

# SOLROUTES



## *Tunisian Deportees*

*The challenge of reintegration and the limit of solidarity.*

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## Introduction

This report, produced within the framework of the Solroutes project, aims to provide an overview of the Tunisian context and to shed light on “life” after deportation and solidarity among deportees. It examines the impact of social context through a focus on daily life, including feelings, perceptions, and practices of post-return life as experienced by deportees. I adopt this concept to describe the involuntary transfer of migrants from their country of residence or temporary stay back to their country of origin (cf. Kleist, 2017). Deportation or non-voluntary return, as described by some research (Schuster and Majidi, 2013), represents a forced movement imposed upon individuals without their consent or desire to return. Contrary to voluntary return, which is defined by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as a decision made freely, with full understanding of the circumstances, and carried out in conditions of safety and dignity (UNHCR 1996).

As highlighted by Cassarino (2015), the security-focused approach to migration over the past two decades has significantly influenced official discussions and policies. This influence has led to the merging of concepts such as return, expulsion, and readmission, with readmission becoming particularly crucial in the European agenda to counter 'irregular immigration' (Robertsensi, 2019). Cassarino emphasizes that without making a crucial distinction between return as a natural stage in the migration cycle and readmission, arises from an administrative decision aimed at coercively expelling a person from a territory, policy discussions on the relationship between return, reintegration, and development will continue to prioritize security concerns. He, therefore, introduces the concept of "return preparedness," which underscores the importance of migrants' free choice and willingness to return to their home countries and the various resources mobilized to do so.

Thereby, the report is structured roughly into three main sections: The first section provides an overview of the general context in Tunisia, focusing on daily life and exploring the impact of this environment on the prevailing mood, which is predominantly marked by frustration. It also discusses the challenges associated with reintegrating deported individuals, highlighting the discrepancy between European development-focused approaches and the practicalities of readmission agreements. We will explore how even those who have received assistance either sold their belongings, migrated again, or did not consider this assistance as a permanent solution. In the second section, we address the reasons behind the limited solidarity toward deportees, despite the increasing numbers. We attribute this to the concept of *el hogra*, a feeling of humiliation, exclusion, contempt, and abuse of power that prevents people from expressing their need to avoid losing their value and dignity. However, this common feeling can probably transform into an act of solidarity among people who may suffer from similar experiences. In the third part, we explore art-based research within a specific political framework, with a particular focus on the

role of rap music. This section delves into the generative narrative workshop to understand how rap music has emerged as a tool for self-narrative and a powerful means of disseminating a culture of dissent. As highlighted (Nouri Ghana, 2012), rap music plays a key role in raising awareness about societal and economic issues and reflects popular preoccupations and concerns.

Additionally, social media serve as parallel spaces for counter-narratives and self-expression, repositioning individuals as political subjects. These platforms provide alternative space for migrants to share their experiences and denounce their conditions within a political context characterized by authority and a weak civil society, which may also be somewhat "ideologized" or "elitized." Nancy Fraser refers to this space as "subaltern counter publics," where marginalized social groups create and disseminate counter-discourse, allowing them to articulate oppositional interpretations of their identities and interests. (1990, 67).

## Tunisia as a target of externalization:

Tunisia was among the first countries in the EU neighbourhood to be targeted by the externalization policies of the EU and its member states, particularly since the enforcement of the Schengen Agreement (Cuttitta, 2006). This engagement involved bilateral agreements and cooperation, often in the form of readmission agreements (Cassarino 2010). Even though Tunisia has entered into readmission agreements with several EU countries, including Austria, Belgium, France, Greece, and Switzerland (Cassarino s.d. in Cuttita and Chaouch, 2023), demonstrating significant cooperation in this regard, since the regime of Ben Ali, who emphasized efficiency in negotiation and migration management (Cassarino, 2012). Italy, in particular, stands out with at least six agreements related to returns and forced returns (Euromed, 2021).

However, following what has been called the Arab Uprisings and the fall of the Ben Ali regime, a significant number of *harragas* (irregular migrants)<sup>1</sup> arrived in Italy from the Tunisian coasts, prompting a narrative of invasion (Marfleet and Cetti, 2013). The European reaction to migration continued the trend of implementing more restrictive migration policies, particularly towards migrants deemed undesirable (Dini and Giusa, 2020). These policies traditionally involve signing readmission agreements and strengthening border controls, often in exchange for trade, economic cooperation, and development aid (Tazziolli, 2018; Zardo, 2020). Therefore, a number of further agreements were concluded to limit the freedom of movement and strengthen border

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<sup>1</sup> Harraga" is a North African term referring to undocumented migrants. The term literally means "to burn," symbolizing the act of burning borders, used to describe those attempting to reach Europe by irregular manner.

control; these include but are not limited to the memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed in July 2023 (Cuttita and Chaouch, 2023), in which the EU promised substantial support for Tunisian migration and border controls. Indicating that the EU will endeavour to provide sufficient additional financial support, in particular for the provision of equipment, training, and technical support necessary to further improve management of Tunisia's border, *"The text also emphasizes that Tunisia is not a country of settlement for irregular migrants and that the North African country controls its own borders only"*<sup>2</sup>.

Beyond the rhetoric, a separate EU document published by Statewatch<sup>3</sup> shows that despite Tunisia's claims to "control its own borders only the support promised by the MoU comes with the European interest at the forefront". In theory, *"the EU seeks to enhance the return and readmission of irregular Tunisian nationals from the EU to Tunisia, prioritizing voluntary return and reintegration programs over forced repatriation. Additionally, the EU aims to promote legal migration through initiatives like the 'Talent Partnership' and by improving visa conditions for Tunisian nationals"*. However, in practice, what is noteworthy is. *"Tunisia has become the primary destination for deportees from Italy, constituting 73.5% of cases, surpassing other North African nationalities"* (FTDES, 2022).<sup>4</sup> As for visa facilitation, In December 2023, just five months after the signing of the memorandum agreement, Tunisian students organized protests outside the Italian embassy due to perceived unfair visa rejections.<sup>5</sup>

Additionally, these agreements have started to cause tangible effects on the ground, characterized by instances of human rights violations (Hendow, 2013), particularly concerning collective deportation operations, or what scholars have labelled "deportation regime," to refer to the institutionalization and widespread use of deportation as a primary instrument of migration control (Gibney, 2013; Isakjee et al., 2020; De Genova and Peutz, 2010). Tunisians are also deprived of access to international protection because Tunisia is considered a safe country, despite numerous activists and civil society organizations warning about the deteriorating situation in Tunisia and contesting its classification as safe according to EU states<sup>6</sup>. Furthermore, the detention

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<sup>2</sup> Parliamentary Lawyers: Democratic Oversight Needed for EU-Tunisia Migration Agreement." *Statewatch*. Accessed March 2024. <https://www.statewatch.org/news/2024/march/parliamentary-lawyers-democratic-oversight-needed-for-eu-tunisia-migration-agreement/>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Etude sur les conditions de séjour et les trajectoires des migrant.e.s tunisien.ne.s rapatrié.e.s en Italie 2022 Access at 15/03/2024 <https://ftdes.net/etude-sur-les-conditions-de-sejour-et-les-trajectoires-des-migrant-e-s-tunisien-ne-s-rapatrie-e-s-en-italie/>

<sup>5</sup> Refus de Visa pour les Étudiants Tunisiens : Protestation devant l'Ambassade d'Italie." *Tuniscope*. April 1, 2024. <https://www.tuniscope.com/ar/article/369343/actualites/tunisie/italie-192016>.

