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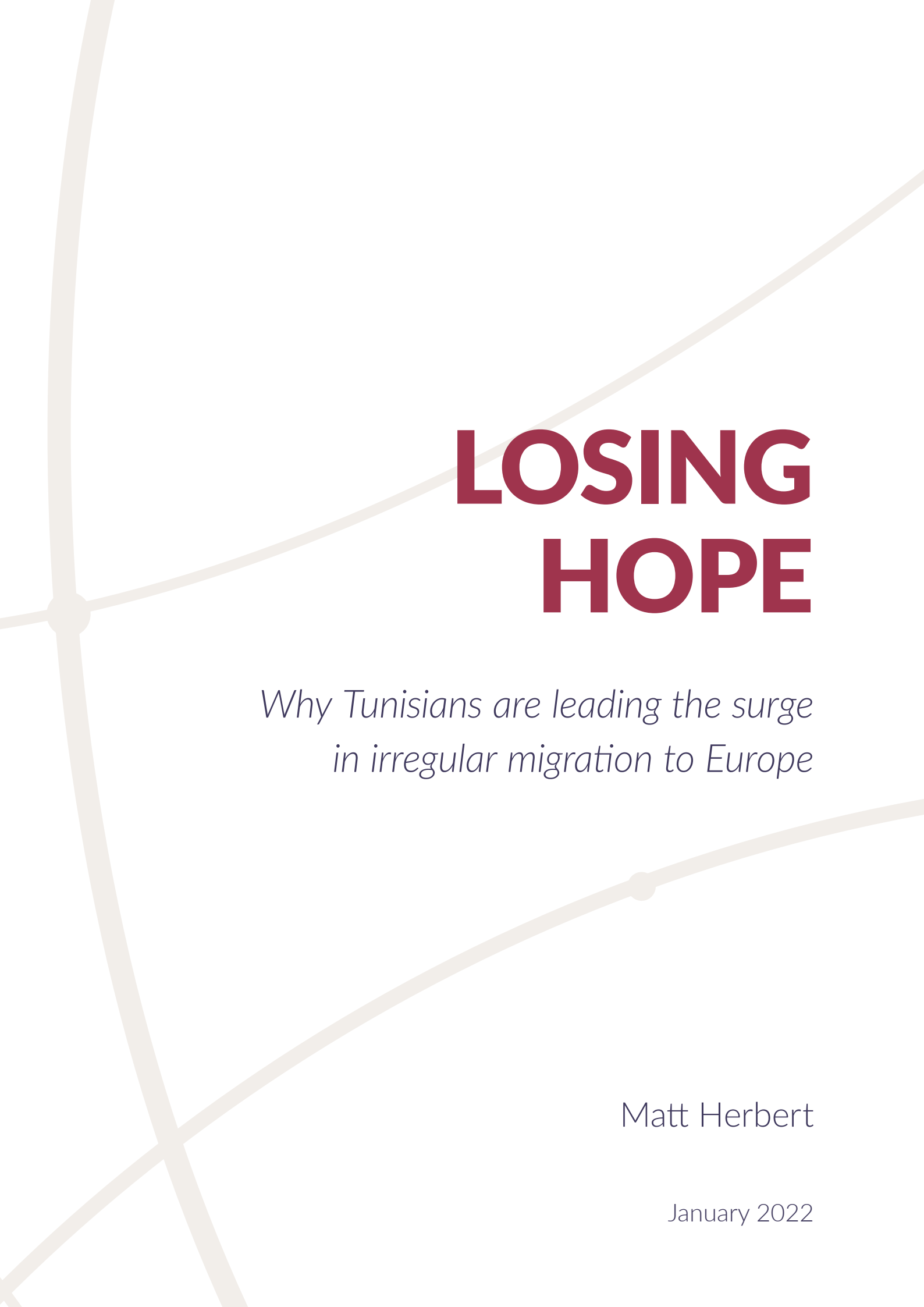
# LOSING HOPE

Why Tunisians are leading the surge  
in irregular migration to Europe

MATT HERBERT

JANUARY 2022





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in irregular migration to Europe*

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January 2022

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Tunisians wave their national flag during a strike in Tataouine against marginalization and to demand development and employment, which have helped drive a record wave of irregular migration from the country. © Fathi Nasri/AFP via Getty Images



**B**etween 2020 and mid-2021, migration from and through Tunisia rose to levels not seen since the months following the 2011 revolution. Between January 2020 and mid-December 2021, Tunisian security and defence forces intercepted 35 040 irregular migrants in the country's littoral areas and off its shores, two-thirds of whom were Tunisian nationals. Over the same period, authorities in Italy recorded the disembarkation of 28 124 Tunisians, as well as roughly 6 000 migrants from other countries who left from the country.

The reasons for this surge are complex, with no single factor responsible for the rise in departures. Rather, the decisions of Tunisian irregular migrants – who make up the overwhelming thrust behind these rising numbers – have been influenced by an interplay of economic and social factors. These include a worsening economic situation at home, poor career options, the social repercussions of unemployment or underemployment, and pessimism about the ability or willingness of Tunisia's political leadership to improve the situation in the country.

The COVID-19 pandemic affected migration by exacerbating pre-existing trends, rather than acting as a standalone catalyst. In particular, public-health measures implemented by the government led to widespread job losses in some sectors, including tourism and hospitality, leading to increased economic pressure to leave. Further, it affected the ability of Tunisians to migrate legally, limiting the exit opportunities for the middle class and leading some to seek irregular pathways.

The factors driving transit migration by foreigners through Tunisia are more opaque. They are linked principally to the risks associated with other transit routes in North Africa, such as Libya, as well as the rising number of irregular migrants living in Tunisia.

*The pandemic affected migration by exacerbating pre-existing trends rather than acting as a standalone catalyst.*

The COVID-19 pandemic has had two significant impacts on the dynamics of foreign migrants using Tunisia as a transit point. First, public-health measures implemented by the Tunisian government led to significant job losses among its migrant population. Second, it led to an inflow of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa from Tunisia's neighbours, primarily Algeria, where they had been living, and where job losses and fears of deportation mounted during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As numbers have increased, the means by which migrants leave Tunisia and travel to Europe has also evolved. It remains, in part, facilitated by human-smuggling networks. Unlike Libya, where smuggling networks can be large, long-standing and well known, Tunisia's networks are relatively small and localized. The price for embarkation ranges between TND 2 500 and TND 4 000 (€916–€1 465).

However, the importance of human smugglers for migrants, especially Tunisian nationals, is waning as growing numbers of young Tunisians choose instead to 'self-smuggle', pooling their money, sourcing boats, engines and fuel, and departing on their own.

The irregular migration surge seen in 2020 and 2021 breaks with the generally low-level flows seen throughout the decade; however, the shift is likely to be sustained over the foreseeable future. The factors enabling irregular migration from Tunisia – a long coastline, proximity to Europe, and a plethora of smuggling options, many of which are particularly difficult for security forces to control – are unlikely to change. Given the current internal social, economic and political trends in Tunisia, there is a strong possibility that irregular migration in late-2021 and beyond may continue to grow, eclipsing even the high levels seen to date.

This report begins by detailing the rise in irregular migration from Tunisia to Europe in 2020 and 2021. It next assesses the dynamics that led to the surge, including those responsible for the rise in irregular migration by foreigners through Tunisia. The report then turns to the structure of human smuggling networks along the Tunisian littoral, and the broader means through which irregular migrants embark from the country. Finally, an assessment is offered of the security forces responsible for border control and laws salient to irregular migration, along with Tunisia's politics of irregular migration.

## Methodology

The assessment is based on over 50 interviews conducted throughout Tunisia by the GI-TOC between May 2020 and October 2021. Interviewees included Tunisian and foreign migrants, Tunisians interested in migration, human smugglers, government officials, politicians and international observers. The interviews are complemented by an analysis of data compiled by the GI-TOC from the Tunisian Ministry of Interior, the Tunisian Ministry of Defence, the Italian Ministry of Interior and Frontex, covering the period 2009 to 2021. Reports by UN agencies, NGOs and media were also used.





Tunisian irregular migrants in Lampedusa, August 2020. Given the socio-economic and political trends in Tunisia, such migration is expected to grow. © Lorenzo Palizzolo/Getty Images



A photograph showing a health screening of migrants at night. A person in a grey shirt and purple pants, wearing a face shield and gloves, is using a handheld device to check the temperature of a man's forehead. The man being screened is wearing a red t-shirt with 'STREET 93' and black shorts. Other migrants are visible in the background, some wearing athletic gear. The scene is illuminated by artificial light, and the background is dark.

