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# "My Visa Application Was Denied, I decided to Go Anyway" Interpreting, Experiencing, and Contesting Visa Policies and the (Im)mobility Regime in Algeria

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# “My Visa Application Was Denied, I Decided to Go Anyway”

## Interpreting, Experiencing, and Contesting Visa Policies and the (Im)mobility Regime in Algeria

Farida Souiah

■ **ABSTRACT:** This article explores the ways people targeted by restrictive migration and mobility policies in Algeria experience, interpret, and contest them. It focuses on the perspective of *harragas*, literally “those who burn” the borders. In the Maghrebi dialects, this is notably how people leaving without documentation are referred to. It reflects the fact that they do not respect the mandatory steps for legal departure. Also, they figuratively “burn” their papers to avoid deportation once in Europe. Drawing on qualitative fieldwork, this article outlines the complex and ambiguous attitudes toward the legal mobility regime of those it aims to exclude: compliance, deception, delegitimization, and defiance. It contributes to debates about human experiences of borders and inequality in mobility regimes. It helps deepen knowledge on why restrictive migration and mobility policies fail and are often counterproductive, encouraging the undocumented migration they were meant to deter.

■ **KEYWORDS:** Algeria, *harragas*, mobility regime, undocumented migrants, visa policy

### Introduction

In January 2018, as I was waiting in line with visa applicants in front of TLS Contact, a private company in charge of collecting visa applications for the French Consulate in Oran, Algeria, I met Karim and Samir. The two college students started to talk about the visa application process and how frustrating and expensive it was. I was there as part of a postdoctoral research project on how Algerians experience and interpret mobility constraints through visa applications and refusals. After a little while, it became evident that the two friends had no intention of coming back to Algeria if they ever got a short-stay visa. Samir even mentioned that he had tried to “burn” the border before and he would try again if he did not get a visa. In the Maghrebi dialects, “those who burn” the borders, *harragas*, are those who leave without documentation. The word reflects the fact that they do not respect the mandatory steps for legal departure. Also, they figuratively “burn” their papers to avoid deportation once in Europe. When Samir told me that he had tried to “burn,” I could not keep myself from shaking my head. “Don’t you believe me?” he asked. I laughed and told him that I wished I could have met *harragas* without even trying to when they were the actual focus of my research, as a PhD student. In front of TLS Contact, I was not actively looking for *harragas*, nor people whose intent was to overstay if they ever got a short-stay visa. I met Samir and others in a similar situation by mere coincidence. These conver-



sations started to reveal the very complex and ambiguous attitudes of *harragas* toward the legal mobility regime and, more specifically, visa obligations. Therefore, I decided to revisit the data I collected as part of my PhD dissertation on *harga* and to pay closer attention to what *harragas* had to say about visas and visa policy. This article draws on both the fieldwork conducted as part of my research on visas and on *harragas*, entangling the two research topics.

In 2017 and 2018, the data collected are mainly from my fieldwork journal, where I wrote every day after spending a couple of hours in front of TLS Contact in Oran or Algiers. I also recorded semi-structured interviews with four *harragas*. In 2011 and 2012, I did my fieldwork on *harragas* in Oran and Mostaganem, because many leave for Spain from these locations. Also, it is where I am originally from. Meeting *harragas* was easier because of my personal network and because my maternal family lives in La Salamandre, where one of the ports of Mostaganem is located. It was easier but not easy to meet *harragas*, because they were all men from a very different socioeconomic background than my own. It was difficult to meet one-on-one with different young males who were more or less my age without being concerned for my family’s reputation. Also, after several meetings with the same person, I had in several instances to clarify that I was not romantically interested. I met twenty-eight *harragas* in Oran and Mostaganem in 2011 and 2012. The data mainly consists of recordings of semi-structured interviews and fieldwork notes that were recollections of unstructured interviews or meetings.

