

The Root Cause of the Migrant Crisis - Putting Profits Before People

The wretched of the sea: an Algerian perspective

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The securitisation of immigration control has failed to solve the migrant crisis because it ignores the root cause: a global system that puts profits before people.

Every year, thousands of people risk their lives crossing the Mediterranean in fragile boats, fleeing war, poverty, persecution, and misery in order to reach the shores of Europe and the possibility of a better, safer life.

Sadly a significant number of the hopeful perish in their attempts—drowning when their flimsy vessels capsize or sink—or end up in humiliating camps and prisons in southern European countries, waiting to be deported and returned, their dreams shattered.

What sets this year apart in the ongoing tragedy is the sheer scale of migrant deaths. More than 1,500 migrants have drowned so far—50 times more than last year. This explosion in mortality is attributable in part to ongoing conflicts in Syria, Libya and Mali, which are driving ever greater numbers of Africans, Syrians, and even migrant workers from South Asia, to seek refuge in Europe.

At the same time, Italy has discontinued its Operation Mare Nostrum rescue program due to its cost, and despite its deep culpability in the crisis the European Union has refused to pick up the baton, preferring to let migrants drown—as a deterrent in their view to the unwanted people considering coming to fortress Europe.

The unofficial EU ‘let them drown’ policy was [illustrated](#) by a British minister at the Foreign Office, Lady Anelay, in October 2014: “We do not support planned search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean,” she said, explaining that these generated “an unintended ‘pull factor’, encouraging more migrants to attempt the dangerous sea crossing and thereby leading to more tragic and unnecessary deaths.”

These undesirable migrants come not only from poor and war-torn countries, but also from countries like the North African giant Algeria, which prides itself on being a beacon of stability in the region, and which harbours vast oil and gas reserves.

Despite its wealth and stability, it is nevertheless one of the biggest countries producing what Algerians call Harraga—‘illegal migrants’ in the Maghrebi language.

Fortress Europe

The EU’s enthusiasm for deterring migrants has been apparent for years. Since 2001,

carriers that fail to check the validity of travellers' passports and visas are subject to sanctions and heavy fines.

In September 2007, seven Tunisian fishermen were [indicted and](#) had their boats confiscated by an Italian judge for "support of illegal immigration." The fishermen had dared to save a boat transporting passengers to Lampedusa (Sicily), preventing it from sinking as stipulated by maritime rules.

Until recently, European countries externalised the protection of their borders to authoritarian regimes in North Africa. For example, according to the 2008 Berlusconi-Gaddafi agreement, Italy could send African immigrants back to Libya without screening them for asylum claims, thus violating international human rights obligations, and in return Libya received sweetheart economic deals.

In fact, Italy agreed to pay Libya a five billion dollar reparations deal over its 1911-43 colonial rule, in the form of Italian investment over 20 years. At a conference in Italy in 2010, the Libyan leader also [declared](#) that Europe would "turn black" unless it was more rigorous in turning back immigrants, which according to him would cost €5 billion a year.

Despite the chaos and mayhem caused by the NATO intervention in Libya, the country is still a key transit point for illegal migration from [\[urlhttp://www.theguardian.com/world/africa\]](http://www.theguardian.com/world/africa)Africa[/url] to Europe. A significant number of the black Africans living and working in Libya find themselves forced to escape to Europe because of the deep instability as well as the vicious racism they face.

Morocco has also zealously played its role as guardian of fortress Europe. In 2005, [twenty](#) people from sub-Saharan Africa died trying to cross the Spanish-Moroccan border fences at Ceuta and Melilla—some by falling, others by asphyxiation, and still others shot by the Moroccan army. In 2008, 30 people (including four children) drowned off the shore of Al-Hoceima (northeast of Morocco), after law enforcement authorities punched holes in their inflatable boat.

