SOLROUTES

Maritime Solidarities from Below?

Framing the Nexus between Fishing and Crossing in the Mahdia region (Tunisia)

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Summary

Introduction

Figure 1. Chebba's boat graveyard

The Governorate of Mahdia, with its fishing ports and coastal towns, offers a unique vantage point for exploring the effects of increasing migration prohibition on the rearticulation of solidarity in the crossing of the central Mediterranean[1]. From this privileged observatory, one can trace how the securitisation of the Italian-Tunisian border – initiated with the restructuration of the European border regime in the 1990s – has not halted departures[2], but has resulted in stark social stratifications and differentiated travel modes, divided along lines of race, class, gender, and personal abilities. These dynamics have profoundly impacted historical neighbourhood connections with Sicily. Contrary to its intended purpose of halting departures, Euro-Tunisian migration restrictions along the central Mediterranean route have primarily restructured access to migratory infrastructures, creating rigid socio-racial hierarchies. This reconfiguration manifests in varied levels of access to travel arrangements, vessel types, nautical equipment, payment scales, risks undertaken, and prospects of success. The opening image of two wrecked boats in Chebba's boat graveyard vividly captures this contrast: the notorious *iron boats* used by sub-Saharan migrants, juxtaposed against the wooden *flouka* typically employed by local *harraga* (literally "those who burn" borders).

Mahdia's geographic location – just 87 nautical miles from Lampedusa – makes it a crucial transit point for both inland Tunisians and non-Tunisian migrants seeking to cross the Mediterranean. With a population exceeding 400,000 people, the region is also a significant source of local migrants. These young *harraga* view migration as their sole path to social emancipation and economic improvement. The long tradition of

[1] In particular, our research was conducted in Mahdia, Rajish, Ksour Essef, Salakta, El Alia, Bredaa, Sidi Alouan, Ghedabna, Chebba, and Mellouléche.

[2] In 2023, Tunisia surpassed Libya as the primary departure point for boats arriving in Italy, with 98,000 migrants setting off from Tunisia, particularly from the Sfax region.

emigration from Mahdia and Chebba, particularly to Sicilian towns such as Mazara del Vallo, flourished in an era of unrestricted mobility. However, today's the strengthening of the Italian-Tunisian border clashes with the unstoppable flows of *harraga*. Our ethnographic research focused on the self-organisation of migratory journeys by Tunisian migrants in the Mahdia region, as well as the reconfiguration of forms of solidarity under the securitarian policies of President Kaïs Saïed and the 2023 EU-Tunisia Memorandum.

Many Tunisians we interviewed distinguish between two modalities of migration: small-scale *harrag* operations and *comita* migration. The former involves a minor smuggler organising the journey, often in contrast to "big" smugglers who manage crossings for sub-Saharan migrants, colloquially referred to as *Africans*. In the latter, groups of friends or neighbours collaborate to plan and execute expeditions. This *comita* form of migration is deeply rooted in the coastal culture and requires specialised maritime knowledge, often tied to the region's longstanding fishing traditions. Such local knowledge raises questions about whether these mutual aid networks represent a form of *maritime solidarity from below* and how prohibition policies influence the viability of such friends-driven initiatives. What roles do factors such as black-market control, crackdowns on theft, and corruption play in these dynamics? Within this context, people involved in fishing often assume prominent roles, highlighting the intricate entanglements between fishing activities and cross-border migration.

Methodological problems: doing field research in a hostile environment for academic freedom

Our fieldwork in Tunisia has been heavily influenced by an increasingly hostile environment towards academic freedom. Following the 2010-2011 revolution, Tunisia embarked on a democratic transition, widely praised by Western media. Civil society organisations flourished profiting from the climate of loosened censorship in the media and in politics, with the emergence of numerous associations and NGOs, and space for freedom of expression and academic production on Tunisia expanded significantly (Scaglioni 2020). However, this climate of openness and increasing tolerance towards minorities began to deteriorate with Kaïs Saïed's rise to power. After winning the presidential elections in 2019, Saied declared a state of emergency in 2021, consolidating his power. In 2023, the President delivered a xenophobic and racist speech, saying that "hordes of irregular migrants from sub-Saharan Africa" came to Tunisia, "with all the violence, crime, and unacceptable practices that entails". He said this was an "unnatural" situation and part of a criminal plan designed to "change the demographic make-up" and turn Tunisia into "just another African country that doesn't belong to the Arab and Islamic nations anymore"[3]. This speech ushered in a new phase of criminalisation and repression of migration; such a crackdown extended beyond migrants themselves, targeting militant and political networks, as well as academics and migration scholars. As an example, Sadia Mesbah, president of the anti-racism association Mnemty, and Cherifa Riahi, former president of the association Terre d'Asile, were arrested in May 2024. Discussing migration in public spaces became increasingly challenging, especially interacting with the Black population – particularly in the area of Sfax– was increasingly restricted.

In this securitarian context, ethnographic research on Tunisian migration could still be conducted, but only by maintaining a low profile, employing undercover methods. The risks associated with such work became starkly

[3] See: https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/03/tunisia-presidents-racist-speech-incites-a-wave-of-violence-against-black-africans/.

evident during field research, when the arrest of French researcher Victor Dupont heightened concerns and level of attention. Having arrived in Tunisia ten days earlier under the supervision of Vincent Geisser, Dupont was conducting research in the Jendouba region on the socio-professional trajectories of young Tunisians involved in the 2011 revolution. Arrested in El Kef on charges of "endangering State security", he was detained for three weeks before being deported to France[4]. The true reasons behind his arrest remain unclear – some suggest he was found with photos of military structures – but the incident had an undeniable deterrent effect on our room for doing research, making formal collaboration with associations particularly risky. We decided not to pass through formal associations and not to apply for official permissions to conduct research and film, since requesting approval from the authorities to conduct research also meant subjecting oneself to scrutiny. At the same time, without official authorisation, some people were not disposable to participate in the research.

