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*Algeria and the Risks of Illegal Migration: Hogra (Contempt),
Hirak (Protest Movement) and Harraga (Illegal Migrants)*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since early 2019, popular protests in Algeria, labelled Arab Spring 2.0 (together with other protests in Sudan, Iraq, and Lebanon), caused apprehension in Europe regarding possible migration waves from this country. An analogy was drawn with Arab Spring 1.0 which was a significant factor in the migration crisis of 2015, leading many Arab young people towards Europe. Geopolitically, it is also noteworthy that Algeria went through a protracted civil war (1991–2002), causing hundreds of thousands of victims. The country struggles with an unmanageable demographic weight (Algeria's fertility rate at 2.946 births per woman, is one of the highest in the MENA region and the world. It slowly tends to decrease, with some bifurcations. It is surprising that it went from 2.38 in 2005 to 3.05 in 2019 as a baby boom is making things even more complicated in Algeria) and an ineffective development policy (the current estimated population of Algeria is 42,228,429).¹ Furthermore, Algeria has an important diaspora in Europe and exports thousands of illegal migrants each year. Algeria is also a transit country for thousands of illegal migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa. All these variables raise the question of the risks of the outbreak of a mass wave of migration in case the political crisis remains unresolved.

¹ WORLD BANK 2020.

ABSTRACT

Algeria is both an important transit country for Sub-Saharan African migrants en route to Europe (Spain) and a sending country. Following some months of unsuccessful protest waves, and as a result of the current economic and pandemic crisis, Algerian youngsters face two options: either to carry on protesting or migrate, with the latter becoming increasingly attractive. By the end of May 2020, Spanish authorities apprehended 6,773 illegal migrants, of whom some 1,700 were Algerians, representing a massive hike as compared to last year's corresponding data. Based on the political, economic and social developments in the country, two scenarios can be identified regarding future migration from Algeria (both foreseeing a substantial increase). (1) If the government strengthens its control over the society without applying manifest repression, hopeless young Algerians will become more and more likely to migrate. (2) Alternatively, if the regime fails in its efforts, and keeps up the violent repression, illegal migration to Europe is expected to accelerate dramatically.

Our work on this paper started before the coronavirus pandemic. Two recent events justify a return to Algeria in order to re-examine the risks of illegal migration. On the one side, the economic and health effects of the pandemic on Algeria aborted the protest movement; they could further intensify the frustration among young Algerians, pushing them towards illegal migration. The attempt to revive protests of May 2020 did not achieve much success; the regime's continuous repressive policy does not give analysts any reason to be optimistic. On the other side, the recent data published about Algerian migrants being the first nationality in terms of the number of arrivals of illegal migrants in Spain (in the first quarter of 2020) is alarming.² While a risk of the possible implosion and collapse of the Algerian regime is unrealistic, especially now that the oil prices are on the rise again, and that the army barely concedes any economic or political resource since independence, there is a real risk in terms of social inertia. Social congestion increases the risks of illegal migration since the country needs at least 300,000 jobs each year.³ In 2017, Ahmed Benbitour (Prime minister of Algeria between 1999 and 2000) called the Algerian state a fluidised state (*dawla mumayya'a*) characterised by inertia, corruption, incompetence and ineffective bureaucracy.⁴ This did not change much with the 2019-2020 crisis. Seen from Europe, and especially from France, which has the largest Algerian diaspora, the political crisis should be solved as soon as possible.⁵

In the following, we provide a brief analysis of the current political context in Algeria. Then, we present data on migration concerning Algeria and discuss the implications of the protests with regards to migration to Europe. Finally, we assess the risks of implosion and spillover effects on Europe in the aftermath of coronavirus. The main aim of this paper is to investigate the risk factors of illegal migration from Algeria, and whether a threat similar to that of the migration crisis of 2015 is possible.

2. UNFULFILLED: PROTESTS AND THE POLITICAL CRISIS IN ALGERIA

The Algerian regime runs society and politics through a rentier and clientelist economy based in 95% on the revenues of hydrocarbons exports. Since the fall in oil prices in 2014-2015 (from 114 to 60 dollars a barrel), and the decrease of the revenues of these exports, politics and society in Algeria felt deeply the economic crisis.⁶ It is estimated that “from \$ 200 billion in 2013, Algeria's foreign exchange reserves fell to \$ 72.6 billion at the end of April 2019. More

² TSA 2020.

³MARTÍN 2003, p 38.

⁴ BENBITOUR 2017.

