

LIMEN

Journal of the International Network for Immigration Research

7–8 (2023/1–2)



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Frontispiece:

Warning sign near the US-Mexico border, Arizona. Photo: shutterstock.com

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Lectori Salutem!

When we launched Limen as the journal of the Migration Research Institute (MRI) in 2020, our main goal was to increase the number of our English-language publications to support the internationalization of the institute. In the past four years, we met and collaborated with numerous leading scholars of immigration studies and its related disciplines. Their contributions not only increased the relevance and academic merit of Limen, but also helped us to build a network which can give a new impetus to our activities.

In November 2023, MRI and four other research centers established the International Network for Immigration Research (INIR). The members of INIR consider immigration a topic that should be assessed with a multifaceted approach that takes into account both the benefits and the challenges. The members of the network share the principle that host countries are sovereign nation states with the right to pursue and enforce their chosen immigration policies that reflect the perspectives of their societies. Instead of merely making normative declarations based on an ideologically driven approach dominated by a strong humanitarian agenda, member organizations address the political, social, economic, and security considerations of immigration in order to develop realistic, long-lasting and responsible policy on this crucial issue.

To further their aims, the members of INIR decided to form an international advisory board for Limen that will serve as a publishing platform for multidisciplinary research and scholarship on migration and its related phenomena. In this double issue, the experts of INIR are elaborating on topics that were raised at the first joint workshop held by the network in Budapest in 2023. The timely issues covered include a rethinking of the international asylum system, the instrumentalization of migration, the shifts in the political preferences of the Hispanic population of the United States, and the challenges posed by immigration and integration in France.

Budapest, 28. 06. 2024

Viktor MARSAI PhD
Executive Director
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The Gateway or the Bastion? Tunisia's role in stemming the flow of Europe-bound migration

Sára Kmeckó

Abstract

A research team from the Migration Research Institute carried out fieldwork in October 2023 in Malta, Italy and Tunisia in order to gain a better understanding of the intensity of migratory pressure on the Central Mediterranean migration route. This analysis presents the findings from the Tunisian part of the fieldwork. It offers an overview of the traditional external markets of Tunisian labour, and it touches on past eras when Tunisia served as host to western guest labourers. The analysis then surveys the development of irregular migration from Tunisia to Europe, along with the cooperation between the North African country and the European Union on issues of migration. It discusses the main characteristics of Tunisia's migration policies and the changes that occurred in the wake of the post-2011 democratisation processes. Finally, it covers key data about irregular migration originating from Tunisia.

Keywords: Tunisia, European Union, migration, Central Mediterranean, gatekeeper states

Tunisian guest workers in Europe, European guest workers in Tunisia

Gaining independence from France in 1956, Tunisia has been a sender country in global migration. The primary external labour markets of Tunisia were traditionally Libya and EU member states, while the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and North America presented their secondary markets.¹ In the 1960s, the North African country signed bilateral treaties with multiple Western European countries (including France, Germany, Italy,² and the Netherlands), which

¹ AWAD – SELIM 2015, 1.

² Tunisian workers in Italy were clustered primarily in Sicily. Their mobility can be considered one of the early waves of international migration to Italy. Tunisian workers first appeared on the economically backward island in the 1960s. During the same period, Sicily's population migrated

allowed Tunisian citizens visa-free entry and ease of seeking employment. As the Tunisian economy was unable to provide employment for a significant part of the labour force that was expanding with the country's population explosion, the state supported the international migration of Tunisian workers, especially because remittances contributed significantly to the livelihood of family members who stayed at home. The situation was also advantageous politically for its partial amelioration of socio-economic tensions.³