# IRREGULAR MIGRATION FROM TUNISIA

Tunisian migrants receive a health screening before being admitted into reception facilities in Lampedusa. © Lorenzo Palizzolo/Getty Images

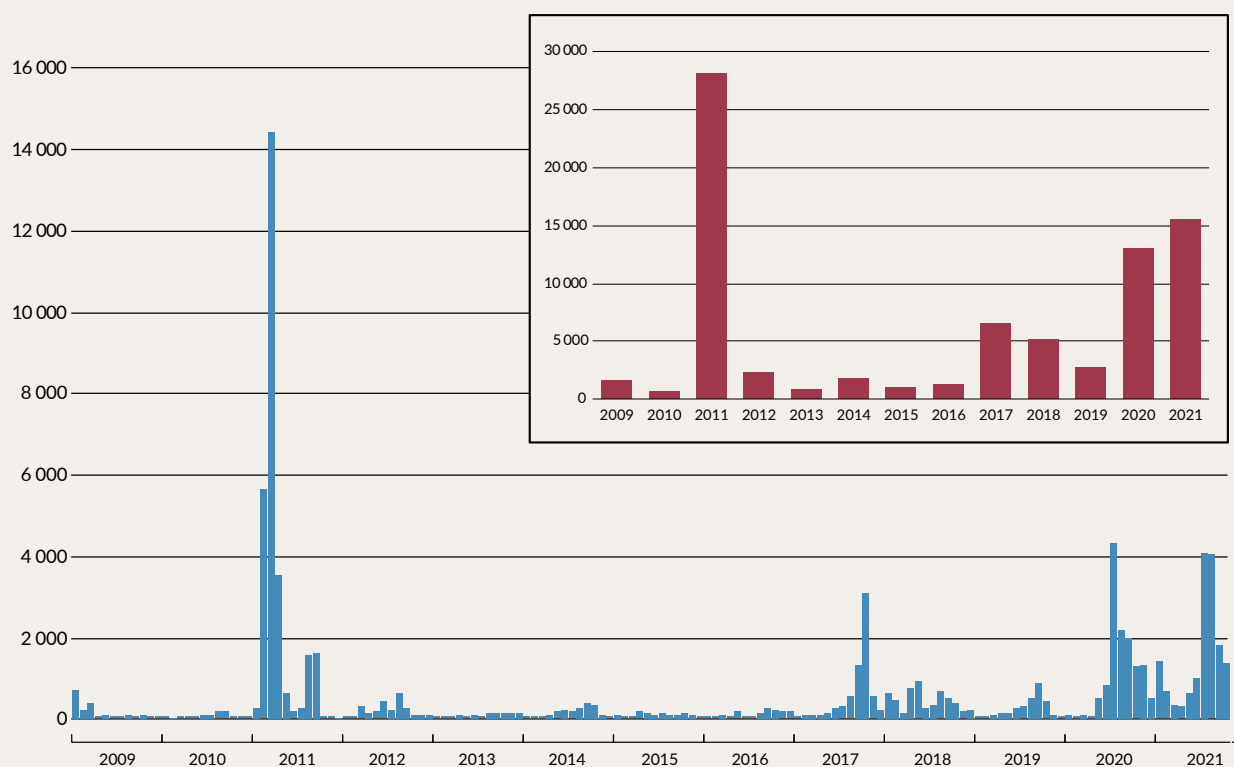


Over the course of 2020 and 2021, irregular migration from Tunisia has risen to the highest point in a decade. In the 22 months between January 2020 and October 2021, Tunisian and Italian authorities intercepted more than 69 000 irregular migrants embarking from the country. This section details the evolution of the current surge, the demography of irregular migrants coming from Tunisia and the geography of departure locations.

Irregular migration from Tunisia to Europe has been a long-standing phenomenon. Irregular migration has occurred from the country's littoral areas since the early 1990s, with most migrants aiming to land in Italy, either in Sicily or the Pelagic Islands.<sup>1</sup> Irregular migration reached a peak in 2011 when a collapse in Tunisian border control in the wake of the country's revolution led mass numbers of Tunisians to depart. Between February and September of that year, Italy intercepted 27 646 Tunisian migrants, with an unknown number arriving undetected.<sup>2</sup>

In the wake of 2011, however, irregular migration from Tunisia sharply ebbed. Few Tunisians sought to migrate irregularly, and those who did tended to move via third countries, such as from Turkey into Greece.<sup>3</sup> This state of affairs stayed remarkably constant for a half-decade before migration from Tunisia began to slowly rise after mid-2017.<sup>4</sup>

In early 2020, however, the gradual rise in irregular migration from Tunisia spiked. Between January and December, Tunisian defence and security forces intercepted 11 789 irregular migrants attempting to depart from the country's shoreline.<sup>5</sup> The surge continued to accelerate in 2021, with 23 251 interceptions recorded between January and mid-December. These arrest levels are starkly higher than 2019, when 4 795 people were intercepted, and significantly exceed those recorded in the country at any point in the past decade.<sup>6</sup>



**FIGURE 1** Tunisian irregular migrants intercepted by European agencies in the central Mediterranean.

NOTE: In 2021, data encompasses January to October only.

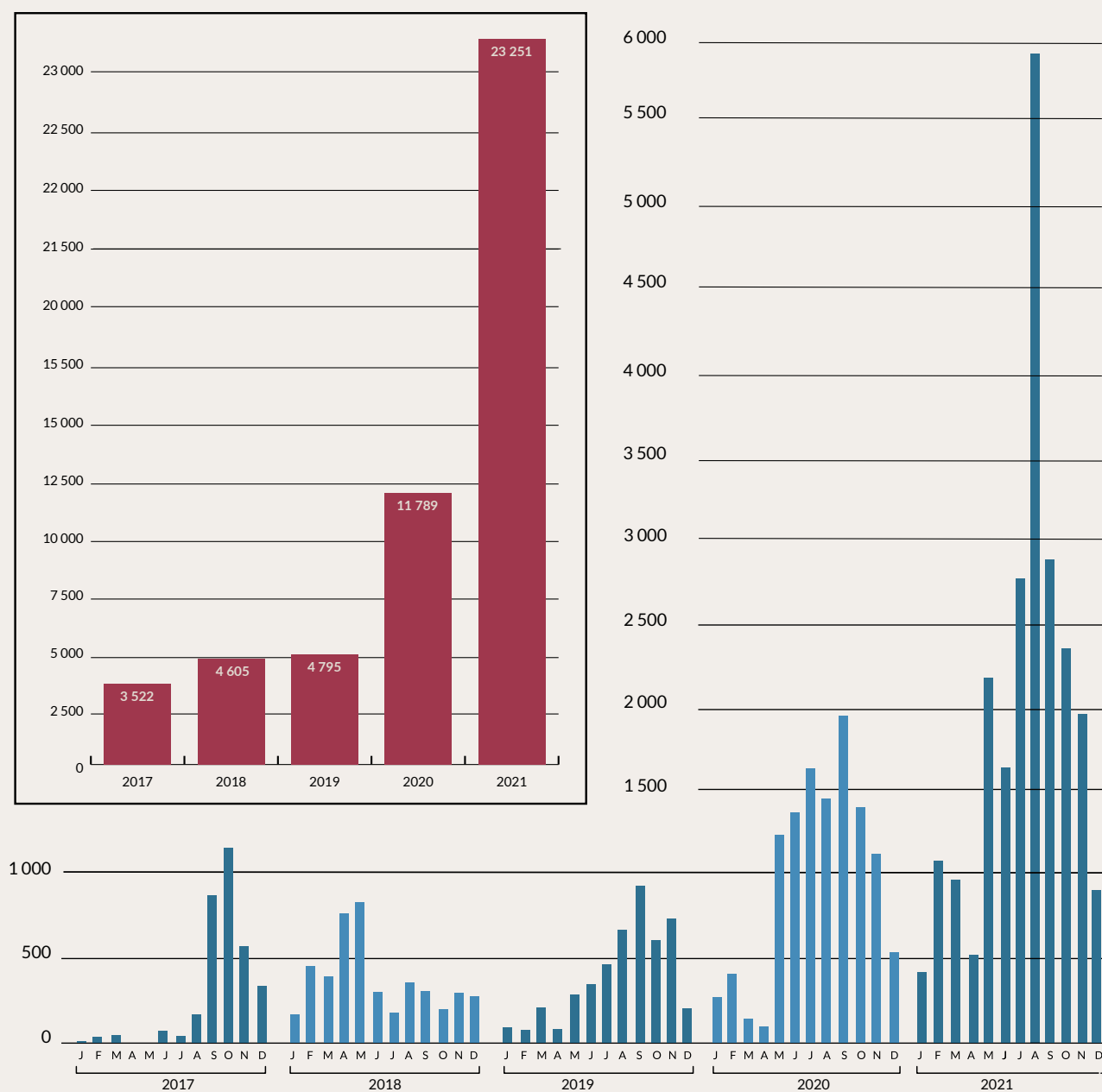
SOURCE: Author analysis of Frontex data and information from Italy's Dipartimento per le Libertà civile e l'Immigrazione

Tunisian interceptions, however, paint only a partial picture of the scope of the surge, as interception levels do not account for irregular migrants who avoid detection. There is a widespread perception among prospective migrants within Tunisia that security-force arrests only catch a fraction of those departing. According to one migrant interviewee: 'While the National Guard try, they only catch one migrant out of 10.'<sup>7</sup>

The perception that significant numbers of migrants evade Tunisian authorities is borne out by data from Italy, where disembarkations of migrants coming from Tunisia roughly equal the interception levels recorded by Tunisian authorities. Between January 2020 and mid-December 2021, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the Italian Ministry of Interior, for example, recorded the disembarkation of 34 003 migrants who had departed Tunisia.<sup>8</sup> Notably, in 2020, the number of arrivals from Tunisia outpaced those from Libya, a substantial reversal from trends seen throughout the 2010s.

