



MIGRATION CRISIS IN TUNISIA: REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Meher Bejaoui | Sep 24th, 2023

The phenomenon of illegal immigration constitutes a multifaceted challenge, bearing implications not only for the individuals involved but also for the nations that serve as their temporary or long-term station. The challenges faced by illegal immigrants can range from difficulty in finding employment and accessing housing, education, and other services to the risk of deportation. The experiences of illegal migrants are subject to an intricate interplay of variables, notably their nation of origin, the reasons behind their irregular migration, and the host country's prevailing policies and attitudes. The surge in illegal immigration to European nations, such as Italy, originating predominantly from Tunisia during the years 2020 and 2021, reflects a complex confluence of economic and societal factors. These factors encompass the deteriorating economic conditions within Tunisia, limited employment prospects characterized by both unemployment and underemployment, and a prevailing sense of disillusionment regarding the efficacy and commitment of the country's political leadership in addressing these issues. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated this issue by instigating job losses amongst migrants within Tunisia and augmenting the migrant population with individuals fleeing neighboring countries where they feared deportation. This trend is anticipated to persist in the foreseeable future.



Figure 1: Map of the Maghreb region

According to official Tunisian statistics, economic adversity constitutes the primary motivation for immigration for nationals hailing from non-Maghreb African countries, accounting for 50.1%. Additionally, 6.3% of nationals cite security and ease of access as their rationale for choosing Tunisia as a destination. A significant proportion of migrants from African nations beyond the Maghreb region, totaling 65.7%, harbor intentions of eventual departure from Tunisia. Within this group, 30.3% express their desire to migrate to another country, while 59.1% aspire to return to their countries of origin.

Illegal immigration from African nations to Tunisia is fueled by a matrix of push and pull factors. These encompass poverty, conflict, persecution or discrimination, lack of opportunities, economic prospects, social welfare systems, and political stability. In the context of illegal immigration via Tunisia to Italy, these factors may manifest as economic disparities and political instability within Tunisia, coupled with the perceived advantages of residing in Italy. In some instances, individuals may confront insurmountable barriers to legal immigration due to stringent visa requirements or the absence of formal bilateral agreements between their native country and the intended host nation. Furthermore, familial

reunification may serve as a compelling motivation for individuals to undertake illegal immigration, as they seek to join relatives already settled in Europe.

Tunisia possesses several attributes that render it an attractive departure point for irregular migration for sub-Saharan nationals. These include an extensive coastline in proximity to Italy, featuring a dense network of small fishing and commercial ports situated in close proximity to major coastal cities, thereby offering opportunities for labor and housing in preparation for clandestine crossings to Italy. The densely populated, urbanized Tunisian-Libyan coastal area fosters the movement and exchange of people and goods, involving both citizens and foreigners from the two nations.

The Tunisian-Libyan border posts are the mainland entry point into Tunisia. Tunisian statistics do not specify the nationality of foreigners entering or leaving each land border post. However, research results (Pliez, 2001) highlight that Tunisia is home to a significant number of migrants from south of the Sahara and that most land entries of these populations into the country are from Libya, in the east. This does not exclude the possibility of entry from Algeria in the west, but this route is the longest distance that sub-Saharan migrants would have to travel across the entire Algerian Sahara, to transit through the cities and roads of eastern Algeria and then enter through the Algerian-Tunisian border posts. Illegal immigration from Tunisia to Italy has historically engendered tensions between the two nations. Despite concerted endeavors to address this issue, it persists as a recurring challenge, bearing the potential for substantial repercussions upon both countries.

Background

In the early 21st century, sub-Saharan migrants in the city of Tunis appeared to have low visibility and were not concentrated in identifiable or well-known neighborhoods or public spaces (Boubakri & Mazzella, 2005). Since then, the situation has grown in complexity. Depending on the

categories of illegal immigrants in Tunisia, the country can be a waiting, arrival, or an expulsion area. Nationals from countries in the sub-Saharan African zones, fleeing from inter-ethnic conflicts, civil wars, and worsening humanitarian conditions risk their lives by crossing the vast expanse of the Great Sahara, and by crossing the sea separating Europe from Africa, a crossing during which hundreds of human lives are lost every year.

