



TUNISIA

The increase in the numbers of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers traveling in mixed migratory movements constitutes a major political and humanitarian challenge. North Africa is affected by such movements as a region of origin, transit and destination.

European restrictions on inward regular migration processes has contributed to the rise of irregular migration flows.¹ These restrictions have forced those on the move to find other ways to reach European shores, which, has resulted in a surge in the activities of organized transnational criminal networks operating smuggling and trafficking rings across the region. Migrants continue to face abuse and exploitation at the hands of these smugglers and traffickers who promise passage across the Mediterranean Sea and national borders.



These movements are driven by those who are fleeing war and searching for security; those looking for better opportunities and future; Geographic proximity and historical ties have also contributed as drivers for North Africans to migrate to Europe (particularly those from Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia) and to the Gulf countries (particularly those from Egypt and Sudan).²

BACKGROUND

Tunisia's approach to migration has been characterized by two principles. First, workers were encouraged to emigrate, because the economy was unable to absorb all labour force. Secondly, Tunisians living abroad were monitored because remittances represented an important source of income.³

Although Tunisia is a signatory to the 1951 Geneva Convention and its new constitution of 2014 guarantees the right to seek political asylum, the country has yet to adopt a national asylum and protection legislation. Current legal frameworks fail to extensive solutions to the present day's challenges in terms of asylum rights, access to work, healthcare, education and freedom of movement.⁴

Tunisia has taken major steps forward in terms of combatting human trafficking. On the 3rd of March 2016, the "Loi organique n° 2016-61" was adopted which improves anti-trafficking regulation. In particular, it recognizes the vulnerability of children by deeming child trafficking and exploitation an aggravating circumstance of the crime of human trafficking.⁵

MIGRANT PROFILE

INBOUND

As of June 2017, there were 58,000⁶ migrants in Tunisia, the majority of whom are from Algeria.⁷ Many of the sub-Saharan Africans in Tunisia are labor migrants or students who migrate to Tunisia regularly. Some Tunisians and sub-Saharan migrants who had previously been living and working in Libya had also arrived in Tunisia fleeing the safety concerns in Libya.⁸

Although there are many migrants in Tunisia who have fled war, particularly from Libya, there are less than 700 refugees that have registered with UNHCR in the country.⁹ This is thought to be because of those who have fled Libya might have a relatively easy time supporting themselves in the country and have more resources than those arriving from elsewhere, and are therefore, less motivated to apply for refugee status.¹⁰ Syrians are the largest refugee population in Tunisia.¹¹

An increasing number of sub-Saharan Africans may be trafficked to Tunisia; women are smuggled into the country to be domestic workers and are denied access to their passports and external communication.¹² Some are also sexually exploited. Boys and young men between the ages of 15-25 are often lured in to Tunisia by schemes that promise them well-paid jobs or even football careers at an academy and are then trafficked and exploited in forced labor in agriculture, construction or in services.¹³

OUTBOUND

Tunisia has traditionally been a country of emigration. According to the Office of Tunisians Abroad (Office des Tunisiens à l'Étranger, Tunisians living abroad (first-generation migrants and born-abroad second and third generation Tunisians) are estimated to reach 1,325,390¹⁴, which represents about 11,9% of the home country's population.¹⁵ In 2011, following the fall of the Ben Ali regime, more than 25,500 Tunisians traveled by sea to Lampedusa, Italy to find work or reunite with their families.¹⁶ Since the events of 2011, Tunisian youth have been migrating to pursue employment opportunities in Europe. However, given that visa requirements to Europe are particularly strict and include expensive travel medical insurance and proof of sufficient resources, many Tunisians intending to migrate to Europe are left with no choice but irregular migration.¹⁷

During 2017, Tunisian emigration to Europe increased significantly. While in 2016, 1,207 Tunisian irregular migrants were registered in Italy, 6,151 Tunisian irregular migrants were registered in 2017.¹⁸ Despite initial speculation that such spike was a result of a shift in route due to the deal between Italy and Libya to restrict migration from Libya, the rise in arrivals from Tunisia has mainly concerned Tunisians and not sub-Saharan Africans.¹⁹