<sup>6</sup> EMERGENCY. 'Tunisia is Neither a Safe Country of Origin Nor a Place of Safety for Those Rescued at Sea.' Accessed April 1, 2024. <https://en.emergency.it/blog/mediterranean/tunisia-is-neither-a-safe-country-of-origin-nor-a-place-of-safety-for-those-rescued-at-sea/>."

center in Italy has become a site of systematic violence. Numerous cases of suicide and the use of drugs to sedate migrants before deportation have been documented.<sup>7</sup>

However, although the literature on migration in Tunisia has expanded, particularly examining the consequences of the migration policies mentioned above, there remains a notable gap in research concerning post-deportation experiences. Questions arise, such as: How do Tunisian deportees perceive their lives after deportation? Is it possible to rebuild a life in a country that one chose to leave voluntarily, only to be forcibly returned to later? To what extent have the projects funded by the European Union succeeded in integrating them? How do we understand the limited solidarity towards Tunisian deportees? And how could art-based research contribute to a deeper understanding of the experiences and challenges faced by Tunisian deportees?

## Methodology

This report presents the findings of a four-month fieldwork research conducted in Tunisia between November 2023 and February 2024. Recognizing the complexity of reality and aiming for a comprehensive understanding, various approaches were employed. Ethnographic observation and qualitative interviews were utilized. So far, four semi-structured interviews have been conducted with deported men aged between 28 and 39 years old. These interviews focused on their lives before migration, their experiences of deportation, conditions in detention centres, and their current lives after deportation. Additionally, one life story interview was conducted with a woman aged 25. Furthermore, two interviews were conducted with non-formal solidarity actors (mothers of deportees), one with a civil society member, and one with a stakeholder (a representative of the Office of Tunisians Abroad), who asked me to keep his name anonymous, considering that the issue is very sensitive. All the interviews were conducted in the Tunisian dialect.

Despite initial optimism, engaging with deported individuals proved more challenging than anticipated, particularly within my neighbourhood. While my original goal was to focus on deportees from my immediate vicinity in a small town in Mahdia, (a city on the Tunisian coast known as one of the main departure points for migrants to Europe), I later realized that gathering testimonies from deportees in general presented significant difficulties. Many individuals may feel ashamed discussing their situations. Moreover, among my neighbours, there may be perceptions

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<sup>7</sup> Luca Rondi and Lorenzo Figoni. 'Enquête : Médicaments, Expulsion, Tunisie-Italie.' Inkyfada. Accessed April 1, 2024. <https://inkyfada.com/fr/2023/05/23/enquete-migrants-medicaments-expulsion-tunisie-italie/>."

of my success in overcoming similar challenges. As a woman conducting research within a foreign university and having experienced a period without legal documentation before successfully regulating my situation, I found that these aspects further complicated communication with deportees from my neighbours. Gender dynamics also played a role, with some men feeling uncomfortable discussing their experiences with women. Additionally, individuals in distress require support and trust to share their experiences fully.

Given these challenges, I decided to change my approach and relocate from my residential area in search of better conditions to connect with deported individuals. Interestingly, I found that most of the people I reached out to were connected through friends or colleagues who are activists in civil society. Accessing the world of these individuals, despite the challenges involved, was much easier compared to those considered residents of my neighborhood. This highlights the uncertainty of our status as insider researchers. However, conducting interviews with family members, especially mothers of deported individuals, proved to be much smoother. They approached me spontaneously to share their experiences without any prompting. They were aware of my research on the subject and perhaps believed I could help amplify their voices. Some of them asked me about the procedures to reclaim their rights and whether I could assist them in obtaining specific help, especially since they heard that those who are deported can receive financial assistance. As a researcher and community member, I found myself facing a delicate balance. Meeting the needs of both roles presented challenges, as the community's expectations sometimes do not align with my research objectives. The weight of responsibility I felt made it challenging to communicate the distinction, which could lead to disappointment among those seeking my assistance.

## **The daily life: a context of struggle is becoming increasingly suffocating.**

Even though the studies on migration return indicate that the modes of reintegration are diversified. These modes undoubtedly reflect the migratory experiences lived by migrants in their former country of immigration. However, they also reflect the social, economic, institutional, and political contexts post-return in the country of origin (Cassarino, 2015). This is particularly relevant in the Tunisian context, where an ongoing crisis has transformed the daily routine into long queues, with people lining up to buy essential items. The ongoing political, economic, and social crises that Tunisia is facing are not new; they are fundamentally structural. However, focusing on the sociology of daily life allows us to examine the immediate behaviour of individuals within specific contexts, "this include the perception, feelings and meaning members experience as well as the micro structure they create in process" (Alder and Fontana, 1987).



The current situation in Tunisia is marked by a dictatorship's repression of freedoms and opposition. This repression has made it increasingly difficult for influential forces in society to act due to fear of legal repercussions. Many opposition figures have been arbitrarily imprisoned without clear charges. *At least 40 individuals have faced investigations or legal actions simply for exercising their right to freedom of expression, with some being subjected to arbitrary arrest and detention. They are specifically accused of "insulting" authorities or "spreading false news," offenses that are not recognized under international law.*<sup>8</sup> Additionally, there is an unparalleled economic crisis with interruptions in the supply of essential goods and a rapid increase in prices, items such as bread, oil, coffee, milk, sugar, and other basic necessities, which have become scarce in the market. The economic repercussions of the COVID crisis and the Russian war have begun to take their toll on the ground, affecting many countries (Abderrazzak and Mejri, 2023). However, the impact of this crisis may vary from one country to another. In a country like Tunisia, which heavily relies on exports, especially grains and fodder, from Ukraine and Russia, it has become unable to provide basic necessities. This routine, in turn, has affected the overall mood, with increasing waves of violence, tension, and anger. However, the head of state continues to downplay the crisis and justify everything with conspiracy theories<sup>9</sup> without taking any serious action to halt the country's escalating situation.

This situation is starting to have a serious impact on people, making the daily lives of citizens like a kind of hell, as expressed by many Tunisian deportees I have met. Conversations among people often center on the difficulty of sustaining life in a country that struggles to provide necessities, as mentioned by Bilal, 39-year-old, during our interview at his house.<sup>10</sup>

“Nothing inspires you here. People are frustrated, live under pressure, and look grim. In the morning, there's nothing to inspire you to wake up, *“barcha fedda”* (the situation is suffocating a lot). If it were up to me, I would have returned to Italy long ago. I've been deported more than five times, yet if given the chance, I would try again because nothing has changed; everything, in fact, is getting worse.”

Given this context, we question which “development” can succeed in such an atmosphere, especially considering that EU member states tend to emphasize development when addressing readmission agreements. The key question is: How can we expect people to contribute to their

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<sup>8</sup> Tunisie. Il faut libérer immédiatement un journaliste qui encourt deux ans de prison pour « outrage » à une ministre du gouvernement, Amnesty international Access 19/04/24 <https://www.amnesty.org/fr/latest/news/2024/01/tunisia-immediately-release-journalist-facing-two-years-in-prison-for-insulting-government-minister/>

<sup>9</sup> Najla Ben Salah 2024, Denigration , kais Saied's political weapon of choice , access at 21/03/24 <https://nawaat.org/2024/02/28/denigration-kais-saieds-political-weapon-of-choice>

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Bilel, 39 years old, conducted on: 17/02/2024, Bilal has been deported five times, yet he still considers re-migration as an option

community upon return if the conditions that compelled them to leave persist or worsen? For instance, De Haas (2016: 4) clearly emphasizes, for example, that linking forced return to the development of the country should be considered a "wishful thinking." The same author explains the following in the case of Morocco:

"It is generally unrealistic to expect marginalized, socially, and economically disadvantaged return migrants to make a significant contribution to 'development' in Morocco. From the perspective of these return migrants, their migration represented an opportunity for personal development. Many actually aspire to re-migrate. Their forced or 'voluntary and reluctant' return often increases their sense of marginalization".

