Aspects of crisis migration in Algeria

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We face a new paradigm on migration issues after the so-called Arab Spring, the political, economic and societal crisis in the countries of the Middle East and North Africa. In response, security resolutions adopted by the EU to protect its borders address the countries of the northern shores of the Mediterranean, reflecting a focus on migration movements to the north, but the impacts are also felt in the countries of the southern shore, such as Algeria.

Since the Arab Spring, Algeria has become a haven for mixed migration flows from Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Syria. In these flows, there are also refugees in search of a third country. Many analysts see in these flows only a transit route to the countries of Europe. This observation is only partially correct, because there are many who find shelter in Algeria. In addition to the arrival of foreigners, we have also observed a movement of Algerian migrants, long established in those countries in crisis, to return to Algeria. These returnees, fleeing insecurity in their new home countries, may have lost all social ties within Algeria. Other Algerian migrants are known to be ‘trapped’ in some of these countries, regardless of their status there, regular or irregular.

Historically, Algeria has been known as a host country for refugees. Following every crisis due to natural disaster in the Sahara Desert, sub-Saharan Africans regularly move into southern Algeria. Since 1975, Algeria has been hosting Sahrawi refugees on its territory, and over many years there have been movements of refugees from the crises in Ivory Coast, the Democratic Republic of Congo and, most recently, Mali. There are at least 260,000 foreigners living in Algeria (0.7% of its population in 2012), more than 75% of whom are refugees, asylum seekers and other displaced people including migrants without status.

The new context exposes migrants to difficult social conditions. Algeria, having previously adopted strict regulations regarding migration, has recently been more flexible in order to meet the basic requirements of people displaced by the political crises in North Africa. Nevertheless, Algerian territory is becoming a fortress. Despite the flexible rules of admission of foreign populations, there were 2,766 people expelled from Algeria by the border security forces in 2012. The authorities need to control 1,200 km...
Forcing migration of globalised citizens

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Today’s constant flows of persons and information across frontiers mean that, when an emergency occurs, the international community feels it has to get involved not only out of solidarity but because its citizens could be in danger. Yet while the idea that states must take care of their citizens appears an obvious imperative, could their actions cause more harm than good? Crises — which do not distinguish between nationalities — tend to trigger special relief actions by foreign states for their nationals overseas; however, it is unclear whether foreign states are capable of delivering what they intend or are requested to do, and being a migrant is not necessarily a vulnerability factor, nor are migrants usually the most endangered population.

In March 2011 Sendai City in Japan faced a triple crisis — earthquake, tsunami and radiation threat. As it is not a major tourist centre or international commercial hub, there are few diplomatic missions in the city. At least nineteen consular teams visited from Tokyo, apparently to assess the needs of their compatriots; however, not only is it unclear whether foreign states are capable of delivering what they intend or are requested to do but also being a migrant is not necessarily a vulnerability factor, nor are migrants usually the most endangered population.

The first official evacuation was followed by a wave of displacement, both official and unofficial, of individuals and groups, movements which were covered — significantly — by local and international media. Among the unintended consequences of official evacuations was panic flight when the consular teams offered the opportunity to leave the city. Secondly, there were reported cases in which people were coerced to leave because their government was telling them — as ‘foreigners’ — to do so; ‘foreigner’ is too broad a category to merit undifferentiated action.

Finally, evacuations by consular teams distort in many different ways the established protocols of humanitarian action. Foreign operations do not help the most endangered people, not even among their compatriots, and put pressure on scarce resources. The emphasis on foreign nationals during crises is mostly oriented towards dealing with public opinion and logistics back in their home countries, not about the actual security of persons at the area in trouble.

There are no simple solutions to this particular form of voluntarily forced migration. One important root of the problem can be found in the over-stretched idea of the state’s responsibility and how little attention the idea of ‘belonging’ has received, that is, the possibility of considering oneself a member of the local polity, if not the national one, entitled to protection in times of crisis like anybody else. In the context of a globalised world, we should acknowledge that the scale of human mobility is making conventional responses to crises sometimes inappropriate.

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