

HUMAN SMUGGLING AND TRAFFICKING ECOSYSTEMS  
– NORTH AFRICA AND THE SAHEL

2024 SERIES



**GLOBAL  
INITIATIVE**  
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL  
ORGANIZED CRIME



# TUNISIA

IRREGULAR MIGRATION REACHES  
UNPRECEDENTED LEVELS

AUGUST 2024

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# INTRODUCTION

In 2023, Tunisia emerged as the primary country of embarkation for irregular migrants seeking to reach Europe, eclipsing Libya, which had long been the main North African departure point. In total, some 97 306 migrants arrived in Italy from Tunisia, just over three times as many as in 2022.

Tunisia's new status as North Africa's leading embarkation hub followed four years of constant growth in irregular migration and human smuggling. In previous years, the increase in departures had primarily involved Tunisian nationals. In 2023, however, the surge in irregular migration was largely driven by foreigners, mostly from West Africa and Sudan. While some of these migrants were long-term residents in Tunisia, the spike was fuelled by a notable and rapid rise in the arrival of sub-Saharan migrants across the border with Algeria and, to a lesser extent, the border with Libya.

The high demand for departures led to a more complex smuggling ecosystem in Tunisia, with networks offering increased and diversified services. There were also key shifts in the way foreign migrants, in particular, embarked, with a growing number forgoing engagement with smugglers and turning instead to self-smuggling.

However, as in previous years, it was the worsening of the country's complex political, social and economic problems that spurred clandestine departures and licit migration. While some aspects of the multidimensional crisis facing Tunisia improved, overall the challenges remained acute, with severe drought, uncertain financing conditions and the slow pace of reforms hampering economic recovery, while failures of governance continued to affect the delivery of public services such as water, education and health care.

Moreover, a dramatic shift in Tunisia's approach to irregular migration led to a deterioration in conditions for migrants and an acceleration in the pace of foreign migrants leaving the country. In February, President Kais Saïed denounced undocumented sub-Saharan migration to Tunisia, triggering a series of events that resulted in foreign migrants being evicted from their homes, dismissed from their jobs, and threatened with arrest and violence. This growing climate of fear in turn influenced and hastened the departure of undocumented migrants from the country.

In response to rising migration, the Tunisian government instituted tighter security controls, with occasional escalations in response to spikes in departures. Enforcement in maritime areas and along the



land borders with Libya and Algeria intensified in the second half of the year. In addition, the Tunisian government increasingly resorted to the forced transfer of migrants – mainly to and across the borders with Libya and Algeria – in order to manage tensions among the local population and curb departures. According to public reports documenting the testimonies of deported migrants, a notable element of these forced transfers was the level of violence and abuse inflicted by the Tunisian security forces.

The exceptional growth in irregular migration from and through Tunisia in 2023 marked a rapid escalation of trends observed since 2020. Given the enduring influence of the factors driving irregular movement from Tunisia and other key countries of origin, interest in departures to Europe is expected to persist further into 2024. However, volumes will be influenced by a number of variables, including the effectiveness of security forces in managing increased migratory pressures and the adaptability of smuggling networks to evolving enforcement tactics.

This is the latest Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) monitoring report on human smuggling in Tunisia. It builds on the series of annual reports that has been issued since 2021, tracking the evolution of human smuggling in Tunisia, as well as the political, security and economic dynamics that influence it.<sup>1</sup>

## Methodology

This brief is based on the GI-TOC's field monitoring system. During 2023 – the reporting period for this study – field researchers in the region collected data through semi-structured interviews with smugglers, migrants, community members, transporters, NGO personnel, international observers and others.

Open source data relevant to human smuggling and trafficking was systematically collected and analyzed on a weekly basis. This data was used to formulate questions and areas of inquiry for field research and to validate the field interviews collected by researchers.

Care has been taken to triangulate the information. However, the issues detailed are inherently opaque and the geographical areas covered are often remote, volatile or difficult to access. For this reason, the brief should be seen as a snapshot that will feed into future GI-TOC reporting and analysis to capture the rapidly evolving dynamics in Tunisia and the wider region.



