



187.6 km to Europe: from Sfax to Lampedusa and the new ‘migration crisis’ in the Central Mediterranean

MIGRATION

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Summary

- Tunisia is the main departure point to Italy in 2023 for West Africans and sub-Saharan Africans.
- Socio-economic conditions, food shortages, and poor governance are key factors in Tunisian migration.
- The absence of an asylum and migration system is a critical factor in the transit of asylum seekers to Europe.
- Comparisons with the 2011 crisis reveal lessons learnt, with Italy taking a more proactive stance.
- Europe is divided but also united: divided in its member states’ initial reactions; united in its persistent deployment of a toolbox that has yielded only limited results to date.

The issue

On 16 July 2023, the EU and Tunisia signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on a new strategic partnership whose main focus is migration. The MoU is a response to the increase in migratory arrivals in Italy since 2022, which peaking in early summer 2023. The policy brief looks at what has led to the 'new crisis' in the Central Mediterranean. It examines the factors that shape migration from Tunisia, which have been in place for some time, and suggests that a variation on recent events—albeit on a different scale—has taken place before, accompanied by somewhat similar variations on Europe's current responses.

The chronicle of a migration 'crisis' foretold?

The coastal towns of Tunisia are a common departure point for ports in Sicily, Calabria, Apulia and Sardinia. Tunisians are joined at sea by Ivorians, Malians and a smaller percentage of people originating from Egypt and the Sudan who have crossed through the border with Libya.

Tunisia is thus both a country of origin and transit for migrants to Europe, with the Tunisians constituting one of the main nationalities arriving in Italy by sea since 2020¹. The Italian island of Lampedusa is less than 200 kilometres from the Tunisian port town of Sfax, which is the most common departure point. It is closest landfall to the EU and a less expensive and dangerous route than departing from Libya. In addition, smuggling in Tunisia is not controlled by organized criminal gangs to the same extent as elsewhere; in fact, recent research has highlighted the self-organized nature of the journeys made², with people pooling resources to buy inflatable rafts and safety vests and undertaking the trip without assistance from smugglers.

The UNHCR has declared a total of 132,146 arrivals in Italy since January 2023, peaking in September with roughly 2000 arrivals daily³.

The past year has seen a shift in the make-up of the arrivals. Alongside the men who still constitute the largest share of those on the move, we now see more families and unaccompanied minors, as well as single women undertaking the journey to Italy.

The surge in recent months can be attributed to multiple factors which will be discussed below. Some have been in place for some time, including the various challenges sub-Saharan countries continue to face, poor governance in Tunisia, and ongoing instability in Libya. Others, like food shortages, are more recent. Together, pre-existing and recent elements form a complex mix of determinants that shape not only migration from Tunisia but, more broadly, the onward movement from the Africa region to the EU.

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¹ ASF, ASGI and FTDES, (2022). *Etude sur les conditions de séjour et les trajectoires des migrantes tunisiennes rapatriées en Italie*, <https://ftdes.net/etude-sur-les-conditions-de-sejour-et-les-trajectoires-des-migrant-e-s-tunisien-ne-s-rapatrie-e-s-en-italie/>

² Herbert, M. (2022); Matt Herbert, (2019) 'La mal vie': The routes, drivers and politics of North African irregular migration, Institute for Security Studies.

³ <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/5205>

Visa policy

Since the 1970s, Tunisia has welcomed migration from sub-Saharan countries; the majority of migrants have been French-speaking students who attend public—and, later, also private—universities in the country. Its visa policy is also geared towards attracting people from West African countries who do not need a visa to enter Tunisia (for up to 180 days)⁴ and end up remaining in the country as visa-overstayers.

The exact number of migrants in the country today is unknown, though estimates range from around 30,000 to 50,000⁵. Given the poor socio-economic conditions and the absence of protection mechanisms, many are likely seeking to leave.

The reality is that the ease of travel to Tunisia is facilitating its transformation into a transit hub for journeys to Europe. At the same time, the deteriorating economic and political situation in the country is encouraging migrants who have most likely already lived and worked in Tunisia for a few years to choose to leave now.