This [delocalization](#) and militarisation of immigration control is perhaps best epitomised by the European Union agency Frontex, created in 2005 to intercept migrants between African shores and the Canary Islands, as well as in the Sicily canal, regardless of the violation of fundamental rights such as the right to asylum.

Frontex also participates in the return of these individuals from EU member states to third countries in what they call 'Joint Return Operations,' which have increased considerably in number (2,152 persons returned in 2013, compared with 428 in 2007).

The agency's budget is steadily increasing: from €6.3 million in 2005, it rose to nearly €42 million in 2007 and had topped €97 million by 2014. Funds mainly come from the European commission and Schengen associated countries.

Despite its growing budget and military and surveillance equipment, everything indicates that deaths in the sea have not diminished. If anything, these obstacles push the clandestine migrants to take even more dangerous routes.

Frontex is now being put forward as the replacement for the Operation Mare Nostrum rescue program, with European leaders declaring that they need to crack down on smugglers,

reinforcing the securitisation and the militarisation narrative rather than looking at the structural causes of the crisis.

Algeria and its Harraga

Algeria is also playing along with its European neighbours in the ‘war on migrants.’ In 2009, it made ‘illegal immigration’ a punishable offence. The law stipulates that any Algerian leaving the national territory in an illegal way will get a jail sentence of two to six months.

In 2014, 7,842 illegal border-crossings were detected in the western Mediterranean region (areas on the southern Spanish coast and the land borders of Ceuta and Melilla). Most of the migrants were from western Africa (Cameroon and Mali in particular), but Algerians and Moroccans were among the [top ten](#) nationalities, especially at the sea border. Until 2013, Algerians were topping the list through this maritime route (it was second in 2014, after Cameroon).

According to the 2015 Frontex [annual risk analysis](#), Algeria was ranked amongst the top ten nationalities in detected clandestine entries at border crossing points (BCPs) in 2014. Algeria was also ranked eighth in terms of people exceeding their legal period of stay within the EU.

More strikingly, from November 2010 to March 2011, 11 percent of the 11,808 irregular migrants intercepted in Greece by Frontex were identified as Algerians, behind Pakistanis (16 percent) and Afghans (23 percent). These alarming statistics were even more surprising because the number of Algerian migrants exceeded those of Morocco by a factor of two and were six times greater than Tunisians, despite the unrest in these two countries after [the Arab uprisings](#).

The Algerian Harraga follow numerous maritime routes from Algeria to reach Europe: one from the coasts of Oran (west Algeria) towards continental Spain, one (less developed) links the shores of Dellys (100km east of Algiers) to the island of Palma de Majorca, and another connects the eastern coasts (Annaba and Skikda) towards the Italian island of Sardinia. They also use other routes through Tunisia, Libya and Turkey.

Harga and Hogra

All social classes are touched by the phenomenon of illegal migration: working class people, the unemployed, and university graduates, even doctors and engineers. Algerians leaving the country illegally are mainly unemployed or under-unemployed youth, men as well as women.

The question of why Algeria produces so many young migrants—more so than places with even bleaker economic prospects—is not easy to answer. But I will attempt here to explore it, highlighting the nature of the political system in Algeria as well as some of the socio-economic developments in the last three decades.

Harga (the phenomenon of migrating illegally) literally refers to the verb ‘to burn’ in Arabic. Figuratively it means to overcome a restriction, like going through a red light or jumping the queue or, in this case, crossing borders and seas.

In a way harga represents the pursuit of a future that had come to a [dead end](#) in the home country. It is a means to overcome the restrictions on freedom of circulation imposed by the EU to escape the precariousness of unemployment and the hegemony of clientelist and

oligarchic networks associated with the ruling regime in Algeria—in a nutshell everything that makes life unsustainable. The aim is to realise a life project that does not seem possible to achieve in the home country given present conditions.

One inhabitant of a marginalised and working class town in eastern Algeria, Sidi Salem in Annaba, reflecting upon his precarious situation and desperate life, said to his Harrag brother: “I lost the keys to my future in a cemetery in Algeria called Sidi Salem.”