Figure 2. Kaïs Saïed's electoral manifests in Tunis

In our ethnographic research within the Governorate of Mahdia, we established ethnographic relations mainly with two social groups. The first comprised young people who identify as *harraga*, in particular those who attempted to leave irregularly but were intercepted at sea or, after landing in Italy, were returned to Tunisia voluntarily or were forcibly repatriated. They were generally under the age of thirty, whom we encountered through word of mouth and personal contacts. The second included fishermen of all ages, who provided us with a unique perspective into the intersections between fishing activities and the sea crossings. We met them primarily in male-dominated spaces like cafés, where Nadia's status as a woman made it difficult for her to

[4] See: https://ilmanifesto.it/caso-victor-dupont-la-tunisia-non-e-sicura-neanche-per-i-ricercatori.

access these spaces. However, paradoxically, Filippo's status as an outsider made it easier for him to enter male-dominated spaces and engage in discussions on the *harga*. In one occasion in which we conducted the interview together, the participants expressed regret that they could not speak as freely as they normally would, especially when using harsh or explicit language, out of respect for Nadia as a woman.

Figure 3. Conducting ethnography at the café

Migration, fishing, and solidarity

In recent years, academic literature has shown increasing interest in search and rescue (SAR) activities along the Central Mediterranean route, where more than 30.000 migrants have dead in the attempt of reaching the EU. The first civilian rescue ship was launched in 2014, marking the beginning of a growing "civil fleet" in solidarity with migrants at the world's deadliest border, as a response to the European "reception crisis" (Rea et al. 2019) and the "necropolitics" of the border regime (Mbembe 2019). However, NGO rescue activity has been subjected to criminalisation campaigns by EU member states, the European Union, and agencies such as Frontex, turning the Mediterranean into a *battleground* between proponents and opponents of freedom of movement (Ambrosini 2018). NGO ships operating in the region have faced accusations of colluding with smugglers[5] or acting as a pull factor for migration flows to Europe, with the aim of discouraging migrant departures, illuminating the social construction of the Mediterranean as a neo-colonial space (Mainwaring and DeBono 2021; Proglio et al. 2021).

[5] In the Italian public debate, the NGOs operating in the central Mediterranean have been called "*taxi del mare*".

What the social sciences refer to as "crimes of solidarity" (Tazzioli 2018: Aris Escarcena 2018) also applies to the activities of Sicilian and Tunisian fishermen, who risk criminalisation for rescuing migrants and saving lives when they encounter them during their work (Friese 2015; Ramello 2023). Many scholars have highlighted the tension between migration deterrence policies and the *law of the sea*, a moral code and a legal duty codified in multiple conventions that mandates the rescue of people in distress and their disembarkation at a safe port, regardless of their legal status (Camilli 2019). Rescues carried out by Sicilian or Tunisian fishermen and their entanglement within the battleground of migrations resurfaces cyclically in the media and among activist, with some of them facing legal prosecution by the Italian State. While in the early 2000s fishermen who rescued migrants were often portrayed as heroes in the media, in recent years such actions can lead to administrative detention, accusations of human smuggling, as well as the loss of a day's work. This shift is poignantly depicted in a scene of the film *Terraferma*, which represents the moral conflict between two generations of Lampedusa fishermen after the transformation of the island from an abandoned community into a migratory hub and famous tourist location.

Ahlam Chemlali (2024) examined the environmental and human consequences of border externalisation (*maritime rebordering*) through the perspective of local actors, such as fishermen, who are not the direct targets of European border policies. These consequences manifest in three key "ripple effects" produced by the externalisation of the European border. First, direct conflicts at sea between the Libyan Coast Guard and fishermen, in which the abduction of Tunisian fishermen for ransom has become an increasingly common practice. Since 2014, with the launch of Operation Sophia, the underfunded and previously marginalised Libyan Coast Guard has emerged as the central actor in European externalisation policies, being the only Libyan institution that has been systematically rehabilitated since 2011. The EU and its member States, particularly Italy, have provided the Libyan Coast Guard with millions of euros in funding, training, equipment, and political legitimacy. Secondly, environmental degradation and the fishing crisis. The proliferation of motorboats and port congestion has negatively impacted marine life. Combined with global warming, these factors threaten small fish populations and seaweed ecosystems. Thirdly, the rising number of migrant deaths has resulted in the emergence of graveyards of the unknown in the town of Zarzis, where unidentified bodies of those who perished at sea are buried, underscoring the devastating human cost of border externalisation.

The historical connections between Sicilians and Tunisians

The Mediterranean route between Sicily and Tunisia has always been crossed by the movement of people, goods, knowledge and capital. Cross-border movements unfolded within power relations as well as colonial and post-colonial ties. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, significant flows of Sicilians started to head towards Tunisia, thanks to the influence of a small Italian speaking community (Triulzi 1971). Similarly to their Tunisian counterpart a century after, the movements of Sicilians across the sea initially took the form of circulations, and their presence in Tunisia was leveraged by advocates of colonial expansion. Sicilians started to cross the Mediterranean in search of seasonal works and by 1881, year of the establishment of the French Protectorate, the Italian population with its Sicilian majority had already overcome 10,000 units, becoming Tunisia largest foreign community (Davi 2000). The establishment of the French protectorate scaled up these dynamics of circulation. Between the 1920s and the 1930s, the Italian population of Tunisia counted almost 100,000 people. Even if the geographical origins of Italians became more heterogeneous over time, its overwhelming majority (more than 70 per cent) had come or had their origin in Sicily; nurturing their feelings of national belongings was the way to support Italian interests, and in the 1930s, the persistent efforts of the

French Protectorate to determine a massive change of nationality of Italians remained ineffective. Differently from Tunisians, Italians were tried to be incorporated by French colonial authorities, inaugurating the first tracing of socio-spatial boundaries between Sicilians and Tunisians (Giglioli 2016).

In 1956, year of Tunisian independence, the census still counted 67,000 Italians. The post-colonial State, led by Habib Bourguiba, gradually narrowed the room for movement of Italians, culminated in the nationalisation of foreign-owned lands in 1964, eroding the economic bases for the permanence of large Italian communities in Tunisia (Fleri 2022). The 50,000 Italians departed during the 1960s, followed three main routes. The first, stemming from decades of living and working in a society organized on colonial rules, led to France. The second identifiable route brought many Italian Tunisians to refugees' camps in Italy, like those of Tortona in Piedmont or Latina in Lazio. These camps, conceived and built for foreign refugees mainly from eastern Europe, came to host a significant exodus of Italians coming from Istria, Dalmatia, and North Africa. A third flow brought Italian-Tunisians back to their places of origin, to the same shores of western Sicily, from where their parents or grandparents had left for Tunisia, composing small communities of *returnees*. It was this last trajectory that brought the first pioneer Tunisian migrants in western Sicily: decades of coexistence in Tunisia had generated the interwoven of human relations between Sicilians and Tunisians, in a few cases, these resulted in shared migratory projects. Some Sicilian Tunisian entrepreneurs had maintained strong ties with their land of origin and found ways to move their businesses and economic activities to the other side of the Mediterranean. In doing so, they brought with them their Tunisian employees. As Fleri (2022: 636) points out, "the arrival of the early Tunisian migrants in Sicily was not related to the attractiveness of the Sicilian economy and the opportunity it offered; it was instead a side effect of the profound transformation and rebirth of the century-old migration system between Sicily and Tunisia". Even Cusumano (1975), in his book *Il ritorno infelice*, the first anthropological study of the Tunisian community in Mazara del Vallo, notes that word of mouth played a crucial role: Sicilian fishermen working and residing along the Tunisian coast shared information with Tunisian fishermen seeking to boost their monthly income, encouraging them to migrate temporarily to the Trapani area, that was experiencing a severe labour shortage due to its exceptionally high emigration rate.