While the number of irregular migrants who evade both the Tunisian and Italian security forces is unknown, it is possibly substantial, with many interviewees referencing friends or relatives who arrived in Italy undetected and were now living in Europe.





**FIGURE 2** Total number of interceptions by Tunisian security and defence forces by month.

NOTE: In 2021, data encompasses January to 18 December only.

SOURCE: Author analysis of communiqués from the Tunisian Ministry of Interior and the Tunisian Ministry of Defence, 2017-2021

*'I used to hear only about people in Tunis or in the coastal areas leaving. But now the number of people from the western regions is growing.'*  
– Prospective migrant from Jendouba.

The current surge began before the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in Tunisia in March 2020, with January and February experiencing unusually high arrest levels compared to historic norms. In the initial stages, the pandemic and associated mobility restrictions actually led to a reduction in interceptions, lasting roughly between March and April. The surge began in earnest when such restrictions were partially lifted in early May, with 1 252 people apprehended in Tunisia that month.<sup>9</sup> A similar rise was recorded by Italy, with arrests spiking from 37 in April to 498 in May.<sup>10</sup>

The summer and early autumn represented the first peak of the surge, with about 5 106 migrants (43 per cent of the total for the year) intercepted in July, August and September.<sup>11</sup> Notably, interceptions were elevated during this period both in Tunisia and Italy, suggesting that the rise in arrests was not solely due to increased law enforcement activity by either country.

Migrant interceptions declined in October and November, in part due to a series of arrests of human smugglers in the key departure areas of Mahdia and Sfax governorates. Further declines occurred in December, most likely because of the weather, although arrests remained significantly above historic levels.

The drop in the autumn of 2020, however, proved fleeting. Interception levels in the first three months of 2021 were far higher than normal, more than double the 2020 levels. This accelerated in the spring and summer, with the second peak of the surge coming in August when Tunisian security and defence forces intercepted 5 505 irregular migrants.<sup>12</sup>

The early autumn of 2021 has seen a slow levelling-off of irregular migrant interceptions. However, even at the reduced level, Tunisian interceptions in September and October, with 2 795 and 2 444 migrants caught respectively, were higher than the levels recorded even during the busiest months in 2020 and are an order of magnitude greater than average interception levels in the mid-2010s.

Despite the slow decline in irregular migrant interceptions, there is little reason to believe that the current surge of irregular migration via Tunisia has abated. Rather, accounting for seasonal patterns in migration, current dynamics suggest that migratory movement via Tunisia is likely to remain high in 2022, with the distinct possibility that interception levels in the coming year will overtake the extraordinarily high levels recorded in 2021.

## **Trends in nationality, age and gender**

Irregular migrants departing from Tunisia are overwhelmingly Tunisian nationals. Between January 2020 and December 2021, they accounted for 71 per cent of all migrants intercepted by Tunisian security and defence forces.<sup>13</sup> Between January 2020 and mid-December 2021, Tunisian and Italian authorities intercepted slightly more than 53 000 Tunisians, out of 69 000 total migrants apprehended coming from Tunisia. The prominence of Tunisians on the route is the historic norm, with very few foreign transiting migrants leaving from the country over the past decade.<sup>14</sup>

Data released by the Tunisian Ministry of Interior is not detailed enough to pinpoint which governorates in Tunisia are the origin points for departing migrants. However,



official data and interviews conducted between 2016 and 2021 suggest that the phenomenon is geographically widespread, with irregular migrants drawn both from coastal areas (such as Bizerte, Tunis, Monastir and Sfax) and interior and southern governorates (such as Kairouan, El-Kef, Kebili and Tataouine).

Some anecdotal accounts suggest that migration from interior areas may be increasing. 'I used to hear only about people in Tunis or in the coastal areas leaving,' explained a prospective migrant from Jendouba, interviewed in 2019. 'But now the number of people from the western regions is growing.'<sup>15</sup>

Historically, Tunisian irregular migrants have been male youths, mainly between the ages of 18 and 35. A security-force official further claimed that most come from economically marginalized families, often with limited education and few job prospects.<sup>16</sup>

Over the past two years, the type of Tunisians migrating irregularly has begun to shift. Although young men remain the dominant category of departees, a growing number of women, children, infants and even entire families are joining them.<sup>17</sup> Between January and November 2021, for example, 540 Tunisian women and 599 accompanied children arrived in Italy, versus the 463 women and 435 accompanied children that disembarked throughout 2020.<sup>18</sup>

The age of migrants also appears to be changing, with 3 483 unaccompanied minors leaving for Italy between January 2020 and November 2021.<sup>19</sup> An increasing number of migrants in their forties and fifties have also been recorded in Tunisian interception data. The educational and economic profile of Tunisian migrants is also changing. Increasingly, middle-class people, including some with advanced education or who were employed full-time, are choosing to leave in this way.

**The type of Tunisians migrating irregularly has begun to shift, including whole families and middle-class citizens.**

© Hamdi Zaghdane/AFP via Getty Images



**FIGURE 3** Main irregular migration routes from Tunisia.

## Migrants transiting Tunisia

The number of foreign migrants attempting to cross from Tunisia to Europe rose substantially in 2020, as noted above. Security and defence forces intercepted at least 2 722 foreign migrants along the country's coastline and offshore, compared to 1 257 in 2019.<sup>20</sup> Italian authorities recorded a similar jump, with 1 816 foreigners recorded as embarking from Tunisia, versus 979 in 2019.

The rise in transit migration gained pace in 2021, with Tunisian authorities recording the arrest of 7 063 foreign migrants along the country's littoral and offshore between January and mid-December.<sup>21</sup> During the same period, Italian authorities intercepted roughly 3 700 foreign migrants coming from Tunisia, mostly from Côte d'Ivoire (2 240) or Guinea (1 199).<sup>22</sup>

Data from Tunisian security and defence forces is not sufficiently detailed to analyze the precise nationalities



of the foreign migrants. However, available Tunisian and Italian data indicates that, between 2018 and 2021, nationals from Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Cameroon, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Chad, Sudan, Ghana, Gambia, Somalia, Algeria, Morocco, Syria and Iraq were caught while attempting to migrate irregularly from Tunisia to Italy.

Most foreign migrants departing from Tunisia are male. However, similar to Tunisian migrants, a growing number of foreign women, children and infants have been among the flow of migrants leaving. In 2020, for example, Tunisian security and defence forces reported catching at least 249 foreign female migrants, 51 children and 3 infants, although, due to sometimes unspecific reporting, the actual numbers in all categories are likely higher.<sup>23</sup>

## Departure locations

Embarkation points are scattered all along Tunisia's 1 148-kilometre coastline. The governorates of Bizerte, Nabeul, Mahdia, Sfax and Medenine, in particular, are long-standing departure zones.<sup>24</sup> From these points, most migrant vessels then transit to Italy's Agrigento province, landing at sites in south-western Sicily, for those leaving from northern Tunisia, and on the islands of Lampedusa and Pantelleria, primarily for migrants leaving from the centre and south of the country.

Although the surge seen between 2020 and 2021 involved embarkation points all along the country's coastline, detected departures were overwhelmingly concentrated in the south-central governorate of Sfax. Tunisian government statistics indicate that, in 2020, for example, Sfax accounted for 43 per cent of apprehensions, Greater Tunis 26 per cent, Nabeul and Mahdia both 13 per cent and Monastir 4 per cent. While reporting in 2021 has not been precise enough for comparisons, a similar pattern of departures is likely to prevail.

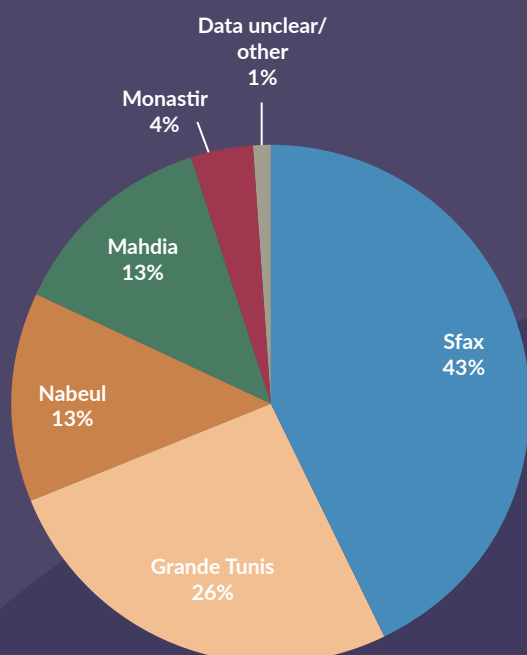
**A boat being towed after sinking off the Tunisian coast carrying 29 people, October 2020.**