It is worth noting that the migration of foreign workers was not unilateral: Tunisia was also targeted by large numbers of workers from within and outside Europe. Between the 1880s and 1960s, several hundreds of thousands of Italian guest labourers found employment in Libya and Tunisia. In the 1930s, Tunisia was host to nearly 100,000 Italian citizens seeking more favourable economic prospects and higher standards of living, albeit their number was down to its third by the early 1960s. The significant drop initially occurred because of French measures targeting the local Italian community (France cited public security as the reason for expropriating Italian-owned public institutions, including schools and hospitals, without any compensation to the previous owners), then the decisions dictated by the politics of “decolonisation” in the newly independent Tunisia.⁴

Apart from Italians, Tunisia also hosted significant numbers of French, Libyan, and Algerian citizens.⁵ Thanks to a flourishing tourism industry, then the economic liberalisation unfolding in the wake of the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP) forced on the country by the World Bank and the IMF in the 1980s, Tunisia – like Morocco – was attracting increasing numbers of highly qualified European workers.⁶

The beginnings of irregular migration from Tunisia

The changes unfolding in European visa policies and border control in the wake of the ratification of the Schengen Agreement redirected highly qualified Tunisian

to the northern provinces of Italy in search of better jobs and higher standards of living. Out of Sicily's population of nearly five million today, 20,000 are of Tunisian origin who constitute the largest non-European local community on the island. FLERI 2022, 624 – 627.

³ HERBERT 2016, 3–4; DE BEL-AIR 2016, 1.

⁴ FAURI – STRANGIO 2020, 447–454, 457–459; FLERI 2022, 633–635.

⁵ NATTER 2023, 681.

⁶ It is hard to determine the precise number of European guest workers in Tunisia because many are staying in the country on a tourist visa. They likely number more than the data in official statistics suggest. NATTER 2023, p. 681.

citizens working abroad towards the labour markets of the wealthy Persian Gulf states. Nevertheless, Tunisians continued to be attracted to the favourable economic opportunities in Europe despite the restrictions placed on legal migration to the EU.⁷ The beginnings of irregular Tunisian migration to Europe can be attributed to the entrepreneurial eye of the drugs and arms trafficking networks active in the country's less developed, typically southern regions. Tunisian demand made smugglers spot an opportunity to diversify into human trafficking between Morocco and Spain, Tunisia and Italy, as well as Libya and Italy. Tunisia's illicit traders, who also cultivated close contacts with the Italian mafia, set up illegal migrant routes mainly between the Cap Bon peninsula in the north and Sicily, and between the central and southern governorates and the Pelagie Islands.⁸ The operation of the networks was aided by numerous local fishermen and boatmen whose excellent knowledge of the terrain helped deliver significant numbers of migrants to Italian shores. Although the services were primarily used by Tunisian citizens, the routes also enjoyed regional popularity as evidenced by the appearance of Moroccan and Algerian migrants.⁹ Since the Tunisian government showed only moderate interest in the situation, no real progress was made in stemming the flow of irregular migration from Tunisia to Italy.

Although in the beginning the illegal migration routes connecting North African states with the southern countries of Europe were utilised primarily by citizens of the former French colonies, by the beginning of the millennium the number of Sub-Saharan Africans crossing through there also grew significantly.¹⁰ This phenomenon made visible the inadequacies of the border security architecture of the region, as well as signalling that the area had become a migration transit zone.¹¹

It is worth noting, however, that at the same time the number of Sub-Saharans staying legally in Tunisia also started to grow. The growing presence was due on the one hand to the attraction of the network of newly established private universities in Tunisia, and on the other the temporary, 2003–2014 relocation of the headquarters of the African Development Bank (est. 1964) from Ivory Coast's Abidjan to Tunis. Large numbers of students from Sub-Saharan countries such as Ivory Coast, Guinea, Mali, Niger, and Senegal came to study at the new private universities under visa waiver programmes. Some of them found positions in different branches of Tunisia's informal sector over time. The relocation of the African Development

⁷ DE BEL-AIR 2016, 2.

⁸ The islands of Lampedusa, Lampione and Linosa.

⁹ HERBERT 2016, 3–4.

¹⁰ TRIANDAFYLLIDOU – MAROUKIS 2012, 33.

¹¹ HANLON – HERBERT 2015, 9.