Meeting female *harragas* was even more difficult because of the social stigma attached to it. their attempt at crossing the Mediterranean fails, it is often difficult to go back and live under the family roof because of the social stigma attached to undocumented female migration in Algeria. Also, there are fewer female *harragas*. The patriarchal family system that prevails in North African countries hinders female migration. For female *harragas*, migration is often synonymous with a familial breakdown. Moreover, this migratory pattern is even riskier for young females. Departing from an isolated beach, in the middle of the night, sailing on a small boat with men during the long crossing of the Mediterranean: the young women do not only feel threatened by the sea but also by their male companions. Finally, the specific ways in which would-be *harragas* obtain information on migratory strategies, meet with one another, and with smugglers—in places of sociability for men<sup>1</sup>—explains the small proportion of females. I have met only two female *harragas*, and they were living in France; I could not meet anywhere my fieldwork was supposed to be exclusively set: in Algeria. I chose not to include their itineraries and their perceptions in this article, which focuses on visas, because both left without their families’ approval under very specific conditions. One was an unmarried pregnant teen, and the other one was “burning” with her then boyfriend who her parents disapproved of. Visas were not mentioned during our meetings. They probably did not ask for a visa, because they did not have the time to and if they had applied for a visa, as students, they would have needed their family’s support.

The particular gendered perspective I am going to explore in this article is therefore of young men who tried to “burn” the borders before, after, in between short-stay visa applications, or without even trying to get a visa. Their interpretation and experience of the legal mobility system is interesting because they ended up trying to migrate despite their exclusion from the legal mobility system. The overwhelming majority of the Algerians who migrate do so through legal channels, mainly through family reunification and student visas. Among those who are undocumented or *sans papiers*, the vast majority entered legally and overstayed the duration of their visas or residency permits. Most of those whose visa application is rejected stay put. A minority “burn” the borders and cross the Mediterranean without a passport or visa. It is the perspective of this minority that this article focuses on. The fact that my fieldwork with *harragas* was set in Algeria introduces an interesting bias for this analysis, because all the men I spoke to somehow failed in their attempts to leave Algeria.

## Visa Policy and Unequal Access to International Mobility

The perspective of *harragas* is interesting to explore because the main goal of the visa system is precisely to prevent the international mobility of people like them. Visa policy is an instrument of migration “remote control” (Zolberg 2003). Visa requirements modify the border’s temporality and location. Border controls are anticipated temporally and delocalized spatially, producing an “extravert flexibilization of the border” (Cuttitta 2007: 68). Visa restrictions are “the principal and most effective instrument of selectivity” (Mau et al. 2012: 7). They allow states “to facilitate the transnational movement of some at the expense of deterring the movement of others” (Neumayer 2006). The EU has issued two lists with respect to visa obligations: a list of countries whose nationals do not require visas, and a list of countries whose nationals do require a visa to enter the Schengen Area. Algeria is on the latter.

To determine if a country should be on the blacklist or not, three factors are taken into consideration: whether or not there is a “migratory risk,” or the probability that short-stay visa holders from a specific country might overstay and become undocumented; “security risks”; and the relations between the EU and the country in question.

As Didier Bigo states, “Granting a visa to a person is, in this respect an exception to the exception (and therefore it follows the logic of scarcity in the minds of those delivering them). It is the restoration of confidence in one individual after suspecting the national group” (2010: 254).<sup>2</sup> Studying the list of documents necessary to apply for a visa or the grounds for refusal mentioned in the EU’s Visa Code reveal the profile of the groups who become excluded from the legal mobility system because they are perceived as representing a “migratory risk.” Being unemployed, not having a job in the formal economy, and having low-paying or unstable employment are discriminatory factors, among others.

Academic research on European visa policy mainly adopts macro-scale and meso-scale levels of analysis focusing on the evolution and Europeanization of visa policy as part of a “remote control” strategy (Guild and Bigo 2003a, 2003b; Guiraudon 2003). There is also a very stimulating body of work undertaking consular practices<sup>3</sup> and focusing on street-level bureaucrats and the use of private contractors to implement visa policy (Alpes 2013, 2017; Alpes and Spire 2014; Infantino 2010, 2016a, 2016b; Infantino and Rea 2012; Spire 2012; Zampagni 2017). Fewer contributions focus on the international relations dimension of European visa policy<sup>4</sup> (El Qadim 2017), or on the lived experiences of visa applicants whose profile is not in line with what European consulates perceive as a “desirable traveler” (Scheel 2017).<sup>5</sup> This contribution focuses more specifically on individuals who did not manage to appropriate mobility to Europe via Schengen visas, but decided to try to migrate anyway: *harragas*.