This is particularly relevant in the Tunisian context, where the country grapples with real problems related to the scarcity of basic goods. Therefore, the interviews revealed that many projects are funded by the European Union through various programs and in collaboration with many actors from civil societies like *Lemma*, *Widou* and *Hajati Beek*.<sup>11</sup> One of the most important being the *Dispositif tounesna*,<sup>12</sup> with an amount of 16.500 dinars for those who want to create a project and an amount ranging from 1000 to 2500 Tunisian dinars for those in need of social assistance depending on their social situation. However, while these aids and projects were initially intended for all returnees, including deportees, according to a representative from the Office of Tunisians Abroad whom I interviewed at his office.<sup>13</sup> These aids have now become reserved only for voluntary returnees. He explained that this change is aimed at avoiding the problems faced by many of his colleagues, such as incidents of violence involving deportees. However, based on information provided by this representative, along with other sources and testimonies from deportees who benefited from these programs, it was found that most of them sold the equipment they received from the project and attempted to migrate again.

Within a project linked to *Lemma*, Slim Ayadi, an activist of the civil society,<sup>14</sup> that I met at his office in Tunisia, said that they have helped at least 11 out of 40 people in obtaining special agricultural projects, considering that the economies of the relevant areas primarily rely on agriculture. However, he acknowledges, on the other hand, that out of the 11, seven sold their equipment and

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<sup>11</sup> There is not much information available about these projects, including their management and specific funding sources. It appears that the process is complex and subject to various bureaucratic aspects, as mentioned by the representative of the Office of Tunisians Abroad in an interview. The only national program for which information is available is *dispositif Tounesna*.

<sup>12</sup> *Dispositif tounesna* is a program implemented by the Office of Tunisians Abroad (OTE) and Funded by the European Union Emergency Trust fund, to ensure support for the socio-economic reintegration of Tunisian migrants, <https://ote.nat.tn/tounesna/>

<sup>13</sup> Interview with the representative of the office of Tunisian abroad, conducted on: 15/02/2024. He asked me to keep his name anonymous considering the issue of deportation to be sensitive.

<sup>14</sup> An interview with Slim Ayadi, a representative of civil society, conducted on February 2, 2024, at his office in Tunis.



capital and migrated again. Although these projects may be a temporary solution for reintegrating, it seems that, in the long term, they have no future.

According to Yassin, a 28-year-old<sup>15</sup> deportee, whom I met at his shop, has been operating his business for one year with the help of the *dispositif Tounesna*, regarding his current situation and satisfaction with his work, he mentioned that working in Tunisia is merely a day-to-day struggle with no prospects. He explains that he works to pay rent and bills, and afford food and drink. Sometimes, he is forced to invest his capital to meet the needs of his family who are in his charge, only to find himself struggling again. When asked the same question, Bilal (mentioned earlier), after starting his project and obtaining funds, laughed and said, “*What are you talking about? I used to have money flowing in my hands, and now I find myself selling used clothes with a foul smell. Of course, there's no comparison, but if it's better than nothing*”.

## **“Border everywhere, border nowhere”: El Hogra “as borderlessness” yet could transform in solidarity:**

They look to you I don't know how...,<sup>16</sup>

We are ashamed to speak out about our experience of deportation because people mock you. They say you went abroad and came back with nothing, empty-handed. It is worse when you're a woman ".<sup>17</sup>

Don't reveal your weakness, don't disclose your secret, and don't approach the police.<sup>18</sup>

These testimonies, among others, were extracted from interviews I conducted, as well as from a song produced in the framework of the Generative Narrative Workshop (GNW) (see the section below: "Hope, Suffering, and Resistance"). They summarize the reasons why individuals hold onto painful experiences and prefer to keep them to themselves in order not to diminish their status or to *garder la face*, as Kaufman argues. We chose these excerpts to explain the limited form of

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<sup>15</sup> Interview with yassine, 29 years old, conducted on: 15/02/2024 .He succeeded in opening a shop for food items with the help of the *Tounesna program*. However, he told me that while it's better than nothing, he doesn't consider his situation stable, and he is planning to migrate again if he finds the opportunity

<sup>16</sup> Bilel 39 years old (mentioned above).

<sup>17</sup> An interview conducted in the form of a life story with Sara, a 25-year-old deportee and mother of three children, who is planning to immigrate again.

<sup>18</sup> Bassem from Monastir, a rapper and deportee, spent over three years in prison in Italy after being accused of smuggling. We collaborated together to create a song that narrates the experience of migration and deportation.

solidarity towards deported people. Many of them declared during the interviews that they did not leave their homes for up to a month after being deported to avoid social stigma and what they perceived as disdainful or pitiful perceptions—or what Tunisians refer to as *el hogra*, in this context, indicates a feeling of humiliation, contempt, or a sense of exclusion and marginalization. It is particularly significant within the socially disadvantaged class, describing the feeling of being treated unfairly and marginalized by the state or by those who hold higher economic and social status. It appears particularly in the context of excessive use of power and violence by the police. This *hogra*, which is at the root of *harga* (Souiah 2012), reveals a sense of uselessness and shame resulting from the dispossession of forms of activity that allow one to have a grip on the world (Bensada 2022).

The silence, as Bassam referred to in the song (see the section below), towards this injustice is actually the consequence of *el hogra* becomes a form of symbolic violence—an invisible violence imposed on individuals until they either resign themselves to it or assimilate (Bouamama 2000). However, silence is not understood as acceptance of reality but rather as a preservation of dignity, where it is better to keep your secrets and pain hidden than to show weakness. This helps us also to understand the reason behind the limited solidarity toward deported people, as asking for help might be seen in this case as an act of weakness, as it involves showing vulnerability to others. Therefore, some deportees prefer to maintain their values and dignity rather than seek assistance. This perspective shows that solidarity is not always viewed as a positive act. We understand this perspective more when some people refer to what is labelled as "mzya," which means favour. As Bilal<sup>19</sup> pointed out, "*I don't like anyone to do me a favour*", the latter may be perceived as an act of solidarity but is not always viewed positively, as it can place an individual in a position of dependency and mercy rather than empowering them to be the full actor of their life.

