



MALCOLM H. KERR  
CARNEGIE MIDDLE EAST CENTER

**XCEPT**

CROSS-BORDER CONFLICT  
EVIDENCE / POLICY / TRENDS

MARCH 2024

# Tunisia's Transformation Into a Transit Hub: Illegal Migration and Policy Dilemmas

Hamza Meddeb and Fakhreddine Louati



---

# **Tunisia's Transformation Into a Transit Hub: Illegal Migration and Policy Dilemmas**

Hamza Meddeb and Fakhreddine Louati

© 2024 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. All rights reserved.

Carnegie does not take institutional positions on public policy issues; the views represented herein are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of Carnegie, its staff, or its trustees.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without permission in writing from Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center or the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Please direct inquiries to:

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace  
Publications Department  
1779 Massachusetts Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20036  
P: + 1 202 483 7600  
F: + 1 202 483 1840  
CarnegieEndowment.org

Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center  
Emir Bechir Street, Lazariéh Tower  
Bldg. No. 2026 1210, 5th flr.  
Downtown Beirut, P.O.Box 11-1061  
Riad El Solh, Lebanon  
P: + 961 1 99 15 91  
F: + 961 1 99 15 91  
Carnegie-MEC.org

This publication can be downloaded at no cost at [Carnegie-MEC.org](http://Carnegie-MEC.org)

Cover photo: Mohamed Azakir / World Bank.



This material has been funded by UK International Development from the UK government. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.

## Contents

Summary	1
Introduction	3
Tunisia's Migration Conundrum: Policies, Perils, and the Path to Europe	4
The Emergence of a Migration Ecosystem in Sfax	10
Tunisian and European Security Failure and Policy Incoherence	13
Conclusion	18
About the Authors	21
Notes	23



## Summary

Due to structural economic, climate, and social crises in the Sahel, Tunisia has emerged as a key transit point for sub-Saharan African migrants and asylum seekers aiming to reach Europe. This has fueled a migration economy in Tunisia. Caught between Tunisia's attempts to leverage migration to pressure the European Union (EU) on the one hand and the EU's securitization of migration on the other, sub-Saharan African migrants find themselves trapped in a complex web of challenges.

### Key Themes

- Tunisia's transformation into a transit country for migrants from Africa to Europe stems from several significant developments: chronic instability in the Sahel region and resulting waves of out-migration, Tunisia's porous borders, its inconsistent migration policies, the proliferation of violence and xenophobic attitudes in the country, and deteriorating economic conditions.
- Tunisia's migration challenges have been exacerbated by the authorities' failure to develop a comprehensive strategy to manage the presence and movement of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa. Security-centric approaches and short-term tactics have characterized the government's response.
- The rising number of migrants coming to Tunisia with the aim of reaching Europe has driven the creation of a migration ecosystem, with the city of Sfax as its linchpin. Other factors enabling the creation of this system have included local crises in key economic sectors such as fisheries, agriculture, and the informal economy.

## Findings

- The government's failure to develop a coherent and realistic approach to migration has had a particularly destabilizing effect. Bureaucratic hurdles and the absence of legal protections, combined with xenophobic and conspiratorial narratives, threaten to spark periodic violence and human rights abuses, thereby exacerbating the vulnerability of migrants in Tunisia.
- The expansion of the migration economy has led to a process of commercializing irregular Europe-bound departures. Corruption, increasing demand, and economic deterioration are enabling a professional migration industry to become entrenched. A regional development strategy that addresses economic and climate crises would help to thwart the nexus between migration and organized crime.
- Tunisia's use of migration as a geopolitical lever to exert pressure on European countries underscores the limitations of the EU's securitization and its policy of externalizing its border controls.
- The various policy misalignments between Tunisia and Europe, and even among EU member states themselves, are fueling instability and could lead to a humanitarian disaster. Only through a revitalized Europe-Africa strategy emphasizing circular migration, investments, and innovative cooperation can irregular migration be effectively reduced.

## Introduction

Tunisia is at the center of a significant shift in the Mediterranean migration landscape. The country has emerged as a key transit point for sub-Saharan African migrants and asylum seekers from Sudan, Chad, Guinea, Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, and elsewhere aiming to reach Europe.<sup>1</sup> Years of deteriorating political and economic conditions had already compelled Tunisians to migrate.<sup>2</sup> However, in the second half of 2022, sub-Saharan Africans surpassed Tunisians as the largest group migrating to Europe from Tunisia.<sup>3</sup> This trend gained momentum in 2023, consolidating Tunisia's status as a migration hub.

The presence of a large sub-Saharan African population in Tunisia dates to 2015. That year, Tunisia and several sub-Saharan countries scrapped mutual visa programs.<sup>4</sup> However, more recent political transformations in the Sahel and Libya have led to a surge in arrivals. A series of coups d'état in the Sahel, together with the climate crisis and deteriorating living conditions, compelled thousands of people to leave their homelands.<sup>5</sup> A migration agreement signed in 2017 between the Italian government and Libya, supported by the European Union (EU), allocated funds for the establishment of detention centers and the transformation of armed groups into coast guards. This agreement inadvertently steered sub-Saharan migrants toward favoring entry into Tunisia over Libya. Following widespread mistreatment by militias and Libya's descent into conflict in 2019, migrants began entering Tunisia in even larger numbers. Most of these migrants hoped to leave Tunisia for Europe. Additionally, many sub-Saharan migrants already in Tunisia lost their informal jobs due to the COVID-19 pandemic and began to seek opportunities elsewhere. Then, in early 2023, Tunisia's authoritarian president, Kais Saied, delivered a speech laden with "great replacement" conspiracy, echoing sentiments embraced by the European far right.<sup>6</sup> This triggered a surge in violent racism toward Black sub-Saharan Africans living in the country and a corresponding increase in Tunisia-based migrants seeking refuge in Europe.<sup>7</sup>

Tunisian authorities have failed to develop a comprehensive strategy to manage, much less curb, the inflow of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa. Instead, they have resorted to inconsistent policies, repressive measures, and short-term tactics emanating from a security mindset and primarily centered on mass expulsions of migrants and asylum seekers to remote rural or border regions. Moreover, a thriving migration economy, one characterized by agile smuggling networks made up of people seeking to earn a living in a country plagued by systemic economic and climate crises, has taken hold in Tunisia. This migration economy has demonstrated great capacity to meet increasingly diversified demand and adapt to constraints generated by law enforcement. As such, the transition of Tunisia into a transit hub demonstrates the extent to which migration has evolved into an entrenched issue, reflecting the structural challenges within the country, its vulnerability to regional instability, and the broader dynamics of geopolitical destabilization.

## Tunisia's Migration Conundrum: Policies, Perils, and the Path to Europe

Tunisia's evolution into a transit country for sub-Saharan African migrants can be attributed to three primary factors: the absence of a comprehensive migration policy, outdated and inadequate legislation, and a security-oriented approach meant to compensate for the lack of a coherent vision. Despite a tentative democratization process in Tunisia following the ouster of president Zine al-Abidin Ben Ali in 2011, political elites were reluctant to recognize Tunisia's new status as a regional migration destination and avoided modernizing the country's outdated legal framework governing migration. Tunisia has failed to pass a law guaranteeing the right to seek asylum, as mandated by the 2014 constitution and various treaties the country has ratified, such as the African Refugee Convention and the UN Refugee Convention.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, despite the adoption of a law on countering human trafficking in 2016 and another in 2018 with the establishment of the National Committee against Trafficking in Persons, post-2011 governments have been reluctant to implement policies safeguarding migrants from exploitation by employers.<sup>9</sup> Sub-Saharan migrants have remained in a state of legal vulnerability, often exploited as cheap labor in both the informal and formal sectors, without any legal guarantee of residency rights.<sup>10</sup> The lack of legal reform has been further worsened by Saied's restoration of authoritarianism since his power grab in July 2021. He has increasingly depended on the security services to manage migration, preferring informal arrangements and repressive measures.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, legally, migrants in Tunisia remain governed largely by the restrictive and draconian Law 2004–06, a holdover from the Ben Ali era.<sup>12</sup> Stringent enforcement of the law by government agencies has left foreigners vulnerable. Even those who enter Tunisia legally, including students and entrepreneurs, face lengthy waits for residence permits.

Consequently, they encounter multiple obstacles—such as difficulties in opening bank accounts and engaging in other routine activities—that hinder their ability to lead normal lives. Since 2011, this has resulted in a notable 30 percent decrease in the number of sub-Saharan university students, many of whom now choose to relocate from their countries to Morocco in pursuit of higher education.<sup>13</sup> The situation of unauthorized migrants is even more untenable: their lack of residence permits means their mobility is restricted, they have limited access to essential services, and they are vulnerable to exploitation by employers.