Political landscape

The political crisis has produced instability, but above all disappointment with the lack of socio-economic support, the absence of opportunities, and widespread corruption. This has motivated a segment of the young population, as well as families, to attempt the journey to Europe.

Street protests throughout Tunisia in December 2010 against high unemployment, poverty, and political repression resulted in the overthrow of the Ben Ali regime in January 2011. The Jasmine Revolution of 2010 inspired similar protests throughout the Middle East and North Africa which are known as the Arab Spring. Hailed as the first democracy in North Africa, Tunisia had a parliamentary system with a Prime Minister elected by Parliament and a President elected by means of national elections. The latter had a key role to play in issues relating to foreign policy and the military. However, the shift to democracy was not smooth. Political tensions between the different branches of government resulted in the strengthening of the society, which played a prominent role in the debate over a new constitution.

In 2019, President Kaïs Saïed, who ran as an independent (not as a member of a political party), won the national elections. Nonetheless, political instability did not return to Tunisia. A power struggle in 2020 in the National Assembly followed by mass protests and coupled with broad dissatisfaction over the economy and the response to the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the eventual dissolution of the National Assembly, the consolidation of power in the hands of the President, and a clampdown on civil society. The shift to a fully presidential system was eventually completed in August 2022. Along with the consolidation of power, President Saïed has also begun to systematically imprison opposition figures, shifting Tunisia further away from the democratic transition of the preceding period.

The political crisis has produced instability, but above all disappointment with the lack of socio-economic support, the absence of opportunities, and widespread corruption.⁶ This has motivated a segment of the young population, as well as families, to attempt the journey to Europe. In many cases, the decision to leave is also linked to economic factors.

⁴ Herbert, M. (2022). Losing Hope: Why Tunisians are leading the surge in irregular migration to Europe. Geneva: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime.

⁵ Dimitriadi, A. (September 2022) Migration and asylum in Tunisia: Domestic interests, external influences, and policy outcomes. ASILE project. www.asileproject.eu

⁶ Herbert, M. (2022).

The economy and access to the labour market

The Tunisian economy is characterized by low investment and job creation, high unemployment and informality, a mismatch between skills demand and supply, and the outward migration of high-skilled professionals⁷. Research has found that the restrictions implemented during the pandemic resulted in job losses. Given that many workers were employed in the informal labour market, they had no economic safety net to fall back on and were, in addition, unable to return to these jobs once the pandemic restrictions were relaxed⁸. Although a range of measures have been adopted, the Tunisian economy has had a range of other factors to contend with.

Drought and the worldwide surge in food prices is slowly eating away at an already battered economic system.

Drought and the worldwide surge in food prices is slowly eating away at an already battered economic system. Climate change has impacted Tunisian agricultural production⁹. A five-year drought has led to reduced harvests, limited water reservoirs, and rising tap water prices. Summer 2023 also saw unprecedented restrictions imposed on drinking water during the night in several cities, in an effort to reduce consumption.

All of this is unfolding on top of the recent (in comparison to other factors) food supply problems the country is facing as a result of Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine. Tunisia is highly dependent on wheat produced in Ukraine, as well as on fertilizers, and the global price rises have affected food security in the country as well as agricultural production¹⁰.

Beyond the poor economic prospects, there is also the question of accessing the labour market. Due to the absence of a Tunisian migration and asylum system, the majority of those who enter (either through visa waiver or irregularly) are unable to regularize their stay (even if they are asylum seekers) and thus enjoy access to the formal labour market. Marginalized and often exploited, many people decide to continue their journey onwards to another destination, this time in Europe.

Racism

If the aforementioned challenges and disruption impact the decision of Tunisians and migrants to leave the country, for sub-Saharan Africans there is an added factor: racism and an increase in incidents of racist violence.