© Housseem Zouari/AFP via Getty Images

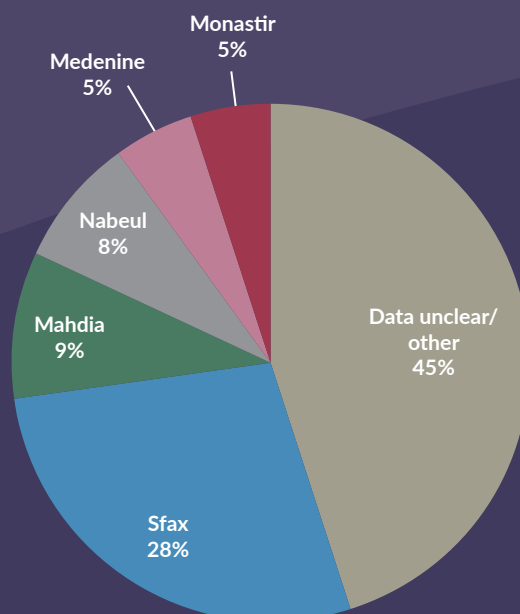


## PRIMARY DEPARTURE LOCATIONS IN TUNISIA, 2017-2020

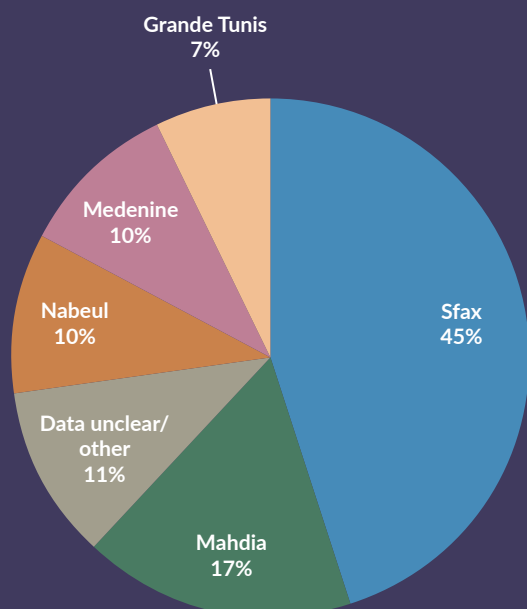
2020



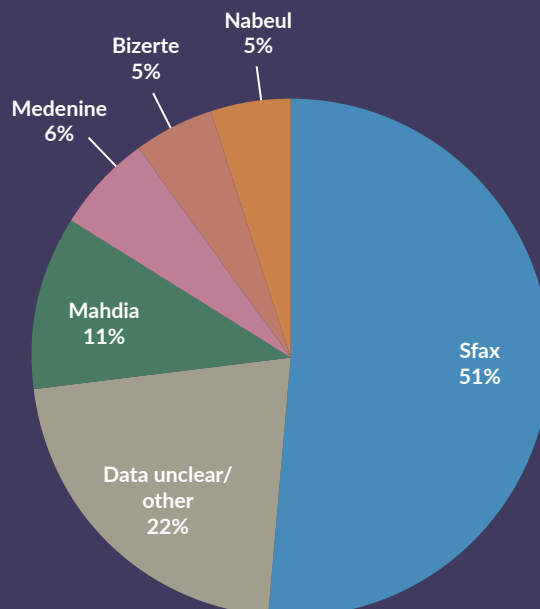
2019



2018



2017



SOURCE: Author analysis of communiqués from the Tunisian Ministry of Interior and the Tunisian Ministry of Defence, 2017-2021

It is important to note that these statistics capture only migrants who have been caught. Interviewees suggest that the departure points in Kelibia (Nabeul governorate), Korba (Sousse governorate), and Ras Jebel (Bizerte governorate) are perceived to be comparatively safe, with many boats departing from these locations having arrived safely in Italy.

The centrality of Sfax as a departure zone is not new; it has been the foremost governorate for departures from Tunisia since 2017, often by a substantial margin. However, in contrast to previous years when many departed from the Kerkennah Islands, in 2020 and 2021, most migration took place from the mainland of the governorate, including areas such as Sidi Mansour and Jibinia. This shift appears to have been driven by the increased presence of Tunisian law-enforcement officials on the islands and the heightened scrutiny of travellers on the ferry from Sfax to Kerkennah.

The shift of departure locations from Kerkennah to mainland Sfax underscores the fact that the situation is dynamic, with these points often rapidly shifting in response to law-enforcement efforts and oscillations in who is migrating. Heightened enforcement against smugglers, such as that which occurred in August 2020 in Sfax and Mahdia governorates, has done little to halt smuggling, leading instead to a dispersal of embarkation points across the country.

Departure points can change rapidly, in part because of the ease with which prospective migrants can access information through social media on departure options, with specific information on where to go. In some instances, contact details for smugglers are also readily available.

One Tunisian youth considering migrating said: 'Because of the internet, everybody knows where people leave from, so some regions are "burnt", known to everybody, and so also known to the authorities, and so other locations emerge.'<sup>25</sup>

There is also a difference in departure points used by Tunisian nationals and foreigners. Tunisians use departure points spread around the country, while foreign migrants typically use Sfax, Mahdia and, to a lesser degree, Medenine governorates, although small but increasing numbers of foreigners have been caught embarking from Sousse and Nabeul in 2021.

It is unclear why foreign irregular migration is largely limited to the south, although the city of Sfax hosts the second-largest migrant community after Tunis, with substantial numbers of Ivorians and Malians living and working there. Interviewees mentioned that the presence of security forces is also a factor, with one interviewee noting that 'Radès and La Goulette [beaches close to Tunis] are far more controlled than the beaches around Sfax.'<sup>26</sup>

Departures from Sfax, however, are most likely made easier by Tunisian smuggling networks that specifically cater for foreigners, assisted by middlemen from the migrant communities.

*Departure points change rapidly, in part because of the ease with which prospective migrants can access information through social media on where to go.*





# MIGRATION DRIVERS AND THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

A protestor holds a bird cage during an anti-government demonstration in Tunis, January 2021.  
Many young Tunisians feel that the current environment in the country is suffocating.  
© Fethi Belaid/AFP via Getty Images





## Migration drivers for Tunisian nationals

The reasons for the 2020–2021 surge in migration by Tunisian nationals are complex, with no single factor responsible for the rise in departures. Rather, decisions to leave seem influenced by a complex interplay of economic and social factors, including a worsening economic situation at home, poor career options, the social repercussions of unemployment or underemployment and pessimism about the ability or willingness of Tunisia's political leadership to improve the situation in the country.

None of these factors is unique to the last two years, and have been in evidence, to varying degrees, since the 2011 revolution. The economic situation, in particular, has worsened considerably since 2017, affecting both low-income populations and the middle class, many of whom have seen the erosion of their purchasing power and general quality of life.

'Before the revolution, there were three classes: rich, middle and poor. After the revolution, there are only two classes: rich and poor, and the gap is widening between them. There is poverty everywhere now. The situation was bad before, but COVID-19 has made it worse,' said a prospective migrant from Kebili.<sup>27</sup>

Another person interviewed, from Zaghouan, noted that 'salaries are ridiculous and purchasing power is very low. Prices are going up and young people can't survive on what they earn.'<sup>28</sup>

A by-product of the country's economic troubles is the growing unemployment and underemployment, especially among the youth and well-educated Tunisians. The problem is particularly acute in interior and southern areas, which were economically marginalized under the Ben Ali and Bourguiba governments.

There are also concerns among young and well-trained Tunisians interviewed that, even if jobs can be found, Tunisia offers few prospects for career progression. One observer bluntly noted, 'If you're under the age of 40, you're trying to leave.'<sup>29</sup>

Economic issues have had a push-pull impact on migration since 2017, driving the intermittent, although inexorable, rise in departures that has been evident over the past four years. The search for economic opportunity, including jobs and the potential for career progression, has pushed young Tunisians to leave the country. Simultaneously, the depreciation of the Tunisian dinar against the euro has made work in Europe, and earnings in euros, far more attractive. As a prospective migrant explained, 'When the euro increased in value, everyone thought, "I can work for two or three years [in Europe] and then come back and start a project here".'<sup>30</sup>

The sentiments and push-pull factors listed above are not exclusive to irregular migrants. They also fuel legal migration efforts by those with the education and the means to secure work or residence permits in Europe, North America or the Middle East. One political observer noted, 'If you are of a certain class, you go legally. If you are not, you go any way you can.'<sup>31</sup>

However, the pandemic also affected the ability of Tunisians to migrate legally. Several Tunisians in Bizerte explained during interviews that their visas or work-abroad arrangements had been paused or blocked as a result of the pandemic.<sup>32</sup> This has also affected the exit opportunities for the middle class, a development that may have led some to seek irregular pathways to emigration. A 26-year-old prospective Tunisian migrant from Kebili governorate said: 'Countries have shut down their borders, so we resort to illegal immigration even more now.'<sup>33</sup>

The pandemic has also significantly worsened the economic situation, exacerbating dynamics around migration in several ways. Public-health measures implemented by the government have led to widespread job losses in some sectors, including tourism and hospitality. The informal sector was also hard hit, particularly by mobility restrictions and border closures, which significantly affected cross-border smuggling.