Here, it also explains migrants' determination to remain in Italy despite the bitterness and the harsh conditions rather than returning to Tunisia and facing the same circumstances that compelled them to leave. Delves primarily to preserve their dignity since they are far away, escaping the conditions they left behind, which undoubtedly remain unchanged. Returning with empty hands in this context would be viewed as a personal failure and incapacity rather than being caused by the system that has failed them and failed to accommodate their dreams from the start. Therefore, deportation, as pointed out by (Khosravi 2016), is seen by many deportees as a return to a situation worse than before their initial departure, politically, financially, and socially. This is particularly pertinent in the story of Mohamed, a 28-year-old<sup>20</sup> from Kasserine (a governorate in

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<sup>19</sup> When I asked Bilal who helped him, whether when he was in Italy or after he returned, he said he doesn't like anyone to do him a favour, especially from Arabic people means those who look like him and speak his language, as he doesn't want to his respect and appear without value, vulnerable, or dependent on others

<sup>20</sup> Mohamed, 28 years old, works in construction and occasionally in the tourism field. I met him at a café in Mahdia on January 1, 2024.

the west-central Tunisia on the frontier with Algeria) living in Mahdia, who was deported from Italy. He mentioned during a conversation that we had at a coffee shop in Mahdia that he has not yet informed his family about his deportation due to feelings of shame. He feels embarrassed because he was their hope and fears seeing the disappointment in his mother's eyes. Similarly, his family still believes that he is in Italy, and he mentions that they sold a piece of land to finance his journey. Accepting his return empty-handed after what he sees as a significant sacrifice from his family proves to be challenging for him. In addition to the fear of contempt from his neighbours, he is troubled by the same reasons that pushed him to leave, encapsulated in the term *el hogra*, which he mentioned. Indicating territorial disparities and an economic model marked by injustice and national centrism, which ignores the interior region. This complex relationship between the periphery and the center, is historically rooted in the oppressive power of the state (Amor, 2023). Although the revolution liberated speech on social injustice, oppression, and marginalization, it failed to provide a solution or eradicate the effects of this injustice, which have worsened and manifested in various forms. Coupled with a deep economic crisis and the resurgence of dictatorship, Tunisia faces growing pressure from the European Union to tighten border surveillance.

This is evident not only in external borders but also in internal monitoring, where ID checks reveal disparities and reinforce social divisions. In certain coastal areas considered migration transit points like Mahdia, internal monitoring and ID card checks have become a near-daily practice. During these checks, ID cards are inspected to determine individuals' origins and where they came from. Those who come from interior regions are referred to as "*barrania*," (outsiders), while locals are called "*awlad el balad*" (city dwellers). They become suspicious candidates for irregular migration if they are found in coastal regions while Kerkennah (an island in the south of Tunisia) is no longer accessible to many Tunisian people.<sup>21</sup>

As Balibar articulates, "some borders are no longer situated at the border at all; in both geographical and political senses" (2002). Borders have transformed into invisible borders, existing everywhere and nowhere (Khosravi, 2019). However, while researchers primarily emphasize *el hogra* to shed light on social injustices stemming from geographical disparities and a development model characterized by centralization and the absence of fair wealth distribution (Amor, 2023) the understanding of *el hogra* may be more comprehensive. This is particularly true as migration today affects not only individuals from the interior regions but also almost all groups excluded from the right to migrate due to not meeting specified conditions imposed by the state of destination. This is why we used the term *el hogra*, also to refer to the abuse of power and

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<sup>21</sup> Khedir, Mabrouka. "Kerkennah Islands: A launchpad to Europe.", *InfoMigrants*, November 1, 2023. accessed on 19/03/2024, at: <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/52836/kerkennah-islands-a-launchpad-to-europe>.

corruption (Yachoulti and Lachheb, 2018) experienced and felt by young people, which led to a relationship of distrust. Sara (mentioned earlier) said:

"The issue *el harga*, lies not with Tunisia itself, but with those who govern Tunisia. It's a 'corrupt' state. If you ask anyone who has been deported, they will tell you they will attempt to immigrate again because of our issues with the state. Individuals feel they have no value in this country; only the *kroz*, wealthy people, enjoy their lives here. Those who are *zwawla*, poor like us, no one cares about them. Everyone desires to immigrate to better themselves, as staying here means we will never improve our lives. I'm certain that even you, with your high level of education, won't achieve anything if you remain here, just like many others who have studied here only to find themselves jobless."

Sara's discourse sheds light on the widespread feeling of marginalization experienced by a wide spectrum of society towards a state that has abandoned them, ignoring their demands and serving only a small wealthy elite. The reference in the discourse to the lack of value felt in this country is synonymous with a sense of contempt. While Yassin (mentioned earlier) goes further in explaining this rift between the state and youth, it becomes apparent that the latter has abandoned its responsibilities to the extent that any possibility of reform seems incredulous. Despite obtaining financial support through the *dispositif Tounesna* program to fund a project selling food items, he said:

"The people in the neighbourhood hardly believe me; every time an official visits me, they whisper among themselves, suspecting that I've become an agent for the state."

This attitude reflects the existence of a strained relationship between individuals and the state, characterized by a lack of trust, alongside with a sense of not belonging and feelings of exclusion that have persisted for so long. Which explains the determination of most deportees I have met to migrate again, with some of them having already returned. Therefore, some scholars argue that *harga* becomes an act of revolt (Tabbabi, 2023; Bensaada, 2022). According to the latter, *hogra* serves as the common thread between the two. *El-hogra* has driven the vulnerable and powerless members of society to engage in various forms of civil resistance, aiming to expose and express their refusal of the economic, political, and societal status quo (Yachoulti and Lachhab, 2019).

Therefore, the representative of the Office of Tunisians Abroad (mentioned earlier), emphasized the importance of attentively listening to these individuals to not feel excluded. He explicitly stated that *el hogra* must be avoided when interacting with them. He criticized the current approach by the state and the EU, which focuses solely on financial and administrative aspects of their situation while neglecting the need for social and psychological assistance. He stressed that providing such

support requires months of dedicated work. Given the situation and in the absence of institutional support, families appear to be the primary source of support for deported individuals. Mothers exhibit a great deal of affection and tenderness, feelings inherently gender characteristic. Furthermore, as mentioned by many deportees, the family remains the sole source of solidarity within the context of migration. Thus, if the feeling of embarrassment upon returning home empty-handed still persists among deported individuals, we shouldn't necessarily interpret it as "hogra," as previously explained, since this sentiment is not understood by family members but rather within the community or others.

Instead, family members can be profoundly affected by deportation (Khosravi, 2016), because they have placed their hopes on migration as a means of survival, or they may have grown tired of seeing their children living in a state of despair without a future. Migration itself also, as a social phenomenon, becomes a movement of solidarity and sacrifice for the family. Or as explained by NELM (new economic of labour migration theory) *"migration as a family or as household strategy that shifts the focus away from individual independence to mutual dependence"* (e.g., Stark, 1991). This means that individuals may sacrifice for the benefit of their families, and families may sacrifice one of their members to provide assistance to the rest through remittances they send from time to time. The deportees I met expressed their desire to migrate in order to improve their own and their families' situations. For them, the family remains the sole source of solidarity, as they understand their circumstances. Despite the bitterness they feel after deportation, which makes them embarrassed to continue to rely financially on their families, deportation experiences also appear impactful, even on the families themselves.

This is particularly relevant in my conversation with Mounira, my neighbour, and a mother of a deportee. As I was passing through the neighborhood on December 26, 2023, she approached me, expressing concern about her son, who was deported from Italy. Knowing that I was researching this matter, she sought my guidance on how to navigate the situation and whom to contact. She opened up about borrowing money from her brother, who had irregularly immigrated two years ago. He works in construction and would send some money for savings, but her husband redirected the funds to their son to help him emigrate in the hope that the latter will succeed in arriving in Europe and send the amount back through the remittance later. Interestingly, this did not bother Mounira's brother, as he understood the situation, having gone through a similar experience himself. However, they faced disappointment when their son was deported shortly after arrival. Mounira expressed heartache witnessing her son's despair, feeling that everything had been shattered. The deep concern arises from the fact that her son never caused trouble, and he used to be willing to work any job with ambition just to make them happy, while individuals with criminal pasts have not faced deportation. Mounira finds it perplexing to understand what his son is going through. She explained that he has always been their hope, consistently demonstrating altruism in striving to make the family happy and providing support. This is the opposite of what his elder son does, who has been living in Dubai for two years and

earns well but prioritizes parties and luxury over family well-being. Therefore, Mounira expressed her willingness to sell everything she owned to buy her son a job contract through *Decreto Flousi*,<sup>22</sup> showing a determination to facilitate his son's journey once again. Understanding that such contracts to Italy cost between 15,000 and 20,000 dinars (approximately 6,000 to 7,000 euros), Mounira, alongside her husband and relatives, aims to assist her son in obtaining a contract, believing it to be a better alternative than seeing him in distress.