There is a continued increase in the number of Tunisians making the journey to Italy via the Central Mediterranean Route. Between January and the end of March 2018, 1,190 Tunisians made the crossing, as compared to 156 arrivals during the same period in 2017.²⁰

ROUTES TO AND FROM TUNISIA

INBOUND

Tunisia may be considered as a destination country, but also a transit country to Europe. Many sub-Saharan migrants depart from the northern coast towards Italy, and might be intercepted or rescued while attempting to cross the sea. Other might come to settle in Tunisia.²¹ The rest of migrants are those who flee from Libya by land to ask for assisted voluntary return (AVR) or seek refuge in Tunisia.²² Tunisia has built a 200-km barrier along the border with Libya in order to monitor these movements.²³

OUTBOUND

Europe-bound boats leaving Tunisia typically depart from the Tunisian Northern coast (Bizerte, Cap Bon) and Eastern coast (Sfax, Thyna and the islands of Kerkennah) and aim to reach Sicily and Lampedusa in Italy. Taking these routes entails significant risks for migrants, due to the risk of drowning and the possibility of being intercepted by the coastguards. Tunisians who are intercepted when attempting to leave the country irregularly face two months in prison.²⁴

MIGRATION MOTIVATIONS

INBOUND

The growing instability in Libya has led migrants to flee Libya for Tunisia in search of safety, particularly in and shortly after 2011. Similarly, Syrians have sought refuge in Tunisia since 2011 but the exact number of Syrians in Tunisia is not clear as many are not registered with UNHCR.²⁵

Many Sub-Saharan boys and young men go to Tunisia for the promise of football careers but are then trafficked.²⁶ Some experience sexual exploitation, and are forced into domestic labour and other forms of forced labour.

OUTBOUND

Tunisian migrants leave Tunisia due to high unemployment in the country and a lack of opportunities. Migration flows from the country peaked in 2011, but young people continue to take to the sea, bound for Europe, in hope of finding more opportunities for employment. The critical deterioration of Tunisia's economic situation, which weighs heavily on Tunisian people, is one of the main reason of the recent rise of emigration.²⁷

Young people's motivation to migrate is particularly strong in low-income neighborhoods in the country. In 2016, the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights found that half of Tunisian youth from low-income neighborhoods were considering leaving the country, and one third of these youths were prepared to do so through irregular channels due to increasing poverty and high unemployment.²⁸

THE MIGRANT EXPERIENCE IN EGYPT

STATUS

Tunisia lacks rules that regulate the status of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in its territory. Refugees are registered with the Red Crescent and processed by UNHCR. However, because the documentation provided by UNHCR is not formally recognized by authorities, refugees risk being arrested and considered irregular migrants.²⁹ Technically, people who have been granted refugee status have rights to accommodation, healthcare, work and education in Tunisia. However, such rights are not systematically granted due to legislative gaps and the lack of formal recognition making the assertion of these rights dependent on publicity and awareness amongst local actors.³⁰

Irregular migrants have very little chance of regularizing their stay in Tunisia as procedures are extremely arduous and demanding.³¹ Irregular migrants' access to employment is usually limited to the informal economy where they may be exposed to the risk of exploitation and abuse.³²

LEAVING TUNISIA

Leaving Tunisia presents challenges for irregular migrants. Many migrants become trapped and live in continuous limbo, as they are required to pay for their flights home when deported and Tunisian law mandates that migrants pay overstay fees for every week that they are in the country irregularly.³³ In addition, they face the risk of detention if their documents are checked. However, decree 1061-2016 has been revised to introduce some facilitations and exemptions for vulnerable migrants and victims of trafficking.³⁴

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28. Ibid.
29. Mazzoleni, Matteo, ["The Drama of Migrants in Tunisia"](#) (April 2016).
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.



International Organization for Migration (IOM)
The UN Migration Agency

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