Loss of livelihood has been further exacerbated by a rise in food prices, roughly 6 per cent year-on-year in May 2021, which heightened food insecurity for some. 'Before, 10 dinars was enough to make dinner,' explained an interviewee in Kasserine, 'But now it is not enough to make a simple *ojja*.'<sup>34</sup> This is not simply an issue for the poor, with a number of middle-class interviewees also reporting cutting down on or forgoing meat and fish.<sup>35</sup>

For many young Tunisians, there is a sense that the current environment is suffocating, with few feeling optimistic. This, the worsening livelihood options and a degradation in living standards have helped drive the current migration wave. One worker in Bizerte said: 'A lot of people here lost their jobs because of corona, so they have nothing to do. A lot of people were thinking about *harqa* [migrating], but corona opened the path.'<sup>36</sup> Other contacts in the governorate described the job losses linked to the pandemic simply as the 'final straw'.<sup>37</sup>

## Chaotic politics forestall change

Tunisia's chaotic and often sclerotic political dynamics have also furthered widespread pessimism that economic and social concerns are likely to be addressed. Throughout 2020 and 2021, frustrations rose substantially, with many young people interviewed saying the government was not fulfilling the needs of citizens nor addressing their problems. Interviewees consistently noted that financial disbursements made by the government to support economic sectors suffering because of COVID-19 did not appreciably improve the situation of workers, especially those who were self-employed or working in the informal sector. As put by an interviewee: 'The measures taken by the government do not relate to the needs of poor people.'<sup>38</sup>

In some cases, general frustrations with the government are further exacerbated by problematic or abusive encounters between citizens and security-force officials. Personal, negative experience with security forces can have a catalyzing impact on migration decision-making, as it reifies and intensifies beliefs about structural inequality,



rule of law and dysfunctional relations between state agents and citizens that many interviewees cited as key drivers for migrating. A youth explained in October 2020 that 'a lot of people here are leaving because they are fed up with the police.'<sup>39</sup>

Migration from Tunisia is also rooted in some specific social factors. For example, economic difficulties affected social dynamics in a way that further encouraged thoughts of emigration. Unemployment and underemployment have especially impacted the feasibility of marriage and having a family for young Tunisians. 'Young people want to get married and start a family and all of this depends on having a job,' said the prospective migrant from Kebili.<sup>40</sup> The vision of a better life elsewhere has been fuelled by stories of people who migrated and were successful.<sup>41</sup>

There is also a spontaneous aspect to migration from Tunisia. Interviewees noted that many migrants, especially young people, departed with friends or left because friends had done so. As one interviewee said:

The idea of leaving exists in people's minds as something that is a possibility. But it isn't planned out; rather, it is triggered. Taking a boat is often an impulsive act: the result of a chance meeting with a friend or a change at work. The pandemic created more of these trigger moments and people had less to keep them here.<sup>42</sup>

**Tunisian citizens gather in front of a government building in Tunis to claim financial aid promised by the government, March 2020. © Fethi Belaid/ AFP via Getty Images**



## Migration drivers for foreign transit migrants

The factors driving transit migration by foreigners through Tunisia are more opaque. They are likely to be linked principally to the rising numbers of irregular migrants living in Tunisia and the risks associated with other transit routes in North Africa.

The number of foreign migrants in Tunisia has grown substantially since the 2011 revolution, especially those from sub-Saharan Africa. The size of these groups of migrants is unclear, with no formal government figures available. Estimates vary widely, making them unhelpful in assessing the situation. Mercy Corps and the International Organization for Migration estimate that between 10 000 and 12 000 sub-Saharan migrants live in Tunisia, while the NGO Lawyers Without Borders suggests it could be as high as 75 000, including 6 000 university students.<sup>43</sup> Irrespective of the figures, interviewees agreed that the number of arrivals from sub-Saharan Africa has accelerated in recent years.<sup>44</sup>

In contrast to the overland routes that sub-Saharan migrants use to access Libya and Algeria, most of those in Tunisia arrive legally by air, using the visa-on-arrival option. One Ivorian, later caught by Libyan Coast Guards after departing Tunisia, said: 'For me, [getting to Tunisia] was not difficult at all. I went by plane ... with a passport, a ticket and a hotel reservation.'<sup>45</sup> However, the complexity and cost of getting work or residency papers in Tunisia for Africans from the south mean that those who stay on in the country after the expiry of their three-month tourist visas do so illegally.

African migrants gather in the Tunisian coastal city of Sfax, April 2021. The number of foreign migrants in Tunisia has increased during the pandemic.

© Fethi Belaid/AFP via Getty Images





Most of these migrants in Tunisia work in tourism, hospitality or construction. It is believed that prostitution involving sub-Saharan migrants, both voluntary and coerced, has increased in recent years.<sup>46</sup>

The migrant community is generally concentrated in three cities: Tunis, where job opportunities are seen as plentiful; Sousse, which has a low cost of living; and Sfax, where most boats to Europe leave from.<sup>47</sup>

While some of these migrants went to Tunisia with the aim of settling there, interviews suggest that many also see it as a stepping stone to Europe. 'The ultimate goal for most migrants [here] is to be able to arrive in Europe at all costs, whether departing from Tunisia or Libya,' said one migrant from a sub-Saharan country.<sup>48</sup>

The view of Tunisia as a good stopover on the way to Europe was also expressed by migrants in West Africa, including those interviewed in Touboro (Cameroon) and Goré (Chad) in May 2020. Cameroonian migrants interviewed in Tahoua, Niger, in January 2021, flagged that Tunisia is perceived as easier to access, and the passage to Italy less risky, than the route between Morocco and Spain.<sup>49</sup>

The pandemic has had two significant impacts on the dynamics of foreign migrants using Tunisia as a transit point. First, public-health measures implemented by the government led to significant job losses among the migrant population, who were vulnerable because of the informal nature of their employment and the type of sectors in which most were employed, which have been particularly hard hit. 'The COVID situation caused many of us to lose our jobs. Even after confinement, some have returned to work, but others have not been so lucky,' said one migrant.<sup>50</sup>

These economic difficulties seem to have prompted a growing number of sub-Saharan migrants to make the crossing to Europe. Although it appears that most had intended to emigrate to Europe anyway, the pandemic has been a catalyst. It has also led to an inflow of sub-Saharan African migrants from Tunisia's neighbours, primarily Algeria, where they had been living. In April, May, June and July 2020, relatively high levels of arrivals were recorded in Tunisia's north-western

governorates of Jendouba, Kef and Kasserine. One contact noted that there were at least 100 arrivals per month during this period.<sup>51</sup> While this levelled off later in 2020 and 2021, the level of arrivals remained significantly elevated.

Migrants arriving from Algeria were primarily male and West African, with arrests of nationals from Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, Guinea and Somalia reported. Most were employed in construction in Algeria and had lost their jobs because of COVID-19 restrictions and endured hostility from locals, while strict mobility controls impeded their ability to work.<sup>52</sup> Some reportedly relocated because of concerns that they would be arrested and deported to Niger by Algeria's security forces, given the latter country's increasingly harsh policies towards foreign irregular migrants since 2017.<sup>53</sup>

One 28-year-old Togolese migrant described the journey: 'I came with five friends from work to Tunisia. We mostly paid Algerian smugglers to get us to Annaba and then took different collective cabs to small villages where we spent one or two nights before going back on the road. In the end, we were left at the border and told to follow a path. I arrived in the middle of the night in Fériana.'<sup>54</sup>


While the influx has not been large in comparison to flows of migrants into Libya or southern Algeria, it is significant for Tunisia, which experiences limited cross-border migration in general, and particularly along its border with Algeria. It is also relatively substantial in terms of the overall irregular migration population of Tunisia.

It is unclear whether migrants arriving from Algeria did so with the expectation of continuing their journey to Europe as illegal migrants, although the worsening economic climate for migrants in Tunisia has probably pushed some to do so. The Togolese migrant noted: 'I am still struggling to find work. I liked being here in the first place because my movements were freer than in Algeria, but I think I might leave for Europe in clandestine boats if my situation does not get better. I can't go back to my country.'

A photograph of a fisherman in a light blue jacket and a tan cap working on a small, white boat with blue and red stripes. The boat is tilted on a sandy beach, and the fisherman is using a power tool. In the background, another similar boat is visible in the water. The sky is clear blue, and the sea is calm. A large, stylized white graphic of a compass rose or a similar geometric design is overlaid on the top left of the image.

# METHODS OF DEPARTURE

A fisherman works on his boat in Tunisia's Kerkennah Islands off Sfax, the site of a number of catastrophic shipwrecks. Many migrants use such boats to reach Italy. © Anis Mili/AFP via Getty Images



Regular migration from Tunisia to Europe is facilitated, in part, by the operations of human-smuggling networks. Unlike Libya, where smuggling networks are frequently large, long-standing and well known, Tunisia's networks are relatively small, localized and proliferate. One smuggler in central Tunisia, asked about the number of smuggling networks in his governorate, explained: 'In every small town in Nabeul, at least one big [smuggling] network and several smaller networks are operating.'<sup>55</sup>

However, the importance of human smuggling for migrants, especially Tunisian nationals, is waning as growing numbers of young Tunisians choose instead to 'self-smuggle', pooling their money, sourcing boats, engines and fuel, and departing on their own.

The following section details the process and operations of human-smuggling networks in Tunisia before addressing the rise of self-smuggling, including the issue of stowaways.

## Human-smuggling networks and processes

Human-smuggling networks have operated along Tunisia's coasts for more than two decades, emerging as some of the first (alongside those in Morocco) to shuttle migrants from North Africa to Europe.<sup>56</sup> The smuggling industry in Tunisia has endured, although it remains atomized, primarily consisting of small networks involving Tunisian nationals who operate in relatively constrained geographic areas.<sup>57</sup>

A small number of European, primarily Italian, smugglers are also reported to be involved in the trade, although the expense of the services they offer limits the number of Tunisian or foreign migrants who use them.

There is little indication that the migration surge in 2020 and 2021 was due to an appreciable shift in the operations, scope or capacity of Tunisian smuggling networks.