Bank headquarters to Tunis due to the civil war in Ivory Coast also involved the temporary resettling of several thousand highly qualified Sub-Saharan employees and their staff.¹² They were considered guests under President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali's regime (1987–2011) that eased their arrival in Tunisia.¹³

Tunisia and the externalisation of European border control: successes and failures

Sensing the migration pressure from North Africa, southern European states, and Italy in particular, tried to strengthen cooperation with Tunisia and Libya. Tunisian president Ben Ali was open to expanding collaboration on migration issues in exchange for adequate political and financial support. Italy and Tunisia signed numerous bilateral treaties covering, among others, readmission agreements on illegal Tunisian citizens and third country nationals (TCN) in Italy, along with joint marine patrols by the two states. Similar to Morocco, Tunisia made human trafficking a criminal offense in 2004, and Tunisian authorities started taking more decisive action against trafficking networks operating in the country.¹⁴ Some “draconic”¹⁵ clauses of the amended law came under heavy criticism from human rights organisations, but the new immigration law was favourable to European countries and stayed in effect. The law strengthened the international legitimacy of the regime, and it gave the president a tool for even tighter surveillance¹⁶ of Tunisia's population in the vein he did with Tunisians employed in Western Europe. Supporting Tunisians in finding employment abroad, the state simultaneously exerted major efforts to monitor the Tunisian diaspora in western countries through a network controlled by the president's party. Within the framework of the 1995 Euro-Mediterranean Partnership Tunisia and European states agreed that the struggle against religious extremism is a “shared security interest.” Thus, the issue of battling Islamism enabled President Ben Ali to also surveil and control the political opposition living abroad.¹⁷

¹² NATTER 2023, 681.

¹³ NATTER 2018, 7.

¹⁴ HERBERT 2016, 4.

¹⁵ The new law penalised irregular migrants and those aiding them with fines of €4,800–60,000 or up to 20 years' imprisonment. Migrants captured could not appeal the authorities' decision, and even vulnerable groups (minors and pregnant women) were not exempt from expulsion. However, the state was unable to enforce its rules in every case, thus the application of the new immigration law remained inconsistent. NATTER 2023, 677, 683.

¹⁶ NATTER 2018, 11.

¹⁷ DINI – GIUSIA 2020, 25–27; DE BEL-AIR 2016, 1.

As a result of the upping of Tunisian efforts combating illegal migration and the establishment of the European border and coast guard agency Frontex, the volume of irregular migration from Tunisia to Italy decreased significantly. However, the Tunisian state failed to tackle the underlying causes of illegal migration, the social disaffection with the structural problems of the economy. One major outstanding issue was the chronic high unemployment that affected youth particularly. This problem could be traced back to the low economic capacity of added value production and the absence of attractive job opportunities.¹⁸

The uprising that broke out in Tunisia in December 2010 had numerous casualties but led to the fall of Ben Ali. The “Jasmine Revolution” also ended the efficient collaboration on migration between Tunisia and Europe whose security interests aligned with the terms of the cooperation. The series of protests that affected major cities but were eventually crushed by law enforcement agencies were provoked by the authoritarian model of government that relied heavily on state security, together with the chronically high unemployment rates that affected 30% of youth. With the collapse of the country’s system of border control, Tunisia could no longer pay much attention to curbing irregular migration targeting Europe. Many exploited the situation. In the first days of 2011, 48,000 irregular migrants were caught at Italian shores. There were 28,000 Tunisian citizens among them.¹⁹ The situation was further aggravated by the Libyan conflict that started in February 2011, resulting in the mass exodus of hundreds of thousands of expatriate workers, a portion of whom joined irregular migration flows heading towards Europe. According to estimates by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), during this period 722,000 expat workers departed from the western Tripolitania region of the oil-rich North African country. Due to geographical proximity, 313,000 of them left for Tunisia.²⁰ With the escalation of the Libyan situation, Tunisia also started receiving Libyan refugees, although no precise data concerning them is available to date.²¹

¹⁸ HERBERT, 2016, 4–5.

