their main destination was Morocco or Libya. However, the available statistics indicate that Algeria is very often the destination for many immigrants. Strict border control in the Sahelian-Saharan belt to combat terrorism and organised crime is prompting some migrants to cross borders irregularly, in secret, often with the help of smugglers, significantly increasing the cost of such trips.

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## ABSTRACT

In the twenty-first century, there was a sharp increase in migration from sub-Saharan Africa to Algeria, and the Sahel zone became a hot stop for illegal human smuggling. Some immigrants go to the north of the country to continue their journey to Europe; others remain in Algeria, treating it as a destination country and do not continue their journey. Algeria has been repeatedly accused of using illegal practices against migrants, such as deportations, pushbacks, and detentions. The aim of the article is to try to assess the scale of the problem of illegal immigration in Algeria based on available statistical data and their periodisation. The main routes taken by migrants will be described, as well as the basic principles of migration policy in Algeria. The following hypotheses were put forward: 1) Algeria is mainly a transit country for migrants from sub-Saharan Africa; 2) The main irregular migration routes lead from the Sahel zone; 3) There

is unequal treatment of people in terms of violations of Algerian law (division into Algerians and others). For the purposes of the article, the following research methods were used – analysis and synthesis, comparative method, statistical method, and systemic approach.

**Keywords:** Algeria, irregular migration, expulsions, Trans-Saharan migration route

## **PROBLEM NIEREGULARNYCH MIGRACJI Z AFRYKI SUBSAHARYJSKIEJ DO ALGIERII W XXI WIEKU**

### **STRESZCZENIE**

W XXI wieku nastąpił gwałtowny wzrost migracji z Afryki Subsaharyjskiej do Algierii, a strefa Sahelu stała się, głównym miejscem nielegalnego przemytu ludzi. Niektórzy imigranci udają się na północ kraju, aby kontynuować podróż do Europy; inni pozostają w Algierii, traktując ją jako kraj docelowy i nie odbywają dalszej podróży. Algieria była wielokrotnie oskarżana o stosowanie wobec migrantów nielegalnych praktyk, takich jak deportacje, pushbacki, zatrzymania. Celem artykułu jest próba oceny skali problemu nielegalnej imigracji do Algierii na podstawie dostępnych danych statystycznych i ich periodyzacji oraz opisanie głównych sposobów przemytu ludzi oraz scharakteryzowanie podstawowych zasad polityki migracyjnej. Dlatego też postawiono następujące hipotezy: 1) Algieria jest głównie państwem tranzytowym dla migrantów z Afryki Subsaharyjskiej; 2) Główne szlaki nielegalnych migracji prowadzą ze strefy Sahelu; 3) Odnotowuje się nierówne traktowanie osób pod względem łamania algierskiego prawa (podział na Algierczyków i innych). Na potrzeby artykułu zostały wykorzystane następujące metody badawcze – analiza i synteza, metoda komparatystyczna, statystyczna oraz podejście systemowe.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Algieria, nieregularne migracje, wydalenia, transsaharyjski szlak migracyjny