## Borders, as if They Were Always There

The *harragas* I met never mentioned historical factors to question the existence of mobility constraints. It was as if the borders had always been there. Algeria was administered as an integral part of France until 1962. Freedom of mobility was certainly not always the rule when Algeria was a French colony. However, a reform, introduced under the Status of Algeria in 1947, allowed those who were then called French-Algerian Muslims (*Français-musulmans d’Algérie*) to come and go freely. In 1962, the Evian Accords that formalized the cease-fire and defined the relations between the two countries also maintained the freedom of mobility. Algerians did not even need a passport to go to France (and vice versa). They could come and go with a simple ID (except if a court order prohibited a specific person from traveling to France). Algerians who lived in

France had the same economic rights as French people. They did not need a specific authorization to settle or work. However, *harragas* never mentioned the (post)colonial relations between France and Algeria and the related history of movement in and outside France as an argument to delegitimize the (im)mobility regime.

Very few *harragas* touched on the fact that unemployed men doing manual work were able to migrate legally and even had an advantage in the past. Even when France and Algeria started limiting migration through quotas (*contingent*)<sup>6</sup> or exit visas<sup>7</sup> delivered by the Algerian Office National de la Main d’Oeuvre, being unemployed was a favorable condition.<sup>8</sup> Until the 1970s, a large majority of Algerian migrants were men and more specifically men doing manual work. In 1968, 90 percent of Algerians in France were blue-collar workers (Blanchard 2018). In the 1970s, after two decades of economic expansion post–World War II, France, as well as most other Western countries, experienced an economic recession. It was a turning point for the mobility regime in Algeria as well as on a global scale. In this context of high unemployment and inflation, racism, especially racism and violence toward Algerians, was on the rise in France (Gastaut 1993, 1994). In September 1973, Houari Boumediene,<sup>9</sup> in a public speech, officially put an end to labor emigration because of the prejudice Algerians faced in France. In 1974, France closed its door to the recruitment of labor migrants. Announced as temporary, the suspension turned out to be lasting. The history of blue-collar migration of Algerian men during the post-war boom is never mentioned to delegitimize the restrictive and selective migration policies of today, however. When asked if he could migrate legally, Samir mentioned that it was impossible for someone like him to get a student visa, so his only option would be marrying somebody with a French passport. He then proceeded to laugh and asked if I knew anybody who would be interested. It was as if labor migration was never a distinct possibility.

None of the *harragas* I met mentioned spontaneously the fact that visa obligations were fairly recent. It was as if mobility constraints were natural or had always existed. They could not even imagine a world in which their movements were not subject to the exclusionary mechanisms the mobility regime creates. However, theoretically, until the 1980s Algerians who wanted to travel for short stays did not need a visa and there were no quotas of any sort. In practice, since the mid-1960s, French authorities limited the entry of Algerians, as the French diplomatic archives located in La Couverneuve testify.<sup>10</sup> As soon as there was a limitation of legal migration through quotas, French authorities started suspecting travelers and mentioning “fake tourists” in official documents. They suspected them of being would-be migrants using tourism as a pretext to get to France and then regularize their situation (which was easier for them than for other undocumented foreigners in France because of some of the provisions in the Evian Accords first, and then in the 1968 Accord on the circulation, stay and employment of Algerians and their families in France<sup>11</sup>). It was only in October 1986, through an exchange of letters, that visa obligations were introduced. In his letter, Eric Desmarest, director of the cabinet for the French minister of foreign affairs, wrote that “the circumstances are exceptional” and required being especially cautious with mobility. The “circumstances” he referred to were a wave of terrorist attacks, later attributed to Hezbollah, targeting Paris’s department stores in 1985 and 1986 (Bigo 1991). The Algerian authorities took note of this obligation and announced that, in return, French nationals were required to get a visa to visit Algeria. The visa requirements were first announced as “temporary” but proved to be durable. In reality, imposing mobility constraints and establishing visa obligations was part of a dynamic started by France in the beginning of the 1980s, when it established visa obligations for nationals of many South American and Asian countries. France planned to impose visas for Algeria, but the colonial past made it more difficult than for other countries. Security was a mere excuse to impose visas on people that France saw as potential undocumented migrants, Algerians as well as others (GISTI 1991).