⁵ See the diplomatic crisis between Algeria and France which started on 26 May 2020 when France broadcasted two documentaries on the Hirak.

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⁶ ZERROUKY 2019.

than \$ 130 billion was thus consumed to fill the imbalances in the balance trade and deficits”.⁷ Losing more than half of its hydrocarbons revenues, the regime could not maintain the construction and public employment sectors which offered jobs to hundreds of thousands of people. As a consequence, by the end of April 2019 “3,650 construction companies ceased their activities, causing the destruction of 275,000 jobs and another 175,000 jobs could disappear in the coming months.”⁸

Weakened by the economic crisis, the current political crisis was triggered by a friction within the Algerian regime, between two branches, one represented by Abdelaziz Bouteflika (82 years old) and his clan and allies, and the other led by Ahmed Gaid Salah, Chief of Staff of the People's National Army, supported by key generals of the military. Abdelaziz Bouteflika's decision, in early February 2019, to apply for a fifth presidential term was contested by his opponents. On 16 February 2019, massive protests were used by the army to eliminate Abdelaziz Bouteflika's circle. However, the protests gained in popularity, mirroring discontent with social policies, a deep economic crisis, and demands for change; this made the task of the military regime even harder in finding a political alternative and solution for the crisis. The army organised formal presidential elections (held on 12 December 2019) which were won by Abdelmadjid Tebboune to by-pass popular protests and gain time. However, protests continue to date and the risks of massive repression or explosion are still high in Algeria.

President Tebboune came to power with three obstacles: first, he was rejected by the protesters who did not recognise his legitimacy (officially 39.88% voted in the elections while independent sources discredited this voter turnout). Second, his affiliation with Bouteflika's regime sheds doubt on him as he was a minister and a prime minister in Bouteflika's administration for long years. Third, Tebboune's main supporter in the army, Ahmed Gaid Salah died 11 days after the elections (on 23 December 2019).⁹ Thus, as a contested president, without popular legitimacy and relying only on the support of the army, Tebboune would not be able to address the political and economic challenges Algeria faces as quickly as expected.

These rushed and illegitimate elections undermined even more the trust between the youth and the Algerian regime, and amidst inertia, they could encourage some young people to radicalise. We already saw a similar scenario leading to civil war in the early 1990s when contempt, *Hogra*, was the key slogan that explained how the population felt the social rupture with the state, which systematically, arbitrarily and contemptuously violated their rights and abused

⁷ ZERROUKY 2019.

⁸ ZERROUKY 2019.

⁹ SASAPOST 2019.

power.¹⁰ These social demands were rejected by the state and exploited by the Islamic Salvation Front who defied the state and won the 1991 Algerian legislative election. The army cancelled the elections pushing Islamists to engage in terrorism and the country into civil war.

The new head of the army Saïd Chengriha was appointed by Tebboune on 23 December 2019. Chengriha is the commander of ground forces since 2018 and had a discrete career in the ground forces of the army.¹¹ This quick transition shows the arrangement between the army and president Tebboune to maintain control of the country. As such, security and reproduction of the regime's policies remain the priorities in the current configuration, and it is hardly imaginable that the regime would proceed to real reforms. This stands in contrast to expectations of Algerian youth of development, job opportunities, end of corruption and emergence of a competent and non-oppressive government, and as put by *the New Statesman* "across the Middle East, they are done with false prophets".¹²

3. MIGRATION FACTS

Before the 2019 crisis, it was estimated that some 100,000 Sub-Saharan African illegal migrants live on the Algerian territory (of whom 25,000 live in Tamanrasset, the far south of the country);¹³ statistics of the Algerian government assert that arrivals across the southern border have reached an average of 500 people a day, who then spread across all Algerian soil.¹⁴ Estimates of the International Organisation for Migration claimed that "between 50,000 and 75,000 migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa live on the Algerian territory in an irregular situation, of which 42% do not intend to migrate to Europe, but in fact want to live, work and settle in Algeria".¹⁵

Algerian authorities said in November 2018 that they expelled 37,000 illegal migrants (from Niger) since 2014.¹⁶ Additionally, around 30,000 Algerian illegal migrants are on the move to Europe every year.¹⁷ Unemployment among the young Algerians reached 35% before the protests which exacerbated the phenomenon of *Harraga* (illegal migrants in the Algerian dialect) especially through boats, with numerous deaths and thousands arrested by the Algerian

¹⁰ ROBERTS 2002, p 1.