According to CENSIS (1979), Tunisian migrants began migrating between 1968 and 1972 at a steady rate of approximately 60–80 people per week. This marked one of the first instances in which the Italian Republican government had to address the issue of international labour immigration (Colucci 2018). Initially, they settled mainly in the Mazara del Vallo area to work in the fishing industry, but within a few years, many moved to other Sicilian provinces, primarily in search of employment in agriculture. Meanwhile, social relations between Sicilians and Tunisian endured and, while the departure was sudden and dramatic, still in 1971, 12,000 Italians resided in Tunisia. This presence ensured the perpetuation of relationships and the flows of information (Fleri 2022). Italy and Tunisia worked to maintain and improve logistical and transport connections while diplomatic and commercial relations remained – considered the shocks provoked by decolonisation – optimal. Since 1956, Tunisia and Italy have maintained strong diplomatic relations, both as part of the Western bloc. In the geopolitical landscape following World War II, restrictions on free movement primarily stemmed from tensions between the capitalist and the socialist bloc. In the 1970s and 1980s, Tunisia, the nearest among North African countries, with its long history of relations with Italy, was a privileged interlocutor for cooperative initiatives. Moreover, the audacious strategy of the Italian multinational oil and gas company ENI, was opening spaces for a new role of Italy in the global energy market. Right at that time, in the early 1970s, ENI was, testing the feasibility of a crucial infrastructural project: the Trans-Mediterranean pipeline, a gas pipeline connecting Algeria to Italy through Tunisia (Ben-Yehoyada 2017). Initial rejections and repatriations

notwithstanding, a different approach was adopted, and in 1973, authorities issued an extraordinary regularization for Tunisian workers.

Mazara del Vallo hosted almost half of the total number of Tunisian living in Sicily, and the local fleet and its related activities employed the bulk of them (Sbraccia and Saitta 2003). At the beginning of the 1970s, seafaring in Mazara del Vallo was living a moment of rapid expansion that was turning the town into the first fishing port of the Mediterranean. This evolution was initially due to the constant flows of capitals coming from the development program of the Cassa del Mezzogiorno, a governmental scheme conceived in the 1950s to narrow the economic gap between northern and southern Italy. The Cassa del Mezzogiorno financed the motorisation and construction of trawlers employed in deep-sea fisheries. In 1972, at its peak, Mazara's fishing fleet comprised one vessel for ocean fishing, 180 for deep-sea fishing, and 200 for coastal fishing (Venezia 2022).

According to Flero (2022), the arrival of Tunisians in Mazara del Vallo should be linked neither with the absence of local workforce nor with the refusal of domestic workers to take on jobs in the fleet, but rather to needs inherent fishing activities. The forms of depth-sea fishing practiced by Mazarese trawlers, the distribution of fish stock in the Channel of Sicily, and the sustainability of the fleet swelling required an expansion of fishing operations beyond Italian waters and an approaching of the Tunisian coasts. The combination of these three factors convinced Mazarese shipowners to hire Tunisian fishers in the belief that their presence would represent some sort of "free pass" for their vessels in Tunisian national waters. Already in the mid-1960s, Tunisian authorities had seized Sicilian trawlers caught in illegal fishing activities, creating an international affair that embarrassed the diplomatic authorities of the two countries (the so-called *guerra del pesce*). The presence of Arab workers on Sicilian boats gave the shipowners at least a chance to negotiate with the Tunisian coast guard (see also Ben-Yehoyada 2017). When the Mazarese fleet begun its expansion, these small groups of Tunisians present in western Sicily became "devices" of mediation between potential newcomers and the needs of shipowners. The growth of the Mazarese fleet and its enlarging operations scale created the economic space for larger Tunisian communities in western Sicily. While circular trajectories between Tunisia and Sicily made migrants identification and quantification arduous, local authorities appraised that around 2000 Tunisians lived stably in the Province of Trapani. The creation of jobs related to the fishing industry and the proliferation of trawlers in Mazara del Vallo greatly benefited Tunisian newcomers.

The interrelation between the fishing activities of Mazara del Vallo and Tunisian migration determined the localisation of migrants' origin areas. By the 1970s, the majority of Tunisian migrants in Sicily came from two fishing towns on the western coast of Tunisia: Chebba and Mahdia. Migrants from this region met two necessities: they had skills and experience as fishermen, and they came from the very same area in which Mazarese trawlers operated: the fishing grounds in front of southeastern shores of Tunisia that have always attracted fishermen form all over the Mediterranean (...). Leaving the country because of the poor conditions triggered by the contradictory results of the agrarian reform in the 1960s, Tunisian assumed an ambiguous status: from one side, they were fullfledged international migrants; from the other, they worked at sea, often near their home villages.

The typical Tunisian immigrant was almost always a man temporarily separated from his wife and family, who had remained in Tunisia. His primary goal was to save as much as possible, minimising expenses – particularly on housing – to retain the bulk of his earnings in Italy. The money saved was usually taken back to Tunisia, where it was primarily invested in real estate. Ironically, the Mazara district that housed these migrants was an abandoned and deteriorated area left in disrepair after the 1968 Belice earthquake, known as the Qasbah. By

the late 1970s, it became evident that many Tunisian migrants had not yet saved enough to sustain a decent life upon returning home (Venezia 2022). As a result, their migratory pattern evolved from short-term, seasonal work – albeit repeated over multiple seasons – to a medium-to-long-term outlook, typically spanning five to ten years. This shift brought about a fundamental change in the nature of their migration. Many workers began relocating their entire families, or at least their wives and children, to Mazara del Vallo. With this transition, housing conditions also improved, as an increasing number of families moved out of the Qasbah and into other districts of the city, marking a more permanent settlement.