Meanwhile, if many deported individuals express their desire to immigrate to improve their lives, they are also willing to risk their lives and endure the hardships of exile to help their family reciprocate the sacrifices made for them, which suggests a kind of an "inter-familial implicit contract" (Stark and Luca, 1988: 478). Yassin expressed the challenge of witnessing his family's struggles and being unable to help. His initial intention in going to Europe was to assist them. Though not substantial, the remittances he sent monthly before being deported were crucial for sustaining his family and symbolized his respect and care for their well-being. These contributions also provided him with a sense of purpose and usefulness. However, now, as he mentioned, they are living day by day, facing financial challenges, which he considers a burden.

## **Does this shared suffering experience transform into solidarity among excluded individuals?**

Sara, 25 years old and a mother of three children who had been deported from Italy, initially didn't disclose to me that she had been deported. I met her through a friend of mine, as she was planning to migrate. In our conversations, I attempted to adopt a relational approach, providing her with a sense of security to express herself without fear of the preconceived judgments she has grown accustomed to. Later, I understood that she felt ashamed of that experience and continued to hide it from everyone. She felt a sense of guilt towards her children, whom she left with their grandmother, pretending that she was on a work trip. However, the feelings of shame and society's judgment persist. Firstly, a woman who migrates irregularly is often viewed negatively, *"The low participation of women, for example, in some migration flows, can only be*

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<sup>22</sup> It seems that Italy's annual quotas of new inflows, known as "decreto flussi," have also become a subject of trade and fraud, where certain brokers exploit the desperation of individuals seeking to migrate. These brokers intervene with employers in Italy to facilitate work contracts for those willing to pay. However, they make it clear from the beginning that upon reaching Italy, the individual has no rights; they are simply providing a service for a fee. They inform them that they must pay a sum of money, sometimes exceeding 7,000 euros, and explain that once they arrive, they have to find work themselves. The broker only guarantees a safer journey. Nevertheless, many aspiring migrants accept this offer without considering the consequences. At least six individuals known to Mounira have succeeded in obtaining this contract, which is what she aims to do with her son.

*understood in this context. Cultural factors provide us with tools to comprehend these exceptions”* (Mabrouk, 2010. p23).

However, it is worth noting here that we have transitioned from low participation to a form of “invisibilization” of female migrants. For example, when we look at the number of Tunisian women who arrived irregularly in Italy in 2023, it reached around 1352, whereas, in 2019, there were only 72 arrivals (FTDES, 2023)<sup>23</sup>. This doesn't even consider those who have not been reported or those whose visas have expired, indicating a significant increase. Secondly, being a neglectful mother is considered taboo. Thirdly, her past further adds to the burden, making her feel the weight of societal judgment. Additionally, deportation remains socially stigmatized, and revealing her situation would likely lead to negative assumptions, such as attributing her deportation to her own sins.

Sara's past, characterized by abuse and societal condemnation, sheds light on the disproportionate burden faced by women, especially those with a troubled history. She recounted a significant event from her teenage years when she was wrongly accused of distributing marijuana to her cousin at school. This later, which should have been a space for rehabilitation and education, turned into a trial, as Sara pointed out with her sister, who was present during the interview and also acknowledged the gravity of the situation. The mistake of a 13-year-old girl cost her a heavy price that continues to haunt her to this day. Dreaming for a future that serves as an alternative to an undesirable past. Sara expresses a willingness to let go of her previous experiences and fully embrace a future devoid of a predetermined purpose. Despite being pushed back several times by Tunisian authorities and deported by Italian ones, Sara is planning to migrate again with her children. She has learned from some people when she was at the detention center that women with children are less likely to be deported. When I asked her about who would cover the cost of the journey, given that it is expensive (according to various sources, the cost ranges from 6,000 to 7,000 Tunisian Dinars, and she is a mother of 3), she told me that her friends, who are considered outcasts in society and are perceived as criminals, as she said, have promised to take her for free.

They only asked her to contact those whom she trusts means those who are capable of providing payment are willing to take risks without attracting attention or speaking to others. Once they reach the required number and the conditions are favourable, they will depart. However, despite her openness to discuss her personal life, even in those details that appear very sensitive, she remains reserved about her relationships with those she collaborates with to facilitate her journey. The only thing she mentioned about them is that they, like her, were marginalized by the system.

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<sup>23</sup> Irregular migration statistics, *FTDES* 30/11 2023, accessed on 4/4/2024, at: <https://ftdes.net/statistiques-migration-2023/>



The country oppressed them and did not provide them with the necessities of life. She asked me somewhat strangely: *"What do you expect them to do? Consume marijuana and live unemployed?"* I do not know whether she fears them, is concerned for them, or for each other. Perhaps they constitute her world, as she initially mentioned; she refuses to consider them as criminals. She expresses anger towards society and finds refuge in it when needed. Even though she recognizes that the experience of deportation is gendered because women are already viewed negatively before their departure, we believe that the experience of shame is also common and affects both men and women. However, Sara's story emphasizes the need for nuanced storytelling that captures both the challenges and the agency of individuals within the cultural context. Recognizing intersectionality and the role of class, along with understanding the challenges faced by women from a lower socioeconomic class with limited cultural capital, are crucial for understanding these nuances.

While the dominant representation of migrant women has often depicted them as either "oppressors" or "victims" to be saved from their culture (Farris, 2017), erasing their agency and resistance (Musarrat 2000; Shrover et al. 2008) it also tends to ignore violence against women in the Global North" (Mulinari 2007; Razack 1998). However, as (Schmoll, 2020) emphasizes, moving away from the victimization narrative of migrant women and politicizing gender means placing the agency of migrant women at the center of analysis. This departure involves rejecting the image of women as inevitably subordinate to patriarchal relationships within their communities. From this perspective, Sara's life becomes a story revealing women's resistance against a patriarchal society and an increasingly unjust and oppressive migration policy. Representing many women from socially disadvantaged classes, Sara faces numerous difficulties and confronts cultural, economic, and social challenges. However, these obstacles do not deter her from maintaining hope for a better life.

Sara is neither a victim nor an icon, as discussed by (Phizacklea and Morokvasic, 2004). Their perspectives highlight two extreme tendencies: one absolves women as passive victims of structural determinism, while the other portrays women as strong "actors" solely responsible for their successes or failures. Instead, Sara's story represents one of many women whose experiences deserve attention to understand the complexity of reality within patriarchal systems and restrictive migration policies that disproportionately affect individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.



## Between imaginary and reality, hope, disappointment and resilience

By employing an art-based research approach, the study focused on interpreting the experience of deportation, specifically, and immigration in general, through rap music to provide a broader and more complex understanding of a phenomenon. The song was co-produced within the framework of a generative narrative workshop with Bassem, 29 years old, a deported man who had been imprisoned for three years after being accused of human trafficking and illegal migration. I got to know Bassem through some friends who gave me his number, and we stayed in touch for about a month before meeting in person. Due to his work commitments as a fisherman, he returns home once a week, sometimes every two weeks. However, we remained in contact via WhatsApp to plan the outline of the song and discuss how we could build it.