# HUMAN SMUGGLING SURGES FROM TUNISIA

In 2023, human smuggling activity in Tunisia reached unprecedented levels, with the country overtaking Libya as the primary point of embarkation for migrants heading to Italy. From 1 January to 31 December, 97 306 migrants arrived in Italy, almost triple the 2022 figure of 32 371, which was itself a record.<sup>2</sup> Notably, arrivals from Tunisia were nearly double those from Libya.

The increase was primarily driven by foreign nationals, highlighting Tunisia's growing role as a transit country for migrants heading to Europe. Of the total number of arrivals in Italy, 79 984 were foreigners, mostly from West Africa or Sudan. While some Syrians and Moroccans arrived from Tunisia, these nationalities remained more marginal.

The remaining 17 322 arrivals in Italy were Tunisian. After almost three years of uninterrupted growth, the level of Tunisian movement seemed to stabilize, with 2023 numbers slightly lower than 2022, when 18 148 migrants disembarked in Italy. However, the decrease in 2023 is only relative to the previous year, which saw the highest number of Tunisian arrivals since 2018. Overall, the number of Tunisian migrants arriving in Italy remained exceptionally high compared to the norms of the last 12 years.

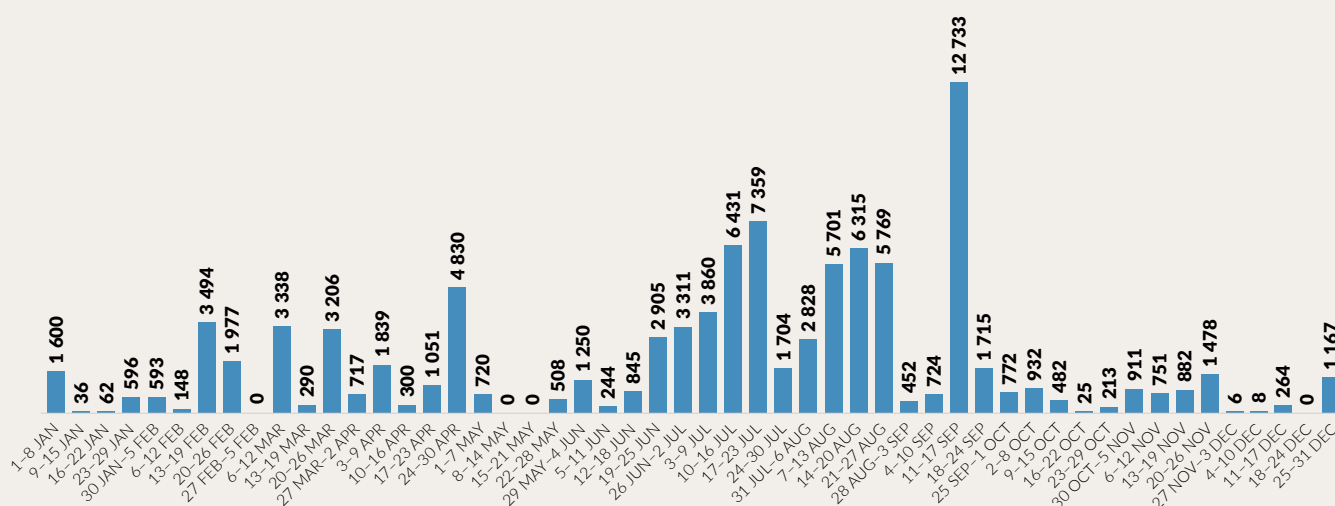
Young men continued to dominate departures statistics. However, data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) showed an alarming rise in the number of unaccompanied Tunisian children reaching Italy, which jumped from 2 515 in 2022 (representing 13.6% of Tunisian arrivals) to 3 241 in 2023 (18.1%).<sup>3</sup> This increase seems to have been driven by perceived benefits for minor migrants in certain European countries, including protection from deportation, and provision of education and care. A Tunisian high school student noted: 'We heard that France takes children before they turn 13, so they have a better chance of getting papers. They take them to youth centres, teach them how to get a job, and give them a place to stay.'<sup>4</sup>