At first, France allocated visas quite liberally to Algerians. However, in the 1990s, visas became harder to get. The director of the Visa Department at the French Consulate in Algiers wrote a note to the consular clerks in charge of examining visa applications. The note stated: “In addition to the substantiating documents required [for visa application], it is necessary to check the socioeconomic stability of the visa applicants in Algeria. In that respect, I stress that visas must be automatically refused to unemployed people, precarious workers, etc.”<sup>12</sup> Further, he asked the consular clerks to “gather to the extent possible the data to ensure the applicant’s good faith and that he will leave France at the end of his stay.”<sup>13</sup> He asked his employees to “question the applicants about “the real motivation behind their trip to France, especially when they say they are tourists.”<sup>14</sup> This note demonstrates the climate of suspicion that prevailed, and continues to prevail, in the examination of visa applications (GISTI 1991).

None of the *harragas* I met mentioned the fact that their parents or even their older siblings knew a time when visas between France and Algeria did not exist or that the climate of suspicion under which visa applications are considered was not always as prevalent. Listening to them talk about the borders and the impossibility to migrate or even travel legally when you are who they are, suggests that there is no history or memory of migration or mobility as such in Algeria. The colonial past, the fact that France used to actively recruit the workforce in Algeria, and the fact that visas were only introduced in the mid-1980s are not mentioned in order to question the mobility regime and contest its legitimacy. At the same time, the *harragas* did not passively sit still and accept their situation. They found ways to contest the mobility regime.

### Rejecting Visa Constraints and the (Im)mobility Regime

Some of the people I met during my research ignored or rejected completely the legal mobility system that excluded them. Sofiane did not even try to get a visa before attempting to leave Algeria on a small boat in 2006. When I met him, in Oran, in 2011, he was 30 years old. He was then doing some construction work for private homes with one of my cousins, who introduced us. As many of the young men I met, he was working in the informal sector and longing for a more stable job, benefits, and a better salary. When I asked him if he had ever applied for a visa, he replied: “I never asked for a visa. They don’t give visas. They give visas to rich traders and businessmen. They give visas to old people, married people, and retired people. They don’t grant visas to young people. Why would I even bother to apply? It is obvious they are going to reject my visa application.” Sofiane corrected himself spontaneously after initially stating that nobody gets visas. He then listed the people who can get a visa and thus those who cannot. According to him, being young, single, and without a high-earning job makes a visa application completely in vain. He tried to “burn.” Sofiane’s small boat was arrested when it was getting close to Almería, in Spain. He spent 40 days in a holding center before being deported.

Sofiane was not the only *harrag* I talked to who thinks that visa applications are made in vain. Mourad mentioned similar arguments and said that he did not want “to tire himself for nothing.” Yet, Mourad has a different profile than Sofiane. He has a high school degree and went to the University of Mostaganem to study commerce for four years. He quit before graduating because he felt he was getting nowhere. He tried to leave Algeria with his little brother, but their boat was arrested in Spanish territorial waters. They were placed in a holding center and then deported. When I met him, he was 27 and working in a small grocery store located in La Salamandre. He was paid day to day and did not have a contract or any benefits. He too was working in the informal sector.

Mourad brought up during our conversation the name of friends or acquaintances whose applications were rejected as proof that his would suffer the same fate. He also mentioned that he could not apply for a visa even if he wanted to because of his situation. Being able to submit a complete application is a challenge, as pay slips and a proof of registration with social security are among the papers the consulate asks for. He could not provide them.