We first met at the beginning of February in Monastir, where he lives. We talked about his experience of being imprisoned and accused of human trafficking and illegal migration. Bassem owns a fishing boat that he operates with his wife's father and a group of about six other workers. He was arrested on charges of smuggling, which he continues to deny, especially since he never intended to cross borders or engage in illegal activities. He considered his life to revolve entirely around the sea since he was 14 years old.

He recalls the events leading up to the incident, which occurred on July 20, 2020. Three of his workers didn't show up for work, so he contacted others temporarily to secure the job. They went into territorial waters near Mazara for fishing. It seemed like a regular day until they passed through a corridor 8 km away from Mazara. The engine of the boat experienced excessive heat, so he decided to stop it until it cooled down. The water pushed the boat until it hit a rock. So the workers with him grabbed their bags and escaped. Bassem tried to persuade them otherwise, but they saw it as a chance to reach Italian territories easily. Afterward, Bassem turned the boat around and continued, leaving the fleeing workers behind. Soon after, security forces surrounded them. Bassem panicked and tried to flee. The security forces fired warning shots into the air, surrounding their boat. The waves surged around them, causing the boat to sway, and Bassem struggled to keep his balance. Water started to seep in, and he had to stand up to avoid being submerged. They were all apprehended and taken into custody, as he said.

Bassem was sentenced to three and a half years in prison after being convinced that it was the only way to avoid a harsher sentence that could reach more than 10 years. He had to admit that he had indeed assisted migrants in crossing. Bassem still cannot accept the accusation because he believes that if he had truly intended to engage in smuggling, he would have transported many more people, not just three. He also argues that if he had wanted to assist young people in migrating, he wouldn't have carried all the documentation that the police found with him. However, he was compelled to admit to smuggling in order to mitigate his sentence.

We agree to narrate this experience through a song, drawing inspiration from Bassam's personal journey and the stories of others he encountered in prison and the detention center. While my focus was centred on deportation and its surrounding circumstances, I crafted lines inspired by the experiences of the deportees I interviewed. It became clear that deportation often marks the final stage of a long migration journey filled with numerous challenges. The song reflects on Basem's life in prison and the experiences of the migrants he encountered there, highlighting the loss of freedom, longing for family, and the problems and conflicts he witnessed inside the prison. Bassem observed that many inmates, predominantly migrants, were involved in various crimes due to their undocumented status, which left them vulnerable to exploitation and difficult circumstances. He also commented on the treatment by prison officials despite recognizing a strong friendship with Italian prisoners during his time there.

*The country of poverty and Pharaoh (tyranny).*

*Everything is permissible in (referring to corruption and absence of laws).*

*We are ruled by Zionists (perceived by public opinion as a capitalist colonial movement)*

*The president is an old man (referring to the conflict between generations).*

*Monkeys eat Kaki (salt bread) and give you banana (referring to the injustice distribution of resources between rich and poor).*

*So here I'm leaving on a boat forced.*

*I'm going to Italy I'm going to heaven.*

*I found people worse than us.*

*Fleeing from the worries that reached our eyes. (Cover us).*

*Apply the law and I stretch out my hand to the henna. (Knowing that I won't get anything.).*

*They put me in jail for being a boat captain.*

*The jailer closes the door; your eyes don't see light, my friend.*

*The world is narrow for me, there is no place to cross.*

*To be dead is better than alive.*

*You have to adapt and live.*

*Don't show your wound to others.*

*Prison life is hard, don't stand and don't show your weakness.*

*Don't tell your secret.*

*Don't approach the police*

*Drugs sold per gram, cocaine and hashish.*

*Year after year, three years passed.*

*I saw the wonders of who killed and who stabbed.*

*It is normal to be standing today and stabbed tomorrow.*

*The war of the nerves starts at zero o'clock.*

*Morning noon and night, we live on with pasta.*

*Racism is in their blood; you talk, they punish you.*

*Tunisian, Algerian, Libyan, and brothers from Casablanca.*

*May God have mercy on those who died in prison and in exile!*

*Here despite the bitterness, you see people wishing to die, being thrown from a plane with handcuffs  
in their hands.*

*Running away from brokers who throw them to fish. (Referring to injustice and abuse of power)*

*The passport of prostitution makes you cry under the wall.*

*Time to release has to come, I got out and left my brothers.*



*May God relieve the prisoners who sleep in distress!*

*A mixture of sorrow and a rose into hibernation but this is God's destiny in this life.*

*Center Decollenza , it is time to deport .*

*In the prison system, it is impossible to see the sun, there is a lot of dirt, and meals are only served at night.*

*No way, a few days and be in Tunisia*

*They don't care about you, live or die.*

*The law of street fish eats fish.*

*A Muslim living between Christians and Jews, there is no need to explain: between them, you do not exist. (Referring to Islamophobia and discriminatory treatment practiced by prison officials towards Arab and Muslim migrants).*

*Maybe we forget the dream to living the freedom, in my home. I say a word, and I write a story on a piece of paper.*

*A very dark period. I had a lesson. In the moonlight, I saw my wound with needles. I thank god we live with our heads raised and always man. (Referring to manhood and characterizing courage, valour, and determination...).*

*Live and learn from the world, my friend, no situation last forever.*

*Imprisonment, the song was lost.*

*Despite this, I set my flag high on the mountains. (Referring to the resistance and victory).*

As we can see, the song revolves around three main themes. The first focuses on the reasons driving youth to migrate, which are summarized as corruption, unfair wealth distribution, governance by unqualified individuals, and the enduring influence of colonialism on the country's foundations, which is referred to as "Zionism." This is perceived by public opinion as a capitalist colonial movement that controls wealth and collaborates with internal forces to influence nations.

In the second axe, the song focuses on the circumstances of being accused and imprisoned by people who are supposed to enforce the law. This leads us to the world of prison, which is supposed to be a space for deterrence but instead becomes a parallel world where crime becomes the law and survival is for the strongest. Drugs and cannabis become means of forgetting and surviving as well.

While the law, for the most part, seems tailored to suit the interests of those in power. Here, the song takes us from the dreams that young people built about Italy as the promised land, where one could enjoy their rights and live with dignity, which they did not find in their own country, only to collide with a reality characterized by racism and discrimination. Although Bassam didn't hesitate to mention in our conversation that many of his friends in prison were Italians, and he had formed close bonds with them, closer than with those from his own community. However, Bassam mentioned that the prison authorities showed a lot of racism toward North African migrants. He often got into conflicts with them due to the disdain and mistreatment he experienced, which he primarily attributes to being Arab and Muslim. This indicates that the problem lies within the system, not with individuals. Therefore, he perceives that Muslims do not receive the same treatment compared to Jews and Christians. Perhaps this attitude also stems from the Islamophobic climate in Europe in general, which leads people from Islamic religious backgrounds to feel discriminated against.