The cycle does not end should migrants decide to depart Tunisia legally. The Tunisian government imposes a hefty penalty of 3,000 Tunisian dinars (\$1,000) on individuals who exceed their three-month stay before exiting Tunisian territory.<sup>14</sup> For many sub-Saharan migrants struggling to make ends meet, this sum is exorbitant and compels them to remain in the country illegally. Further compounding the situation is the inconsistency of Tunisia's migration policies. Even as it imposed stringent conditions on residency and departure, Tunisia entered into agreements between 2014 and 2019 that exempted nationals of numerous sub-Saharan countries from visa requirements. This influenced the decision of many sub-Saharan Africans to move to Tunisia. However, migrants who remain in the country for longer than three months find themselves ensnared in a precarious situation.<sup>15</sup>

Several other structural factors have also contributed significantly to the increased flow of migrants transiting through Tunisia. These include persistent poverty and insecurity across several sub-Saharan African states.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, there is a widespread perception that Tunisia serves as a safer transit point to Europe when compared to neighboring Libya or even Algeria.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, Tunisia's inability to prevent Algeria from directing significant numbers of migrants toward the country has also played a pivotal role in shaping migration dynamics in the region.<sup>18</sup> Thousands of sub-Saharan migrants transit through Algeria before reaching Tunisia en route to Europe. Algerian authorities have adopted a security-oriented approach aimed at preventing such migrants from settling in the country.<sup>19</sup> Oftentimes, this takes the form of directing them toward neighboring countries, particularly Niger in the south and Tunisia in the east.<sup>20</sup> Tunisia's reliance on Algeria for natural gas and economic assistance has created an asymmetrical situation in which Tunisia lacks a margin of maneuver and coordination on migration flows with its powerful neighbor and is compelled to manage the influx of migrants independently.

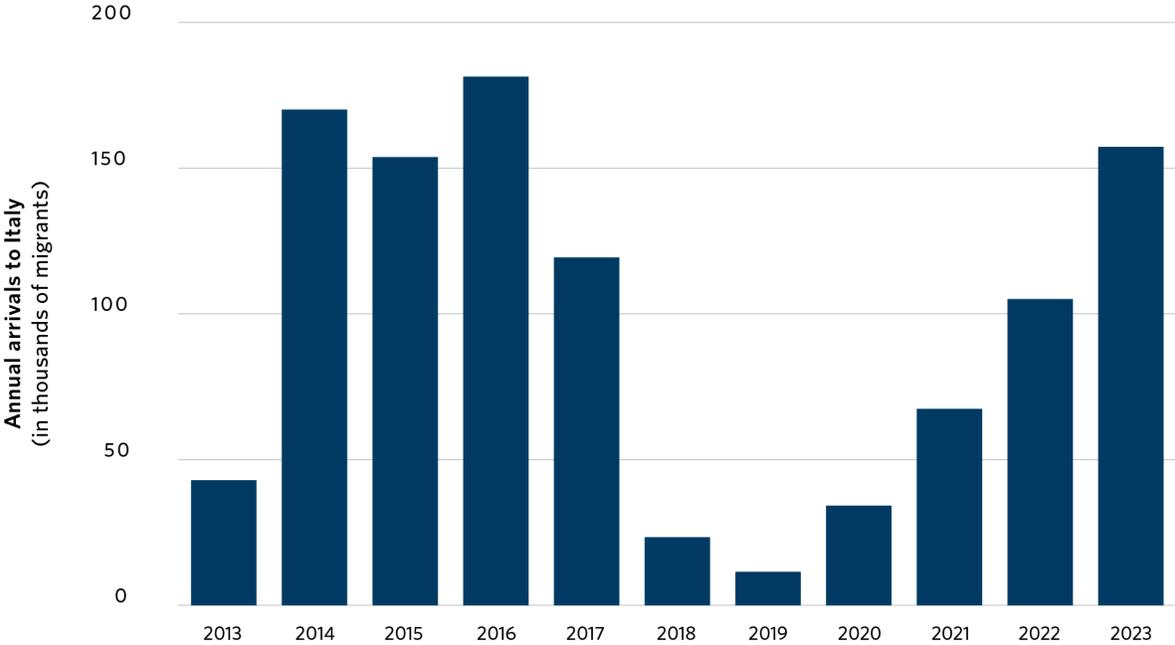
Saied's xenophobic and hateful remarks during a National Security Council meeting on February 21, 2023, sparked a wave of racist violence against Black sub-Saharan migrants, students, and asylum seekers. As the country's financial crisis worsened and Saied's popularity waned, the president decided to scapegoat Black migrants, claiming that "hordes of irregular migrants from sub-Saharan Africa" had entered Tunisia, bringing with them "violence, crime, and unacceptable practices."<sup>21</sup> He also propagated a conspiracy theory, asserting that this influx was part of a criminal plan aimed at "changing the demographic makeup" of Tunisia and transforming it into "just another African country that doesn't belong to the Arab and Islamic nations any more."<sup>22</sup> The resulting combination of roundups by security forces and xenophobic attacks by a section of Tunisian society prompted many sub-Saharan migrants to illegally migrate to Europe.<sup>23</sup>

**Map 1: Migration Routes From Tunisia to Italy**



The figures are telling. In 2017, just before the signing of a security-focused migration agreement between Libya and Italy, the former accounted for 91 percent of arrivals to Italian shores. This had made Libya the primary destination for most African migrants. However, since then, Tunisia has emerged as a favored exit point for migrants along the central Mediterranean route. By 2019, only 36 percent of sea crossings departed from Libya, while 32 percent originated from Tunisia. In 2020, 43 percent of sea arrivals to Italy originated from Tunisia, followed closely by 38 percent from Libya.<sup>24</sup> The trend continued, reaching a high in 2023, with 61 percent of arrivals to Italy originating from Tunisia and 33 percent from Libya.<sup>25</sup> Overall figures have also increased. The deterioration of the economic situation in North Africa and the Sahel due to the COVID-19 pandemic caused a surge in the total number of arrivals to Italy, from 11,500 in 2019 to 157,300 in 2023.<sup>26</sup>

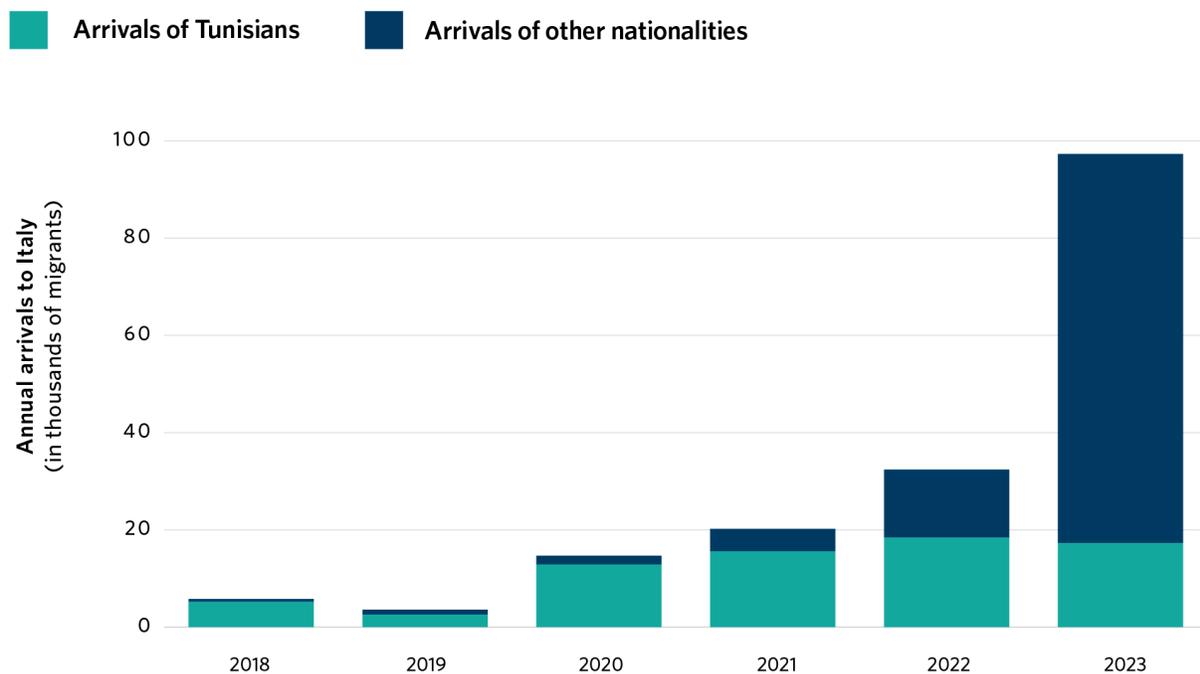
**Figure 1. Annual Arrivals to Italy, 2013-2023**



Source: Data collected by authors based on the UN Refugee Agency Operational Data portal.

