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Illegal Migration of Algerian Youths: A Haunting Problem

by [Ahmed Marwane](#)

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Brief Analysis

With eighty-two-year-old president Abdelaziz Bouteflika's announcement and subsequent retraction of the claim that he will run for a fifth term, Algerians have become increasingly concerned about the future of their country. This is especially true among the country's youths, who have translated these fears into protest movements across several Algerian cities, rejecting a fifth term for a president who suffers from serious health conditions that have prevented him from addressing the people since 2014. The parties supporting Bouteflika have generally justified another term for the ailing president by emphasizing the need to finish the "development process," an integral component of the economic plan that Bouteflika launched when he first took office in April 1999.

Yet this vision does not seem to have convinced wide swaths of Algerian society—particularly youths, many of whom are struggling with extremely difficult economic circumstances caused by the [erosion of the country's hard currency reserves](#), which have diminished from nearly \$180 billion in 2014 to less than \$90 billion today. Furthermore, the collapse of the value of local currency against foreign currency has reached unprecedented lows, leading to levels of [inflation rising](#) from an average of 2.92 percent in 2014 to 5.59 percent in 2017. Algerians also struggle with an extreme erosion of purchasing power as a result of rising prices. In a recently published [report](#) by the Algerian League for the Defense of Human Rights, the social, political, and economic policies that Algeria has relied upon have failed. According to the NGO, endemic corruption, monopolization of wealth in the hands of the top 10 percent of society, and the high rate of youth unemployment—which currently stands at 35 percent—are all driving factors for [large-scale immigration](#) from the country.

Since 2009, the Algerian government has attempted to prevent illegal emigration from its borders by introducing [punitive measures](#) against those who try to leave. Currently, any Algerian seeking to migrate to another country without the required paperwork could face [up to six months](#) in prison, while participation in human trafficking networks carries a prison sentence of up to five years. Nevertheless, Algeria's deteriorating economic situation continues to push youths to flee toward Europe on the "boats of death" in a phenomenon that Algerians call

the “*harga*.” In recent months, the illegal emigration of Algerian youths to Europe has come to the forefront once more. This phenomenon is no longer limited to desperate young men; it has also become a way for women, children, and the elderly to flee to Europe to look for a better life. And although the authorities boast of a long record of successive economic accomplishments since President Bouteflika came to power—such as creating housing, offering job opportunities, and reviving the local economy—the opposition and nonstate media argue that the *harga* phenomenon alone undermines the state’s claims about the success of its large-scale economic reforms.

In response to this mounting problem, the Interior Ministry held an [extended meeting](#) in January and invited experts to shed light on the phenomenon. Ironically, while public officials and governmental figures did attend the meeting, youths who suffer directly from this situation were not in attendance. And instead of presenting practical and tangible solutions to reduce the problem, the participants accused and tracked fifty-one social media websites that then-interior minister Noureddine Bedoui—now appointed to the position of prime minister in the recent cabinet reshuffle—claimed encourage Algerian youths to take the “death boats” to Europe. Bedoui also presented the information that 344 persons had been turned in to the authorities, of whom 24 were imprisoned, while 200 others had investigations opened in similar cases. He added that the authorities were still looking for 96 cases of missing “*harragas*” while confirming that 119 bodies had been found in the sea, with more than 4,000 total deaths recorded.

Meanwhile, the government is attempting to use mosques to raise youth awareness about the dangers of illegal migration. Minister of Religious Affairs and Awqaf Mohamed Aissa recently called upon mosques throughout Algeria to devote a portion of the Friday sermon to raising awareness about these dangers and to offer advice to youths so that [“they do not fall into this sinful temptation.”](#)

Although the 998 kilometers of the Algerian coast are patrolled by a large number of boats and military helicopters, all efforts to contain the problem have failed so far. According to the [statistics](#) published by the official website of the Navy Coast Guard, authorities thwarted 3,983 illegal migration attempts in 2018 alone—including 287 by women and 1,126 by minors. Nonetheless, the Algerian League [claimed](#) that these official statistics did not reflect the real figures, which exceed 17,500 persons annually. At least some of those migrants succeed in reaching the Spanish and Italian coast, then spreading out toward other European countries.

There is no doubt that in order to fight this phenomenon, it is necessary to introduce stringent laws targeting smugglers, who make a total of nearly [\\$7 billion per year](#). For these smugglers, who charge between \$1,000 and \$10,000 per person, human trafficking is just as profitable as drug trafficking.

However, effectively tackling illegal emigration also requires a more comprehensive approach. In light of the frustration and hopelessness generated by Algeria’s political and economic leadership, which is mostly composed of the older “revolutionary” generation from the war for independence, it is unlikely that the problem will be solved without deep economic and social reforms that will put an end to the marginalization of youths. Such reform must enable Algerian youths, who make up almost 75 percent of the general population, to serve in senior political positions, encourage them to become more involved in the political process, and increase transparency.

Likewise, real political reform must create expanded economic opportunities for Algerian youths. For example, government efforts to increase access to affordable public housing in light of Algeria’s [prolonged housing crisis](#) should be expanded to better assist single and unmarried youths, who under the current law cannot benefit from the country’s various housing programs. There must also be a review of the mechanisms for employment and for granting bank loans to youths in order to establish small enterprises and startups, along with a review of the law for government contracts. This law should require different government institutions to award a certain percentage of their projects to youth-owned enterprises. Furthermore, Algerian policymakers must introduce initiatives establishing training programs and targeting the shortage of available jobs in the country’s historically marginalized interior and isolated regions.

While it is clear that Algeria's elites are already implementing some changes in light of continuing protests, true reform will acknowledge these issues and implement policies that address youth concerns along with punishments for human traffickers. Otherwise, Algeria's *harga* phenomenon is likely to continue unabated. ❖



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