Illegal immigration from Algeria is also the logical consequence of more than three decades of economic restructuring and trade liberalisation, which has decimated the productive and job-generating economy, leading to massive unemployment and the perpetuation of a rent-seeking mentality relying on oil and gas exports while importing everything else.

To understand *harga* it is necessary to couple it with the concept of *hogra* in Algeria. *Hogra* means contempt, disdain, exclusion and also describes an attitude that condones and propagates violence against the many, the *laissés pour compte* (the forgotten and marginalised masses).

Due to the restrictions on freedom of expression and association and also because of the lack of spaces for entertainment, art and creativity, young people feel suffocated, humiliated, without dignity—foreigners in their own country. The only horizon they can see is the one beyond the sea.

‘Civil society’ in Algeria is weak and fragmented, partly due to the traumatic civil war of the 1990s but also because of the ongoing stifling of political expression. Algerians face huge difficulties in setting up organisations or even getting authorisations for meetings and conferences if they are perceived to be critical or political in nature. Moreover, cultural production is still under the oppressive patronage of the official authorities, which always try to co-opt and kill creativity in the bud to avoid any form of subversion.

In that respect, it is an act denouncing authoritarianism, a culture of contestation coming from a social group that feels marginalised and neglected. The powerful message of the youth to the ruling classes in Algeria is “Roma wella antoma”, meaning “Rome rather than you”. They also say, “We’d rather die eaten by fish than eaten by worms.”

Instead of reindustrialising the country and investing in Algerian youths who risk their lives to reach the northern shores of the Mediterranean in order to escape the despair of being marginalised, the Algerian authorities offered financial support to the IMF, the neo-colonial tool of plunder that [crippled the economy](#) in the first place.

In fact Algeria submitted to the neoliberal prescriptions of the IMF in the form of two structural adjustment programs (1992-1993, 1994-1999). While the brutal civil war was raging, these programs were pursued with all the disastrous consequences they had on the population: huge job losses, a decrease in purchasing power, cuts to public spending, increasing precariousness of salaried workers, opening up of foreign trade, and the privatisation of public companies. This is indeed shock doctrine and disaster capitalism at work.

Despite all the risks taken by clandestine migrants, the appeal of Europe is preserved by the Edenesque aura around it that is maintained by those who reach the other shore. Despite the difficulties, misery, exploitation, and racism Algerians are subjected to in the EU, it is

anathema for them to say: we failed. How can they not succeed after all they've done to leave their beloved country, a country that has forsaken them and how can they be a disappointment to their dear families?

Harga is only a reflection of [what has become of Algeria](#) and other African countries five decades after independence, with anti-national ruling elites only content with enriching themselves, and satisfying foreign capital.

To borrow the eloquent words of the late Latin American writer Eduardo Galeano, it seems that the ruling elite has no interest whatsoever in determining whether patriotism might not prove more profitable than treason, and whether begging is really the only formula for international politics. Sovereignty is being mortgaged by the Algerian regime, which has abdicated to its foreign masters.

People in Algeria and elsewhere in the global south immigrate because their countries' economies are failing them, due to the ongoing capitalist exploitation and western imperialist domination that go hand in hand with repressive and corrupt regimes.

The immigration tragedy that we saw last April in the Mediterranean will go on as long as the entrenched authoritarian structures of power and oppression are still in place, as long as the looting of our natural resources is underway by means of unfair trade deals and outside military interventions, as long as the profoundly unjust system we live in continues subjugating our countries and maintaining their subaltern positions as exporters of cheap natural resources and markets for rich countries' industrialised products.

Tragedies of this scale will continue unless we do away with the domination and exclusion of the wretched of the earth and the damned of the sea. It is necessary and urgent to engage in the struggle for global justice against a system that puts profits before humans.

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