¹¹ ELKHABAR 2019.

¹² JENKINS 2019.

¹³ ALILAT 2018.

¹⁴ QWIDAR 2019.

¹⁵ QWIDAR 2019.

¹⁶ LAHYANI 2018.

¹⁷ DEMOCRATIC ARABIC CENTER 2019.

LADDH 2019

coast guards.¹⁸ Other recent indicators show how deep the crisis is in Algeria: 342,857 Algerians applied for the lotto green card in 2018 (2,462 obtained it).¹⁹

4. MIGRATION RISKS

A Gallup study revealed that about “31 percent of adult Algerians (44 percent of young people, the highest proportion in North Africa) want to leave their country and migrate to another country in search of better opportunities to live”.²⁰ Likewise, the 2019 Arab Barometer survey asserted that “Europe is the most commonly cited destination for potential migrants, especially among those living in the Maghreb countries of Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia”.²¹ Due to historical (colonisation) and geographical reasons (proximity), immigration from North African countries mainly targets Europe. The Arab Barometer found that 42 percent of people in Algeria would consider migrating illegally.²²

The impact of the Algerian crisis on migration trends was discussed early in the crisis. Several media, both Arab and Western including the PanArab channel Aljazeera, reported that illegal migration from Algerian shores completely stopped.²³ Even the French channel France24 (the voice of French interests) said that since the protests “there is zero illegal immigration from Algeria”.²⁴ This, however, was but wishful thinking, and probably a side effect of the “revolutionary euphoria” of some media, especially international ones, motivated by interests in the fall of the regime in Algeria. Others could have been persuaded by the assumption that illegal migration could diminish if young Algerians are taking action to change their realities (which is true for qualified middleclass youth only). We will return to this point during the discussion in *Section 4*. Suffices here to say that illegal migration is a daily business in Algeria for decades: data provided by the coast guard published in Algerian newspapers regularly during the months of February-December 2019 showed attempts of illegal migration by boat people, some of whom died, others arrested and of course some succeeded. An example is the Algerian newspaper *al-Khabar* which reported the arrest of 52 illegal migrants, Algerians and foreigners in Oran in the first week of May 2019 at the *zenith* of the *Hirak's* (meaning movement in Arabic)

¹⁸ MARWANI 2019.

¹⁹ DJAZAIRESS 2019a. A

DJAZAIRESS 2019b

²⁰ ALJAZAIR1 2019.

²¹ ARAB BAROMETER 2019, p 2.

²² ARAB BAROMETER 2019, p 10.

²³ HARRAZ 2019.

²⁴ FRANCE24 2019.

popularity.²⁵ This tendency continued during the subsequent months until the end of December 2019 as *al-Khabar* reported regularly the arrest by the Algerian Coast guard of illegal immigrants and smugglers of different nationalities.

Furthermore, the Algerian Minister of Interior Noureddine Badawi announced that his security services “were able to identify 51 Algerian Facebook pages which incite youth to illegal immigration, and arrest some of these pages’ administrators, assuring that justice will not tolerate them and his services fight these groups”.²⁶ Dozens of other Algerian Facebook pages are still operating; some of them are old, others new which serve for smugglers as channels to offer their services. Some adventure-seeking migrants are driven merely by illusions of success in Europe.

There is more to Algeria’s vulnerability to illegal migration. Spanish authorities announced in early May 2019 the dismantlement of a network of eleven Bangladeshi smugglers which transported South Asian citizens to Spain (who paid between 14,000 and 20,000 euros for the trip) via Algeria. The organisation benefited from visas for Algeria, delivered with complicity by members of the Algerian consular representation in India for about 350 illegal migrants from Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, India and Pakistan.²⁷

Still, considering that Algerian illegal migrants prefer France as a final destination, it is the French authorities which are mostly anxious about the risks of an Algerian mass migration wave. Thus, Jean-Yves Le Drian, French Minister of Foreign Affairs declared that “we take all our responsibilities in this region, essential for our own security. As for the migration flows from Algeria, they are stable and controlled, and the French government attaches special importance to this matter”.²⁸ France’s position is rather delicate as it wishes for too many things at once: it hopes to avoid a mass migration crisis of Algerians to France while it supports both the army and a gradual and inclusive political process, which could solve the political crisis in Algeria. The Algerian army believes it does not need any opening towards the *Hirak*, and also believes it controls illegal immigration.