¹⁹ HERBERT 2022a, 6.

²⁰ The remaining crowd of 409,000 fled to Egypt, Niger and Chad. BOUBAKRI 2024, 112.

²¹ Their numbers are estimated between 8,000 and 800,000. The 2014 census recorded a mere 8,772 Libyan citizens in Tunisia, but the official data is far from reflecting the actual situation as most Libyans are staying in the country either illegally or on a tourist visa. Even conservative estimates put the number at half a million people at least, while other estimates talk about the presence of one or even 1.8 million. For geopolitical and financial reasons, Tunisian governments have not attempted to administratively settle the stay of Libyan refugees in Tunisia. On the one hand, the government’s interests dictate maintaining cordial ties with both Libyan governments. On the other, a significant group of the Libyans who settled down in Tunisia made financial contributions with substantial investments in various sectors. All of this helped Tunisian society to

Changing migration policies in Tunisia

Tunisia has traditionally considered itself a sender country of migrants, regardless of the long period in its history when they hosted significant numbers of foreigners, including many guest labourers. This situation remained unchanged by the 2011 ‘Arab Spring’ and its subsequent events, even though from the perspective of migration these strengthened the transit or receiver character of North African states. Unlike Tunisia, the other states in the region were spurred by regional processes to prominently feature migration as a problem on their political agenda. This was also manifest in their legislative processes.

Egypt ratified its ten-year strategy for curbing irregular migration in 2016.²² The strategy includes severe penalties, and the strict measures have proved effective so far, although it is uncertain how well the country that admitted 10 million migrants and refugees can keep its commitments in the future. The refugees and migrants in Egypt place a massive burden on the North African country’s social care system.²³

Morocco’s King Mohammed VI articulated in 2013 the goal of developing a comprehensive immigration policy that takes an integrated approach to interpreting migration and asylum. Executed through several steps, reforms serving to increase the international prestige and assert the geopolitical interests of the country also included the 2014 National Immigration and Asylum Policy, a strategic document that was the first of its kind for the country.²⁴ However, the monarchy’s tendency to proceed with caution is reflected in the fact that important elements of the reforms can only be executed by royal decree, thus they can be revoked at any time. In return, it has been possible to keep sensitive issues off the political agenda.²⁵

Tunisia to this day has not produced a similar government decision, although one of the outcomes expected from the democratisation processes²⁶ that started in

view them as “brothers” and “guests” of the country despite the Libyans’ lack of any official legal status. NATTER 2018, 7, 12; NATTER 2023, 681; KARASPASAN 2015; ROMAN – PASTORE 2018, 11.
²² SAYFO 2023, 5.

²³ MARSAL – N. RÓZSA 2023, 11–13.

²⁴ TÁRIK – TÓTH 2023, 3–4.

²⁵ NATTER 2023, 684–687.

²⁶ President Kais Saied has dismissed several prime ministers since his 2020 inauguration, and he first suspended, then dismissed parliament. In summer 2022, he expanded his presidential powers through the amendment of the 2014 constitution, which allowed him to set political directions more firmly. Several opposition politicians were arrested at the same time.

2011 and thus far have produced only dubious results was the development of the country's first national strategy on migration that would also consider humanitarian perspectives. The work begun in 2012 with the involvement of the European Union and NGOs was slowed down considerably by political factors both internal and foreign, and by today it has essentially stalled. Developing a unified strategy was complicated by the involvement of multiple actors in the document preparation process, unlike in previous times. On the one hand, lack of internal cooperation prevented post-2011 governments from coming up with a unified vision on the issue. Officials viewed the phenomenon of migration in general through different lenses, nor did they share a perspective about the relative ratios of related security risks and exploitable opportunities. In addition, the development of a national strategy was hindered by Tunisia's rejection of European Union expectations of the country taking on the task of guarding Europe's external borders. Adjusting to social expectations, post-2011 Tunisian leaders objected to becoming a gatekeeper state.²⁷ Rejecting these European efforts is a cornerstone of the migration-related mentality of democratically elected Tunisian governments whose position also reflects the attitude of Tunisian society.²⁸ It is important to note that while prior to 2011 migration – particularly irregular migration – was not a subject of domestic political debates, the situation has changed considerably since 2022.