With the increase in the number of sea crossings from Tunisia, a new trend emerged: the steady increase in the arrivals of sub-Saharan Africans departing from Tunisia.<sup>27</sup> Of a total of 3,600 migrants who departed from Tunisia in 2019, 2,600 were Tunisians. The proportion declined in 2022, with 18,400 Tunisians out of a total of 32,400 migrants departing from the country. In 2023, the percentage of Tunisians declined further. Of 97,300 migrants arriving to Italy by sea from Tunisia that year, there were 17,300 Tunisians, representing only 18 percent. Among the total number of arrivals in Italy from all locations in 2023, 12 percent hailed from Guinea, 11 percent from Tunisia, 11 percent from Côte d’Ivoire, 6 percent from Burkina Faso, 4 percent from Mali, and 3 percent from Sudan.<sup>28</sup> The Tunisian Interior Ministry reported intercepting 70,000 migrants in 2023, representing a stark rise from the 31,297 intercepted in 2022. Of this total, 77.5 percent were sub-Saharan migrants, while the remaining 22.5 percent were Tunisians.<sup>29</sup> This marked a notable shift from 2022, when 59 percent were foreign migrants and 41 percent were Tunisians.<sup>30</sup>

**Figure 2. Share of Tunisians in Overall Arrivals From Tunisia to Italy, 2019-2023**



Source: Data collected by authors based on the UN Refugee Agency Operational Data portal.

Much of the surge is attributable to the racial tensions that arose during the spring and summer of 2023.<sup>31</sup> The Tunisian president's xenophobic statements prompted many employers to dismiss irregular migrant workers, leaving them fearful and in hiding. Incidents of violence ensued. On May 22, a group of Tunisians attacked sub-Saharan Africans in Sfax, resulting in the death of a migrant from Benin.<sup>32</sup> Subsequently, clashes erupted on July 2 and again two days later, after a migrant fatally stabbed a Tunisian citizen.<sup>33</sup> In response, the police, supported by residents, detained hundreds of sub-Saharan Africans, some of whom were trying to leave for Europe, and banished them to the Libyan and Algerian borders.<sup>34</sup> According to international humanitarian sources, at least 5,500 migrants have been banished to the Libyan border and 3,000 to the Algerian border since June 2023.<sup>35</sup> Tragically, over one hundred migrants have perished in the Libyan-Tunisian desert.<sup>36</sup>

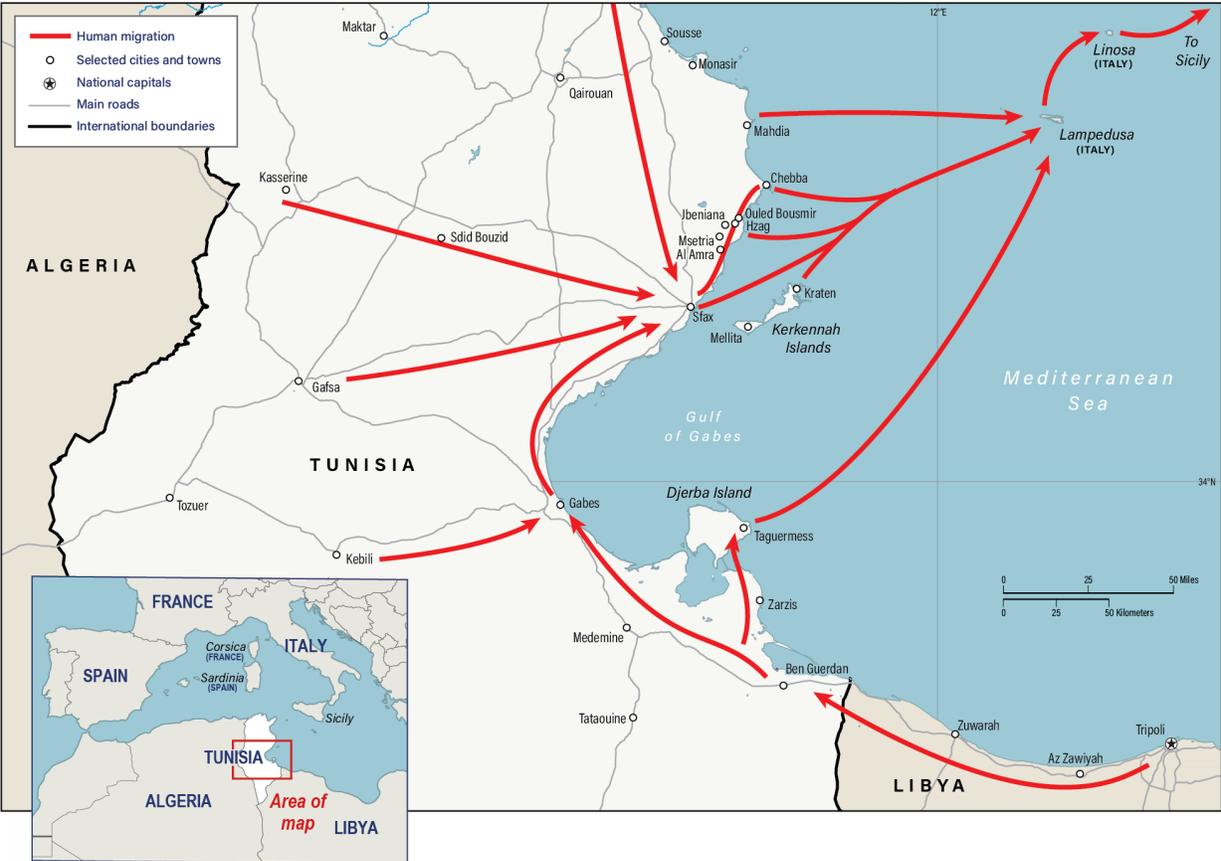
Tunisia has established arrangements with sub-Saharan African countries such as Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, and Guinea, by which the Tunisian authorities waive penalties for unauthorized migrants who opt for repatriation. Nonetheless, the number of individuals accepting repatriation remains low. Of the 7,000 Ivorians registered in Tunisia, only 3,000 agreed to voluntary return, of whom 1,053 have been repatriated.<sup>37</sup> The number of Malians and Guineans repatriated was even smaller.<sup>38</sup> For a significant portion of migrants, illegal migration to Europe remains the preferred choice. Saïed's attacks on sub-Saharan migrants helped spur more such migration.<sup>39</sup> Between mid-July 2023 and the beginning of September, crossings from Tunisia to Italy rose by almost 70 percent, with a record 7,000 migrants arriving on Lampedusa Island in just one forty-eight-hour period on September 12 and 13.<sup>40</sup> Of the total arrivals to Italy in 2023, 43.5 percent took place in July, August, and September, which coincided with the deterioration of security for migrants in Tunisia.<sup>41</sup>

It is unlikely that any of this will change in the near future. Political volatility around Africa's so-called "coup belt" is further undermining state systems across the Sahel and West Africa that were poorly functioning to begin with.<sup>42</sup> The ongoing civil war in Sudan is also generating a migratory wave. It has already displaced 5 million people, of whom an estimated 1 million have traveled abroad.<sup>43</sup> Some have made their way to Tunisia and built smuggling networks for compatriots who have yet to arrive.<sup>44</sup> This trend will most likely intensify as the conflict in Sudan persists. For all these reasons, Tunisia will probably remain a hot spot of migration and transit for years to come.

# The Emergence of a Migration Ecosystem in Sfax

Large-scale human smuggling from Tunisia is not a recent development. What is novel is the emergence of Sfax in southern Tunisia as a central migration hub. Sfax, Tunisia’s second-largest city by population, has historically been known for its economic vibrancy. Through the entrepreneurship and craftsmanship of its residents, the city has sustained thriving economic activity in multiple sectors, including catering, construction, trade, and industry.<sup>45</sup> As Tunisia’s economic situation deteriorated over the past decade and the number of sub-Saharan migrants in the region increased, many sectors began to rely on these migrants as a cost-effective, albeit legally precarious, workforce. The continued economic downturn coupled with the rise of racial tensions sparked the creation of a thriving migration economy in Sfax and its environs, which now offer an example of the progressive industrialization of migration.