On 21 February 2023, in a national security council meeting, President Saïed spoke of "hordes of illegal migrants" whose presence in Tunisia he called a source of "violence, crime and unacceptable acts."¹¹ His statements were the spark that set long-simmering social discontent alight. The anti-Black racism escalated into physical attacks against migrants, students and asylum seekers, particularly in the coastal town of Sfax, one of the main urban centres and departure points for migrants. Tensions had been brewing for some time, according to several media reports. The death of a Tunisian man amidst clashes between migrants and Tunisians¹² was the spark. In response, the security forces

⁷ <https://www.oecd.org/economy/tunisia-economic-snapshot/>

⁸ Herbert, M. (2022).

⁹ Herbert, M. (2022)

¹⁰ ICMPD (2022). "Fine-Grained: Exploring the link between food security and migration in Tunisia." Vienna: ICMPD.

¹¹ https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2023/02/23/in-tunisia-president-kais-saied-claims-sub-saharan-migrants-threaten-country-s-identity_6016898_124.html

¹² <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/tunisian-killed-clashes-with-migrants-after-days-tension-coastal-city-2023-07-04/>

arbitrarily detained and deported hundreds of migrants to Tunisia's borders with Algeria and Libya.

Although Tunisia has traditionally been considered a safe destination for migrants and asylum seekers from the region, this can no longer be taken for granted. As attacks and racism against a section of the population increase, it is to be expected that some will seek to move on to Europe.

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An incomplete asylum system

The aforementioned issues impact disproportionately on asylum seekers in Tunisia. Despite being a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention as well as to the 1969 AU Refugee Convention, Tunisia does not have a national asylum system in place.

The right to asylum, is enshrined in the Tunisian Constitution of 26 January 2014, which stipulates that: "The right to political asylum shall be guaranteed as prescribed by the law. It is prohibited to surrender persons who have been granted political asylum"¹³. However, the law has yet to be approved by Parliament, and has in effect been pending since 2014¹⁴. Instead, the Tunisian state has outsourced the asylum determination procedure to the UNHCR since 1992, and this is all-encompassing, i.e., the reception of asylum applicants is also under the mandate of the UNHCR. Applications take a long time to process—from several months to a year¹⁵—due to the limited staff available. Resettlement places from Tunisia are extremely limited, meaning that asylum seekers remain in the country indefinitely without basic access to goods, services, and opportunities.

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There is little evidence that the asylum law will be signed anytime soon. This is largely due to Europe's efforts at externalizing its migrant and asylum seeker processes, with various proposals involving offshore processing and camps in third countries centring on Tunisia. However, the country has made it clear that it will not agree to serve as a processing space for asylum seekers en route to the EU¹⁶. This is why it is unwilling to continue with asylum reforms that would render it a safe third country for EU member states¹⁷.

From 2011 to 2023

In the spring of 2011, some 25,000 migrants, most of them young Tunisian men, arrived in Lampedusa in small boats after massive protests ousted Tunisia's long-time dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

After some 4,000 migrants arrived in Lampedusa in the space of a week in March 2011, Italy offered to send police liaisons to Tunisia to facilitate border controls; Tunisia refused. The Italian interior minister at the time referred to the arrivals as a "biblical exodus". By April, around 20,000 Tunisians had disembarked on the island of Lampedusa. Italy proceeded to issue temporary papers to those already on the island, but made a deal with

¹³ Constitute Project. Tunisia 2014. https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Tunisia_2014?lang=en

¹⁴ VERON, P. (2020, NOVEMBER 24). *Tunisia: Possibilities for reform and implementation of migrant reception and protection*. ECDPM. <https://ecdpm.org/publications/tunisia-possibilities-reform-implementation-migranreception-protection/>

¹⁵ Dimitriadi, A. (September 2022)

¹⁶ Abderrahim, T., Knoll, A. (2017). EU-Tunisia cooperation on migration: conflicting agendas? ECDPM Talking Points blog. <https://ecdpm.org/talking-points/eu-tunisia-cooperation-migration/>

¹⁷ Dimitriadi, A. September 2022

Tunisia to deport any new arrivals. The assumption on the Italian side was that the Tunisians would move to France. As migrants were transferred to the Italian mainland, and began seeking ways to reach the French border, France shut down trains from Italy, reinstated border controls, and sparred with Italy over responsibility-sharing.

