



Expulsions from Algeria to Niger: a postcolonial approach to IOM- assisted "voluntary" returns

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Background Rationale and Content

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Abstract

The expulsion of migrants, mainly black Africans, from Algeria to the border with Niger has increased in recent years, since 2014 and especially since 2017. In this context, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) assists vulnerable migrants and incorporates them into its "assisted voluntary return" program. However, in line with the results of our fieldwork, several scholars and social organizations question the "voluntary" character of these returns and the interests behind these repatriations. In this article, we examine the power relations at play between the IOM, the European Union (EU) and returned migrants and, through a critical approach framed in postcolonialism, analyse the role of the IOM as an actor at the service of the EU's border externalisation efforts.

Keywords

Repatriation, postcolonialism, externalisation, borders, IOM, Sahel

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1. Introduction

The expulsion of migrants from Africa south of the Sahara through Algeria's southern border with Niger has increased in recent years, since 2014 and especially since 2017 and up to the present day. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) plays a crucial role in these expulsions by facilitating programs it calls "assisted voluntary returns" (AVR) (IOM, 2019). IOM's activities have been questioned by scholars and activists and characterized as the enforcement arm of border management and migration containment policies implemented by the European Union (EU) (Andrijasevic and Walters, 2010; Pécoud, 2017).

This article aims to analyse the role of the IOM from a postcolonial approach, focusing on the relations between the international organization and EU migration policies, especially after the 2015 Valletta Summit (Puig, 2020). To do so, we examine expulsions across Algeria's southern border with Niger, especially between 2015 and 2021, including their substantial increase since 2017 (Amnesty International, 2018; Yuen, 2020a). We analyse these so-called "assisted voluntary returns" from a critical perspective and examine the role of IOM as an indispensable actor in EU migration containment policies.

This paper aims to contribute to the existing literature on the role of IOM in the externalization of EU borders. It is based on peer-reviewed academic sources, data reported by IOM and other international organizations, and fieldwork conducted in Niger, in the cities of Niamey and Agadez, as well as visits to the Algerian border, to Assamaka in 2021. IOM's presence in Algeria is relatively recent, especially since 2016, and in Niger it dates back to 2011. However, the organization's presence increased considerably in the Sahelian country after the 2015 Valletta Summit on Migration, the conference between European and African leaders that established the migration governance arrangement based on the southward expansion of European borders. This article aims to shed light on the role of IOM on the Niger-Algeria border, which has so far received less media and academic attention than others such as Libya's or the Moroccan-Tunisian border with Europe (Paoletti, 2011; Brachet, 2016; Puig, 2017; Reviglio, 2020).

The article first sets out the methodology used and then outlines the theoretical framework underpinning this research, concerning the postcolonial approach to migration

governance. It then analyses IOM's actions on the Niger-Algeria border and concludes by reflecting on the need for a post-colonial approach to migration governance.

2. Methodology

This article is based on extensive fieldwork in Niger between 2015 and 2021¹, with several extended stays between January-March 2015 and January-March 2016 in Niamey, as well as occasional trips to the city of Agadez in 2017 and 2019 and the town of Assamaka, on the border with Algeria in 2021. The research employs a primarily qualitative methodology based on semi-structured interviews with people on the move, in addition to staff of local organizations and international agencies related to migration governance, such as the local entity *Alternative Espace Citoyen* and the IOM or the EU itself, among others. Ethnographic techniques such as participant observation and open conversations with people on the move in Niger's main spaces of male sociability, the *fadas*, are also used.

In addition, a bibliographic review of the current academic literature on this topic has been carried out and, in turn, an attempt has been made to apply a postcolonial approach to the migration pattern analysed. It must be said that, as in all research, the sources chosen shape a specific interpretation of the study that entails biases, which can be qualified as Eurocentric. In particular, much of the selected literature on borders was written in the EU or focused largely on European migration management strategies and policies. However, mindful of this, an attempt was made to incorporate references from African research centers and authors (Boyer et al., 2020; Ahmet Tchilouta, 2022; Chena and Kadri, 2024).