Foreign departures fluctuated in 2023. The year started with abnormally high levels, with 6 529 migrants, mainly non-Tunisians, arriving in Italy from Tunisia between January and mid-February. In late February, a statement on migrants by President Saïed (detailed below) led to a crackdown on human smuggling, which had a mixed effect. While the worsening political climate fuelled interest in migration, reinforced surveillance and hardening restrictions curtailed migrants' ability to reach departure hubs and temporarily halted smuggling operations. This led to a slowdown in departures from 27 February to 5 March, and no arrivals were recorded in Italy during this period.

At the beginning of the second week of March, the restrictions imposed on migrants began to ease, and departures increased again. A total of 6 765 foreign migrants arrived in Italy in March, rising further to 7 724 in April. In May, foreign migration from Tunisia to Europe fell sharply, with only 996 arrivals in Italy. While the specific reasons for this decline after a significant surge in departures are not clear, several factors may have played a role, including weather conditions, increased security measures and the effect of the crisis on migrants' financial situation. Departures increased again in June, when 7 563 foreign migrants arrived in Italy from Tunisia, and continued to rise until August, when 17 219 arrivals were recorded. Departures dropped slightly to 11 473 in September, probably due to a multi-faceted security campaign launched by the authorities around the middle of the month. Heightened enforcement continued to affect departures in October, when only 273 foreign migrants departing from Tunisia were registered in Italy. In contrast, Tunisian departures were far more concentrated, with around 32% of the year's total occurring in September.

Mirroring the trends of disembarkation in Italy, interceptions by Tunisian security and military units at sea and in littoral areas increased sharply in 2023, exceeding the numbers recorded in 2022. According to monitoring of the regular press releases on interception operations published by authorities, Tunisian security forces apprehended 39 926 migrants in 2023, up from 29 723 in 2022 and 23 328 in 2021. However, the actual total is likely to be much higher, given the gaps in public communication. In December, a Tunisian Coast Guard official told a media outlet that the authorities had intercepted nearly 70 000 migrants from January to November.<sup>5</sup>

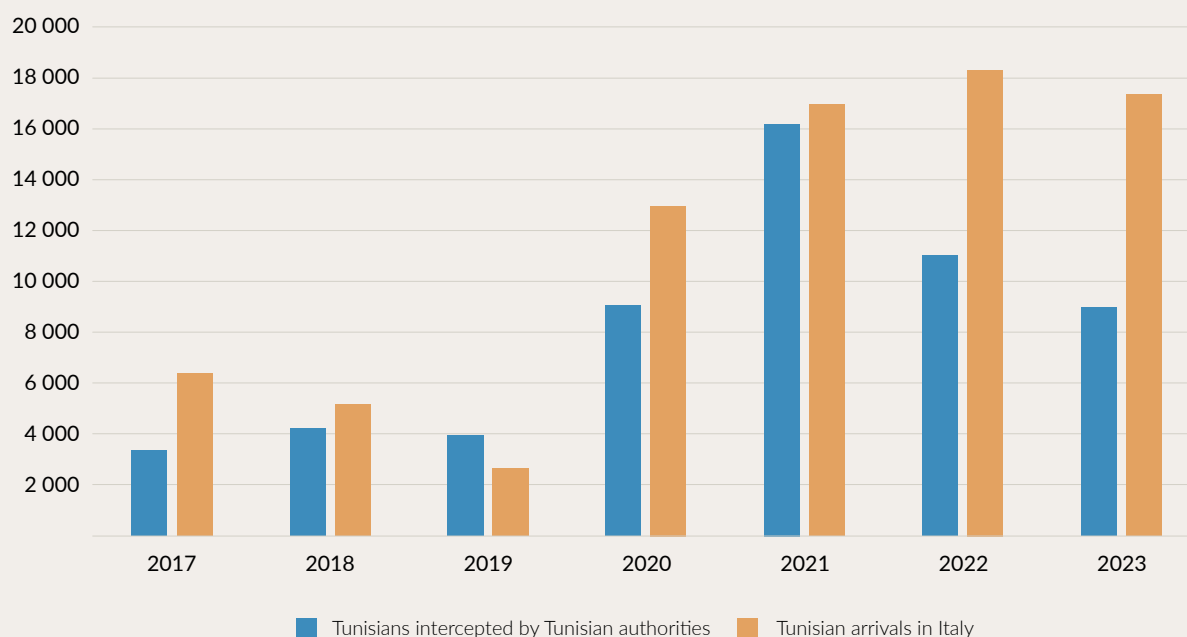
According to official press releases, most of those intercepted (78%) were foreign nationals. In 2023, 30 843 foreigners were intercepted by Tunisian forces at sea and in littoral areas, compared to 18 720 in 2022 and 7 134 in 2021. With the exception of October, foreign migrants consistently accounted for most monthly interceptions.