Italy declared a 'state of emergency' in the early phase of arrivals in 2011, and on 5 April 2011 signed an "exchange of notes" with Tunisia. The agreement envisaged active cooperation between the two nations, both to prevent irregular arrivals in Italy and to repatriate those who arrived after the agreement.¹⁸ The EU sought to support Tunisia's nascent democracy and institutions, to provide equipment and training to improve border controls¹⁹, and to address irregular migration, offering funding.

Leap forward thirteen years and some reactions are eerily familiar. In April 2023, Italy declared a 'state of emergency' which permits *inter alia* the rapid dispensation of funding (5 million euros) to create new structures for processing and forced returns. A Memorandum of Understanding with Tunisia was signed, and when arrivals peaked in late August, President Meloni invited the President of the European Commission to visit Italy in order to stress that this is a European, rather than an Italian, challenge. The Commission proposed a 10-point plan centred on reducing departures as well as combatting migrant smuggling, and announced that funds will be released to boost Tunisia's border controls²⁰ among other commitments.

The French interior minister, Gérald Darmanin, said that France would strengthen the border between Menton and Ventimiglia in Italy to prevent irregular migration, in a repetition of the 2011 reaction. A less surprising voice of dissent came from Poland, which immediately rejected the European Commission's 10-point plan for Lampedusa, which includes the redistribution of arrivals to EU member states before they are ultimately returned to their countries of origin²¹.

Some reactions were also different. Germany—in a rare break from its traditional solidarity stance—has announced that it will pause its participation in the 'voluntary solidarity' mechanism in accordance with which asylum seekers were selected for transfer to Germany upon disembarkation. Germany's Federal Police reported 14,701 irregular border crossings in August, with a total of 70,753 irregular entries recorded in the first eight months of the year. But it was not just the increase in arrivals that led to this response. Germany is growing concerned over Italy's unwillingness to implement the Dublin Regulation²², another common problem among the EU member states in the southern Mediterranean that seek solidarity but often face difficulties in upholding existing arrangements.

The biggest difference is that unlike in 2011, when the Commission did not consider the arrival of 25,000 migrants to constitute a "crisis", this time the Commission and Member States not only labelled events the new "crisis" in the Mediterranean, they also endorsed

...unlike in 2011, when the Commission did not consider the arrival of 25,000 migrants to constitute a "crisis", this time the Commission and Member States not only labelled events the new "crisis" in the Mediterranean, they also endorsed measures to address it. This may also be evidence of Italy's growing influence on European immigration policy.

¹⁸ Campesi, G. (2011). *Arab Revolts and the Crisis of the European Border Regime. Manufacturing the emergency in the Lampedusa Crisis*, Migration Working Group 25th May 2011 Discussion paper <http://www.eui.eu/Documents/RSCAS/Research/MWG/201011/5-25-Campesi.pdf>

¹⁹ ABDERRAHIM, T. (2021, JUNE 28). *Walking a Tightrope in Tunisia: The Aspirations and Limitations of Migration Policy Reform*. DGAP Report No 12.

<https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/walking-tightrope-tunisia>

²⁰ Dimitriadi, A. (2022)

²¹ <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/poland-says-it-will-not-accept-eus-lampedusa-migration-plan/2996506>

²² <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-suspends-migrant-intake-from-italy/a-66802523>

measures to address it. This may also be evidence of Italy's growing influence on European immigration policy.

Italy's new measures (as of 18 September 2023) lengthening the time of detention (up to 18 months) until repatriation can take place were passed with little criticism from its European peers. Italy has also utilized the influx from Tunisia to push for stricter language on migrant rescue missions by NGO boats and on human rights guarantees for migrants under the Crisis Regulation currently being negotiated in the Council²³. Germany, one of the staunch supporters of the human rights obligations in the Pact, has dropped its veto, despite initially criticizing the reduction in guarantees for unaccompanied minors.