Since the 1990s, the creation of the Schengen area and the introduction of restrictive migration laws by European States made the borders between the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean increasingly closed, narrowing down the legal possibilities of moving between Europe and Africa. Following the Italian (1990) and Spanish (1991) imposition of visa requirements for Maghreb States and the increasingly securitisation of external borders, there has been a surge in the journeys of *harraga*, i.e. people that, in the absence of legal channels to travel, choose to embark on Mediterranean informal routes. It marks the entrance in a prohibition migratory system, in which North African States play a central and active role in implementing the restrictive policies of the new European border regime. In 1998, following lengthy negotiations, Italy signed a readmission and police cooperation agreement with Tunisia. As Ilaria Giglioli (2016:13) pointed out, "as part of a longer process that included the incorporation of Southern European States into the EU, and thus increasing differentiation between the Northern and Southern shores of the Mediterranean, this sea had become the key dividing line between the 'west' and the 'rest'. Internal Italian and European geographies of uneven development (including Italy's Southern Question), on the other hand, had faded into the background. By the mid-1990s, the closure and fortification of the Mediterranean border had made the extreme periphery of Italy into a key outpost of Europe".

Moreover, the 1990s marked a turning point not only in national migration legislation but also in the economic landscape, with significant repercussions for the fishing industry in Mazara del Vallo. This decade also saw the beginning of the decline of fishing as the city's economic driving force, due to a combination of national and local economic factors. The roots of this crisis were largely structural, stemming primarily from the failure to develop the fishing industry into a broader processing sector. Instead, the local bourgeoisie, heavily influenced by shipowners, opted to prioritise intensive fishing for export. There was also a key internal shift within the Tunisian community itself: the evolving aspirations and life plans of the new generations and the progressive change of family. Furthermore, there is more and more competition in the international fishing industry. The Tunisian fishing fleet has registered tremendous growth – due also to an international knowhow transfer process triggered by Tunisian fishermen bringing back to their country of origin their acquired competencies, techniques, and skills, and to the fact that many Italian shipowners transferred their enterprises to the South Mediterranean shores, with the aim of evading taxation, and EU rules. In addition, new fleets from Mediterranean countries without any consolidate maritime tradition are entering the Mediterranean fishing basin. With the rise of international competitors, this model became increasingly reliant on public subsidies. However, from the 1980s onwards, these non-repayable investments gradually diminished, leading to a sharp reduction in the fleet.

In the last years, the fall of Ben Ali regime after the Tunisian revolution left a power void in border control, allowing the escape of Tunisians during 2011, in particular from the shores of Zarzis (Zagaria 2019a). After the start of the Covid pandemic, the Tunisians are leading the surge in irregular migration (Herbert 2022). The introduction of prohibition migration laws has not halted the flow of migrants from Tunisia to Sicily, but it has disrupted the long-standing *chain* that once linked Mahdia to Mazara. Sicily, which was formerly a key

settlement place for the Tunisian community in Italy, has increasingly become an island of landing and transit for migrants. Since the "reception crisis" (Rea et al. 2019) of 2015, it has also become a focal point for new mechanisms of mobility control, including the implementation of hotspots and repatriation centres (Anderlini 2024).

The effects of migration prohibition on sea crossings

Despite being a major fishing port with a long-established culture of migration (Belhedi 1996), the Mahdia region has not attracted many ethnographers over the years. Surprisingly, migrations from the region of Mahdia have primarily been examined from the perspective of the arrival context, particularly in Mazara del Vallo, where a "migratory chain" gradually took shape over time. In this section, we explore the impact of migration restrictions on the ways in which the Strait of Sicily is crossed, as viewed from the Southern shore of the Mediterranean.

Our research began with the following question: how does the emergence of a migration prohibition regime affect the modes of irregularised crossings in the Sicilian Channel? How are the forms of solidarity that facilitate these crossings reconfigured? What enables – or hinders – the development of a maritime solidarity from below among young Tunisians? From our ethnographic research, we have observed that *harga* is largely dominated by men, although the idea of migration appeals to many women too. Even if women travelling alone are subjected to social stigma, the number of those who have attempted and succeeded in reaching their destination is significant[6].

Undocumented migration is primarily experienced as a male, youthful, and increasingly personal endeavour, in which social, religious, or familial ties tend to weaken. Framing migration as a personal pursuit does not diminish the significance of social networks or family solidarity (Zagaria 2019b). Families with limited means often provide financial and emotional support for the departure of the "children of the neighbourhood" (*ouled el-houma*), understanding their aspirations for social emancipation, redemption, and socio-economic advancement. Yet, for many young people, leaving represents a *rite of passage* into adulthood, with the journey across the central Mediterranean perceived as both a challenge and an adventure. While undertaken collectively, it remains driven by the desire to enhance personal prestige. As Filippo's previous research on the trajectories of Moroccan *harraga* has shown, social and familial ties tend to weaken in the migration process (Torre 2025).

Tunisian youths often embark on migratory journeys outside of traditional "migration chains" or "migration circuits" structured along family and religious lines. Many depart without a specific destination or concrete plan, envisioning "Europe" (*l-kharij*) as an integrated socio-economic space rather than distinct national contexts. When pre-established or structured social networks are absent at the outset, migrants tend to rely instead on relationships forged during the journey, often distancing themselves from the support of the extended family (*'ayla*). In an ethnographic study of popular neighbourhoods in the city of Tunis, focusing on the youth experience in post-revolutionary Tunisia, Cordova (2023: 13) observed a recurring and structural tension among his interlocutors: the pull between the desire for autonomy and self-fulfilment versus the

[6] See: https://ftdes.net/statistiques-migration-2023/.

stability of social and familial bonds; the attachment to home versus the dream of escape; the yearning for emancipation versus reliance on moral frameworks rooted in religion

"*For me,* harga *is an escape from death*", said Ali, 24 years old, during our interview with him: "*We are not truly alive here. We do not feel alive or that we have a purpose. Life here is just suffering without direction. For example, a day's work earns you 30 dinars. If you go to the café in the morning, buy a coffee, a pack of cigarettes, and some breakfast, what's left of it? And then there are other expenses. Some of us are responsible for our families and have to support them. In this situation, you can't save anything or build anything meaningful*". For many young people in Tunisia, migration has transcended its economic rationale, becoming an almost inevitable goal deeply embedded in the collective imagination. They see staying in a country that cannot accommodate their dreams as a form of slow death, while migration represents hope for a better life. This determination and persistence of young people in pursuing migration are significantly influenced by the image of the diaspora, particularly during their summer returns. These people, who visit their hometowns for a brief period, play a crucial role in shaping migration imaginaries, creating a spectacle of success. Their presence reinforces the perception that migration is the ultimate path to prosperity, influencing the aspirations of younger generations, who increasingly see migration as the only escape from economic precarity and social stagnation.