3. Postcolonialism: a useful approach to analysing mobilities

Colonial history has influenced the world as we know it today, including the conception, implementation and articulation of borders, languages, societies and the mobility of people (Samaddar, 2020). A postcolonial approach allows understanding colonialism as a

¹ It is important to note that the situation has changed on the ground since 2023, with the coup d'état that ousted Mohamed Bazoum in Niger. As for those expelled from Algeria, Niger's ruling military junta has made this a diplomatic issue with the recall of its ambassador to Algiers for consultations and the analogous response from Algeria.

system of global governance built on and by an ideology of exploitations and resistances (Chakrabarty, 2007; Ould Moctar, 2020). The postcolonial perspective unravels colonization as a system of knowledge production and representation, as well as a system of power and exploitation, in the words of Stuart Hall (1995). In this sense, it provides tools to analyse migrations by acknowledging history (Chambers, 2008; Braudel, 2008; Mayblin and Turner, 2020); repositioning categories such as class, gender or racialization (Mains et al., 2013; De Genova, 2017; Mayblin and Turner, 2020); deconstructing power relations between institutions and debating who may be benefiting from them (Spivak, 1988).

Postcolonialism thus makes it possible to analyse the unequal relations between states and other actors and provides tools to elucidate the systematic and systemic exclusion of migrants, especially if they are African and black. For Hassan Ould Moctar, colonialism entails a "problematization of human mobility" (2020). In this sense, to date, decolonization and neocolonialism have continued to directly influence South-North movements, but also other types of displacement. This has taken place through displacements from former colonies to former colonizers and, more indirectly, in the continued management of borders drawn by imperial Europe (Nair, 2013). The postcolonial perspective helps us to identify the neocolonial dynamics at play, addressing the complexity of current relations by attending to the past and re-signifying it (Shohat, 1992). The postcolonial is the focus of analysis and the neocolonial the object of study.

The celebrated Pan-Africanist politician and philosopher Kwame Nkrumah (1965) describes neocolonialism as a "continuation of colonial power relations through processes of economic dependence, conditional aid and cultural hegemony" (Nkrumah, 1965; Van Vossolle, 2016). In this article, "conditional aid" refers to a party offering aid based on conditions related to its interests (Van Vossolle, 2016). This definition is mainly used to describe current official development aid, directed from world powers towards former colonized countries (Gilbert, 2014). Conditional aid becomes a neocolonial tool of migration control and management, a "soft power" through economic means and dependency relations (Nkrumah 1965; Latouche, 1996; Van Vossolle, 2016). From this logic, we examine border reinforcement in third countries and the role of IOM in relation to one of the axes of externalization: returns (De Genova et al., 2015).

4. Externalisation of borders from a postcolonial perspective

Although borders are always artificial constructions that extend the sovereignty of the nation-state to its territorial limits (Kinvall, 2015), in the case of Africa, the delimitation was imposed in a particularly arbitrary and exogenous manner (Kopytoff, 1989; Mamdani, 2005; Bayart, 2009).

Concepts such as deterritorialization, extraterritorialization and externalization, i.e. "territorial and administrative expansion of the migration and border policy of a given state towards third countries" (Casas-Cortes et al., 2014, p. 231), are explained, especially in the African case, as the fruit of colonialism. The units created and legitimized as nation-states derive from and are supported by the relations of subordination derived from colonization (De Genova et al., 2015). The externalization of borders, therefore, is based on dynamics considered neocolonial that intensify dependency (Lemberg-Pedersen, 2019).

Current EU migration management is based on the involvement of nation-states, but also of partners such as private security companies and international organizations such as the IOM, as explained by Pécoud (2017) or Brachet (2016). Ruben Andersson argues that the outsourcing of border management creates "captive markets" that commodify human lives by turning them into objects of exchange (2018, p.414-8). In this sense, international organizations such as the IOM can contribute to the creation of these captive markets, although structural inequality should not make invisible the agency capacity of certain states, considered subaltern, that use their role in a global context focused on restricting migration (Cassarino, 2018; Stock et al., 2019; Ould Moctar, 2020).

The neocolonial logic in the externalization of borders can also be understood as a "racial crisis", according to Nicholas De Genova (2017). The EU's general approach to immigration in recent decades has been guided by a focus on security narratives, a reassertion of borders and a transfer of policing responsibilities to third countries, always from a structural racialization (Garner, 2007, p. 61). "Securitization" is legitimized through the construction of narratives of migration as a threat to identity or as part of the fight against terrorism (Boswell, 2007). It involves policing strategies such as detection, detention and deportation of migrants once they cross borders and thus makes the journey more dangerous and clandestine for people on the move (Menjívar, 2014, p. 353) (Andersson, 2014; Brachet, 2018; Puig, 2020). This leads humanitarian organizations to

become more involved in border management by providing assistance to those crossing high-risk areas (Andrijasevic and Walters, 2010; Cuttitta, 2018).