Map 2: The Migration Belt in Sfax



The 40-kilometer coastal belt between Sfax and Chebba, a town in eastern Tunisia that lies just 130 kilometers from the Italian island of Lampedusa, is responsible for 75 percent of the boats departing for Europe.<sup>46</sup> Jbeniana, Al Amra, Hzag, Louza, Msetria, Al Agarba, Al Hmaizia, Al Bderna, Sidi Makhlouf, Al Awabed, Ouled Bousmir, and Melloulech are among the small towns and villages along this belt that play various roles in facilitating irregular migration.<sup>47</sup> The emergence of a migratory ecosystem in Sfax and neighboring areas stems from the region's economic crises. Many stakeholders in the agricultural and fishing sectors, traditionally mainstays of the Sfax economy, turned to people smuggling when years of drought, the rising cost of basic foodstuffs, and an inconsistent agricultural pricing policy impoverished them, phenomena paralleled by increasing numbers of sub-Saharan migrants entering the country.<sup>48</sup> What was initially limited in scope, primarily involving the region's youth during the summer season, quickly evolved into a booming year-round business.

Over time, an unspoken agreement developed within Sfax, whereby a tenuous integration of migrants was tacitly accepted and sometimes even encouraged by local residents in exchange for access to cheap labor for entrepreneurs and tenants for landlords. The security services were responsible for controlling irregular migration and maintaining order. However, tensions began to escalate due to the rising number of migrants intercepted at sea and subsequently released in Sfax without financial resources or humanitarian aid. Having lost everything, they found themselves unable to afford rent or sustain themselves, which led many to erect makeshift tents in the city and await the opportunity to migrate again.<sup>49</sup>

This crisis has not only affected the city of Sfax but has also extended to its surrounding areas. For example, many migrants have sought refuge in small towns and villages such as Al Amra and Jbeniana. Sub-Saharan Africans have become readily available agricultural laborers, employed in the olive harvest and other agricultural activities. In turn, they have found cheap shelter in these rural areas, often lodging in sheds or tents pitched in the fields while awaiting opportunities to depart. Consequently, small towns and villages in the Sfax hinterland have become entwined in the logistics of irregular migration.

Throughout 2022, with increasing demand for departures, clandestine workshops for crafting metal boats began cropping up in the Sfax hinterland. This activity intensified in 2023. Many destitute migrants engaged in the manufacturing of these metal boats in exchange for shelter. As demand surged and law enforcement cracked down on rising departures, trafficking networks emerged, dealing in engines stolen or smuggled from Libya. Workplaces and agricultural sheds were repurposed to modify moped engines, adapting them for use in boats. Despite the inherent risks and unreliability of these engines, they were utilized due to soaring demand in a burgeoning migratory market.

The dynamic expansion of the migratory ecosystem has also provided opportunities for certain actors within informal trade networks with Algeria and Libya. The decline in Tunisians' smuggling activities with Libya and Algeria was driven by the economic and security challenges in the former and the stricter regulations imposed by authorities in the latter. Some individuals seized the opportunity to become involved in transporting

migrants from the Algerian and Libyan borders to Sfax. Indeed, Algeria has tacitly allowed the passage of sub-Saharan migrants into Tunisia.<sup>50</sup> Once they cross the Algerian-Tunisian border, many migrants undertake the journey to Sfax on foot, while those who have the financial means pay drivers previously engaged in the informal trade of goods to transport them to their destination.<sup>51</sup> This transportation process also entails moving migrants from their places of residence or concealment to the departure points on the day of the crossings. The engagement of transporters to do so reflects their adaptation to the opportunities arising from irregular migration. By participating, transporters contribute to the development of a migration industry.

The escalating demand for irregular departures and the substantial financial stakes involved have compelled networks to organize themselves more systematically. Typically, a network comprises several individuals with distinct roles. The network leader, often referred to as the kingpin, plays a crucial role but paradoxically remains relatively anonymous.<sup>52</sup> The primary responsibilities of the network leader include scheduling departure dates, authorizing crossings, and ensuring the safety of network operatives. To accomplish these tasks, the leader requires access to critical information regarding the movements of security forces both on land and at sea. Assisting the network leader is an organizer who serves as the main point of contact for all other members of the network and maintains direct communication with recruiters, transporters, smugglers, and hosts. Recruiters within sub-Saharan African communities establish connections both within and outside Tunisia to link potential migrants with the organizer. Social networking platforms such as WhatsApp, Signal, and Messenger are extensively used to establish contacts, disseminate information regarding prices and departure conditions, and coordinate with those crossing the Algerian and Libyan borders. Transporters ferry migrants from the borders to Sfax and designated launch points on the shore.

Additionally, sailors sometimes play a role in the proceedings. Sailors or boat captains may assist in directing vessels, particularly in instances where the cost of the crossing is substantial. However, in most cases, sailors are no longer directly involved in these operations. Since 2021, irregular migrants seem to have shifted away from relying on smugglers and are increasingly engaging in self-smuggling. This trend has led to highly decentralized and irregular departures occurring all along the coastline, resulting in sporadic waves of Tunisians and sub-Saharan migrants arriving on Italian shores. Migrants often rely on GPS technology and basic navigation skills. Typically, smugglers maintain relationships with local authorities, meaning that the transition to self-smuggling is altering migratory dynamics by cutting out the middlemen.<sup>53</sup>

However, self-smuggling entails significant risks—physical, psychological, and financial. Often, boats are overloaded with passengers by organizers in a bid to maximize profits, despite being structurally ill-suited for perilous crossings. Though many migrants complete the journey successfully, others are intercepted, and tragically, the number of those who perish at sea has risen steadily in recent years. According to the International Organization for Migration, the number of migrants and refugees who went missing or lost their lives

while attempting to cross the sea surged from 1,553 in 2021 to 1,417 in 2022, and reached 2,500 in 2023.<sup>54</sup> These figures highlight the significant risks migrants undertake in their endeavors to reach Italian shores, especially amid prevailing securitization measures.

Notably, a distinction is made between Tunisians and sub-Saharan Africans in terms of pricing and safety measures. Tunisians typically pay more, around 5,000 dinars (\$1,500) per person, and cross on safer boats equipped with reliable engines. Sub-Saharan Africans are offered cheaper crossings, around 2,500 dinars (\$800) per person, but with significantly higher risks involved.<sup>55</sup> They often cross on iron or inflatable boats fitted with unreliable engines. To maximize profits, smugglers have begun overcrowding boats, substantially increasing their risk of capsizing. Still, with the increase in whole family departures, it has become possible for a family or a group of families from the same neighborhood to collectively secure a private boat and determine its quality beforehand.

Ultimately, the smuggling ecosystem in Sfax has evolved into a mass-market business. As obstacles to legal migration increase, more people are turning to smuggling networks, which, in turn, charge higher fees for riskier approaches to get their clients into Europe. Despite enhanced measures by European authorities to curb illegal migration, the growing demand for smuggling networks indicates that aspirations to reach Europe persist and are being exacerbated by the push factors migrants face in their home countries. This strong demand base has enabled smuggling networks to thrive, despite the fact that they put vulnerable people in extremely risky situations in pursuit of profit.

## Tunisian and European Security Failure and Policy Incoherence

As is the case in other countries, the scale of demand has driven the illicit migration industry in Tunisia, creating a migratory phenomenon too vast for border forces to effectively contain beyond a certain limit. The Tunisian authorities have responded with heavy-handed securitization. Despite the post-2011 democratization process, the country's elites were reluctant to recognize Tunisia's new status as a regional migration destination and neglected to modernize the legal framework governing migration. Tunisia abstained from enacting a law guaranteeing the right to seek asylum, as mandated by the 2014 constitution and various treaties the country has ratified, such as the African Refugee Convention and the UN Refugee Convention.<sup>56</sup> The lack of legal reform of the migration governance framework has been further worsened by Saied since his power grab in July 2021. He has increasingly depended on security services to manage migration, preferring informal arrangements and resorting to repressive measures.<sup>57</sup>

In parallel, European countries began gravitating toward security-oriented solutions to their migration problem. A European externalization project that aimed to establish the southern Mediterranean states as a buffer zone took shape starting in the 2000s and accelerated in the 2010s with the buildup of an acute migration and refugee crisis that culminated in 2015 when 1.3 million people came to Europe to seek asylum, the highest in a single year since World War II.<sup>58</sup> This endeavor involved migration deals between the EU and partner states in the EU's southern neighborhood designed to enhance the latter's border management and migrant interception capabilities. Additionally, a complex network of funding mechanisms was employed to restrict migrants' mobility and finance detention centers in countries such as Türkiye and Libya. Overall, externalization relied heavily on extensive securitization measures.<sup>59</sup> Paradoxically, these efforts granted significant leverage to regimes in the southern neighborhood over the EU. Despite these extensive measures, the outcome was striking. Since 2020, the number of migrants arriving in Italy has steadily increased, reaching levels reminiscent of the crisis years of 2014–2016.<sup>60</sup> This suggests that externalization efforts may be counterproductive. Indeed, the most notable impact of securitization policies is not a decrease in migration or the neutralization of smugglers but an increase in the value of the smugglers' services and the danger to those who use them.