Across the EU, there is concern over what are perceived as multi-crises in the neighbourhood and their potential knock-on effects on migration. Thus, unlike 2011 and despite the initial divergence, member states now appear willing to come together in support of tighter rules and restrictions at the external borders as well as outsourcing the responsibility for migration management to Tunisia and beyond.

Thinking of the bigger picture

By 2047, according to the Institute for Security Studies²⁴, Africa is expected to account for a quarter of the world's population, but less than six percent of the global economy. It remains a region plagued by poor governance, unrest and conflicts, and is susceptible to climate change. The United Nations estimates that more than 43 million people need humanitarian assistance in the Horn of Africa, across Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia, largely as a result of the drought that has been ongoing for three years²⁵. In the Sahel region²⁶, nine coups (two attempted, seven successful) have taken place over a period of three years, with the latest in Niger in July 2023. The socio-economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic and the geopolitical effect of the war in Ukraine further complicate the regional outlook for peace.

All the above are critical factors that shape the potential for migratory movement. This does not mean that everyone will migrate. There is ample evidence to show that aspirations to migrate do not always lead to decisions to migrate²⁷. The push factors alone are not sufficient triggers for migration to occur. Some will opt to move in search of a better life, both within the Africa region and beyond. Current data indicates that most African migration occurs within the continent as migrants seek employment opportunities in neighbouring countries²⁸. Though reports and discourse highlight displacement and irregular migration from Africa to Europe, recent findings indicate that 80 per cent of Africans thinking about migration have no interest in leaving the continent (IOM, 2017) and no intention of moving permanently²⁹. However, those who will seek to migrate and do not have sufficient financial capital are highly likely to end up in one of the North African countries and try to cross the Central Mediterranean.

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²³ <https://www.politico.eu/article/italy-germany-migration-deal-pull-break-compromise/>

²⁴ <https://futures.issafrica.org/>

²⁵ <https://www.unfpa.org/crisis-horn-africa>

²⁶ It includes the West African states of Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Mauritania

²⁷ de Haas, H. A theory of migration: the aspirations-capabilities framework. CMS 9, 8 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-020-00210-4>

²⁸ International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2017). African migration to Europe: How can adequate data help improve evidence-based policymaking and reduce possible misconceptions? Global Migration Data Analysis Centre (GMDAC) Data Briefing Series, No. 11. <https://publications.iom.int/books/global-migration-data-analysis-centredata-briefing-series-issue-no-11-november-2017>.

²⁹ International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2017).

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In her State of the Union speech in September 2023, the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Layen, stated that "We will decide who comes to Europe and under what circumstances, not the smugglers." It is a sentiment that reflects current European policies, but oversimplifies a complex reality. Smuggling is a business model based on demand and supply, and in the end, it is the people on the move who decide to utilize smugglers under specific circumstances³⁰. This reduces neither the risks nor the criminal aspects of smuggling operations, but it does mean that to address irregular migration, we must first address the main drivers that facilitate and/or force movement.

Tunisia is one in a long list of countries in Europe's neighbourhood where movement is complex and driven by different factors. Rather than seeking to apply 'European' responses to a non-European issue³¹, perhaps it is time to consider alternative toolboxes and approaches, including genuine North to South partnerships.

³⁰ Campana, P., Gelsthorpe, L. Choosing a Smuggler: Decision-making Amongst Migrants Smuggled to Europe. *Eur J Crim Policy Res* 27, 5–21 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10610-020-09459-y> ;

³¹ Dimitriadi, A. (2022). The EU-Southern Neighbourhood Relationship in Transition: From 'Closed' to Semi-Open Borders in the Mediterranean? *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook*. <https://www.iemed.org/publication/the-eu-southern-neighbourhood-relationship-in-transition-from-closed-to-semi-open-borders-in-the-mediterranean/>