**FIGURE 1** Weekly arrivals in Italy from Tunisia.

SOURCE: UNHCR





**FIGURE 2** Yearly disembarkations of Tunisian nationals in Tunisia and in Italy, 2017–2023.

SOURCE: Italian Interior Ministry, Frontex and GI-TOC monitoring

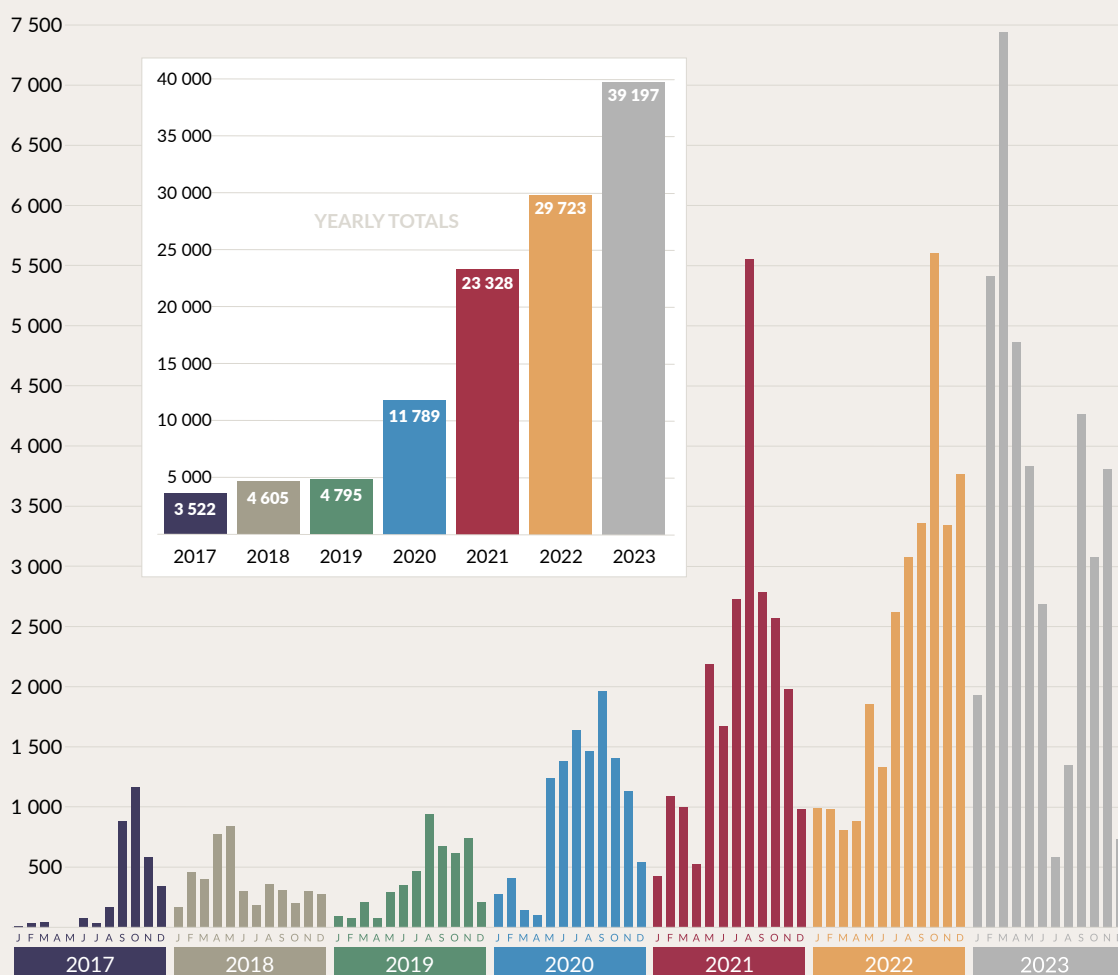
In contrast, Tunisian interceptions of Tunisian nationals have decreased steadily from 16 194 in 2021 to 11 003 in 2022 and further to 8 354 in 2023. This contrasts sharply with the disembarkation trends in Italy, which saw a large increase in Tunisian arrivals between 2021 and 2022, and only a slight dip in 2023.