Julien Brachet (2016) argues that IOM uses humanitarian concerns to hide its true intentions when "managing" migration. For example, according to the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (2020), IOM tends to portray migrants as victims in need of support, but only offers humanitarian aid to those who agree to be repatriated (Farrah, 2020, p. 36). Critical border scholars have examined how narratives of "security" and "human rights" concerns allow migrants to be framed as both "at risk" and "a risk," depending on which option allows for expeditious intervention by Europe (Aradau, 2004). With the externalization of borders, the humanitarian appeal is elevated to a security concern (Lemberg-Pedersen, 2019; Ahmet Tchilouta, 2022).

5. Assisted voluntary returns from a critical perspective

The so-called assisted voluntary return (AVR) strategy, implemented and legitimized by IOM, has become a key method of international border 'management' in recent years (Geiger and Pécoud, 2020). AVR consists of assisting migrants who are unwilling or unable to remain in the country of arrival to travel back to their country of origin or previous stay (IOM, 2019). In the literature on these mobility genres, we find three closely related terms: repatriation, which is defined as the 'personal right of a refugee, prisoner of war or civilian detainee to return to his or her country of nationality under specified conditions'; voluntary repatriation, which describes the 'return of eligible persons to the country of origin on the basis of freely expressed willingness to return'; and assisted voluntary return, which is the 'administrative, logistical, financial and reintegration support to rejected asylum seekers, victims of human trafficking, stranded migrants, qualified nationals and other migrants who are unable or unwilling to remain in the host country and who offer to return to their country of origin' (IOM, 2011).

IOM's strategy and involvement in AVR has been much debated by academics, NGOs and activist groups alike (Chimni, 2004; Andrijasevic and Walters, 2010; Pécoud, 2017; Migreurop, 2019). Chimni (2004) argues that voluntary repatriation has come to be seen as the preferred solution to declining migration flows by countries in the Global North, which see no reason to share the burden of accommodating migrants from the

South in terms of protection and resources. Thus, he argues that voluntary repatriation can be understood as a migration management strategy based on the interests of the Global North. Andrijasevic and Walters (2010), for their part, see AVR also as part of what they call 'international border governance', in which border management is increasingly characterised by international involvement in terms of expertise, tactics and intervention (Andrijasevic and Walters, 2010, p. 984).

However, unlike Chimni, Andrijasevic and Walters emphasise the agency of the countries cooperating with IOM and stress that this assistance is the result of the sovereign states' own will. Pécoud (2018), for his part, is concerned that the increase in repatriations in general may create situations in which refugees in need of protection are returned to their country of origin instead of being granted asylum. Along these lines, he argues that the use of language framing returns as 'voluntary' is simply another way of expelling unwanted foreigners and concealing power relations between countries (Pécoud, 2017). Furthermore, Farrah (2020) notes that, in some cases, humanitarian aid is only provided to migrants who agree to return to their country of origin or primary residence.

6. Case study: the stranded on the Algerian-Nigerien border

The practice of outsourcing, through securitization, return and a humanitarian approach, converge perfectly in the case of the people expelled from Algeria to Niger. Moreover, the border drawn between the two states, in a straight line in the middle of the desert, is a magnificent example of the arbitrariness and colonial heritage of borders (Mamdani, 2005).

Algeria is a popular transit country for migrants from sub-Saharan African countries bound for Europe, although it is also a country of destination and origin (Farrah, 2020). The country's southern border has experienced an increase in migration flows since the 1990s and especially with the revitalization of the central Mediterranean route from 2013 after the closure (or its attempted)² of the western Mediterranean one. Refugees, labor

² Since the so-called 'cayuco crisis' of 2006 in the Canary Islands, Spain, together with the EU, began to design and deploy its border externalisation policies. This implied the attempt to close the Atlantic route and, therefore, the reevaluation of a historical migratory route such as the central Mediterranean, through the Sahara desert, especially Agadez, the main migratory passage for Sahrawi migrants (Gabrielli, 2017; Puig, 2020).

migrants and people seeking family reunification are included (Zardo and Loschi, 2020). In this regard, many migrants arrive in Algeria every week, mainly from West Africa and the Sahel (IOM, 2022). Most of them cross the 1,500 kilometers of border that Algeria shares with Mali and Niger in the middle of the Sahara (IOM, 2022).