However, focusing solely on reducing discrimination among religious groups overlooks the broader spectrum of social groups experiencing various forms of discrimination. It's important to acknowledge that Bassam comes from a working-class background, leaving school early to pursue a life at sea and entering the fishing world at the age of 14. Therefore, his understanding of discrimination may be limited to these three religions. Even though I didn't agree with his perspective on this matter, I chose not to request that he change his statement. The only time I tried to intervene and dissuade Bassam from his stance was when I urged him to change the first segment, where he describes the president as an old man. This was based on ethical principles and concern for his safety in a political climate fraught with risks, where many activists and artists have been imprisoned for a post or a picture that didn't please the president

I suggested to Bassam to change it to protect himself. However, he refused. Considering that the anger in his heart was greater than what he intended to say. Although we composed the song together and proposed the topics we would work on, I did not attempt to intervene in the details related to his experience and how to express it. My role was to focus on the deportation experience and distill some words from the interviews I conducted into poetic verses. I made a few modifications to the words without changing their meaning to suit the artistic format. The excerpt I suggested is relevant to the deportation experience, which is the core of the subject I worked on, and it says that:

“Here, despite the bitterness, you see people wishing to die, being thrown from a plane with handcuffs in their hands. And not returning to Tunisia to see their mothers crying in tears”. Running away from brokers who throw them to fish. (Referring to injustice and abuse of power) the green passport didn't give me any value (Referring to discrimination based on the colour of passports at the border)”.

This segment was extracted from the experiences of deportees who expressed their desire to die rather than return to Tunisia, as they found it difficult to face the disappointment after witnessing the sacrifices made by their families, especially their mothers. However, for technical reasons, as Bassam pointed out, he tried to change some words to fit the rhythm and lyrics better, and he deleted some other words where he found difficulty in pronouncing them with the musical rhythm. These words included "green passport," which Bassam changed to "prostitution passport." Here, I wanted to refer to the discrimination and boundaries imposed by the border system on individuals based on the colour of their passports, as I witnessed this myself every time I entered the airport. It was also evoked by some people that I have interviewed, such as Slim Ayadi (mentioned above), who considers that the Tunisian passport is worthless. Slim said:

"The Tunisian state doesn't value Tunisian citizens. For instance, I was born in Italy and lived there for seven years before returning to Tunisia. I travel back and forth using a green passport. I see how the Italian government and institutions treat me based on my Tunisian passport, both in Tunisia and abroad. Tunisians have no value."

While European passport holders enjoy expedited procedures, non-European passport holders are left waiting for long hours. Perhaps this explains Bassam's change of the word "green" to "prostitution," as a reference to one of the most demeaning professions in society, signifying humiliation of human dignity, where migrants wait under the walls to cross just as prostitutes wait for clients. The other phrase that Bassam omitted for technical reasons was:

"They wish to be thrown out of the plane and not returning to Tunisia to not see their mothers crying in tears."

While he keeps the first part of the phrase, he removes the second one, again for technical reason; this phrase was uttered by Mohamed from Gafsa (mentioned above), acknowledging the sacrifices made by his mother. She used to rise early in the morning to craft sweet rush, transforming it into traditional products due to its abundance in the Kasserine Governorate. This process required strength and effort to uproot the grass and roll it, often resulting in injured hands. Although the segment I mentioned earlier pertains to the experience of deportation, Bassem chose to include it in the chorus. When we discussed the issue, he told me that the prison and deportation centers are not much different, a sentiment echoed by many activists in civil society, including Majdi

Karbaï, a former deputy and current civil society activist. He has repeatedly stated that the conditions in detention centers in Italy are humiliating<sup>24</sup>. Besides, deportation is the ultimate phase of the ongoing struggle journey for the deportees. Here, we see the migrants' determination to stay in Italy despite the suffering and delve primarily to preserve their dignity and escape the conditions they left behind. They prefer to remain in a state of exile despite the bitterness, in the hope that conditions will change someday, which they see as preferable to returning to a place where they faced hardship and know already it is not going to change. As mentioned earlier. This excerpt once again highlights how the abuse use of power and the preference for a bourgeois elite, or as Sarra previously mentioned, refers to them as *kroz*, over the rest of the population. As pointed out by (Dini and Giusa, 2020):

“The authoritarian and secularised modernization initiated by Bourguiba and later persuade by Ben Ali was based on “state patronage” carried out by class of bilingual Tunisian bourgeois forged during the French colonisation that politically and culturally excluded the illiterate and rural population ...this elite class controlled the export of raw materials and benefitted directly from their rentier logic it orchestrated authoritarian power relations with the rest of the population based on the clientelist logic ...”.

It may seem strange that the response to the discrimination, abuse of power, and injustice experienced by migrants is silence, as Bassam referred to in the song, saying: *“You have to adapt and live, don't show your wound to others, don't show your weakness, and don't tell your secret.”* However, again, silence confirms what we explain above; it becomes a form of symbolic and, invisible violence imposition on individuals. Prevent them from delving their pain in order to preserve their dignity rather than being subjected to pity. Silence is not understood as acceptance or assimilation to reality but rather as an attempt to avoid diminishing someone's value. Through this situation again, we understand that silence is often a choice made to preserve one's dignity and avoid vulnerability. This reluctance to seek help and limited solidarity towards deportees can be attributed to individuals' fear of appearing weak and vulnerable. Actually, the subsequent section regarding the refusal to cooperate with the police represents a form of revolt. This is because the police have long symbolized the regime in its violent and humiliating form, particularly in the Tunisian context, where young people often refer to Tunisia as a police state.

The song concludes with a message of hope, envisioning a future of freedom and the ability to live in a country where individuals can freely express themselves. This message reflects the enduring hope that propels individuals towards resistance—a hope for a better life. This aspiration motivates them to confront harsh realities, both in their homeland and in their adopted country.

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24 TUNISIA –MAJDI KARBAL QUALIFIES LIVING CONDITIONS ON MIGRANTS AS HUMILIATING AND INHUMAN 2022, ACCES 15/042024 AT [HTTPS://NEWS-TUNISIA.TUNISIENUMERIQUE.COM/TUNISIA-MAJDI-KARBAL-QUALIFIES-LIVING-CONDITIONS-OF-MIGRANTS-AS-HUMILIATING-AND-INHUMAN/](https://news-tunisia.tunisienumerique.com/tunisia-majdi-karbai-qualifies-living-conditions-of-migrants-as-humiliating-and-inhuman/)

Therefore, according to (Saidani, 2015), this form of art production allows young people to articulate a subversive worldview that identifies societal crises as deeply rooted in structure, necessitating profound and transformative changes.

### Social media a space of counter-narrative:

Starting from the principle that social networks have become a space for political expression, both collectively and individually (Veil, 2017), the democratization of this space offers various forms that have become a relevant source of knowledge and information sharing for migrants to navigate their journey and challenge Eurocentric perspectives of borders (Bayramoğlu, 2023). Moreover, it can also challenge the nation-centric view of borders. Especially in a political context characterized by dictatorship, populism, and a weak civil society. Therefore, digital videos created by Tunisians who irregularly immigrated and were detained by Italian authorities in deportation centers were analysed. Subsequently, they chose to convey their situation through social media platforms, aiming to reach Tunisian authorities and fellow nationals. Specifically, platforms like Facebook and the page *Tounes Berjelha* served as dedicated spaces for migrants in general, and those without documents.

Tunisian deportees turn to social media to express their anger and discontentment against the Tunisian government, which is perceived as complicit with the EU against the interests of its citizens. These spaces remain a refuge for them to protest practices they perceive as unjust against them, especially in the center of detention, where they face mistreatment, abuse, and violation of their human rights. Something that the Tunisian government continues to deny for example, in April 2022, the Tunisian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement refuting the remarks made by Deputy Majdi Karbai regarding the existence of an agreement with European countries for the expulsion of Tunisians<sup>25</sup>. The response came shortly thereafter, a few days later, in the Italian parliament, when Italian Interior Minister Luciana Lamorgese announced the expulsion of around 850 migrants to their countries of origin since the beginning of 2022.<sup>26</sup> She described this as an achievement, thanks to the ongoing dialogue and agreements signed with Tunisian authorities, stating that she will visit Tunisia to further activate consultation on immigration policy. Consequently, many videos have been published by Tunisian deportees, revolving around the reasons that led Tunisia to accept such treatment, asking the government to review the agreement with Italy.