In other words, low-intensity illegal migration from Algeria of approximately 30,000 illegal migrants a year, which is the usual number, is tolerable from a French point of view, and could clear up the responsibility of the Algerian army in illegal migration. However, if the conditions worsen, which is likely to happen if the army does not open political and economic opportunities for the Algerian youth, then one should expect hundreds of thousands of people to leave

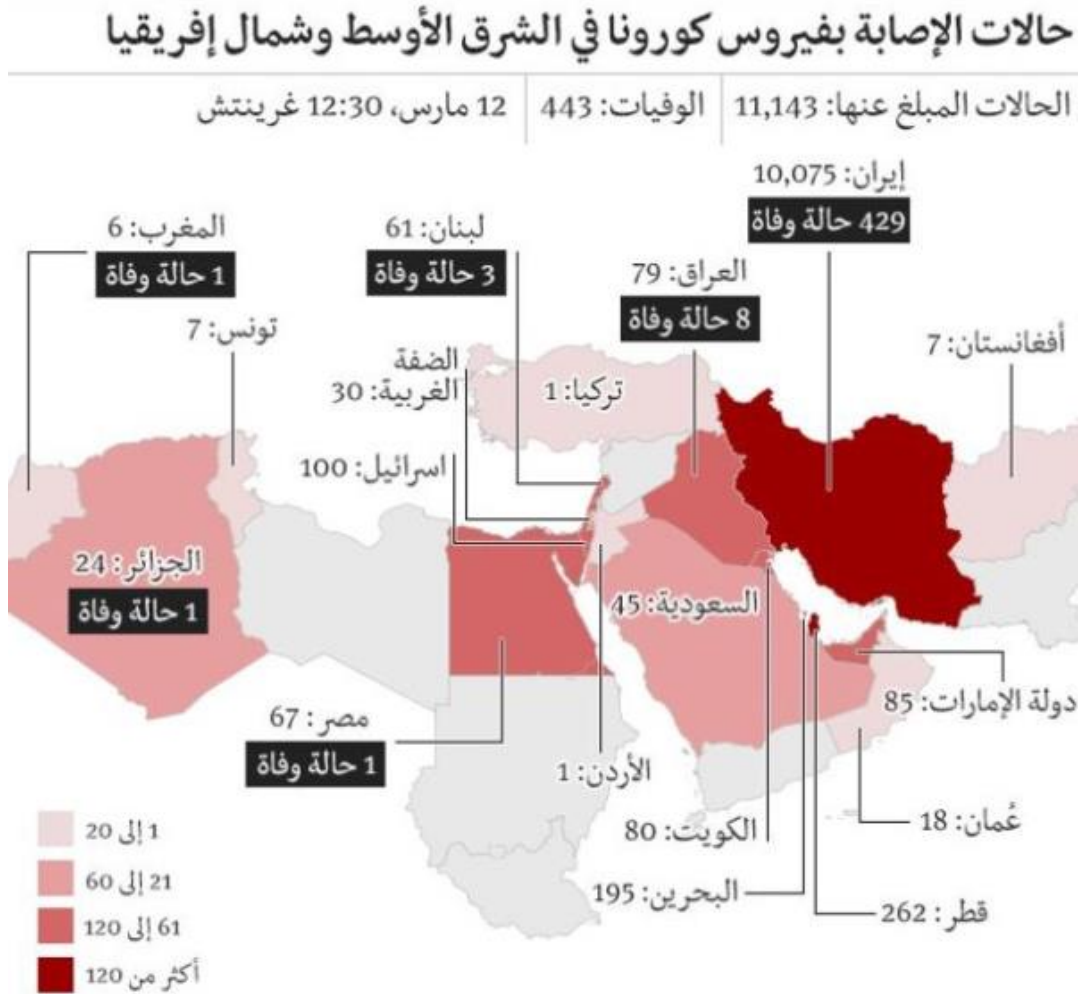
²⁵ ELKHABAR 2019.

²⁶ ALMASDARE 2019.

²⁷ EL PAIS 2019.

²⁸ VOAAFRIQUE 2019.

Algeria for France and other European countries. As we will see in the following section, the risks increase even further in the aftermath of the coronavirus.