Some of the *harragas* I met, as Mourad or Sofiane, chose to completely ignore the legal mobility regime and visa requirements. They were convinced that visas were put into place primarily to prevent their mobility to Europe because of how little money they had, how young they were, and how unstable their economic or their personal situation was. They were confronted with mechanisms that excluded them from the formal tracks, whether the formal economy or the legal mobility regime. In a sense, their attempt to migrate irregularly is a continuation of their social and economic situation in Algeria. They cannot rely on the formal economy to gain socioeconomic rights and lead a dignified life in Algeria. They cannot rely on the legal mobility regime to migrate and try to live a dignified life elsewhere. They rely on informal channels on all levels of life, and undocumented migration is just one of them.

### Experiencing and Interpreting Visa Rejection

Other *harragas* I met tried to play the game and applied for a visa. This is the case of Amine, whom I met in 2011. At the time of his applications, he had a job in the formal sector; he was a security agent for Sonalgaz, a state-owned company in charge of electricity and natural gas distribution in Algeria.

I applied for a Spanish visa. They rejected my application. I applied for a French visa. They rejected my application. Nothing. My application was complete. I had an attestation of employment and I had a job at Sonalgaz. The summer was coming, I prepared my passport and asked for a visa for the third time but still nothing. They were complete applications. I wasted my time. My applications were denied without any explanation. I decided to go anyway. I decided to “burn” the borders.

Amine felt disheartened and frustrated. When asked about his visa applications, he seemed confused and not able to understand the refusal. He insisted several times that his applications had been complete and questioned the process, particularly the fact that he did not get any explanation. For him, providing all the documentation the consulate asked for should have granted him a visa. Amine also spoke of his impression that the entire process was a mere waste of money and time. The cost of the application was a point of great frustration and confusion for many applicants, who mentioned that they should be reimbursed if their application got rejected. In her work, Jill Alpes explores the meaning of monetary flows in exchange for travel permits. She shows that even though consulates try to legitimate monetary transfers by using the term “fee” to refer to them, applicants still sometimes perceive them as a “price” (Alpes 2013). Amine, as many others, felt like he paid for a visa he did not get.

Even if Amine said he could not think of any reason why he did not get a visa at first, he mentioned some when we were talking more broadly about his economic situation. Amine quit school when he was 16. His father managed to help him find a job as a security agent a few years later, but it was a short-term contract with a very low pay. “The pay was insufficient and the contract short-term. By the way, I think this is why they refused my visa application.” After three visa refusals, he decided to “burn” and go to Spain despite everything.



The *harragas* I met who did attempt visa applications did not always apply for a visa *before* trying to “burn.” Some applied after or in between two attempts to leave by boat. I met Djamel with Adel in January 2018 while I was visiting my family. Adel is a fisherman who tried to “burn” three times—his last attempt was in 2017—whereas Djamel tried only once. Their first (and last for Djamel) attempt was together in 2012. Djamel said that he “‘burned’ without really thinking forward” because his friends and neighbors, including Adel, were preparing for an attempt and “he had no reason to stay behind.” They were arrested and held for 40 days in Spain before being deported. Djamel did not try to “burn” again but had applied for three visas since, all of which were refused. He found the procedure exhausting and listed all the steps, insisting on the financial cost of each one before adding: “If you did all that and paid all that money to get a visa it would be OK, but they don’t give a visa.” Not unlike Amine, he said he did not understand why his applications were refused, stressing that they were “complete” and focusing on that fact that he “paid” for the visa. He also brought up a widespread rumor in Algeria that the application file did not get to the consulate. He accused the employees of the private company in charge of collecting the applications of not transmitting the files to the consulate to pocket the visa fees. In general, the private companies in charge of collecting visa applications, notably TLS, were more often than not blamed for the mismanagement of the visa application (lack of appointment, the condition under which the applications are filed, and more surprisingly visa refusals). There undoubtedly is a dilution of the accountability of the consulate because of the outsourcing.