Displacements from the Sahel to Algeria cannot - and should not - be dissociated from the idiosyncrasies of nomadism and semi-nomadism operating in the area, which transcend the post-colonial confines of nation-states. However, in the current context of globalization, some of these mobilities configure counter-geographies of migration (Sassen, 2003) that conceive mobility as economic diversification of Sahelian populations, not always accustomed to moving along these routes, who settle in coastal or southern Algerian cities (Lecocq, 2010; McDougall and Scheele, 2012; Bredeloup, 2012; Puig-Cepero et al. 2021).

The most immediate antecedent of this migratory pattern is to be found in what is customarily called "the Kantché phenomenon", a female and seasonal migration dating back to the 1970s, although it became better known internationally from 2013, when the European will to curb mobilities across the desert instrumentalized the death of 92 women and minors in the Sahara to warn of the dangers of the dunes for migrations towards Europe³. In fact, a regional migratory phenomenon was exploited to start building the narrative of hindering transit migrations through Niger, coming from different African countries, Gambia, Ivory Coast or Senegal (Yuen, 2020a).

In order to deter the increase of this migration pattern, Algeria signed an agreement with Niger in 2014 aimed at repatriating undocumented Nigerien nationals. However, following the bilateral repatriation agreement, Algerian authorities carried out mass arrests and expulsions to Niger of thousands of undocumented Nigerien migrants, targeting first women and children and eventually also Nigerien male migrant workers (Alternative, 2015). In 2016, Algerian authorities expanded the scope of these activities to include migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees from other West African countries in addition to Niger -including Mali, Guinea Conakry, and Cameroon- by forcibly

³ The mobility of the women of Kantché, in Zinder region, began around 1975, when the protagonists took the route to the mines of Arlit, in northern Niger, where their husbands worked, and where they settled as domestic servants. Especially since 2011, they extended the route to Algeria, where they started begging in the streets of the coastal cities of the Maghreb country, most of them with their children, due to the lack of possibilities to access the formal market in Algeria (Oumarou, 2016).

transporting them to the country's southern borders. Since then, expulsions of migrants from various African countries south of the Sahara have continued to increase (Amnesty International, 2018).

From January to April 2024 alone, a total of 9900 people have been expelled from Algeria to Niger, according to the NGO Alarm Phone. For its part, according to Médecins Sans Frontières, 23,175 expulsions from Algeria to the border with Niger were recorded in 2020, a figure slightly lower than the 29,888 expulsions recorded in 2019, but excessively high considering that by then the borders were officially closed since March 2020 because of the COVID pandemic.

The existing racism in North Africa towards black people, coupled with a context conducive to the externalization of borders in the area, has thus led to an increase in expulsions, and subsequently repatriations, at Niger's border with Algeria (Yuen, 2020a). The main reason has been the intensification of Algerian securitization of borders, largely due to national self-interest for economic issues and the inherent racism of much of Algerian society towards black Africans, explained by historical and cultural issues (Lecocq, 2010; Bialasiewicz, 2012; Farrah, 2020).

Zardo and Loschi (2020) state that, of all the states in North Africa, the Middle East and the Sahel regions, Algeria cooperates the least with EU migration programs. It does not cooperate with Frontex, the EU Border and Coast Guard Agency (Zardo and Loschi 2020). Instead of entering into agreements with the EU as a whole, it prefers bilateral agreements with individual member states (Zardo and Loschi 2020). This situation forces the EU to use alternative channels, such as the IOM, either in neighboring countries such as Niger, to achieve its objectives in influencing migration management.

7. IOM: the organization for migration?

Niger became, at least until 2023, the "new advanced frontier of Europe", according to representatives of EU institutions, such as the former EU representative for the Sahel, Angel Losada. There, IOM has been a crucial actor in the deployment of European policies. Much of this policy has been implemented through the securitization of borders and routes, and also through development aid in the country considered one of the poorest in the world (Kervyn and Shilhav, 2017; Concord, 2018; Venturi, 2018; Zardo, 2020).