As highlighted by the representatives of Comunità Bradaa all'Estero, an association named after the town of El Bradaa, often referred to as *Little Italy* due to its significant diaspora in Italy, this perception is deeply ingrained in the local mindset. As the representatives told us, the town has approximately 18,000 inhabitants, of whom 80 per cent reside in Europe, with 60 per cent concentrated in Italy. As one of the representatives observed, for many young people the *harga* has become their only aspiration: "*It's as if they're under some kind of* brainwashing", he remarked. He explained that the glamour associated with returning migrants during the summer fuels this aspiration: "*They see migrants coming back with cars and nice clothes, and they want the same life. They don't see the hardships migrants endure abroad; they only see the fleeting glamour of their summer visits*". During our meeting, he highlighted that members of the diaspora allocate a specific budget for their summer visits, using this time to enjoy themselves and project an image of success. "*Weddings, for instance, become grand social events where famous Tunisian singers are invited, reinforcing the aspirational pull of migration*". The term *brainwashing*, used in this context, suggests a form of collective illusion in which the hardships of migration are either deliberately or unconsciously overlooked. The return of the diaspora during the summer serves as living proof that migration leads to success, at least in the eyes of those who remain behind. These displays of affluence reinforce the belief that migration guarantees financial prosperity and social prestige. As Kleist (2017) points out, contemporary migration is characterised by a "mobility paradox": the increased reach and accessibility of communication, media and transport technologies mean that people in many parts of the world are exposed to visions of the good life elsewhere. At the same time, because of growing inequality, paired with restrictive mobility regimes, the vast majority of people in the Global South are excluded from the circuits of legal mobility, not least on the African continent. Compared to older generations, the migration prohibition and the barriers to legal mobility reinforces an idealised vision of Europe, as Mohamed, a 57-years old fisherman from Mahdia told us:

> *Visas lie at the heart of the challenges unfolding in the Mediterranean today. Without these restrictions, the world would be a better place. In my generation, we could travel freely without such barriers, and there were no major issues. Many from my generation, having had the opportunity to move freely, were able to return to their home countries once they realized that life abroad was not as they had imagined. I, myself, chose to return and work in Tunisia after trying my luck in Italy.*

Today's youth, however, no longer have this option. This situation fuels two major issues: on one hand, those who are unable to travel develop an idealized vision of Europe, believing it to be a paradise. On the other hand, those who do manage to reach Europe and face its harsh realities often find themselves unable to return due to the social stigma they might encounter.

Europeans claim that by closing their borders, they are protecting themselves from terrorism. But what about the thousands of people who die at sea every year as a consequence of these policies—isn't that also a form of terrorism?

In particular, we argue that the emergence of migration prohibition regime has had four intertwined consequences for the migratory space between North Africa and Europe. The first effect is the increasing diversification of destinations and the multiplication of migration routes, as a form of adaptation to the international visa regime and the militarisation of European external border. A clear example of this is the route through the Balkans, taken by young Maghreb travellers who can enter Turkey by plane without a visa. Having previously explored this route in detail from the perspective of Moroccan migrants, Filippo expected to hear similar accounts in Tunisia: stories of people choosing the Balkans as a gateway to Europe, following what can be called "anti-geographical" routes (Giliberti, Sacco, and Torre 2026). Surprisingly, however, in the Mahdia region, our interlocutors told us that this option is rarely considered, as it is perceived to be more expensive and difficult. Some reports suggest that this route is primarily taken by migrants from Tunisia's interior regions, such as those from the city of Tataouine (Ziadia 2022; Meddeb 2023).

A second consequence of the European border regime is that it has effectively pushed undocumented migrants into long-term or even permanent stay in Europe. This can be seen as an "unintended consequence" (Czaika and de Haas 2014) of Europe's restrictive migration policies, which have disrupted historical patterns of circular mobility across the Mediterranean. Tunisian youth departing for Europe are acutely aware that, until they obtain the longed-for residence permit – which may never come – returning to Tunisia will be impossible. Migration, for them, is a *leap into the unknown*. Many of those we spoke to initially aspired to temporary mobility, hoping to work for a few years before returning home. "*I love Tunisia, it's my country. I'd like to work abroad for 4-5 years, make some money and then go back…*", is one example of these conversations. However, faced with the reality of border restrictions and legal constraints, many resign themselves to the likelihood that they will not return, at least, not for many years to come.

The growing restrictions on freedom of movement and the securitisation of border policies have also led to the third effect, an increasing professionalisation of smugglers. In the vernacular Maghreb dialects, *harraga* refers both to irregular travellers and to smugglers, who are increasingly organising themselves into structured networks to meet the rising demand for mobility among those deprived of the right to free movement (Mabrouk 2010). Finally, beyond the general worsening of travel conditions by sea, we have observed that border closures have reshaped access to migratory infrastructure in the Strait of Sicily, leading to new forms of social stratification and *segregation* in migration journeys. Different migrant groups find themselves in competition for the resources that enable mobility, creating hierarchies based on social class, race, gender, and physical ability.