As part of its externalization push, the EU has at times adopted an approach influenced by Italy's right-wing government, which has softened its criticism of Tunisia's authoritarian shift. In such instances, the EU has sought to link financial assistance to Tunisia with collaboration on controlling migration flows. Critics argue that such political and economic support for Saïed undermines efforts to compel him to alter his antidemocratic course—without any guarantee that this would consolidate Tunisia's stability. In the longer term, the argument goes, such an approach could even lead to a surge in Tunisian migration, as Saïed's aversion to reform might result in the collapse of Tunisia's economy. This is the position of Germany, as well as a group of members in the European Parliament that criticized close cooperation with the Saïed regime and accused the European Commission of “bankrolling dictators.”<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, for others, including France and Italy, curbing sub-Saharan African migration to Europe in the immediate term is imperative and can therefore take precedence over potential democratic and economic reforms in Tunisia.

## **Securitization: Tunisia's Failed Panacea**

In the summer of 2023, the Tunisian security forces faced escalating challenges arising from intercommunal tensions in Sfax, greater demand for migration by both Tunisians and sub-Saharan Africans, and increasingly sophisticated and well-connected smuggling networks. Caught between demands by their European partners that they curb irregular departures, the frustrations of the Sfax population, and populist rhetoric that scapegoated migrants, the security forces found their maneuverability severely constrained. Unable to devise a clear and effective policy, they opted for a security-centric approach.

The security forces adopted three main tactics. The first involved the expulsion of sub-Saharan migrants from Sfax and their relocation to the desert and border regions.<sup>62</sup> In July 2023, following deadly clashes between groups of Tunisians and sub-Saharan Africans, security services conducted raids in which they arbitrarily arrested thousands of foreigners, by some accounts in excess of 4,000 individuals, who were then expelled to regions bordering Libya and Algeria.<sup>63</sup> The rationale behind this was to clear Sfax of sub-Saharan migrants, mitigate intercommunity tensions, and shift blame to neighboring countries—particularly Algeria and Libya—for facilitating the transit of migrants into Tunisia. In the border areas to which they were banished, numerous migrants, including children, lost their lives, as documented by journalists, human rights organizations, and international agencies. These reports also detailed widespread abuse and violence inflicted upon migrants by members of the Tunisian security forces.<sup>64</sup>

The second tactic involved the internal displacement of migrants from populated areas to mostly uninhabited agricultural regions where basic services were virtually nonexistent and opportunities for sustenance were scarce.<sup>65</sup> However, by early September 2023, officials realized that migrants who were unable to embark on sea journeys would likely return to urban centers where they would have better prospects for survival and for reestablishing connections.<sup>66</sup> Consequently, the authorities abruptly began transporting them to known human smuggling hubs such as Al Amra.<sup>67</sup> This was widely interpreted as a signal from Tunisian decisionmakers to their European counterparts that the migratory issue was not exclusive to Tunisia and had to be addressed collectively. It also served as a warning that if a solution was not found, these migrants would inevitably seek passage to Europe.<sup>68</sup>

The third tactic was implemented in the final weeks of September and in early October and involved a sudden increase in the arrests of select smugglers. As security units dispatched from Tunis intensified their activity in areas known as hotbeds of smuggling, international agency reports indicated a decline in departures from Tunisia. However, temporary surges of security units from outside Sfax, primarily from the capital, could be sustained only for brief periods. The substantial profits generated by the smuggling economy and weak state control in the coastal areas between Sfax and Chebba may explain occasional collusion between members of the security forces and smuggling networks. This collusion also underscores concerns regarding the erosion of the central state authority in certain regions, particularly concerning cross-border movements.<sup>69</sup>

The role of the security services in policing irregular migration has been ill-defined, in large part due to the absence of responsible political leadership capable of offering a vision to address the migration crisis. The security forces were left with little direction. Moreover, the humanitarian crisis and the human rights violations on the part of these forces demonstrate that security sector reform is badly needed and should have been part of the democratization process.<sup>70</sup> Over a decade, Tunisia faced challenges during its democratization process in effectively controlling and overseeing the Interior Ministry. The security sector grappled with issues of poor management, arbitrary decisionmaking powers, and a process known as the “democratization of ranks,” which involved the politically motivated hiring of approximately

25,000 new and inadequately trained recruits, alongside a disorderly promotion plan.<sup>71</sup> These conditions led to a decline in professionalism and performance within the security sector, contributing to the increased use of illegal force and petty corruption.

Despite the president's attempts to consolidate his position following his power grab in July 2021, his control over the security sector remains fragile. Saied's inability to address chronic issues of unemployment, migration, and socioeconomic crisis has placed the all-important security forces in a precarious position, one in which they rely primarily on short-term tactics and maneuvering.<sup>72</sup> This situation fosters opportunities for corruption, collusion between security forces and criminal gangs, and abuse. Considering such inefficiency, the center must resort periodically to direct intervention by dispatching units from the capital to enforce strategic decisions.

Behind the facade of stability, Saied's regime appears to operate as a "stabilitocracy."<sup>73</sup> The term refers to a state that possesses the capability to leverage illusionary stability to secure external legitimacy despite deficiencies in state capacities, democracy, and human rights. States within the EU's neighborhood such as Morocco, North Macedonia, Türkiye, and Serbia have utilized stability to obtain economic assistance and political backing in exchange for providing assistance in addressing regional issues, including controlling refugee and migrant flows. However, the most notable impact of these securitization policies and the bargain between Tunisia and its European neighbors is not a decrease in migration or a neutralization of smugglers but an increase in the value of the smugglers' services and the risks to those who use them.

## Illegal Migration: A Political Football Between Tunisia and Europe

When it comes to migration issues, EU member states have since 2015 focused mainly on extinguishing fires—dealing with crises by shutting off smuggling routes and striking deals with countries of the southern Mediterranean littoral. After the EU-Türkiye agreement of 2016, whereby Türkiye accepted to control the mobility of millions of Syrians refugees in exchange for financial aid and customs privileges, the EU sought to replicate its strategy elsewhere. It would externalize the solution to illegal migration by ensuring that governments of transit countries would compel migrants and asylum seekers to stay in place. The EU signed agreements with Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Senegal along these lines. Much the same thing was done on the central Mediterranean maritime route as well. After a wave of illegal migrations from Libya between 2014 and 2016, Italy agreed to fund militia-run detention centers inside Libya, where thousands of African migrants who were trying to cross into Europe were already being held. But these arrangements are only effective if there is an alignment of interests between the EU and partner countries, and Tunisia presented an obstacle. Migration may be a burden to Tunisia, but the country's role as a transit country has become a geopolitical tool by which the Saied regime exerts leverage over its European neighbors.

In 2023, amid the surge in sub-Saharan migration from Tunisia, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni spearheaded a “Team Europe” response to negotiate a comprehensive partnership agreement with Saied in which migration would be an essential pillar.<sup>74</sup> In July 2023, the EU and Tunisia signed a memorandum of understanding featuring a macro financial assistance loan of 900 million euros (\$980 million), contingent upon an International Monetary Fund (IMF) program. This encompassed budgetary support of 150 million euros (\$160 million) for 2023, the bolstering of economic and trade ties, the promotion of green energy initiatives, the fostering of people-to-people projects, and the allocation of an aid package (\$115 million of the \$160 million) to combat irregular migration.<sup>75</sup> The agreement aimed to establish a novel paradigm in migration partnerships. Rather than adopting the conventional security-focused approach, it positioned European migration assistance to Tunisia within a broader framework of sustainable development, with the goal of reducing medium- and long-term migration. Notably, only one of the agreement’s five pillars directly addressed migration. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen hailed the deal as a prototype for future agreements with other Mediterranean countries.<sup>76</sup>

Isolated and much criticized since his power grab in July 2021, Saied capitalized on the validation offered by high-profile visits from European leaders.<sup>77</sup> The agreement was unveiled in Tunis by Saied, the Dutch and Italian prime ministers, and von der Leyen.<sup>78</sup> It signaled the EU’s alignment with an authoritarian leader who had dismantled a democracy promoted by Europeans themselves over the past decade. This was a disconcerting moment for advocates of democracy across North Africa and a victory for Saied, who had played the migration card to secure recognition by European neighbors. For Italian policymakers and von der Leyen, the agreement symbolized the formalization of long-standing collective stances on migration: the funding allocated for the deal’s migration components was distinct and therefore not contingent on Saied’s acceptance of the IMF proposal. However, the macro financial assistance component of the agreement (\$980 million) was conditioned on Tunisia’s engagement with an IMF program. This approach, which considers the EU-Tunisia agreement sometimes as a comprehensive one and sometimes as divided into separate components is confusing and has caused tension between European member states and EU institutions. It has also kept the agreement mere ink on paper, neither officially suspended nor fully implemented.