In Niger, where our case study is situated, the IOM has had a base since 2006, although its influence and presence has been growing since 2011, first with the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, and second after the 2015 Valletta Summit, when its power in the country increased exponentially (Brachet, 2016). Although the IOM was created in 1951 with the intention of assisting in the resettlement logistics of the millions displaced on the European continent after World War II, in 2016 it became a United Nations agency with an expanded mission of "migrant support" worldwide (Pécoud, 2017; Geiger & Pécoud, 2020; IOM, 2022; Ahouga, 2024). The creation of the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa at the Valletta Summit, which wove a direct causality between lack of development and migrations, was the perfect excuse to settle IOM and the outsourcing strategy in Niger, through "development" projects, border security, return promotion and information campaigns or migration deterrence (Boyer et al., 2010; Geiger & Pécoud, 2020; Puig, 2020). Since 2017 and especially since 2019, IOM projects of "assisted returns", "reintegration", "migrant stabilization" have not stopped happening (Chappart, 2019).

The Algerian authorities' persecution of migrants and the massive and exponential expulsions since 2017 have led to an increase in the number of people assisted by IOM in returning to their countries of origin, mostly men (Yuen, 2020b). Since 2016, IOM has assisted more than 90,000 migrants in transit through the Agadez region with shelter, food, medical and psychosocial care, and helped them return to their countries of origin. Of these, 70% of the migrants were assisted for the first time in Assamaka, mainly nationals from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Between 2016 and 2017, a large part of the migrants arrived at the transit centers that IOM has in different parts of Niger - mainly Arlit and Agadez - by their own means, but as of 2018 that changed and most people arrived at the centers with IOM assistance (Yuen, 2020b).

According to various civil society, academic and journalistic organisations and collectives such as Migration Control, Migreurop, the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) and Human Rights Watch, among others, these expulsions of migrants at the borders of southern Algeria violate international law (Thiombiano, 2020; Naceur, 2022). The UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants stated in 2018 that Algeria risks violating the principle of non-refoulement by sending migrants to countries where they are at risk of persecution (Farrah, 2020). In addition, Migration Control claims that there is systematic racial discrimination favouring Arab migrants over African migrants and

argues that these policies create major problems for potential migrants and refugees attempting to cross the border (Naceur, 2022).

In the Algerian-Nigerien context, IOM and the EU cooperate on "migrant protection" mechanisms that eventually involve the implementation of migration containment measures (Geiger and Pécoud, 2020). Through these initiatives, migrants who could probably otherwise have crossed the Mediterranean and reached European borders are prevented from passing through or being detained in transit countries. Thus, this system of returns, financed in part by the EU, represents nothing more than a new manifestation of an old form of control.

Pécoud states that "the EU effectively relies on the IOM, especially when it comes to externalizing border control" (2018, p. 1626). In approaching a case through the lens of postcolonialism, it is important to keep in mind how a racial hierarchy can be relevant to understanding the power relations of the system in place. In this case, the majority of migrants expelled from Algeria to Niger, and subsequently repatriated to their countries of origin from Niger, are from West Africa and the Sahel region (IOM, 2022). These returns have racial implications: migrants who are mostly black are being returned from a country that is mostly Arab during their journey to reach a continent that is believed to be mostly white. In this sense, this work of expelling migrants from Algeria so that they do not reach Europe, or because they pose a "threat" or a "problem" to the Algerian authorities, can be considered a form of racialized border control (Ashutosh and Mountz, 2011, p. 35).

According to various international NGOs, and as confirmed by our fieldwork, expulsions from Algeria are mostly of black people from African countries south of the Sahara and involve numerous cases of ill-treatment and torture in violation of human rights (Amnesty International, 2018; Lecadet, 2017). Many of the people are deported while working or while at home. For example, Mohamed, who we spoke to at the Agadez transit centre in Niger, married to an Algerian woman and with a son born in Algeria, was deported without warning when police stopped him on his way to the dentist for a routine visit. He had his papers at home and was not allowed to collect them. His mobile phone was confiscated and he was never able to notify his family of his whereabouts. He rushed to tell his story in the hope that his wife would know he was alive.

Another expellee, Ibrahim, claims that he was caught while working in a construction quarry, where he had been collecting enough money for a week to cross to Europe. The

police arrived and took him and several of his friends away. He claims that they were treated 'like animals', crammed into the buses and convoys that took them to the middle of the desert. These testimonies are neither anecdotal nor unique; they are constantly repeated during our fieldwork in Assamaka, Agadez and Niamey, Niger, where most of those expelled from Algeria end up before returning to their countries of origin.