The European Union and Tunisia signed a strategic treaty²⁹ in 2023 which also touched on migration, among other issues. The EU made no secret of its intention to make Tunisia a defender of its external borders in exchange for the € 1 billion financial support granted to the country suffering from an economic crisis. However, Tunisia would be unable to develop completely effective border controls even with a clever utilization of the promised financial support. On the one hand, their priorities reflect Tunisia's unfavourable social and economic situation that differs significantly from that of Europe. On the other, there is an *ab ovo* rejection of the gatekeeper role, accompanied by a questionable willingness to cooperate.³⁰ A significant part of Tunisian society believes that by signing the agreement in the summer Kais Saied only wanted to strengthen the legitimacy of his power, and the European financial support negotiated for is a tool serving this goal.³¹ The

²⁷ NATTER 2022, 2, 6–14; DINI – GIUSIA 2020, 42–48.

²⁸ Personal interview with a Tunisian sociologist and a local family, Tunis, October 2023.

²⁹ DE LEO 2023.

³⁰ It is a widely held view that Tunisian authorities have always turned a partial blind eye to the irregular migration of Tunisian citizens to Europe. The departure of mostly undereducated, typically young men lowered the chances of mass protests breaking out for social disaffection. Personal interview with a Tunisian sociologist, Tunis, October 2023.

³¹ Interview with a Tunisian sociologist, Tunis, October 2023.

difficulties of cooperation between the parties are indicated by Tunisia's September barring of the entry of the delegation from the foreign affairs committee of the European Parliament to continue its factfinding mission about the democratic transformations in the country.³² Furthermore, in early October the president rejected EU financial support because he believed it violated the agreement signed in July.³³ Against the initial hopes attached to the pact, the number of irregular migrants arriving at the shores of Italy from Tunisia has been growing steadily since 2019. What is more, in 2023 more people came from Tunisia than from neighbouring Libya.³⁴ It is thus conceivable that the two parties will be forced to renegotiate the agreement in the future.

Growing intensity of migration originating from Tunisia since 2020

The Covid-19 pandemic and the severe economic crisis it created, followed by the war in Ukraine, deepened the country's festering political, economic and social problems. As a result, the volume of irregular migration targeting Europe was amplified once more. Thus, irregular migration originating from Tunisia can be traced back to demographic explosion,³⁵ the absence of structural reforms in the economy³⁶ and the related high rates of unemployment³⁷, along with the long-standing fundamental reliance of the regime on internal security and intelligence services³⁸ (*mukhabharat* model of the state). Due to Tunisia's unresolved economic problems, the volume of irregular migration to Europe has been growing steadily since 2020.

2022 produced a new record in the number of irregular migrants arriving in Italy, higher than the data from 2011: while the migration wave provoked by the "Jasmine Revolution" saw 27,982 Tunisian citizens reach Italian shores illegally, the number grew to 32,371 in 2022. It is worth noting that while Tunisian irregular migrants

³² JONES 2023.

³³ MIDDLE EAST MONITOR 2023.

³⁴ MARTINI – MAGERISI 2023.

³⁵ Tunisia's population grew three-fold between 1960 and 2022, from 4 to 12 million. WORLD BANK 2022.

³⁶ ELDIN – SALIH 2013, 187.

³⁷ Due to the low rates of Tunisia's economic ability to produce added value, there were no attractive job prospects for young people. This led to continuing high unemployment rates of 13–16% that affected primarily the young generations. IMF 2010.

³⁸ LUTTERBECK 2015, FERWAGNER 2009, 70–71.