Legal immigrants who live in Tunisia initially arrive with passports. As time goes by, they are mostly divided into two groups: those who intended to reside in Tunisia from the start and those who intend to use Tunisia as a steppingstone to migrate to Europe. Immigrants who have lived in Tunisia enjoy legal immigration status for the first three months, but once their visas expire, they remain illegal immigrants due to Tunisia's rigid immigration policies (Matt, 2022). The fact that many legal immigrants in Tunisia are forced to remain in the country illegally has a number of negative consequences. For example, it makes it difficult for them to find work, to access healthcare, and to send their children to school. It also makes them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

The number of African nationals from countries outside the Maghreb region has seen a significant increase since 2014, rising from 7,200 to 21,466 individuals in 2021 (Observatoire national de la migration, 2021). Among these, Ivoirians constitute the largest group, comprising approximately one-third of the total, while nationals from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Guinea, and Mali make up approximately one-tenth of the African population from outside the Maghreb. One of ten foreign residents in Tunisia have arrived in the last 20 years, and nearly one of seven arrived since 2015. The acceleration of entries in recent years is due to immigration from countries in Africa outside the Maghreb region, which accounts for approximately half of all migrants during the most recent period. The foreign population residing in Tunisia is characterized by a strong geographical concentration disparity. It is mainly located in two regions: Greater Tunis (50.2%) and the Centre-East (27.7%). The South and Northeast regions have lower proportions, respectively 7.3% and 5.5%

(Observatoire national de la migration, 2021). The country's Western regions (Northwest and Centre-West), bordering Algeria, are less attractive for foreigners to stay or settle in, due to lack of opportunities and overall quality of life.

According to the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES), 544 deaths and missing persons have occurred during the first nine months of 2022. In addition, 16,292 Tunisian nationals (including 3,430 minors and 828 women) successfully arrived at the Italian coast from January to October 2022, compared to 14,342 during the same period in 2021. Without distinction of nationality, Tunisian authorities intercepted 29,129 migrants during over 1,800 crossing operations in the first ten months of 2022. Per the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex), approximately 93,805 illegal border crossings occurred through the central Mediterranean route from January to November 2022. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that approximately 104,484 individuals arrived in Italy by the sea in 2022, with 17,443 of these individuals being Tunisian. The statistics highlight the dangers and challenges faced by migrants, as well as the need for a more humane and effective response. They also emphasize the need to address the root causes of irregular migration and to provide safe and legal pathways for migration.

Diplomatic tensions

The migration crisis increased tensions between Tunisia and Italy. In June 2018, the Italian ambassador to Tunis was summoned by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs following derogatory remarks made by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior at the time, condemning the “sending” of “convicted criminals” by Tunisia to Italy (Deutsche Welle, 2018, June 26). Due to rising tensions, on 27 July 2020, Rome sent its Minister of the Interior to Tunis to discuss the strong resurgence of clandestine crossings of the Mediterranean since the end of the pandemic lockdown. The statements made sounded like a warning. On July 30, the Tunisian ambassador to Rome was summoned as a response. The next day, the Italian Minister of

Foreign Affairs increased the pressure on Tunisia by threatening to suspend aid. The minister mentioned a first envelope of 6.5 million euros. He also pledged to systematically repatriate Tunisians who land in Italy. The minister argued that Tunisia is a safe country with a recognized government, unlike Libya, which is embroiled in civil war.

Tunisian President Kais Saied sought to ease tensions and addressed the issue of migration, stating that the responsibility lies with both sides of the Mediterranean. He pointed to the unequal distribution of wealth as a contributing factor and argued that rather than investing more in coast guards to combat the issue, the root causes that drive individuals to migrate should be addressed. He also acknowledged Tunisia's role in the issue, stating that the country has failed to address economic problems and that there are many projects that are hindered by political and administrative blockages. Despite the diplomatic tensions around illegal immigration between Tunisia and Italy, both maintain good economic relations. During recent months, several high official meetings were held, and more coordinated efforts were conducted to address and treat the crisis.