Later on, when I openly asked Djamel if he thought that his arrest while trying to cross the Mediterranean without papers and his deportation had anything to do with his visa application refusals, he was definitive: “No, it did not have anything to do with me ‘burning’ in 2012. When I was deported, they gave me a document specifying that I was not allowed there for three years. I waited three years before applying for a visa.” The last time he applied for a visa, his brother applied with him to help him. His brother got a visa and he did not. Adel, who was present while we were talking, laughed ironically when Djamel mentioned his brother and said, “But tell her what he is.” Djamel specified that his brother was a public servant working for the *wilaya*<sup>15</sup> who made twice his salary. Djamel was a plumber at the University of Mostaganem, barely making above the minimum wage in Algeria.

Here again, even if he first said he had no understanding of the grounds for rejection of his visa application, Djamel suggested some explanations later on. He asked his brother to apply with him because he thought that it made more believable the fact that he wanted to go to France as a tourist. Also, his brother had a more stable familial and economic situation and made more money. He mentioned that his brother had traveled abroad before whereas he had not, as if international mobility calls for international mobility. Overall, he seemed convinced that his economic situation was the main obstacle for getting a visa. Indeed, he mentioned in the conversation that he could have applied with fake pay slips. Then he dismissed the possibility, saying it would be “a whole other thing” and mentioning the risk of getting caught and going to prison.

Djamel, contrary to the *harragas* I met in 2011, got a form specifying the grounds for the visa refusal, but he did not mention it before I asked him specifically. He dismissed the reasons given by the consulate for rejecting his application because of the administrative language they were phrased in. In the form visa applicants receive, all the grounds for refusal in the Visa Code are listed and numbered, and then those that specifically apply to the person are checked off. When I asked Djamel which one he got, he told me “I got the number 3 and number 9” and did not elaborate. Most of the young people I met got those two justifications, which refer broadly to their insufficient means and the fact that the consular agent who examined the application was not convinced that they would leave the Schengen space beyond the duration of their visa. It is

interesting that none of the people I spoke to mentioned the fact that they were intending to stay and find a job once in Europe as the reason why their application was refused. The fact that the visas are meant to keep out those who represent a “migratory risk” according to the Schengen Area was rarely, if ever, mentioned.

Migration is often framed in terms of binary categories: “forced” vs. “voluntary,” “legal” vs. “illegal,” “skilled” vs. “unskilled,” “wanted” vs. “unwanted,” and so forth. These binary categorizations structure the public debate, legitimizing certain types of migration at the expense of others. These categories, which infuse the scientific discourse in more or less critical ways, show their limits because of the complexity of migrants’ itineraries. In the perspective of the *harragas*, these binary categories make little to no sense. Migration is a nonlinear and nonbinary process: being in Algeria trying to “burn” after, before, or without trying to get a visa, not quite making to Europe, and trying again, as well as getting a short-stay visa and overstaying or “burning,” are both legitimate potentialities in their eyes.

### Fitting the Description of the “Real Tourist”

There are those who ignore and reject the visa system and do not even try to get a visa, those who try to fit its demands and apply with a genuine file, and those who try to dupe the system by using forged documents in their applications. In his work, Stephan Scheel analyzes “the provision of falsified or manipulated supporting documents upon which the decision to issue a biometric visa is based” as a form of appropriation enticed by “highly restrictive requirements for a Schengen visa that do not correspond to local realities” (2017: 5). Rachid, who was selling cell phones on the street in downtown Mostaganem, applied for visas in several consulates of the Schengen space (France, Italy, Spain, and Poland) but also out of the Schengen space (United States and Canada). From one application to the other he declared different statuses, jobs, or salaries, as if it was all about finding out who was the perfect or most believable “traveler” for Western countries: a married teacher in middle school, a successful merchant, or a civil servant. He seemed to ignore that consulates keep a record of your previous applications or that consulates can communicate with each other.

Mohammed, 28, and Tahar, 25, were inseparable brothers. They used to be undeclared workers at a baker’s shop, making bread. When I met them, in 2017, they were street vendors in their neighborhood in Oran. They mainly sold cigarettes, phone credits, and sandwiches. They tried applying for a visa with forged documents after trying to “burn.” Talking about his friends and neighbors, Mohammed said, “Everybody left. Some got a visa, some left on a small boat from the Algerian shores, and some took the road.” When he mentioned the “road,” Mohammed was referring to those who try to reach Europe through Ceuta, an autonomous Spanish city located in North Africa. Trying to get a visa seems to be a way, as any other, to leave Algeria. Also, applying for a visa is not always the first thing they try, but one among others. Mohammed and Tahar ended up buying forged documents to apply for a visa after their attempt to leave Algeria by boat aborted. They had to turn back while they were still in the Algerian territorial waters because of an engine-related problem and bad weather. Buying the documents cost them about 20,000 dinars each. The less risky option is not always the first option; determined to leave, *harragas* opt for one means or another depending on the opportunities that arise.