The honeymoon between Saied and his European partners did not last long. Disagreements among EU member states prompted the Council of Europe to postpone the agreement’s implementation. German policymakers and others had voiced frustration over the agreement, which they felt occurred under a European banner without prior consensus across the EU.<sup>79</sup> These behind-the-scenes disagreements intensified to the extent that Germany’s foreign minister penned a letter to the European Commission asserting that insufficient consultation with member states, along with the deal’s disregard for human rights and procedural shortcomings, rendered it unsuitable as a template for future agreements. EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell echoed these concerns, cautioning privately that the EU might face legal challenges if sued over the deal. These tensions exacerbated conflicts between the European Parliament and the European Commission.<sup>80</sup>

Also, in October 2023, Saied rejected a European disbursement of 60 million euros (\$70 million), attempting to separate the EU agreement from the IMF deal. This was and remains a key pillar of his strategy. However, the EU rebuffed this disassociation, insisting that increased funding should be tied to reforms and fearing that otherwise Tunisia would be further incentivized to weaponize migration flows. Interestingly, delays in implementing the agreement coincided with a sharp increase in illegal departures from Tunisia's shores, exerting pressure on the EU to relax its conditions. In September 2023, 7,000 migrants arrived in Lampedusa within two days.<sup>81</sup>

These tensions between Tunisia and its European neighbors underscore the strategic nature of migration and expose the limitations of the EU's border externalization efforts, which aim to transform the countries bordering Europe into buffer zones. Whereas the EU sought to replicate its successful strategy with Türkiye in Tunisia, Saied rejected the concept of externalization, asserting Tunisia's independence from Europe's migration concerns. Saied's actions reveal a desire to replenish the coffers of his country's Interior Ministry—the backbone of his regime—and exploit European anxieties about migration to secure legitimization for his power grab. By rejecting the initial EU disbursement of funds, Saied forced Europeans back to the negotiating table, highlighting the power dynamics implicit in externalization agreements.

## Conclusion

Tunisia's transformation into a transit country for migrants underscores the need to approach migration as a long-term and structural phenomenon, not merely as a security matter. Escalating conflicts in the Sahel and West Africa, along with Libya's fragility and Tunisia's porous borders, mean that the outflow of people will continue and that many will continue to use Tunisia as a hub. Similarly, as the intended ultimate destination of most migrants from Africa, Europe can continue to expect large numbers of migrants to succeed in making their way to its shores. The only unknown variable is whether Tunisia and the EU will change their approach to dealing with the phenomenon and what policies they might adopt.

Ideally, Tunisia and the EU should cooperate in the interest of devising solutions that are mutually beneficial and that balance short- and long-term policy strategies to effectively manage migration flows. And given that migration is closely linked to issues of security, international relations, national identity, and economics, a holistic approach would be best. A fragmented approach that fails to acknowledge the deeply rooted structural factors driving human migration is inadequate for resolving the crisis.

Stabilizing the Sahel is an urgent priority, as is facilitating and strengthening assistance and emergency aid by humanitarian organizations to sub-Saharan migrants streaming out of their increasingly unstable countries. Exerting pressure on Saied's regime is key to Tunisia's implementation of much-needed political and economic reforms, including legislation that ensures essential rights and protections for migrants, who might then be dissuaded from trying to reach Europe through illegal means. Labor gaps in Europe and in North Africa should be addressed through agreements that allow for migration that is legal and ultimately circular, with migrants able to move back and forth. Finally, fostering regional cooperation to regulate the flow of migrants from Libya and Algeria is key to preventing the transformation of Tunisia into an even larger transit hub where smuggling networks exploit regional rivalries. Without such a comprehensive approach, Saied may well persist in exploiting migration as a pressure card against Europe. In addition to leaving the immediate issue of migration itself unaddressed, this would mean continued human rights violations and could potentially trigger sporadic outbreaks of violence.



## About the Authors

**Hamza Meddeb** is a research fellow at the Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut, where he co-leads the Political Economy Program.

**Fakhreddine Louati** is an international development professional specializing in Tunisia, with expertise in field research, policy analysis, vulnerable population inclusion, youth inclusion, and countering/preventing violent extremism.



## Notes

- 1 Ricard González, “Tunisia Overtakes Libya as the Top Migrant Launch Point for Europe,” *El País*, August 11, 2023, <https://english.elpais.com/international/2023-08-11/tunisia-overtakes-libya-as-the-top-migrant-launch-point-for-europe.html>.
- 2 Ishac Diwan, Hachemi Alaya, and Hamza Meddeb, “The Buildup to a Crisis: Current Tensions and Future Scenarios for Tunisia,” Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center, January 23, 2024, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2024/01/23/buildup-to-crisis-current-tensions-and-future-scenarios-for-tunisia-pub-91424>.
- 3 Lorena Stella Martini and Tarek Megerisi, “Road to Nowhere: Why Europe’s Border Externalisation Is a Dead End,” European Council on Foreign Relations, December 14, 2023, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/road-to-nowhere-why-europes-border-externalisation-is-a-dead-end>.
- 4 Citizens of the following countries have been granted a stay of less than ninety days: Angola, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Comoros, Côte d’Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Mali, Namibia, Niger, Senegal, Seychelles, and South Africa. See Adnen El Ghali and Ahlem Chamlali, “Ne rien faire et ne rien laisser faire. Les enjeux de la non politique migratoire tunisienne” [Do Nothing and Let Nothing Happen. The Challenges of Tunisian Non-Migratory Policy], *Revue Tunisienne de Science Politique*, no. 7 2022, [https://vbn.aau.dk/ws/portalfiles/portal/468232034/Adnen\\_El\\_Ghali\\_and\\_Ahlam\\_Chemlali.pdf](https://vbn.aau.dk/ws/portalfiles/portal/468232034/Adnen_El_Ghali_and_Ahlam_Chemlali.pdf).
- 5 International Crisis Group, *Managing Trafficking in Northern Niger*, Africa Report no. 285, January 6, 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/niger/285-managing-trafficking-northern-niger>.
- 6 International Crisis Group, *Tunisia’s Challenge: Avoiding Default and Preserving Peace*, Middle East and North Africa Report no. 243, December 22, 2023, [https://icg-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2023-12/243-tunisia-challenge\\_0.pdf](https://icg-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2023-12/243-tunisia-challenge_0.pdf).
- 7 Amnesty International, “Tunisia: President’s Racist Speech Incites a Wave of Violence Against Black Africans,” March 10, 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/03/tunisia-presidents-racist-speech-incites-a-wave-of-violence-against-black-africans>.
- 8 Rihab Boukhayatia, “Droit D’asile En Tunisie : Gravé Dans La Constitution, Méprisé Par Les Lois” [Right of Asylum in Tunisia: Enshrined in the Constitution, Despised by the Laws], *Nawaat*, February 19, 2021, <https://nawaat.org/2021/02/19/droit-dasile-en-tunisie-grave-dans-la-constitution-meprise-par-les-lois>.