Our Tunisian interlocutors primarily distinguish three forms of *harga*: migration through a *harrag*/smuggler, and *comita* migration. The latter is a micro-form of collective self-organisation built upon horizontal social relationships, such as those within the neighbourhood (*huma*), peer groups, and circles of friends, that enable would-be migrants to pay less and travel more safely. Their familiarity with the sea becomes a form of

knowledge that can be mobilised as a resource, fostering informal solidarity among friends. It is a form of migration characterised by a strong dimension of autonomy and self-organisation, shaped primarily through networks of friendship, family, and neighbourhood ties. We argue that *comita* migration represents a distinct form of *maritime solidarity from below*, emerging from the capacity of Mahdia's youth to organise collectively in order to cross the EU-African border. This practice draws on the maritime knowledge and the deep connection with the sea and access to means of transport. The material means of production of the migratory journey (the boat, engine, GPS, fuel, smugglers, and corruption) create new forms of social stratification. However, gaining direct access to these means through self-organisation challenges border policies, the rising costs of travel, and the monopoly of intermediaries. This form of autonomy enables people to migrate at minimal cost and to attempt the journey repeatedly without requiring significant financial investment. This form of self-organised migration highlights the evolving tactics that migrants develop in response to restrictive border regimes. Due to their proximity to the sea and repeated attempts, they have acquired essential knowledge of the sea and the precautions necessary for survival. Some have taken matters into their own hands by organizing in small groups ranging from five to seven individuals or more pooling their resources to purchase a boat without relying on a *harrag (smuggler)* and obtaining the necessary equipment for the crossing. For those within the maritime community, what may be considered an inaccessible and dangerous space is reimagined as an active domain of movement and agency. The participants we encountered still prefer travelling by sea, as their familiarity with it makes the journey feel more manageable compared to crossing through Serbia or Turkey, as many others do today. While some migrants opt for land routes, particularly through the Balkans, viewing them as safer and less risky, those accustomed to the sea find it to be the fastest and most accessible way to reach Europe. The knowledge of maritime routes shapes their strategies, which are deeply rooted in a cultural connection to the sea. This experience makes the sea seem less like an obstacle and more like a familiar, though unpredictable, path that can be navigated with skill. Their extensive knowledge of maritime conditions, cultivated through daily proximity to the coast, enables them to navigate the risks of irregular migration more effectively than those with little to no experience in maritime environments. In contrast to individuals from inland areas.

Souk el-harga: the material role of fishermen in the undocumented sea crossings

Fishing is a pillar of Tunisian society, with a national fishing fleet of 13,702 vessels, 93% of which are coastal boats[7]. The fishing and aquaculture sector is also a fundamental sector in the economy of the coastal regions, providing 50,200 direct jobs, distributed as follows: 73% coastal fishing, 11% light fishing, 11% trawling, 3% shore fishing, and 2% aquaculture. The port infrastructure comprises 40 ports, including ten deep-sea ports: Tabarka, Bizerte, La Goulette, Kélibia, Sousse, Téboulba, Mahdia, Sfax, Gabès, and Zarzis, and 30 coastal ports and landing sites. The total capacity of these ports is 150,000 tonnes of seafood per year. The volume of seafood exports in Tunisia fluctuates around 26,000 tonnes for a value close to 248 million dinars, thus placing it second in agricultural and agri-food exports after olive oil[8].

[7] See: https://ftdes.net/etude-la-composante-bleue-du-developpement-durable-en-tunisie-etat-des-lieux-et-perspectives/.
[8] See: https://www.ctaqua.tn/peche-et-aquaculture-en-tunisie/.

Approximately 75% of exports are directed towards EU markets. The main exported products are cephalopods (octopus and cuttlefish), crustaceans (prawns and shrimp), shellfish and fresh fish (bluefin tuna) and aquaculture products.

Since the 1990s, the communities of artisanal fishermen have lived in precarious conditions and under difficult socio-economic circumstances. In our research, artisanal fishermen from Mahdia, Chebba, Salakta, and El Alia with whom we have talked reconnect their economic precarity to different reasons, such as security problems at the maritime border with Libya, reduction of available fishing zones, illegal fishing, pollution and global warming, and migrants' boats and bodies at sea. Because of these factors, many fishermen have emigrated or turned into potential migrants. Others have converted totally or partially to the border economy.

For instance, Omar, a 45-year-old fisherman from Rajish, shared his experience regarding the challenges facing the fishing industry, particularly the issue of illegal fishing. He highlighted that migratory species that was once abundant have now been significantly depleted due to the lack of effective enforcement of fishing regulations. While fishermen hold licenses, many operate outside designated fishing zones, a practice largely driven by big vessels that rarely face penalties. In contrast, small-scale fishermen are subjected to stricter regulatory enforcement, which further exacerbates their economic vulnerability. Omar lamented also the disappearance of state financial assistance programs, such as the previously available subsidy for fishing nets, which has left fishermen struggling with rising operational costs. Many fishermen said that the lack of institutional support, combined with the challenges posed by climate change and the overfishing caused to illegal practices and the use of advanced fishing technologies, has led many to view *harga* as a potential pathway to economic improvement. Omar himself has crossed the Mediterranean two times, but in both cases he was returned back to Tunisia.

Fishermen's support to *harraga* is deeply intertwined with the economic and social hardships they face, shaping both their understanding of the reasons to leave and their indirect role in facilitating it. Struggling with financial insecurity, high-interest loans, and a lack of State support, many fishermen empathize with migrants who see no future in their homeland. As Amir, a 45-year-old fisherman from Rajish, pointed out: "*Some choose irregular migration, even though it's a risky choice and they might die along the way. They feel that staying here is like being dead already, so they take the gamble, hoping to improve their lives. Here, you can only survive if your father is wealthy; otherwise, there's no future for the rest of the youth. Personally, I help those who want to leave if is in need and not a thief who steals from others to migrate. If I know someone is using their own money for* harga*, I help them, but not a thief. I'm aware that, If the police catches you, you could face charges, and it might be hard to get out of it. But I will help any migrant in need nevertheless. Honestly, surveillance has become very strict recently, which is why* harga *has decreased. But life here is no longer dignified. Instead of helping the youth and citizens to love their country and serve it, they've done nothing to make us want to stay here*". This shared hardship fosters a sense of solidarity, leading some to assist those attempting to cross the sea—not as professional smugglers, but as individuals responding to a collective struggle. However, their role extends beyond mere acts of compassion; the structural difficulties they face push them into an ambiguous position where they are both victims of economic precarity and sympathetic to irregular migrants. As border surveillance intensifies, some fishermen see *harga* not only as a desperate escape for migrants but also as a reflection of the State's failure to provide dignified alternatives. In this sense, their involvement challenges restrictive migration policies, highlighting how economic exclusion and strict border control creates unintended networks of resistance. While their actions are often criminalized, they reveal the complex realities of life in coastal communities.