Several factors could explain the higher probability of interception for boats carrying sub-Saharan migrants. First, the differences in crossing methods are crucial. Tunisians, who often pay higher fees for safer journeys, rely on smugglers with a track record of organizing successful journeys. Sub-Saharan migrants tend to operate under greater financial constraints, and generally opt for cheaper options, often using low-quality boats and inexperienced pilots. These are more vulnerable to interception (as detailed in the section below).

In addition, some smugglers serving foreign migrants employ dangerous or questionable methods. It has been reported that smugglers have deliberately directed boats carrying foreign migrants on dangerous routes that are difficult to navigate, posing a challenge to inexperienced captains and increasing the likelihood of interception. One interviewee indicated that this tactic is applied strategically, especially when smugglers launch separate boats carrying Tunisian and foreign migrants at the same time. The attention of the authorities is drawn to the vessels transporting foreign migrants, ensuring that the Tunisian nationals can travel undetected.

It is important to reiterate that interpretation of the 2023 interception data must be undertaken with caution due to gaps in public communication by the Interior Ministry since June. Before then, the ministry had issued near daily press releases on interceptions, as well as regular weekly summaries of activity. In July, however, press releases on migration (but apparently not on other security activities) became more sporadic. Even when statements were issued, the GI-TOC noted a general decrease in the amount of information provided, including breakdowns of the numbers of Tunisian versus foreign migrants.

It is unclear what has driven this decline in official communication. While to some extent it may be due to sensitivities surrounding the sharp increase in migration out of the country, it is also possible that it simply reflects a return to the long-standing reticence that was the norm among Tunisian security agencies before 2011.



**FIGURE 3** Total number of interceptions by Tunisian security and defence forces by month, 2017–2023.  
SOURCE: GI-TOC monitoring

Whatever the cause, the shift in communication makes it difficult to assess the situation, impedes efforts to fully understand fluctuations in Tunisian apprehensions of different groups, and necessitates caution in identifying trends. Simply put, fluctuations in monthly apprehensions may be due to changes in interception levels, data release approaches, or both.

Tragically, the number of fatal shipwrecks off Tunisia's coast increased in 2023, with overcrowded and poor-quality, makeshift boats contributing to a rise in the number of migrant deaths and disappearances. Estimates by the Forum Tunisien des Droits Économiques et Sociaux (Tunisian Forum for Socio-Economic Rights – FTDES) indicate 1 262 casualties, more than double the 581 victims recorded in 2022.<sup>6</sup> The actual number is likely to be higher, as many shipwrecks go unreported. Although it is difficult to determine the nationalities of the victims, most are believed to be sub-Saharan African.

Notably, March and April saw the highest number of incidents, with 92 deaths and 373 missing. This is likely to be the result of accelerated departures following the crackdown on irregular migrants, discussed in more detail in a later section. Interviews with migrants during these two months indicated that sub-Saharans seeking a quick departure from Tunisia were increasingly willing to rely on smugglers offering risky passage.