'The Maghreb countries use us as camels. They take us away in trucks like sheep. They tell us, get off here and walk several kilometres, without food, in the middle of the desert, in impossible heat. It is hell'. (Daouda, Assamaka, September 2021)

This case is no exception and demonstrates the cruelty of the Algerian authorities toward black Africans settled either temporarily or permanently in the country. They are forcibly transferred by bus from the north of the country to cities in the south, such as Tamanrasset, and then abandoned in the middle of the desert, 15 kilometres from the border with Niger, at a destination known as 'point 0'. From there, migrants must continue on foot until they reach Niger, where international organisations such as the IOM and international NGOs help those who 'wish' to return to their country.

'We didn't know anything here. We were dropped off at the border and told to walk in the desert. In the desert you can easily get lost, but it's not their problem. If you die, it's not their problem either. We suffered a lot. Trying to get to Europe is not easy'. (Ibrahim, Assamaka, September 2021)

'We arrived and met the IOM staff. They checked us in and provided us with some supplies. We slept in the hangars for the night. There are no rooms. There is no mattress or anything. The IOM gave us some conditions: they asked us; do you want to go back now? We said yes, we were ready to go back to our country'. (Bachir, September 2021)

Thus, without meaningful alternatives, thousands of people are 'invited' to take advantage of assisted voluntary return and begin the process of returning home. However, once in Agadez, return is not immediate. In many cases, migrants are stuck in transit centres in Niger or other countries in the region until bureaucratic processes are carried out and resources become available for them to return, either by land or by plane. The nature of this interaction raises concerns about the interests behind the supposed

'voluntary' nature of this return, which only occurs after forced expulsion from Algeria. For this reason, the role of the IOM in this process should be questioned. While, on the one hand, it is true that the organisation carries out protection work for vulnerable people, on the other hand, it also pushes people who have no other alternative to a return circuit that is the opposite of 'voluntary'.

'I was forced to leave. It is not a voluntary return, because it is voluntary when you want to do it, but when you are forced, it is no longer voluntary. When you arrive at the IOM, they ask you: do you want to go home, yes or no? If you say yes, IOM takes care of you, which is what happened in my case, but if you say no, they don't take care of you'. (Joseph, Agadez, September 2021)

The IOM acts in a dual humanitarian role, helping and accompanying migrants in the middle of the desert, but urging them to return in order to assist them (Moreno-Lax, 2017). However, the IOM has neither legitimacy nor competence to act if the migrant does not agree to the 'voluntary' return, as this would go directly against the freedom of movement of people. Therefore, they hide behind the 'voluntariness' of the return to act, even if it is questionable (Encinas, 2016).

'Despite their discourse, despite the fact that they say they are an organisation for migration, unfortunately, they are against migration. Although they say they are a humanitarian organisation, when you are a migrant wandering around the city and you knock on the door of the IOM and ask for water, food or shelter, they don't receive you. They only do so if you fit the profile of migrant they are looking for, which is someone who is discouraged or someone who has been forcibly repatriated and is now willing to return to their country. They will say it's voluntarily, but deep down it's against their will'. (Tcherno Boulama, Alternative Espace Citoyen, Niamey, March 2019)

In fact, there are those who do not want to adhere to the "voluntary" returns and who, therefore, may try to cross again or may try to return to their country of origin by their own means. In both cases, most will try to work informally in some Nigerian cities and stay in the ghettos, informal shelters on the desert route where migrants wait to continue their

journey, either to Libya or Algeria and also, although less frequently to return to their country.

The IOM, in collaboration with Niger, where the whole system of border containment and externalization has been set up in the most effective way for European interests, offers help to migrants only if they decide to return (Puig, 2020). The IOM itself, through the former head of mission in Niger in 2015, to the question on whether Europe was taking its borders to countries like Niger replies:

"Yes, a European minister recently said so when he returned to his country after being here. They asked him: why did you visit Niger? And he answered: because it is our neighbor, symbolically speaking. It is clear, yes."

For its part, the EU, through its ambassador in Niger, denies this with a speech about "common interests" between countries.

"I am often asked, when I speak of an agreement between equals, Madam Ambassador, what is an agreement between equals when one of the partners comes with billions of euros and the other is probably the last country on the planet. I think the answer is that the agreement has to be based on common interests, values and commitments".