Figure 4. Artisanal fishermen in Rajish

As Tunisian fishermen have the means of production of the sea migratory route at their disposal, they play a decisive role for the organization of the *harga*. The implication of fishermen in the maritime crossings are no longer confined to occasional rescue efforts for those stranded at sea and their juridical consequences[9]; rather, they have become key actors in the migration process. Some have been drawn into facilitating irregular migration, while others, facing heightened economic precarity, have been compelled to sell their boats or using it as a means to migrate. A conversation with a fisherman's wife illuminated how some people, including fishermen themselves, are becoming intricately involved in facilitating irregular migration. Her son, for instance, wanted to migrate, but was unable to afford the required amount of money for a work contract. In response, her husband, a fisherman, suggested that their son could use his boat, gather a group of friends, and cross to Europe, only for the boat to be reported as stolen once they reached the Italian border. This method, according to the woman, had become increasingly common among fishermen, who no longer wanted to endure the harsh conditions at sea. Her neighbor, for instance, had sold his boat to migrants for 30,000 dinars, despite it being worth no more than 10,000 dinars, and then report the boat as stolen once it had crossed. Additionally, many are now confronted with increased risks, including boat thefts, illustrating how migration policies reverberate beyond their intended targets, reshaping local economies and social relations. Many fishermen, who were true victims of boat thefts, have been entangled in legal issues due to suspicions of their involvement in these irregular migration practices. Thus, the boat can be used to emigrate, to sell it in the black market or must be protected by thefts. In fact, economic hardships and the great demand for the *harraga* push some

[9] The most famous and mediatic cases of Tunisian fishermen prosecuted by the Italian State are those of Abdelbasset Jenzeri, a fisherman from Teboulba, in 2007, and Chamseddine Bourassine, a captain from Zarzis, in 2018.

fisherman to sell their boats and equipment, fueling an informal economy, or *souk el-harga*, that thrives on the increasing demand for migration. The emergence of *souk el-harga* challenges the State narrative of criminalisation surrounding smugglers.

While the institutional narrative view the *harrag*/smuggler as a criminal, the people we encountered regard him as a crucial figure who provides essential services. Despite his illegality, the *harrag*/smuggler is seen by the young Tunisians we encountered as a lifesaver, an opportunity to escape dire socio-economic conditions. Moreover, while they do not deny that he is a *clochard*, (as some have described him a figure disconnected from societal norms), this characterisation arises from the necessity of his role. In this context, the term refers to the need for him to appear tough and unyielding, as migrants feel they cannot trust someone who is weak or fearful of authority. They require a figure who is fearless in the face of police or legal repercussions: "*He is a hero (*qudwah*). He saves you from your situation, he does you a favour, helps you. He does it for work, he benefits from it, but we also benefit from it. After meeting this person, you give him a sort of deposit (*'arboun*) with which he buys the boat and all the equipment. The day everything is ready he calls us to pay the rest and leave. He is a* clochard*, a criminal. A* harrag *can't be nice, he's a bit rigid, strong, determined, has personality, he's a* clochard*...*". These responses highlight how people involved in irregular migration processes, including smugglers, are often seen in a different light by the migrants themselves, not as exploitative criminals, but as essential facilitators within a context shaped by economic necessity and migratory prohibition policies.

Our interlocutors did not provide a specific definition of the term "solidarity"; however, it resonates deeply in the practices arising from the overlap of interests among those involved in, and benefiting from, the migration process, even if they carry out a somewhat illegal practice. What seems to matter to these people is not the definition and reasons, but the results they achieve. The *harrag*/smuggler, who receives money to facilitate the border crossing, provides a service from the perspective of those benefiting from it. In addition, the policemen who turn a blind eye on black market and illegal practice are seen as acts of *rjoulya* (a term used to describe someone displaying chivalry and bravery), as expressed by some migrants. These people were aware of the risks faced by both border polices and smugglers, recognizing that both are simply doing their jobs. However, the tolerance of the authorities through a "laissez-passer" attitude is enough to frame them as "*rojla/rjoulya*". *Rjoulya*, in this context, refers to noble actions taken by someone in relation to those in need. Although this concept may carry connotations of sexism, it applies to both men and women in practice. Solidarity here may take on a social and gendered dimension, as acts of courage, strength, and chivalry, which are often considered masculine traits, but these qualities also apply to women who help or take actions that beneficiaries view as heroic. What is worth noting in this context, and in relation to the previously mentioned dynamics of *souk el-harga*, is the interconnection of various interests that overlap to create new practices, which challenge the restriction of borders. The *harga*, in this sense, has created an informal market, where multiple actors benefit, despite its illegal nature. This market thrives on the convergence of economic hardship, migration aspirations, and the enforcement of restrictive migration policies.

Figure 5. The manshar *of Chebba*

Generative narrative workshop (GNW)

The GNW related to the node presented in this report is the film *Tra terra e mare* by Massimo Cannarella and Enrico Fravega. The report's authors participated in various ways to the production process of the film. In particular, Nadia organised and conducted a focus group with Tunisian women in Mazara del Vallo, which was filmed and became part of the film. Beyond this, the two authors recorded some video interviews to Tunisian fishermen in the region of Mahdia, that are part of the archive to be used for the film. The documentary *Tra terra e mare* (between land and sea) aims to show a fragment of the complex relationship between Sicilian, Tunisians, and the sea, trying to make the discourse on the sea less romantic and more concrete. For the wives and daughters of sailors and fishermen, the sea is not an imaginary exotic place, but a dangerous and inhospitable place of fear. A place where death and absence are common travelling companions. The sea takes away their family members, swallowed up by the distance or by the waters, it takes them away from their daily life and exposes them to incalculable risks. Storms, kidnappings, accidents, along an uncertain maritime border where armed attacks and rescues at sea are not rare events. The life of fishermen and their families thus becomes emblematic of the tensions that cross the Strait of Sicily between economic transformations, balances and politics between coastal countries and attempts to control the migratory phenomenon.

Conclusion

This report has examined maritime migration and solidarity as a deeply embedded social, economic, and historical reality, drawing on existing literature and insights from diverse actors encountered in the Mahdia region. It explores how migration is shaped by both contemporary challenges and long-standing connections between coastal communities and transnational mobility networks.

It has illustrated how the perception of *harga* has shifted into a collective illusion, where social imaginaries are increasingly shaped by the aspiration to seek a better life elsewhere. As Europe's border policies become more militarized and exclusionary – forcing migrants into ever more dangerous and clandestine routes – these very restrictions have also given rise to informal networks of solidarity and self-organization.

This study highlights the complex interplay between maritime migration, securitisation, and solidarity from below, emphasizing the diverse actors involved and their varying approaches to supporting or resisting border controls. By analysing the experiences of two key groups – migrants and fishermen – we illustrate how solidarity emerges from within local communities, often in response to shared hardships and precarious conditions.