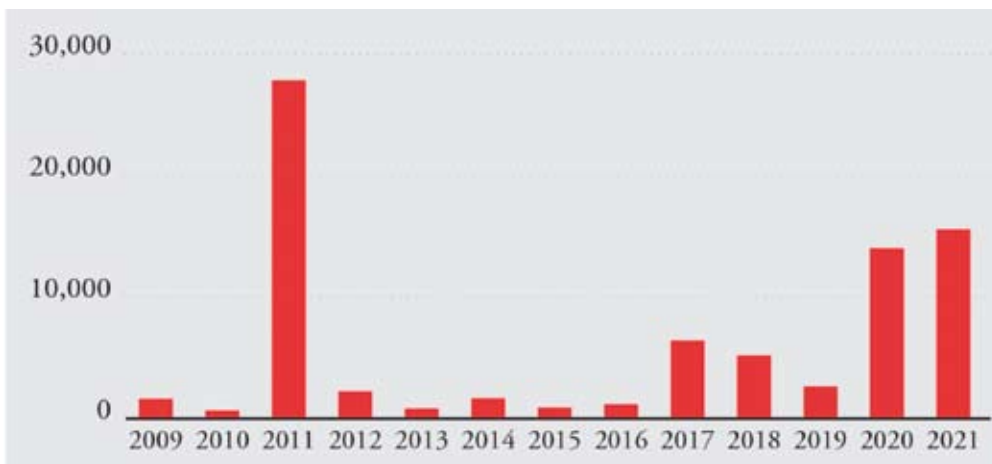


Figure 1. Irregular border crossings into Europe by Tunisian migrants on the Central Mediterranean route, 2009–2021.

arrived in Europe mainly on the Central Mediterranean route, by the end of 2022 more and more attempted to enter the European Union following a route in the West Balkans. Authorities captured a record 6,782 Tunisian migrants on this route in 2022.³⁹ However, after the Serbian government's November 2022 introduction of visa requirements for the citizens of multiple countries, the migration pressure on the West Balkans route eased considerably. The decision also had an impact on the number of irregular migrants from Tunisia.⁴⁰

The strengthening of the flow of irregular migration from the North African country can also be seen in the growing numbers of irregular migrants captured on the coastline by Tunisian security and defence forces. While the number of people caught was a mere 3,522 in 2017, in 2021 it was up to 23,328, then hitting between an estimated 29,732 and 38,713 migrants in 2022.⁴¹

The increase in the intensity of irregular migration from Tunisia also continued in 2023. The Central Mediterranean route saw significant growth in traffic, and irregular border crossing incidents rose to levels not seen since 2016. In the first 11 months of 2023, Frontex reported 152,211 irregular border crossings, a 61% year-on-year increase from 2022.⁴² As a consequence of the growing traffic along the Central Mediterranean route, the tendency for irregular migrants landing in Italy has also shown growth. According to UNHCR data, 85,282 irregular migrants

³⁹ ABDERRAHIM 2023, 13–14.

⁴⁰ FRONTEX 2023b, 16.

⁴¹ ABDERRAHIM 2023, 13–14.

⁴² FRONTEX 2023a.

came to Italy by sea in the first ten months of 2022. The same period in 2023 saw a 69% increase, with 144,098 arrivals. The breakdown of the 144,098 irregular migrants by nationality reveals that after Syrians and Bangladeshis, Tunisians were the third largest group to arrive in Italy illegally, with a total of 16,699 people.⁴³