Most human-smuggling networks in Tunisia are relatively small, encompassing fewer than a dozen members. Most involve just a handful of individuals.

There are a variety of distinct roles within each network. Leaders, known as '*Harrak*', are typically experienced smugglers who act as logisticians, bringing together the various components, such as boats and departure housing, necessary for a smuggling effort to succeed. Nearly all are from littoral areas, with interviewees and data from Tunisian security forces suggesting they range in age from their 20s to mid-50s, with most in their mid-30s.<sup>58</sup> One smuggler in Nabeul explained the background of the *Harrak*, noting, 'They are always fishermen who know the sea, know how to get to Italy, and know the movements of the Coast Guard.'<sup>59</sup>

A second key role in the network is that of middleman, known either as a '*wassit*' or a '*samsar*'. They make contact with prospective migrants, vet them and negotiate the cost of passage. In some instances, middlemen also operate in a freelance capacity. A smuggler from Nabeul explained that the middleman typically earns a percentage of the migrant's payment.<sup>60</sup> Most are male, although some females are also involved because of the perception that women are less likely to attract security-force attention.<sup>61</sup>

Other common roles within human-smuggling networks in Tunisia include individuals tasked with housing, feeding and, in some instances, transporting groups of migrants waiting to depart (also called a '*wassit*'); actors tasked with overseeing protection; and individuals charged with captaining the migrant vessel (sometimes called a '*rayes*'). Not every network, however, employs a discrete individual for each role, with network leaders also sometimes handling other roles. Migrants are also sometimes asked to captain vessels, typically in exchange for a lowering or waiving of smuggling fees.<sup>62</sup>

There is a variety of different options offered by smugglers, with different networks specializing in different offerings. Basic options involve the use of small wooden or rubber boats, which typically carry between six and 24 individuals, with the boat typically abandoned in Italy upon arrival. In a smaller number of cases, converted fishing boats that carry groups of 75

to 110 migrants are used, although the practice seems confined to networks operating from Sfax or Mahdia governorates. These vessels normally conduct round trips, dropping migrants off close to the Italian shoreline before returning to Tunisia.<sup>63</sup>

The cost of the different options for transport depends on several factors. A Tunisian lawyer noted, 'The price depends on the condition of the boat and its hull, on the quality of the equipment, and if the smuggler has strong connections with the police or not.'<sup>64</sup> Prices in 2020 and 2021 were stable, reportedly ranging between TND 2 500 and TND 4 000 (€916–€1 465).<sup>65</sup> These are effectively unchanged from prices in 2019.

Luxury transport options also exist, including speedboats from Bizerte governorate and privately owned yachts leaving from urban areas such as Tunis, Nabeul and Sousse. The latter can take migrants quite far afield, with some reportedly disembarking in France.

These options are significantly more expensive than the basic options, with passage on speedboats costing €3 000 or more, while transport on yachts ranges from TND 8 000 to TND 12 000 (€2 412–€3 618) per person.<sup>66</sup> Most foreign smugglers active in Tunisia are involved in such luxury options, with Italian and French nationals in particular reported to be involved in yacht-borne smuggling.<sup>67</sup>

The process of human smuggling is broadly similar for both basic and luxury options. Prospective migrants hear about smugglers or departure locations either by word of mouth or on social media sites such as Facebook and TikTok. Migrants then contact a middleman and negotiate the cost of passage, which can be flexible.

Once an arrangement has been made with a middleman, the migrants are informed of a general departure date and location. Frequently, groups of migrants gather at a '*gouna*' or hiding place, often a building, near the departure location. They wait there for several days to a few weeks for good sailing conditions. Housing and food costs are included in the overall price. Before heading to the *gouna*, migrants typically have to show they have the required funds to avoid the risk of non-payment when they embark.

Migrants typically pay smugglers in cash, although some also accept prepaid bank cards. For Tunisian migrants,





Migrants arrive in Lampedusa. During the migration surge seen in 2020 and 2021, many Tunisians have arranged for their own crossing, ditching smugglers' services and instead pooling resources to buy their own boats, fuel and supplies.

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payment modalities can be structured in several ways. First, some migrants pay the entire sum up front to the smuggler. Second, some pay part of the fee several days before departure, after a date has been fixed, and then disburse the remainder while they are still at sea and after they lose access to the Tunisian network on their phones. Third, some pay the advance deposit and the rest on arrival in Italy.

Migrants often board at night on remote beach areas. 'The departure of the boats is usually between one and four in the morning,' explained one interviewee.<sup>68</sup>

In some instances, smugglers coordinate to simultaneously launch a number of vessels from the same stretch of coast on a single night to limit the likelihood of security forces being able to interdict all of them.

## The process of foreign migration from Tunisia

The process of smuggling for foreign migrants, primarily those from sub-Saharan Africa, is similar in most ways to that used to move Tunisians. Information on middlemen is conveyed by word of mouth, with one interviewee noting that, in some instances, the middleman is from the irregular migrant community.<sup>69</sup>

The middlemen sometimes actively look to make contact with prospective migrants. One Ivorian, describing his abortive attempt to reach Europe, said: 'While I was in a kiosk drinking coffee, someone came and asked me if I wanted to leave for Italy. I declined his offer because I did not know if he was telling the truth or he was just a swindler. However, the kiosk owner told me that he really was a smuggler, so I started to consider the idea.'<sup>70</sup>

The cost of passage for foreign migrants reportedly ranges from TND 2 000 to TND 4 500 (€617–€1 389).<sup>71</sup> Foreign migrants are almost always required to pay the full sum for the trip before departing.

One major difference between migrant-smuggling networks catering for Tunisians and those catering for foreign nationals is the number of migrants per trip. As noted above, most smuggling attempts involve Tunisian nationals who tend to be in small groups, typically six to 12 people. In contrast, between 50 and several hundred foreign migrants can be involved in a single departure. The overloading of vessels carrying foreign migrants caused several shipwrecks over the course of 2020 and 2021. While the waters off Tunisia are not nearly as deadly as those off Libya, at least 243 men, women and children, nearly all of them migrants from sub-Saharan Africa, have drowned over the last two years.





Self-smuggling is relatively straightforward, especially for youth in littoral areas, who generally source vessels locally.  
© Anis Mili/AFP via Getty Images

## The rise in self-smuggling

While human smuggling networks did not substantially change between 2020 and 2021, Tunisian nationals' reliance on such networks has shifted, with self-smuggling, called '*comita*' in Tunisia, rising in popularity. In this process, groups of fewer than a dozen migrants pool their money to purchase vessels, motors and other equipment and then depart on their own.

They are typically residents of coastal governorates who have basic maritime skills and a general understanding of how to navigate towards Italian territory.

Self-smuggling has occurred from Tunisia for nearly a decade. However, interviewees suggest that concerns about their safety with smugglers, the success rate of arriving at the chosen destination and the ease of accessing equipment have led to a boom in its popularity, especially among youth in littoral areas.<sup>72</sup>

'[Self-smuggling] is getting popular because a lot of smugglers are cheaters,' explained one Tunisian migrant from Zaghuan. 'The smuggler will tell passengers that they arrived in Italy and have them get off when it is actually just another place on the Tunisian coast. It is also safer, as some smugglers will throw migrants into the sea if they face any risk.'<sup>73</sup>

Another issue migrants have with smugglers is that, in some instances, the latter take their money and then inform the security forces about the operation.

Potential migrants also perceive self-smuggling trips to be more successful than those organized by smugglers, with some migrants saying that, as far as they were aware, up to 70 per cent of people doing the trips themselves had arrived successfully, and undetected, in Italy.<sup>74</sup>

The process of self-smuggling is also relatively straightforward, especially for youth in littoral areas. Vessels and engines are generally sourced locally, although one migrant said that his group had sourced and paid for its boat on the internet.<sup>75</sup> Boats, either wooden or polyester-resin, cost between TND 3 000 and TND 10 000 (€1 099–€3 015). Engines, typically 25 horsepower, are TND 4 000–TND 5 000 (€1 465–€1 832), with most migrants purchasing two, due to the risk of one failing.<sup>76</sup>

Because the process of self-smuggling involves group purchases, the interval between an individual's decision to emigrate and the actual departure can be relatively short. One 27-year-old migrant from Mahdia, interviewed remotely in Nice, France, said: 'We got the boat at night, we bought gas and we took off.'<sup>77</sup>

The increase in self-smuggling incidents in Tunisia has posed a challenge to security-force efforts to clamp down on irregular migration, a dynamic that has also been observed in Morocco and Algeria, where this approach is also employed.<sup>78</sup> Because self-smuggling attempts are undertaken by small groups of linked individuals and, until the point of departure, involve only licit commercial purchases, opportunities for law enforcement to identify and interdict the groups are far more limited than with traditional smugglers. Self-smuggling is highly likely to continue to grow in popularity among Tunisian migrants, in part for this reason.

There is little indication at present that non-Tunisians are involved in self-smuggling. The only example of foreigners self-organizing a departure occurred in September 2019, when a group of 25 non-Tunisians pooled TND 3 500 (€1 276) each and bought a fishing boat in Mahdia for TND 33 000 (€12 038). The group, along with three Tunisians, was arrested in Nabeul before departing, so it is unclear how the group intended to sail or navigate their vessel.