## **Smuggling networks remain important, but self-smuggling continues to grow**

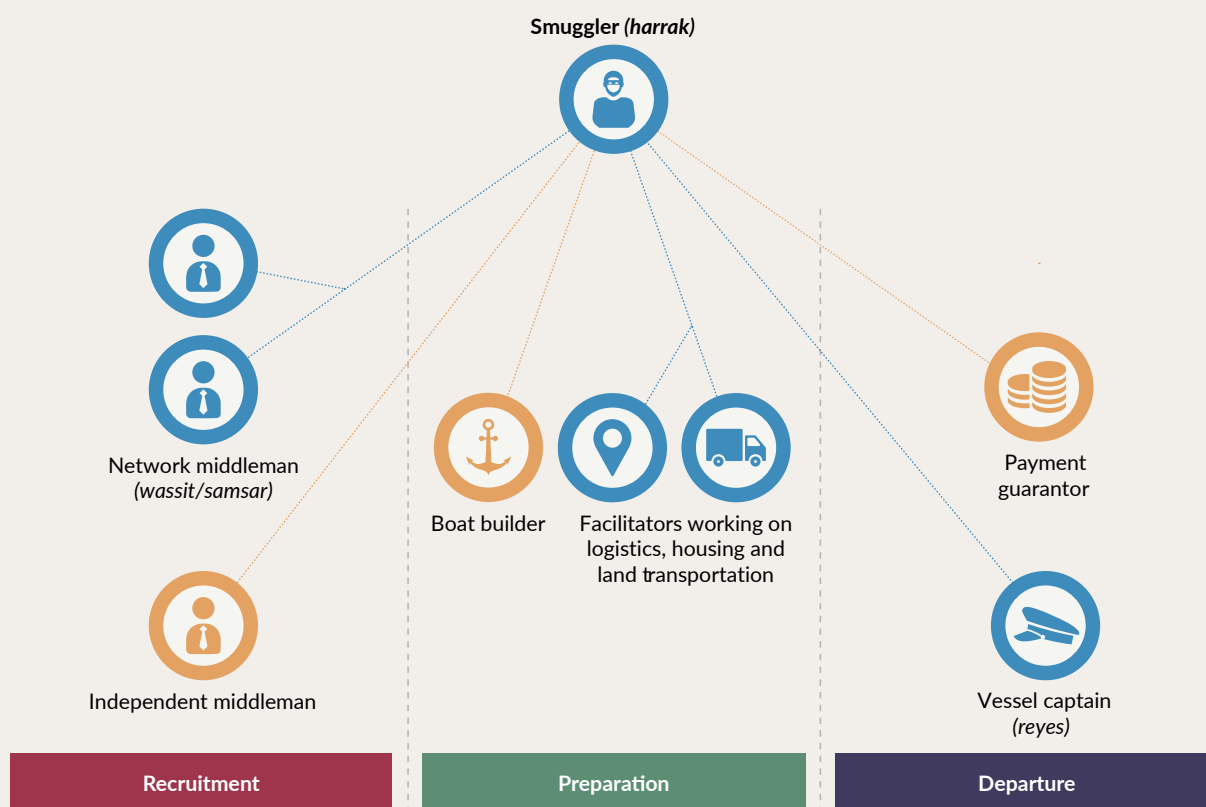
As the GI-TOC has detailed in annual reports since 2020, migrants leaving Tunisia typically use one of two main methods: human smuggling networks or self-smuggling. This pattern continued in 2023, although there were key changes in the way foreign migrants, in particular, departed from the Tunisian coast.

Most sub-Saharan migrants used smuggling networks. While the networks serving Tunisian nationals operate along the entire coastline, those catering to foreign migrants are concentrated in the central governorates of Sfax and Mahdia. In 2023, Sfax – particularly the northern areas such as La Louza, Jebeniana and Msetria – was the main hub for sea crossings to Europe. This partly reflects a long-term trend, as Sfax's economic status attracts foreign migrants for work and its proximity to Italy's Pelagie Islands facilitates migrant departures. However, over the course of 2023, the smuggling ecosystem in the governorate deepened and became more complex.