1. FIGURE This infographic as of 12 March 2020 shows that Algeria was hit early by Covid-19 compared to Tunisia and Morocco²⁹

The Algerian government showed the poorest management of the coronavirus crisis among Maghreb countries (and one of the worst in the MENA region): as of 16 June 2020, 11,031 people were infected and 777 people died of the coronavirus in Algeria according to official statistics. The number of deaths was way beyond the numbers registered in Morocco (212 deaths) and Tunisia (49 deaths).³⁰ Even more, Covid-19 had a shocking impact on the Algerian economy: the Algerian government announced it will lose around 17 billion dollars of oil and gas revenues during 2020 (expecting only 20.6 billion dollars instead of 37.4 billion,

²⁹ Source: <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/science-and-tech-51852030>

³⁰ WORLDOMETERS 2020.

a loss of some 45% of oil and gas revenues) in addition to losing 7 billion dollars of currency reserves during the pandemic.³¹

Amidst a general crisis in the country, at least since February 2019, these economic and health vulnerabilities added desperation to frustration for many young people in Algeria. Those young people on social media who were hesitating about the Algerian dilemma (revolution or illegal migration) now seem to have made their minds for illegal migration; this can be seen in the daily information published in May 2020 by Algerian and Spanish media. Thus, in mid-May 2020, the Spanish Civil Guard arrested 11 people in Almería (Spain) for illegal trafficking in persons from Algeria to Spain. The dismantled criminal organisation moved 126 migrants to Spain in two days. For this, they used boats that lack the minimum-security measures, with an excessive number of people on board. Among the migrants there were minors, pregnant women and a disabled person.³² By the end of May 2020, Spanish authorities announced that “about 1,700 Algerians have arrived in Spain since the beginning of 2020 (in the total 6,773 illegal immigrants landed in Spain) compared to only about 100 in the same period last year. These migrants leave from northern Algeria on boats that can travel 200 km separating the two countries, within only three or four hours, as they pass under the radar of the border guards.”³³

Thus, the same crisis which led to the *Hirak* in Algeria (authoritarian politics, failed social policies and absence of resource sharing) went deeper with the decreasing of the government’s economic capacities. Consequently, the risk of illegal mass migration increases. Politically speaking, illegal mass migration could be a good opportunity for the government to end the *Hirak*.

The numbers speak for themselves. However, it is also of interest to understand the culture and attitudes of illegal migration. We were familiar with the justifications given for illegal migration before the pandemic (unemployment, better life conditions in Europe etc.), but there is something “new” about this culture of migration. Some Algerians now, young medical staff, celebrities or common people, justify their decision to migrate by “the curse of a land hit by coronavirus”.³⁴ By this attitude, albeit greatly exaggerated, they express their disappointment with how the government managed the coronavirus, in terms of health and economic consequences.

³¹ SKYNEWSARABIA 2020.

³² INTERIOR 2020.

³³ INFOMIGRANTS 2020.

³⁴ Source: <https://twitter.com/najwareghiss/status/1259200034295480320>

That said, thought of in rational terms, almost the whole world was under lockdown, and every country had to take restrictive measures, suffered economic hardship, a higher number of deaths, and so many other difficulties; Algeria endured little in terms of health crisis, and is one of the richest countries in terms of oil and gas energy. All numbers show that France, for example, was hit harder by the pandemic. Influenced by economy and political science, we tend to think that illegal migration stems from a rational choice, based on quantifying the gains and the losses in the project of illegal migration. However, there is little rationality in taking the risk of dying in the sea because one believes the “Unknown” (Europe) to be better than the “Hard Known” (Algeria). Digging into the culture of migration (as embedded in the local settings of Algerian society) behind such decision is beyond the scope of this paper.

5. SPILLOVER EFFECTS: EUROPE AND THE ALGERIAN CRISIS

In addition to illegal migration, Algeria faces another security challenge, that of the Libyan crisis. Although the risk that the war in Libya could extend to Algeria is minimal, the involvement of Turkey (and the possibility that Islamist groups in Libya would gain more power) could destabilise Algeria. Currently, radical Islamist Algerian groups operate in the south, and in case they decide to operate in the east or the north of Algeria, this could be a major security challenge.

Europe, and especially France, has another reason to worry about the risks of the Algerian crisis, namely the presence of a massive Algerian diaspora on its territory. In his book *Western Muslims and Conflicts Abroad: Conflict Spillovers to Diasporas*, Juris Pupcenoks examines the leaking out of the Algerian civil war (1991–2002) to France as a reactive conflict spillover, and describes it as follows:

During the early 1990s, the Algerian Civil War resonated in France. The War erupted following a 1992 decision to rescind Algerian national election results, results which would have given the Islamic Salvation Front the majority of seats in parliament. After intense fighting and numerous deaths, the Algerian government managed to defeat Islamist forces by the late 1990s. At the beginning of the fighting, concerns were expressed about a potential spillover in Western-European Algerian communities, particularly in France. Fears were further increased because France had provided economic and military assistance to the Algerian regime [...] in 1995, the Armed Islamic Group launched a bombing campaign in France and French police eventually arrested or killed the guerrillas who disrupted French cities using bomb threats.³⁵

³⁵ PUPCENOKS 2015, p 34.