A key finding of this study is the impact of border securitisation on both migration and local communities. The reinforcement of maritime controls has not halted migration but has instead reshaped it, fostering the emergence of new informal practices that facilitate, regulate, or exploit mobility. One of the most illustrative examples of this dynamic is *souk el-harga*, an informal market that operates within this securitised landscape. This market consists of economic transactions and social negotiations involving a range of actors – fishermen, intermediaries, and migrants – who engage in the commodification of mobility.

The role of fishermen in migration-related activities is complex, shaped by both economic necessity and social positioning. The crisis in artisanal fishing – exacerbated by security challenges at the Libyan border, lack of institutional support, and environmental degradation – has led many fishermen to either migrate themselves or convert into the border economy. Some actively participate in smuggling networks, while others facilitate access to maritime routes in more indirect ways. While these actions are criminalized by the State, they reveal deeper systemic failures in providing viable alternatives for local communities. In many cases, these fishermen navigate a blurred line between illegality and survival, as their involvement in migration stems from shared struggles in an increasingly precarious environment.

This dynamic is particularly evident in the case of *comita* migration, where individuals band together to pool resources, bypass intermediaries, and navigate the risks of irregular travel with minimal financial investment. This form of migration, rooted in collective autonomy, is shaped by *maritime privilege*, which determines who has access to the sea and under what conditions. People from Mahdia, benefiting from specialised knowledge, networks, and financial resources, are able to profit from migration economies or regulate movement in ways that reinforce existing hierarchies.

Ultimately, this report underscores that migration in Mahdia is not simply a response to economic hardship or restrictive border policies; it is embedded in a broader historical and social fabric that connects coastal communities to transnational mobility. As securitization efforts intensify, these communities continue to adapt, resisting, negotiating, and reshaping the very structures meant to contain them.

Glossary

'Abeya: the necessary number of people required to embark on the journey.

'Arboun: deposit.

Babour: ferry.

Balansi: trawling boat.

Centro: the Hotspot in Lampedusa.

Clochard: someone disconnected from societal norms.

Comita: group of friends.

Spulsé: deported people.

Flouka: boat.

Jabri: uncivilized.

Karkara: trawling boat.

Khiyout: connections.

Ghorba: the exile.

Hakim: the police.

Harga/Harraga: the "burning"/those who "burn" the borders

Hogra: humiliation.

Igawen: hiding place before leaving.

Lusko: motorboat.

Manshar: boatyard, black market for boats.

Rais: the captain.

Rjoulya: heroism.

Samsar: the middleman.

Shkaf: little boat.

Shansuli: purse seines.

Skadra: patrol boat.

Takwin: self-reliance/material fruits of migration.

Essential chronology of the border

1990: Italy introduces visa requirements for Tunisian citizens.

1998: first bilateral agreement between Italy and Tunisia on migration control and readmission procedures.

2004: after rescuing of 37 Sudanese migrants in distress, the German NGO ship Cap Anamur is denied entry to Italy, and its crew faces legal prosecution.

2005: definition of the Tunisian Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

2007: Abdelbasset Jenzeri, a fisherman from Teboulba, is prosecuted for helping migrants.

2008: Treaty on Friendship, Partnership and Cooperation between Italy and Libya

2008 (29th November): during a sea storm, five Mazara crew were asked by the Coast Guard to join a massive rescue operation involving two boats adrift, with about 650 people onboard. At that time Mazara's fishermen were often involved in the rescue of men and women at sea, but after this case, their stories circulated throughout the whole world; there were social network pages dedicated to them, and the most famous newspapers wanted them for their cover stories.

2009: definition of the Libyan EEZ.

2010-11: Tunisian revolution and fall of Ben Ali regime.

2011 (January-March): 6,000 Tunisians disembark on Lampedusa, taking advantage of the decreased surveillance of Tunisian coasts, mainly leaving from the port of Zarzis.

2011 (October): fall of Gheddafi regime.

2013 (3rd October): a boat carrying over 500 migrants, mostly from Eritrea, capsizes near Lampedusa. At least 368 people die, marking one of the deadliest tragedies in the Mediterranean.

2013: Pope Francis chooses to conduct his first pastoral visit to the island of Lampedusa, where he denounced "the globalisation of indifference" to migrants' death at sea.

2013: Italian Operation Mare Nostrum.

2014: the first NGO begins operating in the Mediterranean, marking the start of a "civil fleet" for search and rescue operations. The Alarm Phone network is launched.

2015: European Operation Sophia.

2016: Tunisian fishermen rescue over 6,000 migrants.

2017 (8th October): a boat carrying around 70 migrants, mostly Tunisian, sinks off the Kerkennah Islands after colliding with a Tunisian Navy vessel. Only 40 people are rescued. Most victims come from rural areas like Sidi Bouzid and Jendouba. The tragedy sparks nationwide protests.

2017 (July): Code of Conduct for NGOs.

2017: memorandum of understanding between Libya and Italy

2017: the C-Star, a vessel affiliated with the far-right group Defend Europe, attempts to obstruct the rescue operations of NGOs in the Mediterranean.

2018 (June): a fishing boat capsizes two hours after departing from the Kerkennah Islands, carrying 180 migrants of various nationalities, at least half of whom are Tunisian. Official reports list 74 dead and about 50 missing. Establishment of the Libyan Search and Rescue (SAR) zone.

2018 (August): six Tunisian fishermen are arrested in Italy, including Chamseddine Bourassine, accused of being involved in facilitating illegal migration after rescuing migrants at sea.

2019: Kaïs Saïed's electoral victory.

2020 (1st September): fishermen from Mazara are captured by militias of General Haftar in Libya and will be released after 108 days in captivity.

2021 (25th July): Tunisian President Kaïs Saïed dissolves the government, suspends parliament, and declares a state of emergency.

2023 (February): The president gives a xenophobic and racist speech, stating that "hordes of irregular migrants from sub-Saharan Africa" have arrived in Tunisia, "with all the violence, crime, and unacceptable practices that this entails."

2023 (21st September): 18 people depart from Zarzis towards Italy but never reach their destination. The victims' families begin their own investigation and discover that other bodies had been recovered by local authorities around the same time and buried without DNA testing. 18/18 becomes the non-negotiable demand of the protesters: truth and justice, the recovery, and proper burial of all 18 individuals who lost their lives.

2023 (July): memorandum of understanding between Tunisia and the European Union

2024 (June): establishment of the Tunisiam Search and Rescue (SAR) zone.

2024 (October): re-election of Kaïs Saïed.

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