It is unlikely at this stage that foreigners in Tunisia will shift to this method of migration because of the specificity of some of the skills needed, such as basic navigational knowledge and understanding of the routes to Italy.

## Stowaways

A number of migration attempts from Tunisia in 2020 and 2021 involved people stowing away on container ships and cruise liners docked in commercial ports, primarily La Goulette and Radès near Tunis, although incidents have been reported in Sousse, Sfax and Zarzis, too. While many stowaway incidents have involved small groups, in some instances 30 to 50 individuals were found trying to climb port walls. Data from Tunisian security forces indicates that at least 1 184 individuals attempted to stow away on vessels between January 2020 and October 2021.<sup>79</sup>

Such incidents have long been a feature of irregular migration from Tunisia, with a surge in stowaway attempts recorded in 2018, for example. They frequently involve younger migrants, often teenagers, although information from Tunisia's Ministry of the Interior shows that migrants in their 20s and 30s have also been caught attempting to leave the country this way.

While most stowaways come from the urban areas surrounding the ports, there have been cases where youths from interior governorates, such as Kairouan and Sidi Bouzid, have travelled to Tunis to attempt to get onto vessels in ports around the capital.

While groups and individuals attempting to stow away on ferries are likely to know where they will end up, there is little indication that stowaways on container ships necessarily know their next port of call. There have been cases, notably from Morocco, where groups of youths have inadvertently ended up in West Africa.

Because of the relatively low stakes for this activity, with unsuccessful stowaways not losing money and rarely facing significant sanctions from Tunisian authorities, it is likely that this method will continue to be a popular, although not particularly effective or rapid, means of clandestinely emigrating.






# METHODS AND POLITICS OF ENFORCEMENT

Irregular migrants whose boats broke down off the coast of Ben Gardane, in the south-east of Tunisia, are rescued by the city's coastguard unit, July 2021. © Tasnim Nasri/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images





**T**he Tunisian government's efforts to address the current migration surge face various challenges. These challenges relate not only to capacity gaps, but also the complex politics of irregular migration within Tunisia. This section details the security and defence forces tasked with counter-migration missions and the regulations that they enforce. It then looks at the politics of irregular migration and how Tunisian officials perceive the issue.

Tunisia's border-security architecture comprises three primary bodies: the National Guard (Garde Nationale) and National Police (Sûreté Nationale), which fall under the Ministry of Interior, and the military, which falls under the Ministry of Defence. On irregular migration issues, the National Guard, which includes the Coast Guard (Garde Nationale Maritime), is the primary actor. The National Guard's zone of operational control encompasses most of the rural areas from which migrant vessels embark, as well as, for the Coast Guard, the waters immediately off the coast. Because of this, land and maritime units of the Guard are responsible for the vast majority of interceptions, roughly 87 per cent in the first 10 months of 2021.<sup>80</sup>

The National Police play a lesser role in migration matters, largely limited to intercepting migrants in urban areas as they transit to departure zones, in stash houses, or as they attempt to infiltrate ports to stow away. Finally, naval forces, which operate further offshore, play a role in the interception, and sometimes rescue, of migrants far out to sea.

Nominally, the three forces are meant to work together to varying degrees. The most intense coordination is often between the Coast Guard and the Navy, which have worked jointly on a number of enforcement and rescue operations. However, despite broader efforts to heighten inter-force coordination since 2011, gaps remain. These gaps, coupled with Tunisia's extremely long coastline and the nature of smuggling in the country – involving numerous small smuggling networks, rather than a handful of large actors – pose a steep challenge to efforts to address irregular migration by security approaches alone.

## Migration laws and the challenge of deterrence

Tunisia maintains laws against both irregular migration – any entry or exit from the country that occurs outside of formal border crossings – and migrant smuggling. Such laws, decrees and orders pertinent to irregular migration have existed since the 1960s in Tunisia (see Figure 4).

REGULATION	YEAR PROMULGATED	FOCUS
Law No. 68-7	1968	Condition of foreigners in Tunisia
Law No. 75-40	1975	Passports and travel documents
Law No. 77-28	1977	Maritime Disciplinary and Penal Code
Decree No. 2012-634	2012	Creation of the Secretariat of State for Immigration and Tunisians Abroad at the Ministry of Social Affairs
Order of the Minister of Social Affairs of 4 June 2015	2015	Establishing the committee responsible for monitoring the file of Tunisians missing following illegal migration to the Italian coasts, and setting its composition
Law No. 2015-26	2015	On the fight against terrorism and the suppression of money laundering
Law No. 2016-61	2016	On the prevention of and fight against trafficking in persons

**FIGURE 4** Laws, decrees and orders salient to migration, human smuggling and human trafficking in Tunisia.

For Tunisian irregular migrants intercepted by security forces, the most commonly applied law is No. 75-40. It stipulates that Tunisians who knowingly leave or enter Tunisia without an official travel document or without going through the formal entry/exit process can be imprisoned for between 15 days and six months or fined between TND 30 and TND 120 (€8.95–€35.80).<sup>81</sup> These penalties can be doubled for repeat offenders.

However, legal contacts indicate that most Tunisians caught while migrating irregularly typically face far more limited sanctions. Most are detained by the national guard or at a police station for a day or two before being released, and their detention is mainly concerned with collecting information on the smugglers who helped with their crossing. This broadly tracks with interviews conducted with Tunisian migrants caught by Tunisian security forces, all of whom described relatively short periods of detention.

Migrants deported from European states back to Tunisia interviewed for this report indicated a slightly different procedure. Deportees without prior criminal records reported receiving what are locally termed ‘*sorci sentences*’, that is, six-month probationary sentences common in the Tunisian legal system for minor crimes.

There is also potential for administrative sanctions, including administrative supervision or a ban on residence in specific places for up to five years for those convicted of irregular-migration offences. However, such measures are not commonly applied.

Foreign migrants caught entering or leaving Tunisia irregularly are typically charged under a different statute, No. 68-7, which deals more broadly with foreigners entering, leaving or residing in the country. Those contravening the stipulations on entry or exit face the risk of detention for as little as a month and as much as a year and/or a fine of between TND 6 and TND 120 (€1.79–€35.80), followed by deportation upon release.

Human smugglers face more substantial legal jeopardy irrespective of whether they are Tunisians or foreigners. Under law No. 75-40, individuals involved in smuggling, sheltering those seeking to migrate irregularly or transporting them face imprisonment for between three and six years and/or fines of up to TND 20 000 (€5 972).

The wording of the 1975 law suggests it could be applied to groups that enter into a voluntary agreement; however, it is unclear whether the statute has been applied to individuals or groups involved in self-smuggling.

For smugglers convicted of transporting foreigners, the same charges can be supplemented by a sentence of between one month and one year and/or a fine of between TND 6 and TND 120 (€1.79–€35.80) under law No. 68-7. Neither that law nor No. 75-40 specifically provides for special penalties in the case of smugglers, although in such circumstances general Tunisian penal law allows the penalty to be doubled.

Interviews with human smugglers in Sfax and Nabeul governorate suggest there is a substantial difference between the range of punishments detailed under the 1968 and 1975 laws and those actually meted out.<sup>82</sup> Reportedly, the duration and severity of the sentence are typically predicated on the distance from shore travelled, the inherent risk of the enterprise and whether the migrants involved suffered injuries or died.

Smugglers in Sfax reported that, in instances where vessels are intercepted on or near the shore and all migrants



Tunisian women protest in Tunis over the loss of their children in irregular migration attempts, underscoring the risk of personal trauma and the complex politics surrounding the issue. © Sofiene Hamdaoui/AFP via Getty Images





Tunisian youths protest against the freeze on activities of the CS Chebba football team, an issue that prompted threats of mass migration, October 2020. © Bechir Taieb/AFP via Getty Images

involved remain uninjured, the prison sentence is typically a year or less.<sup>83</sup> If migrants are injured or perish or the vessel involved is perceived to be unsafe, the sentence can range from six years to more than 10 years. A smuggler in Nabeul also noted that the money held by a smuggler is typically seized and further fines are levied.<sup>84</sup>

One interviewee in Sfax noted that ‘smart smugglers’ send boats in optimal weather conditions and without too many people on board to minimize the risk of sinking and, with it, greater legal risk.<sup>85</sup>

Despite the existence of laws and sanctions targeting irregular migration, human smuggling and human trafficking, all three activities have been only minimally deterred. Interviews with Tunisian migrants and smugglers underscore the economic benefits, which in turn influence the deterrent effect of the laws.

Tunisian migrants who had already attempted to migrate and have been caught indicated their interest in staging another attempt, largely due to the potential economic gains that a successful voyage could deliver. Where migrants had faced abuse by security forces during detention, their interest in a second attempt was heightened.

As with migrants, the challenge in deterring human smugglers in Tunisia is not primarily an issue of insufficient laws or penalties. However, the profitability of smuggling is extremely high. As detailed above, smuggling networks in Sfax governorate often charge non-Tunisian migrants between TND 2 000 and TND 4 500 (€617–€1 389). In instances where networks pack large numbers onto boats, a routine occurrence for non-Tunisians, networks can gross more than €100 000–€200 000. The high profitability increases both the lure of smuggling and the risk of recidivism.