Human rights

Following the 2011 Arab Spring, the Tunisian government refused to impose a legal duty on asylum, preventing administrative measures from being established through fair and effective procedures (Garelli & Tazzioli, 2017). Now the UNHCR regards those who try to cross the Mediterranean illegally as asylum seekers and assists them on the Tunisian coast. However, Tunisian authorities have erected many barriers to stop people from crossing. The first method is to 'push back' people who seek help from reaching the UNHCR. Moreover, the Tunisian authorities and security forces imprisoned those people in migrant detention facilities in Tunis and other areas (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2011). Illegal immigrants who were rescued off the country's coast allege verbal and physical assault by Tunisian security forces. The second is limiting the activities of people and organizations who assist illegal migration. It criminalized not just illegal immigration but also assistance while prosecuting people and organizations

that assisted immigrants. This not only violated the freedom of those who want to leave the country and seek asylum but also those who assist by preventing financial support from international organizations.

The legal process for illegal migrants was impaired in Tunisia. International legal entities call out the right to due process for asylum applicants and irregular immigrants. This implies that all migrants can go through due process to obtain proper protection such as legal assistance, rights of attorney, and interpretation in languages comprehensible to migrants. The Tunisian security force has consistently denied illegal immigrants access to due process and did not supply professional translators throughout the identification procedure (Badalič, 2018).

Economic impacts

Illegal immigrants from African nations decide to flee their countries, primarily due to the country of origin's economic crises, to live, succeed, and address economic difficulties in the destination country. Unfortunately, the decision to illegally immigrate from African nations generates another economic crisis in Tunisia, which is already suffering from a protracted political and economic crisis, driving Tunisians to illegally immigrate to southern European countries. The influx of immigrants has an impact on the host country's incomes, employment rates, production costs, commodity prices, and governmental expenditures (Jang & Jung, 2022). This intensifies competition in the job market between domestic workers and illegal immigrants and raises societal expenses. This is likely to expand to disputes inside societies as well as between countries.

With the country's economy in disarray, the inflow of illegal immigrants from other countries into Tunisia is far from welcome. Since Tunisia is utilized as an illegal immigration platform to Europe, a considerable immigrant population flows into the country. Yet, Tunisia has been suffering from a long-term terrible economic situation. The Tunisian economy was already facing structural economic challenges such as poor investment, high unemployment, and a mismatch between the demand and

supply, as well as a significant outflow of skilled labor prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has further exacerbated these challenges (OECD, 2022).

Most illegal immigrants work in low-skilled industries like tourism and construction. They increase the number of workers in the labor market at a lower cost than the local labor population (Matt, 2022). This situation leads to high unemployment among Tunisians and poor earnings while making it more difficult for Tunisian workers to find jobs. This trend worsens Tunisia's economic crisis by increasing competition for jobs between Tunisians and illegal immigrants. To avoid competition for limited resources, illegal immigrants often shift their destination toward southern European nations, specifically Italy. This, in turn, also prompts not only illegal immigrants in Tunisia but also some Tunisians to illegally migrate to southern Europe in search of better opportunities.

Conclusion

Tunisia faces challenges in dealing with illegal immigration, including human rights issues, economic pressures, and social unrest. The Tunisian government's reluctance to support illegal immigrants has led to tensions and human rights abuses. Additionally, Tunisia is facing pressure from international entities to guarantee the rights of illegal immigrants to due process. The influx of illegal immigrants has also increased social expenses and competition in the job market. This has led to high unemployment and poor earnings for Tunisians and has impacted the overall economic situation in Tunisia.

Furthermore, the economic crisis caused by the pandemic has made Tunisia an attractive destination for illegal immigrants hoping to travel to Italy or other southern European countries. The closure of alternative accommodation by Tunisia and UNHCR has also left many illegal immigrants without a place to stay. This has led to protests and social unrest among illegal immigrants, as well as overcrowding. Overall, Tunisia faces a complex set of challenges in dealing with illegal immigration. The

Tunisian government must find a way to balance the need to protect human rights with the need to address the economic and social impacts of illegal immigration.

Author's Bio: Meher BEJAOU is an intern with the consortium. He is pursuing his graduate degree in International Studies at Korea University.

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