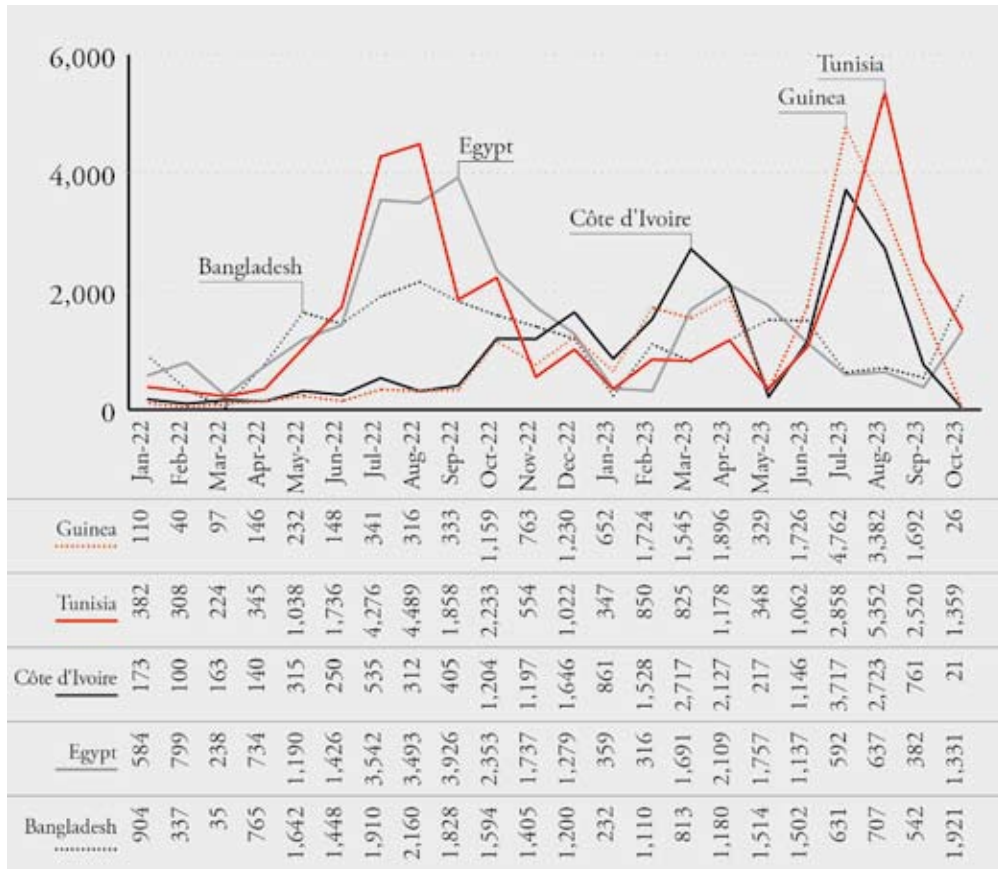


Figure 2. Most common nationalities of arrivals by sea to Italy (January 2022–October 2023) (UNHCR 2023)

Fuelled by chronically unresolved economic and social problems, the growing inclination to migrate is indicated by the fact that in the first 11 months of 2023 the Tunisian coast guard intercepted nearly 70,000 irregular migrants heading for Italy.⁴⁴ This figure is significantly higher than data from 2022. The increasing intensity of migration from Tunisia also signals the poor effectiveness of the

⁴³ UNHCR 2023.

⁴⁴ FRANCE24 2023.

agreement signed in July 2023 by the European Union and the North African country on issues including migration.

Furthermore, it is important to emphasise that an increasingly high percentage of irregular migrants leaving for Europe from Tunisia are not Tunisian, but Sub-Saharan in origin. This further affirms Tunisia's status as a transit country. According to UNHCR data, the country of origin of migrants arriving in Italy by sea between January 2022 and October 2023 can be broken down as, 65%, or 93,090 from Tunisia, while the rest is divided between Libya (30%) and Turkey (5%).