- 9 Tasnim Abderrahim, “Walking a Tightrope in Tunisia. The Aspirations and Limitations of Migration Policy Reform,” German Council on Foreign Relations, no. 12, June 2021, [https://dgap.org/sites/default/files/article\\_pdfs/Report-Tunisia\\_EN\\_2021\\_korr\\_1.pdf](https://dgap.org/sites/default/files/article_pdfs/Report-Tunisia_EN_2021_korr_1.pdf).
- 10 FTDES and Migreurop, Politiques du Non-Accueil en Tunisie [Non-Reception Policies in Tunisia], June 2020, <https://ftdes.net/rapports/ftdes.migreup.pdf>.
- 11 Refugees International, Abuse, Corruption, and Accountability: Time to Reassess EU & U.S. Migration Cooperation With Tunisia, November 16, 2023, <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports-briefs/abuse-corruption-and-accountability-time-to-reassess-eu-u-s-migration-cooperation-with-tunisia>.
- 12 This law targeted irregular migrants, as well as human smugglers, with extremely high penalties, ranging from 8,000 to 100,000 dinars (\$2,500–30,000) and imprisonment from three to twenty years. The law also denied migrants any possibility to appeal decisions and granted no protection from expulsions for vulnerable groups such as minors. See Katharina Natter, “Ad-Hocratic Immigration Governance: How States Secure Their Power Over Immigration Through Intentional Ambiguity,” *Territory, Politics, Governance* 11, no. 4 (2023): 677–694, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21622671.2021.1877189>.
- 13 Adnen El Ghali and Ahlem Chamli, “Ne rien faire et ne rien laisser faire. Les enjeux de la non politique migratoire tunisienne.”
- 14 Refugees International, Abuse, Corruption, and Accountability.
- 15 Refugees International, Abuse, Corruption, and Accountability.
- 16 International Rescue Committee, “The Central Sahel: How Conflict and Climate Change Drive Crisis,” September 26, 2023, <https://www.rescue.org/eu/article/central-sahel-how-conflict-and-climate-change-drive-crisis>.
- 17 “Why Are Migrants to Europe Fleeing From and Through Tunisia?,” *Economist*, May 3, 2023, <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2023/05/03/why-are-migrants-to-europe-fleeing-from-and-through-tunisia>.
- 18 Human Rights Watch, “Tunisia: African Migrants Intercepted at Sea, Expelled,” October 10, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/10/10/tunisia-african-migrants-intercepted-sea-expelled>.
- 19 Human Rights Watch, “Algérie: Des migrants et demandeurs d’asile forcés à quitter le pays” [Algeria: Migrants and Asylum Seekers Forced to Leave the Country], October 9, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/fr/news/2020/10/09/algerie-des-migrants-et-demandeurs-dasile-forces-quitter-le-pays>.
- 20 Wesley Dockery, “Hundreds of Migrants Found Abandoned on Algeria-Niger Border,” *Info Migrants*, July 16, 2018, <https://www.infomigrants.net/fr/post/10646/hundreds-of-migrants-found-abandoned-on-algerianiger-border>.
- 21 Amnesty International, “Tunisia: President’s Racist Speech Incites a Wave of Violence Against Black Africans.”
- 22 Nesrine Malik, “As the Disturbing Scenes in Tunisia Show, Anti-migrant Sentiments Have Gone Global,” *Guardian*, March 13, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/mar/13/tunisia-anti-migrant-sentiments-president-saied>.
- 23 France 24, “Tunisian Mobs Target African Migrants in Sfax to ‘Avenge’ Deadly Stabbing,” July 5, 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20230705-tunisians-target-african-migrants-after-deadly-stabbing>.
- 24 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Italy Sea Arrivals Dashboard,” UNHCR Operational Data Portal, [https://data.unhcr.org/en/search?country=&situation%5B%5D=11&text=Italy+sea+arrivals+dashboard+December+2023&type%5B%5D=link&type%5B%5D=news&type%5B%5D=highlight&type%5B%5D=document&type%5B%5D=needs\\_assessment&type%5B%5D=dataviz&partner=&working\\_group=&sector=&date\\_from=&date\\_to=&uploader=&country\\_json=%7B%220%22%3A%22%22%7D&sector\\_json=%7B%220%22%3A%22%22%7D&apply=](https://data.unhcr.org/en/search?country=&situation%5B%5D=11&text=Italy+sea+arrivals+dashboard+December+2023&type%5B%5D=link&type%5B%5D=news&type%5B%5D=highlight&type%5B%5D=document&type%5B%5D=needs_assessment&type%5B%5D=dataviz&partner=&working_group=&sector=&date_from=&date_to=&uploader=&country_json=%7B%220%22%3A%22%22%7D&sector_json=%7B%220%22%3A%22%22%7D&apply=).
- 25 UNHCR, “Italy Sea Arrivals Dashboard.”
- 26 Data published by the Italian Ministry of Interior, December 31, 2023, [http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/allegati/cruscotto\\_statistico\\_giornaliero\\_31-12-2023.pdf](http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/allegati/cruscotto_statistico_giornaliero_31-12-2023.pdf).

- 27 Data published by the Italian Ministry of Interior, December 31, 2022, [http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/allegati/cruscotto\\_statistico\\_giornaliero\\_31-12-2022-rev.pdf](http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/allegati/cruscotto_statistico_giornaliero_31-12-2022-rev.pdf).
- 28 UNHCR, “Italy Sea Arrivals Dashboard.”
- 29 Charlotte Boitiaux, “Tunis annonce 70 000 interceptions en mer, et reste accusée de renvois vers la Libye” [Tunis Announces 70,000 Interceptions at Sea, and Remains Accused of Referrals to Libya], InfoMigrants, December 11, 2023, <https://www.infomigrants.net/fr/post/53791/tunis-annonce-70-000-interceptions-en-mer-et-reste-accusee-de-renvois-vers-la-libye>.
- 30 Boitiaux, “Tunis annonce 70 000 interceptions en mer, et reste accusée de renvois vers la Libye.”
- 31 Simon Speakman Cordall, “Africans Attacked, Flee Sfax, as Tunisia Racial Tensions Explode,” Al Jazeera, July 5, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/5/african-migrants-in-tunisia-face-discrimination-little-sympathy>.
- 32 Africanews, “Tunisia: 1 Beninese Stabbed to Death in Attack Targeting Sub-Saharan Migrants,” May 29, 2023, <https://www.africanews.com/2023/05/29/tunisia-1-beninese-stabbed-to-death-in-attack-targeting-sub-saharan-migrants>.
- 33 Africanews, “Tunisia: Migrants Arrested After Fatal Stabbing of Local Man,” July 4, 2023, <https://www.africanews.com/2023/07/04/tunisia-migrants-arrested-after-fatal-stabbing-of-local-man>.
- 34 Emma Wallis, “Tunisia Deaths at the Border,” InfoMigrants, July 12, 2023, <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/50320/tunisia-deaths-at-the-border>.
- 35 Julia Dumont, “‘Ils nous ont dit de traverser la frontière, sinon ils nous tireraient dessus’: en Tunisie, une nouvelle vague d’expulsions de migrants vers l’Algérie” [‘They Told Us to Cross the Border, Otherwise They Would Shoot Us’: In Tunisia, a New Wave of Expulsions of Migrants to Algeria], InfoMigrants, October 5, 2023, <https://www.infomigrants.net/fr/post/52358/ils-nous-ont-dit-de-traverser-la-frontiere-sinon-ils-nous-tireraient-dessus--en-tunisie-une-nouvelle-vague-dexpulsions-de-migrants-vers-lalgerie>.
- 36 Boitiaux, “Tunis annonce 70 000 interceptions en mer, et reste accusée de renvois vers la Libye.”
- 37 InfoMigrants, “Discours anti-Noirs du président Saïed : un nouveau vol de 290 Ivoiriens a quitté la Tunisie” [Anti-Black Speech by President Saïed: A New Flight of 290 Ivoirians Left Tunisia], March 24, 2023, <https://www.infomigrants.net/fr/post/47730/discours-antinoirs-du-president-saied--un-nouveau-vol-de-290-ivoiriens-a-quitte-la-tunisie>.
- 38 Hajar Cherni, “Tunisie / Migration : retour de 135 Maliens à Bamako” [Tunisia / Migration: Return of 135 Malians to Bamako], Anadolu Agency, March 6, 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/fr/afrique/tunisie-migration-retour-de-135-maliens-a-bamako/2838474>.
- 39 Héléne Frade, “Arrivées de migrants à Lampedusa : ‘La honte de l’Europe’” [Arrivals of Migrants in Lampedusa: ‘The Shame of Europe’], France 24, September 14, 2023, <https://www.france24.com/fr/émissions/dans-la-presse/20230914-arrivées-de-migrants-à-lampedusa-la-honte-de-l-europe>.
- 40 Data published by the Italian Ministry of Interior, December 31, 2023.
- 41 Data published by the Italian Ministry of Interior, December 31, 2023.
- 42 Theodore Murphy, “Middle Powers, Big Impact: Africa’s ‘Coup Belt,’ Russia, and the Waning Global Order,” European Council on Foreign Relations, September 6, 2023, <https://ecfr.eu/article/middle-powers-big-impact-africas-coup-belt-russia-and-the-waning-global-order>.
- 43 Murphy, “Middle Powers, Big Impact.”
- 44 UNHCR, “Sudan Situation, External Update #25,” September 4–11, 2023, <https://reporting.unhcr.org/sudan-situation-update-26>.
- 45 RFI, “Tunisia: In Sfax, Traders and Entrepreneurs Resilient in the Face of the Economic Crisis,” <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/podcasts/afrique-économique/20230418-tunisie-à-sfax-commerçants-et-entrepreneurs-résilients-face-à-la-crise-économique-2-3>.
- 46 Tasnim Abderrahim, “Tunisia: Increased Fragility Fuels Migration Surge,” Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, July 2023, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Tasnim-Abderrahim-Tunisia-Increased-fragility-fuels-migration-surge-GI-TOC-July-2023.pdf>.