Mohammed used an interesting metaphor to explain his desire to go to Europe. He said that if someone closes a door in a house and tells you that it is the only room that you cannot go in, the only thing you can think about is what is in that room. Recalling in a liberal way the French folktale of Bluebeard, Mohammed blamed his obsession with Europe on mobility constraints.

He says, “If you are left in a house where only one room is locked, you cannot keep yourself from wondering what is on the other side of the locked door to the point of obsession. If the door was open you probably would not have even thought about it.” He added, “Let me go see. I am not stupid, if I don’t like it there, I will come back home. . . . They jailed us. If they don’t give me a visa, I will cross the Mediterranean or take the road to Ceuta.” He submitted his application as a test before his brother submitted his. His visa application was rejected. He was convinced that it was not due to the forged documents, but to a mere lack of luck. He stated that he was unlucky and that some people end up getting a visa after a couple of refusals and that it has nothing to do with how authentic the documents are. Mohammed questioned both the relevance and the efficiency of the visa application process. He compared the system to a mere lottery.

The unpredictability of the outcome of their application was mentioned often by the people I met. When I asked why the system was so unpredictable, they mentioned luck or the *mektoub*,<sup>16</sup> as if they were not destined to get a visa. None of them mentioned the discretionary power of the consular staff and the suspicion (Alpes 2013, 2017; Alpes and Spire 2014; Infantino 2016a; Scheel 2017; Spire 2012) under which each case is examined as the reason for that unpredictability.

The legitimacy of the mobility regime was rarely questioned beyond that. I asked Mohammed why Algerians needed a visa today to go to France when they did not need one before. He said: “Algeria has taken a downturn,” adding, “Our leaders were men then.” For him the mobility constraints today are because of the low negotiation capacities of the Algerian authorities on the international scene and the fact that the Algerian leaders are not interested in defining the right to mobility of the people. He added that because they are free to come and go, they do not care. Mohammed is aware that not all Algerians are constrained in their country and that some can access international mobility, and that for them getting a visa is a simple formality.

Despite their various experiences and perceptions of the mobility regime, the large majority of the *harragas* I met felt that the visa system was exclusionary and was set to keep them out of Europe. They found ways to deal with this exclusion by trying to migrate outside the legal mobility system. Ignoring the visa system or trying to dupe it and ultimately “burning” the borders is a form of protest, a way to contest the mobility regime. There has been an increasing amount of research undertaken (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015; De Genova 2017; De Genova et al. 2018; Papadopoulos et al. 2008; Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013; Scheel 2013) as part the autonomy of migration approach. This approach offers a relevant framework to understand illegalized migration such as *harga* by focusing on the migrants’ subjectivity and their will and capacity to escape control and render the borders porous. Even failed attempts to “burn” or to appropriate mobility via Schengen visas are a way to contest and hinder the borders. Understanding *harga* through the lens of the autonomy of migration approach can help explain something I originally found baffling when I started my fieldwork in Algeria: the fact that most of the *harragas* I met did not try once or twice to “burn” but three, four, or even five times, and had every intention to try again when I met them.

## Conclusion

Young men from Algeria who are unemployed, have an unstable or a low-paying job, or work in the informal sector belong to the category of “undesirable migrants.” They are excluded from the legal mobility system. Despite that, some try to leave Algeria without a visa, on a small boat, risking their lives. This article explored would-be migrants’ perception of the legal mobility regime that is set to prevent their mobility. This exploration reveals a very complex and diverse set of attitudes: ignoring and rejecting the visa obligations, trying to match expectations, trying

to dupe the system, or all of the above. The understanding of the visa application process and its outcome also varied. Most *harragas* knew that the system was set to exclude people with a particular socioeconomic profile; others considered it as a mere question of luck.