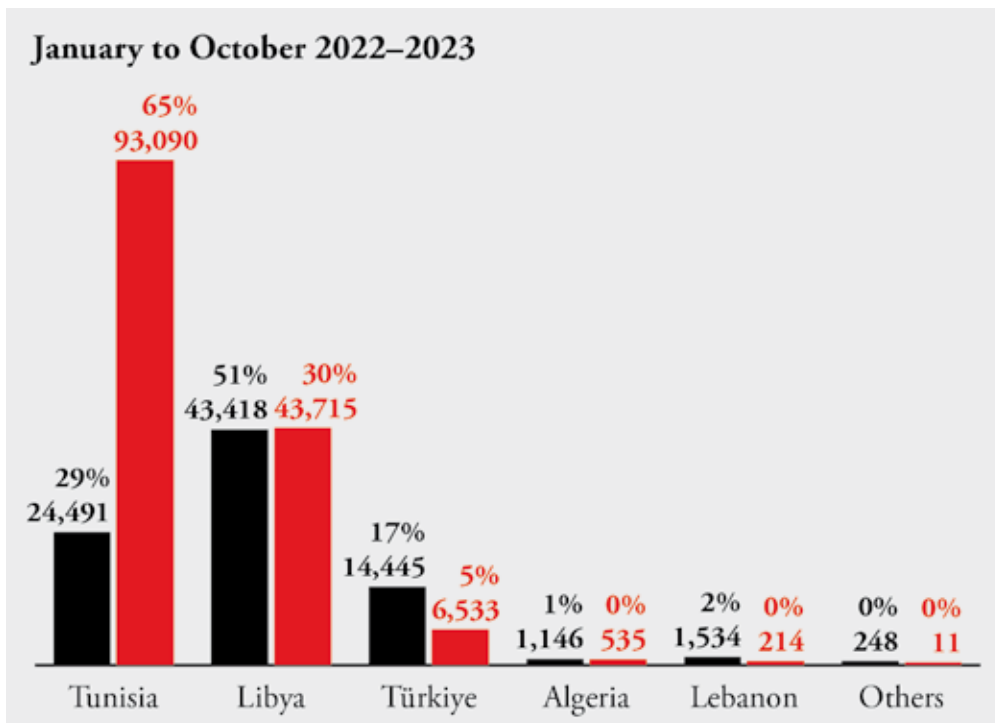


Figure 3. Country of origin for irregular migrants arriving in Italy by sea (January 2022 – October 2023).

The proportion of foreigners among irregular migrants intercepted in Tunisia was 31% in 2021,⁴⁵ 59% in 2002, and as high as 78% by 2023.⁴⁶ The last of these figures may lead us to the probably mistaken conclusion that the desire to migrate has been decreasing among Tunisian citizens. A more likely explanation is that Tunisian authorities exert significantly greater efforts at the exit points of illegal migration to intercept their own citizens, as opposed to citizens from the Sub-

⁴⁵ ABDERRAHIM 2023, 15.

⁴⁶ FRANCE24 2023.

Saharan region, mostly Guinea and Ivory Coast.⁴⁷ In essence, the practice reflects President Kais Saied's conviction that the growing presence of Sub-Saharanans poses a national security risk for Tunisia, which needs to be tackled with both diplomatic and military tools.⁴⁸

Conclusions

Despite Tunisia increasingly playing a triple role (sending, transit and receiver country) in the Euro-African migration system, it continues to define its situation as a sending state. Partly to consolidate their own power, the leaders of the North African country that gained independence from France in 1956 lent considerable support to Tunisian citizens seeking work abroad, because this helped ease socio-economic tensions. However, the tightening of European visa policies and border control in the 1990s had negative impacts on the former colonies of North Africa, which led to the establishment of irregular migration routes from North Africa to Europe in the same decade. The routes that also cross into parts of Tunisian territory continue to exist, but their traffic and user base have changed significantly in the past three decades. In the period since 2011 Tunisia and the European Union has had varying degrees of success in managing the flow of irregular migration to Europe, while a mass of people increasing in size and the range of nationalities attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea in search of a better life. The European Union considers the fortification of North African states as gatekeepers a key to success in fighting the increasingly urgent problem of irregular migration. However, Tunisia's effective participation in the scheme is currently hindered by multiple factors.

⁴⁷ Personal interview with an IOM official, Rome, October 2023.

⁴⁸ ABDERRAHIM 2023, 9.

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