- 47 Observations and in-person interviews in Sfax, Jbeniana, and El Amra, November 4–5, 18, and 19, 2023.
- 48 Emma Mornagui and Shaden Gannam, “Dairy Sector: Small Farmers Ever More Vulnerable to Lobbies,” Inkyfada, June 8, 2022, <https://inkyfada.com/en/2022/06/08/farmers-protest-dairy-sector>.
- 49 Mornagui and Gannam, “Dairy Sector.”
- 50 In-person author interviews with migrants who crossed the Algeria-Tunisia border, December 1, 2023.
- 51 Lou Inès Bes, “9 morts après un accident de camion transportant illégalement des migrants subsahariens” [9 Dead After Accident With Truck Illegally Transporting Sub-Saharan Migrants], Inkyfada, October 5, 2023, <https://inkyfada.com/fr/2023/10/05/accident-camion-migrants-subsahariens>.
- 52 In-person author interviews with migrants in Sfax, November 18–19, 2023.
- 53 Refugees International, Abuse, Corruption, and Accountability.
- 54 Missing Migrants Project, “Migration Within the Mediterranean,” International Organization for Migration, March 15, 2024, [https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean?region\\_incident=All&route=3861&year%5B%5D=2500&month=All&incident\\_date%5Bmin%5D=&incident\\_date%5Bmax%5D=](https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean?region_incident=All&route=3861&year%5B%5D=2500&month=All&incident_date%5Bmin%5D=&incident_date%5Bmax%5D=).
- 55 In-person author interviews with civil society activists, Tunis, December 23, 2023.
- 56 Boukhayatia, “Droit D’asile En Tunisie : Gravé Dans La Constitution, Méprisé Par Les Lois.”
- 57 Refugees International, Abuse, Corruption, and Accountability.
- 58 Phillip Connor, “Number of Refugees to Europe Surges to Record 1.3 Million in 2015,” Pew Research Center, August 2, 2016, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2016/08/02/number-of-refugees-to-europe-surges-to-record-1-3-million-in-2015>.
- 59 Tasnim Abderrahim, “The Securitisation of the EU’s Migration Policies: What Consequences for Southern Mediterranean Countries and Their Relations With the EU?,” EuroMed Survey, IEMed, 2018, <https://www.iemed.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/08.The-Securitisation-of-the-EUs-Migration-Policies-What-Consequences-for-Southern.pdf>.
- 60 Martini and Megerisi, “Road to Nowhere: Why Europe’s Border Externalisation Is a Dead End.”
- 61 Lisa O’Carroll and Helena Smith, “European Commission Accused of ‘Bankrolling Dictators’ by MEPs After Tunisia Deal,” Guardian, March 13, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/mar/13/european-commission-accused-of-bankrolling-dictators-by-meps-after-tunisia-deal>.
- 62 Haïfa Mzalouat, Matteo Trabelsi, and Rihem Neifar, “Perpetrating Apartheid: Sub-Saharan Africans in Sfax Hunted Down, Attacked and Forcibly Deported,” Inkyfada, July 9, 2023, <https://inkyfada.com/en/2023/07/09/sub-saharan-africans-sfax-attacked-deported>.
- 63 North Africa Post, “Tunisia Under Scrutiny for Expelling Thousands of Migrants to Libya, Algeria,” December 12, 2023, <https://northafricapost.com/73684-tunisia-under-scrutiny-for-expelling-thousands-of-migrants-to-libya-algeria.html>.
- 64 Ahmed Elumami, “Sudanese Woman Tells of ‘Horrible’ Desert Journey After Expulsion From Tunisia,” Reuters, August 9, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/sudanese-woman-tells-horrible-desert-journey-after-expulsion-tunisia-2023-08-08>.
- 65 Najla Ben Salah, “Mu’taqalat Huqoul al-Zaitoun fi al-Amira: Hunak Tunaffadh al-Jara’im Khilsatan didd al-Muhajireen” [Olive Grove Detention Centers in al-Amira: Where Crimes Are Secretly Carried out Against Migrants], Nawaat, February 15, 2024, <https://nawaat.org/2024/02/15/م-ةرماعلا-يف-نوتيزلا-لوفح-تالقتعم/2024/02/15/?fbclid=IwAR2Ig4wx-6wBzvtmrFTzPGgqP-vreActYS8QiwdsKAPu87kceKqZooMz8>.
- 66 Refugees International, Abuse, Corruption, and Accountability.
- 67 Driss Rejichi, “À El-Amra, un désastre annoncé pour les migrant-es” [In El-Amra, a Disaster Predicted for Migrants], Inkyfada, December 18, 2023, <https://inkyfada.com/fr/2023/12/18/elamra-sfax-migrants-garde-nationale-tunisie>.
- 68 In-person author interviews with civil society activists, Sfax, November 18–19, 2023.
- 69 Refugees International, Abuse, Corruption, and Accountability.

- 70 Yezid Sayigh, “Missed Opportunity: The Politics of Police Reform in Egypt and Tunisia,” Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center, March 17, 2015, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2015/03/17/missed-opportunity-politics-of-police-reform-in-egypt-and-tunisia-pub-59391>.
- 71 International Crisis Group, Reform and Security Strategy in Tunisia, Middle East and North Africa Report no. 161, July 23, 2015, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/tunisia/reform-and-security-strategy-tunisia>.
- 72 Sarah Yerkes et al., “Global Lessons for Tunisia’s Stalled Transition,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 21, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/07/21/global-lessons-for-tunisia-s-stalled-transition-pub-87541>.
- 73 Srda Pavlovic, “Montenegro’s ‘Stabilitocracy’: The West’s Support of Đukanović Is Damaging the Prospects of Democratic Change,” EUROPP (blog), London School of Economics and Political Science, December 23, 2016, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2016/12/23/montenegros-stabilitocracy-how-the-wests-support-of-jukanovic-is-damaging-the-prospects-of-democratic-change>.
- 74 Eleonora Milazzo and Maria Gargano, “Meloni and the EU Align on the Mediterranean Pivot,” EGMONT, October 4, 2023, <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/meloni-and-the-eu-align-on-the-mediterranean-pivot>.
- 75 Andreina De Leo, “The EU-Tunisia Memorandum of Understanding: A Blueprint for Cooperation on Migration?,” Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, October 19, 2023, <https://timep.org/2023/10/19/the-eu-tunisia-memorandum-of-understanding-a-blueprint-for-cooperation-on-migration>.
- 76 Lisa O’Carroll, “EU States Expressed ‘Incomprehension’ at Tunisia Migration Pact, Says Borrell,” Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/18/eu-states-expressed-incomprehension-at-tunisia-migration-pact-says-borrell>.
- 77 Thomas Hill and Sarah Yerkes, “Tunisian Foreign Policy Under Kais Saied,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 11, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/01/11/tunisian-foreign-policy-under-kais-saied-pub-88770>.
- 78 The agreement was announced at a press conference with no press allowed to attend, which illustrates the parties’ sensitivity to key questions, namely the need to tie the macro financial assistance (\$980 million) to a reform program with the IMF long rejected by Saied. Also, whether detention centers were to be established in Tunisia was unclear. Both parties mentioned that the detailed implementation of the agreement will be defined in an appendix to come at a later date. See Lisa O’Carroll, “EU States Expressed ‘Incomprehension’ at Tunisia Migration Pact, Says Borrell.”
- 79 Gabriela Baczynska, “Germany’s Baerbock Joins Chorus Criticizing EU Migration Deal With Tunisia,” Reuters, September 22, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/germanys-baerbock-joins-chorus-criticizing-eu-migration-deal-with-tunisia-2023-09-22>.
- 80 Lisa O’Carroll, “What Is the Controversy Over the EU Migration Deal With Tunisia?,” Guardian, September 18, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/18/what-is-the-controversy-over-the-eu-migration-deal-with-tunisia>.
- 81 Refugees International, Abuse, Corruption, and Accountability.



**MALCOLM H. KERR  
CARNEGIE MIDDLE EAST CENTER**

Emir Bechir Street, Lazarieh Tower | Bldg. No. 2026 1210, 5th flr.  
Downtown Beirut, P.O.Box 11-1061 | Riad El Solh, Lebanon  
P: + 961 1 99 15 91

[Carnegie-MEC.org](https://Carnegie-MEC.org)