More interestingly, very few mentioned the fact that if they ever got a Schengen visa they would overstay its duration as the reason for their application being refused. In a context where legal migration is so controlled, they considered their attempt to distort the short-stay visa procedure so normal that they never mentioned it. For the most part, they sought migration opportunities and perceived the different means as a continuum, which reveals the irrelevancy of binary categorizations of migration. Some attempted to get a short-stay visa, after trying to leave on a small boat and while still hoping for a marriage with a person with a red passport. They perceived the legal mobility regime as illegitimate. For some, the mobility constraints they faced did not deter their will to migrate but fostered it. The *harragas* did not reject the mobility constraints for historical reasons or because they thought that France “owed” mobility to Algerians. They rejected the (im)mobility regime because, first and foremost, it was set against them. They demonstrated their agency by attempting to migrate even when all odds were against them and the mobility regime was set to exclude them. Drawing on the autonomy of migration approach, I argue that their attempts, even failed, contest and hinder the (im)mobility regime and make the borders more porous.

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#### ■ NOTES

1. Many coffee shops in Algeria, notably in popular neighborhoods, are still only for men.
2. Translation by the author. Original text: “L’octroi du visa individuel est à cet égard une exception à l’exception (et c’est pourquoi elle obéit à une logique de ‘rareté’ dans l’esprit de ceux qui les délivrent). C’est un rétablissement de la confiance dans l’individu après l’épreuve du soupçon porté sur un ensemble national.”

3. The outsourcing to private companies of day-to-day implementation, the work environment, and the decision-making process of those in charge of examining the application.
4. Looking at EU-Morocco negotiations on visa facilitation, Nora El Qadim (2018) explores the symbolic dimension of border control and visa policy.
5. Stephan Scheel's (2017) work focuses on the ways in which migrants appropriate mobility to Europe via Schengen visas in the context of biometric controls. He notably develops the case of appropriation through the provision of "real fakes."
6. The Nekkache-Grandval Accord (1964) and the Franco-Algerian Accord of 27 December 1968.
7. The Algerian decree no. 63-161 of 29 May 1963 determined the condition under which Algerian nationals were allowed to work abroad.
8. This Algerian agency delivered visas to those who had unsuccessfully looked for a job on the Algerian market for at least a month.
9. Houari Boumediene ruled Algeria (first as chairman of the Revolutionary Council and then as president) from 1965 to his death in 1978.
10. There are several telegrams and diplomatic notes that mention the quotas of 200 or 250 tourists a week starting in the beginning of 1967 and the refolement of Algerian tourists at the French border when this quota was exceeded. In March 1968, following Algerian demands, France agreed to stop the refolement of Algerians, and that Algeria would make sure that the quotas were respected. In July 1968, France started controlling Algerian tourists at the border and reintroduced refolement procedures because it decided that Algerian authorities were not keeping their end of the bargain. See, for example, Xavier Jeannot, "Note pour le cabinet du ministre, Régime d'entrée en France des touristes algériens," 28 August 1968, Box 0034SUP/123, Diplomatic Archives of La Courneuve.
11. Algerians could get a 10-year residency permit faster and easier. They did not need long-stay visas as a first step for family reunification.
12. Translation by the author. Original text: "Outre les justificatifs requis, il convient, en effet, de vérifier la stabilité de la situation socio-économique du requérant en Algérie. À cet égard, je souligne que les visas doivent être refusés d'office aux chômeurs, aux travailleurs précaires, etc."
13. Translation by the author. Original text: "rassembler dans la mesure du possible les informations permettant d'acquérir la conviction que le requérant est de bonne foi et quittera la France à l'issue de son séjour."
14. Translation by the author. Original text: "interroger les requérants sur les motifs réels de leurs déplacements en France, tout particulièrement lorsque le motif de tourisme est avancé."
15. A *wilaya* is a regional administrative unit.
16. *Mektoub* literally means "it is written" and refers to fate or destiny.

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