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<sup>25</sup> Majdi Karbai, *IFM*, 14/4/2024, accessed on 4/4/2024, at: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=536729041179144>

<sup>26</sup> Majdi Karbai, *Compte Facebook*, 19/4/2024, accessed on 4/4/2024, at: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=665015304561554>



We chose to analyse two videos to highlight the ongoing systematic violence that deported people continue to endure. The two videos were published by the page *Tounes Berjelha*, a page that revolves around the experiences of *harraga*, and the struggle to obtain assistance, whether it be bureaucratic support or employment opportunities. It also sheds light on the conditions faced by the *harraga* in the diaspora. Interestingly, the page was deleted initially, but the videos had already been circulated by many other internet users. It was later restored. Deportees in these videos confirm the poor conditions they endure, not only in terms of housing but also in terms of the treatment they receive, which they describe as inhumane and discriminatory.

### Why only Tunisia?

The first video, published in 2024<sup>27</sup> by a group of young Tunisians confined in a detention center in Italy. The video depicts a migrant attempting suicide in protest of their deportation conditions while others try to stop him. The phone camera then captures others who have been beaten by the police inside the center. Some insist on recording and urge to share the video, while others speak in a tone that combines mockery, blame, and protest against President Kaies Saied's discourse, where he assumes a "protective role" over others, portraying himself as a father figure who wants to protect his "children." He declared migrants as his children who should return from Italy to Tunisia. However, many videos from migrants circulate, condemning this rhetoric and urging him to abandon it. They assert that they are not his children, with a tone of challenge and anger, arguing that he doesn't even understand what they are going through. Their messages often end with phrases like "See how your children, Kaeis Saied, are living," accusing the Tunisian authorities of complicity.

This perspective once again illustrates the analysis we previously discussed, showing how the abuse of power and the sense of disregard or lack of value, coupled with the government's continued neglect of citizens' demands and turning its back on them, drives individuals to migrate. Even after escaping injustice and reaching another country, according to their statements, the Tunisian state attempts to pursue them due to agreements signed between the Tunisian government and EU members

The second video was published 23 February 2024 by the page "*tounes berjelha*"<sup>28</sup> depicts a group of Tunisians being assaulted by the police, one of whom is seen collapsing on the ground due to

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<sup>27</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?ref=saved&v=389509287349929>

<sup>28</sup> Ben Taieb, Compte Facebook, 22/2/2024, accessed on 4/4/2024, at: <https://www.facebook.com/100078719472583/videos/853629796518928/>

the severity of the oppression and the inability to react in the face of the force and arrogance displayed by the police. Some of his friends try to lift him from the ground while others film from a distance, attempting to hide their phones, as filming is prohibited inside these centers. The image appeared blurry, especially since filming is forbidden. The administrator of the page blamed Tunisians for their silence on this situation, accusing them of complacency and lack of solidarity, especially considering they are compatriots.

The page moderator called for Tunisians to unite against what he perceived as humiliation towards the Tunisian nation. Furthermore, the administrator contacted someone who had published the video from the center to narrate the atrocities and violations occurring there, ranging from cleanliness and food issues to arbitrary detentions. The individual mentioned being taken from home without justification and placed in the center due to lack of documentation, with no response despite hiring a lawyer. They appealed to Tunisians to stand by them.

Therefore, these spaces have become spaces for migrants to express themselves in the absence of institutional and civil society support, with solidarity primarily based on national identity. These individuals have chosen to amplify their voices by constantly urging people to share their videos to reach a broader audience, positioning themselves as proactive and independent actors. This act of sharing can be interpreted as a form of tacit consent, reflecting their intent to raise awareness about their experiences and challenges. By utilizing digital platforms to broadcast their stories, they demonstrate agency in shaping their narratives and seek acknowledgment for their struggles. This kind of engagement challenges traditional narratives that might depict them solely as victims who need protection.

### **Discussion and conclusion:**

In this report, we attempted to examine the challenges and the obstacles faced by deportees upon their return, delving into the post-return context, which is a determining factor in the possibility of reintegration (Cassarino, 2004). By examine the daily life that characterise by frustration and a general social climate, which has become increasingly unstable. Despite the assistance provided and supported by the European Union in the form of projects or social aid, we found that these projects may offer temporary solutions but are by no means long-term remedies.

Moreover, deportation, for the most part, is involuntary, although some may claim it to be voluntary to qualify for a grant when they realize that the only option is to guarantee some aid upon their return. The issue of deportation still remains taboo, and deportees continue to feel shame and frustration, unable to open up about their experiences socially, especially since it is perceived as a personal failure. Therefore, we understand the reasons behind the limited solidarity, which we attribute to "el hogra" as a feeling of humiliation initially perceived as a form of invisible violence imposed on individuals. This compels them to conceal their needs and refrain from expressing them, fearing a decrease in their dignity and striving to preserve it. This feeling can evolve over time, potentially leading individuals to resignation or assimilation (Bouamama 2000), but also into anger and revolt if left unresolved (Tabbabi 2023, Bensaada 2022), as witnessed in the 2011 uprising. Although this sentiment particularly affects individuals from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds, especially those from the interior regions, because of the economic model since independence has still favoured central areas and neglected those in the periphery. However, this sentiment of *el hogra* now encompasses a wider spectrum of society, reflecting the deliberate disregard of the state towards its citizens characterized by neglect, abandonment of its responsibilities, and an absence of capability to listen to their demands. In the case of deportees, they are still being dealt with merely as bureaucratic files, as mentioned by the representative of the Office of Tunisians Abroad, neglecting the psychological and social aspects. Consequently, individuals are compelled to migrate, turning migration into a form of protest to seek "karama" (dignity) elsewhere through means of *el Harga*.

Therefore, in this specific social and cultural context where solidarity has to be understood from below, self-reliance is becoming necessary for preserving dignity, and solidarity, as commonly understood, becomes a challenging concept. It is not always viewed positively, as its perception depends on the context, situation, and circumstances. In the case of deportee people, they still find it taboo to open up about their experience because of the shame they may find it difficult to seek assistance while preserving their dignity. This way, the family is still the only actors who provide support for them.

It is worth noting that the question of whether this shared experience or sense of *el hogra* could lead to solidarity remains open-ended without providing a precise answer, especially since we aim to continue researching this matter in the future. This appears important, particularly in the case of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa in Tunisia. During my visit to Sfax (a city in the south of Tunisia where many sub-Saharan migrants are stuck now). Conversations with some Tunisians, discussing their solidarity with these migrants in an environment charged with xenophobia towards foreigners, revealed that some explained their support by rejecting feelings of *el hogra*. Therefore, I believe that this matter requires further investigation in the future.

Moreover, the research methodology based on art has revealed signs of movement that contradict the national narrative and crystallize a discourse emphasizing migrants' ability to be

effective and assert their own narratives in the context of a populist political atmosphere that denies its citizens and believes it can conceal the truth. Through social media, migrants are turning to these platforms not only to exchange information but also to present their own narratives. However, could these networks transform one day into a revolt or a solidarity with deported people, especially given the significant capacity of these platforms to mobilize public opinion?

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