As an interviewee explained: ‘Most smugglers don’t really think of being caught as a real threat. They believe that it’s a risk that is worth taking for the money they get from migrants. In these difficult times, and with the increase of sub-Saharan immigrants willing to go to Europe by sea, the business is becoming even more active.’<sup>86</sup>



## The politics of migration

Irregular migration from its coasts poses both international and domestic political challenges for Tunisia. On the international front, it has become a key point of discussion with both the European Union and Italy, where most migrants from Tunisia arrive. There were a number of diplomatic engagements between European delegations and Tunisian policymakers in 2020 and 2021, in which substantial discussions addressed both security coordination to address irregular migration and also the underlying social drivers.

Tunisian President Kais Saied has repeatedly stressed the need to address Tunisia's economic weakness as part of efforts to combat irregular migration. His focus is broadly shared among the Tunisian political class. However, the issue of migration remains relatively muted in Tunisia, in contrast with the European states. Several members of parliament – which was suspended by Saied on 25 July 2021 – observed that migration by Tunisian nationals is discussed during elections or when the issue emerges as a public concern, primarily when shipwrecks involving Tunisians occur, but over the last several years it has not received substantial or regular discussion within the Parliament.

As one parliamentarian from Mahdia explained: 'There are no parliamentary blocks that talk about the subject; it is always in an individual framework – that is to say, the MPs belonging to the regions that are most affected by this phenomenon, for example, deputies from Mahdia or Sfax, may bring it up. But it has never been treated in an organized way within a commission.'<sup>87</sup>

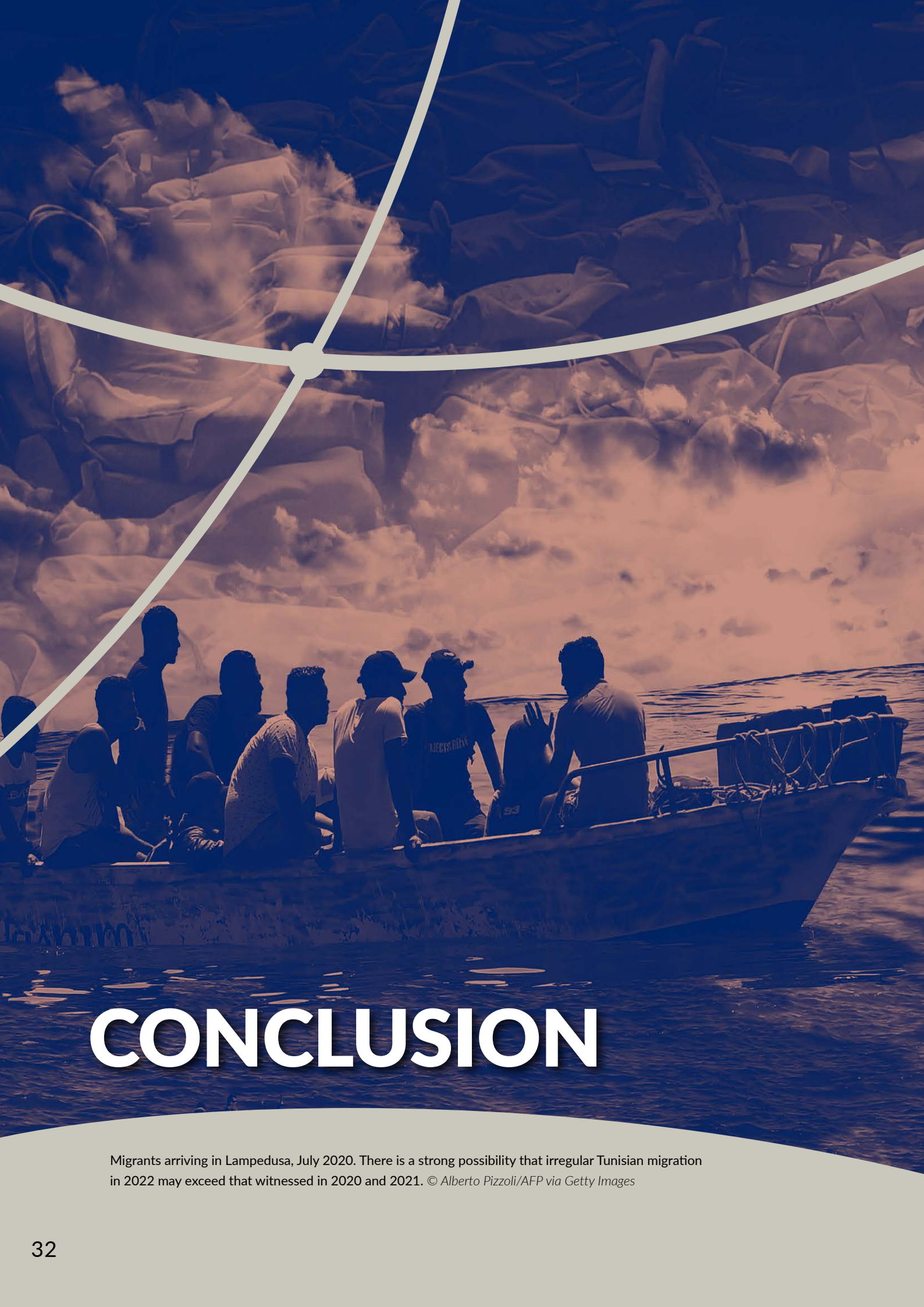
According to Tunisian politicians, this lack of focus has been linked, in part, to Tunisians' limited information on irregular migration. Some indicated the need for further targeted studies, as well as access to information on the root drivers of migration, how the process occurs and the identities and operation details of human smugglers and traffickers working from Tunisia. They also mentioned the names of three committees that could play a role in combating the issue of irregular migration, if properly informed and engaged: the Social Affairs Commission, the Freedom and Foreign Affairs Commission, and the Commission of Tunisians Residing Abroad.

When it is discussed, politicians regard the irregular migration of Tunisian nationals as a development issue, often sympathetically. Individual MPs noted that they view limited financial and social prospects as a key driver for most Tunisian migrants. One said: 'Today in Tunisia, people can no longer dream; the social elevator has broken down; the whole system no longer works, and that's why people are leaving the country in search of dignity and jobs.'<sup>88</sup>

From this stance, the interviewed MPs primarily recommended that irregular migration be addressed through development support, youth training, eased visa access and the regularization of irregular migrants already in Europe. There is little expectation that enhancing the security forces would be a sufficient or sustainable means of reducing departures by Tunisian nationals.


One politician, active with Tunisians abroad, explained, 'We have seen that relying only on the security approach does not work. We are offered logistical and material support [by the EU], such as training, equipment and financial support, but this has not stopped irregular migration. And even if we managed to close the way to the Italian border, our migrants will find other ways to cross to Europe, such as through Melilla or Serbia.'<sup>89</sup>

*'Today in Tunisia, people can no longer dream; the social elevator has broken down; the whole system no longer works, and that's why people are leaving the country in search of dignity and jobs.'*  
– Tunisian MP



# CONCLUSION

Migrants arriving in Lampedusa, July 2020. There is a strong possibility that irregular Tunisian migration in 2022 may exceed that witnessed in 2020 and 2021. © Alberto Pizzoli/AFP via Getty Images



**A**lthough Tunisia's 2020–2021 migration surge contrasts with the relatively low levels of irregular migration seen throughout the decade, it is unlikely to be an aberration. The factors enabling irregular migration from Tunisia – a long coastline, proximity to Europe and a plethora of smuggling options, many of which are particularly difficult for security forces to control – are unlikely to change. Similarly, there is little likelihood of the underlying social and economic drivers of irregular migration improving in 2022. Although President Saïed's suspension of parliament and self-determined expansion of powers after 25 July have obviated some of the political deadlock in the country, this has instead created a slow-moving political crisis. Further, there has been limited apparent action to address looming economic challenges, including a potential debt default. The political crisis, worsening economic challenges and rising violence by security forces have created a potentially combustible situation that could fuel increased irregular migration.

Government and donor efforts to enhance security-force operations and target human-smuggling networks are unlikely to have a significant impact on the broader trend of irregular migration by Tunisians. This is primarily due to the atomized nature of the country's human-smuggling ecosystem and Tunisian migrants' increasing preference for self-smuggling. Heightened enforcement may have an impact on departures by foreign migrants, who do rely on smugglers. However, this seems more likely to displace rather than halt the phenomenon. As one irregular migrant pointed out: 'Despite all the security, today what matters is to be able to arrive in Europe. We have sacrificed a lot to give up at this point.'<sup>90</sup>

There is a strong possibility that irregular migration in 2022 may exceed that witnessed in 2020 and 2021, given the current internal social, economic and political trends in Tunisia. Interviews further suggest the likelihood that Tunisians who are caught trying to migrate illegally during the current surge will make further attempts. A Tunisian political analyst summed up the sentiment prevailing among these people: 'It was scary the first time; I now know how to do it and it's not scary any more, and so I'll do it again.'<sup>91</sup> A Tunisian, when asked whether he planned to try again after a first failed attempt, bluntly replied, 'For sure.'<sup>92</sup>

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# **GLOBAL INITIATIVE**

AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL  
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The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime is a global network with over 500 Network Experts around the world. The Global Initiative provides a platform to promote greater debate and innovative approaches as the building blocks to an inclusive global strategy against organized crime.

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