This conflict spillover has been a dissuasive and persuasive political instrument of putting pressure on French political decision-making. Thus, terrorism dissuaded France from staying neutral or supporting winning Islamists in the Algerian elections amidst risks of social conflict with a sizeable Algerian community. It also persuades the French to sustain the Algerian regime if it wishes to maintain the support of the Algerian community in the French elections.

The Algerian immigrants in Europe (some of which are present in Europe for four generations) mobilised for the *Hirak*, in the major European cities, overwhelmingly. The question remains why these communities are for a time-consuming, prolonged integration within the host countries, while the other day identify themselves completely with their home country. They turned into militants, mobilising in social media and in the streets to support protesters in Algeria.

Spillover effects of a conflict in Algeria, through political and social channels of global connectivity could impact the lives and actions of migrant communities and their host societies. The political allegiance of Algerians living as citizens or residents in France put aside, these acts of Algerian patriotism in France could cause tension as in Marseille, where the Algerian national anthem sounded continuously in a supermarket,³⁶ strengthening all the suspicion of critics of immigration about whether immigrants are able to identify politically with France at all.

This implies that France has to take into account the variable of the Algerian diaspora on its territory in any French policy in Algeria (official data in France published in 2012 estimated that “Algerian immigrants and their children (at least one parent born in Algeria) were 1,713,000”).³⁷ As France is the number one player in Algeria, where strategic and economic French interests lie, it cannot afford sacrificing stability in Algeria which would push hundreds of thousands of Algerians towards France. Although France wants to solve the Algerian crisis quickly, it is compelled to use all prudence to support the Algerian army in avoiding an outbreak.

France, while being one of the main political assets of the Algerian regime and its first economic partner, as noted by *Le Monde*, has “a close and tumultuous relationship at the same time with its former colony, remaining very cautious, even silent, on the Algerian turbulence”.³⁸ Caution is perhaps due to the fear from too much involvement which would have consequences on the Algerian diaspora in France, but also justified by the possibility that the Algerian regime could turn to other political partners for support such as Russia. President

³⁶ OUMMA 2019.

³⁷ INSEE 2012.

³⁸ LE MONDE 2019.

Macron finally reacted after the presidential elections in Algeria in December 2019 and urged, in a prudent tone, the regime to make concessions to the protest movement saying: “I have taken note of the official announcement that Mr. Tebboune has won the Algerian presidential election in the first round. I simply hope that these aspirations expressed by the Algerian people will be answered in the dialogue that must open between the authorities and the population.”³⁹ Thus, Macron wishes to hold the stick from the middle, while aspiring for minor and gradual change that could maintain French interests without creating turbulence within the Algerian diaspora in France.

6. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper was to examine whether the political crisis in Algeria could (1) lead or not to mass illegal migration from Algeria to Europe; (2) intensify or not the economic effects of coronavirus on illegal migration. We investigated data about migration and political actors in Algeria, before and after the coronavirus crisis, and contextualised it within the general political and economic crisis in Algeria since 2019.

Three main elements emerged as significant findings in this paper. First, the Algerian youth continues to protest and demand deep social and political reforms, that, if unfulfilled, could radicalise part of the protesters. Second, the Algerian regime insists on the reproduction of its policies and elites, attempting to gain time through unrepresentative elections and measures of procrastination, relying on the old rentier and clientelist economy, ineffective and corrupt, in a state called by Ahmed Benbitour a fluidised state. Third, Algerian and Sub-Saharan African illegal migrants persist to migrate illegally to Europe from the Algerian coasts, and Algerians have surpassed all other nationalities in the number of arrivals to Spain in 2020 to date.

In light of these variables, there are two probable scenarios for Algeria’s migration risks. On the one hand, the Algerian regime could succeed in securitising and controlling society and politics, and dissipate the protest movement without recourse to repression. Illegal migration is expected to increase in this scenario as many young people would lose hope in their country and migrate. On the other hand, the regime could fail and proceed to repress the protest movement violently. In this second scenario, illegal migration is expected to increase dramatically and could take the form of a mass wave.

³⁹ LE MONDE 2019.

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