In this framework of assumption and denial of the discourse on the externalization of borders, it is also important to note that assisted voluntary returns are only one of the axes established in Niger to contain migration, but there are others, also implemented with the collaboration of the IOM. Among them, we find information campaigns for migrants on the dangers they may encounter during their journeys, which for some is a form of deterrence of migration (Geiger and Pécoud, 2020) or also the promotion of a paradigm of development and migration with a will to sedentarize people, i.e., to finance cooperation projects to prevent people from moving (Lemberg-Pedersen, 2019; Stock et al. 2019). Although these lines of action are not part of the focus of this article, it is important to take them into account when analysing IOM as a powerful actor in an unequal system where assisted voluntary returns operate as a form of control and a crucial source of information on mobility.

In this sense, Pécoud argues that it is necessary to address IOM's role as the main producer of knowledge on migration management (2017). He claims that the organization functions as a technocratic institution that promotes expert advice on the "management" of migration. By consistently using the language of "management," IOM frames migration as an issue to be controlled (Lemberg-Pedersen, 2019; Geiger and Pécoud, 2020). IOM's framing of their own mission as 'strengthening policies, operational systems and technical structures for border management' (IOM, 2022) can be viewed in relation to Hall's (1995) argument that colonisation is a system of power represented by knowledge. IOM's knowledge in terms of data and expertise in various countries creates a relationship of dependency with partner countries. Pécoud (2017) argues that IOM's unique position of having knowledge about the interests and preferences of both EU and North African and Sahelian countries makes it difficult for states on both sides of the Mediterranean not to cooperate with the organisation. IOM thus has a strong influence on countries' border management, which means that it plays a crucial role in promoting assisted voluntary returns as the best solution for migration management (Andrijasevic and Walters, 2010).

Although IOM has no mandate to create policy within countries, and although it does not use hard power, its extensive knowledge and its role as an expert on migration place the organization in a powerful position to influence the management of people and borders. In this sense, IOM's management of assisted voluntary returns can be interpreted as a system of power designed by and to serve the interests of states, mostly European, but also African, as in the case of Niger, and not the interests of migrants.

8. Conclusions and reflections

Throughout this article, we have analysed the complex and multifaceted nature of IOM's action on the Algeria-Niger border. Since scaling up its operations in the region, especially since 2016, IOM has acted as a powerful actor within what can be conceived as a neo-colonial EU dynamic with the most impoverished country, Niger. IOM uses conditional aid to migrants in the form of assisted return of migrants. These returns are intended to contribute to the reduction of the number of people arriving on European shores from an operational point of view and also as a deterrent, i.e. as a warning to navigators for would-be migrants. In addition, they serve to expand IOM's information on

the profiles of migrants who travel with the ultimate aim of being able to establish the traceability of people on the move. Both objectives are based on relations of structural inequality that serve the interests of states, especially European ones, and that are sustained on inequalities derived from (neo)colonialism, which aggravate and reproduce this system, bringing more knowledge about migration to those already in power. In doing so, they also act against the interests of people on the move, whom IOM helps to return to their countries of origin on a questionably "voluntary" basis.

By funding IOM projects involving assisted voluntary returns, the EU effectively prevents migrants who could potentially cross the Mediterranean from doing so. In this way, AVR can be understood as a use of soft power, an updated form of traditional colonialism that, through supposed aid and protection framed with a humanitarian purpose, contributes to strengthening borders, externalising them and, on top of that, expanding the expertise of the organisation and, therefore, of states involved, in the field of migration.

In this sense, IOM serves as an example of how neocolonialism can be the regeneration of colonial structures by new means. IOM's role in this mobility is related to the perpetuation of African postcolonial borders, in this case, those drawn through the middle of the Sahara, with all the repercussions entailed for the people who try to cross them.

In short, this article questions what interests are being prioritised by the International Organization for Migration and how (neo)colonial logics of power are applied in the governance of migration in general and in the case of the Algeria-Niger border in particular. We have noted some relevant issues related to the provision of aid conditional on return and the racialized securitisation of migration controls, but there are still other interesting aspects to investigate, such as the more specific relations between Niger and Algeria on migration governance and the role that the EU plays in these relations, or delving into Algeria's bilateral agreements with EU countries on this issue. While literature already exists on some of these aspects, it deserves and needs to be expanded through further research.

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