The large port facility in the city of Sfax has become a centre for the acquisition of boats by various means, including the illegal sale of ageing fishing vessels. In addition, a clandestine boat-building industry has developed, with workshops in industrial areas and private homes. In some cases, legitimate boat-building companies are also reported to be involved in illicit production. Finally, the concentration of skilled mechanics in Sfax helps smuggling networks in purchasing and maintaining boat engines, which are often bought on the black market or sold through social media platforms.

In 2023, smuggling networks catering to foreign migrants continued to be composed mainly of Tunisian nationals. However, there was a noticeable increase in the involvement of sub-Saharan nationals, often from Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire or Cameroon, both as smugglers and intermediaries. According to interviews with Tunisians and migrants, a growing number of sub-Saharans contacted these foreign smugglers and intermediaries even before arriving in Tunisia to enquire about the availability and prices of sea crossings. Migrants intending to transit through Tunisia were commonly referred to these individuals through acquaintances or family members who had already made the crossing.





**FIGURE 4** Structure of smuggling networks.

The heightened demand for smuggling services by foreign migrants caused an expansion in the number of smuggling networks. It also led to a diversification of the services offered. Networks serving foreign migrants, for example, increasingly offered inexpensive passage aboard iron-hulled boats, which are constructed rapidly and often of poor quality, while other networks continued to use inflatable dinghies and fishing vessels. The growing use of lower-end options contributed to multiple shipwrecks.

As a result of the proliferation of iron vessels, the cost for foreigners fell, even as demand rose. In Sfax, prices for crossings using metal boats ranged from €236 to €740. The cost for passage using wooden boats varied between the networks operated by Tunisians (averaging €1 506) and those run by sub-Saharanans (averaging €1 042). Foreign departures from Mahdia, Sousse and Zarzis were less frequent and more expensive, ranging from €1 807 to €2 409.

While smuggling networks remained the main option for foreign migrants heading to Europe, the use of self-smuggling surged. This is noteworthy, as in the past this method was mainly used by Tunisian nationals, especially those from littoral areas with access to vessels and some degree of maritime knowledge.



**National Guard seizes metal boats in Sfax, July 2023.** Photo: Official Facebook page of the Tunisian National Guard

There were indications that foreign migrants were experimenting with self-smuggling in 2022. However, this still involved some reliance on smuggling networks for the procurement of boats, instructions on how to navigate, and the identification of ideal times and places to depart. Over the course of 2023, self-smuggling by foreign migrants in Tunisia surged. The activity remained primarily concentrated in Sfax. However, in a notable example in February, the Tunisian National Guard foiled a self-smuggling attempt in the south-eastern governorate of Gabès, indicating that the practice was spreading to less well-known departure zones.

Foreign migrants get together and organize *harka* [irregular migration]. They will build a boat and buy an engine. It costs them nothing for 35 or 40 people.

*Interview with a Tunisian official, April 2023*

The shift towards self-smuggling had three main causes. First, the worsening socio-economic conditions for foreign migrants in Tunisia increased the risk tolerance of those seeking to reach Europe. Second, trust in smugglers declined. Posts promoting self-smuggling proliferated on sub-Saharan social media networks, reflecting a dissatisfaction with the perceived high prices and the disregard for human life shown by smugglers. Such posts were often made in the wake of high-profile shipwrecks or, in some cases, after migrants had been defrauded by people posing as smugglers or intermediaries. Third, there was increased coordination within the migrant community. Moreover, the growing number of irregular migrants spending extended periods of time in smuggling hubs led to improved contact with smugglers and a deeper knowledge of the process.

As the presence of sub-Saharan migrants grew, their contact with Tunisians increased over time. They now know how to acquire the necessary equipment to build boats from different materials and have become familiar with departure points and navigation routes towards Italy.

*Interview with a Tunisian official, April 2023*



**Sub-Saharan migrants build a wooden boat in their house in Gabès.**

*Photo: Official Facebook page of the Tunisian National Guard*

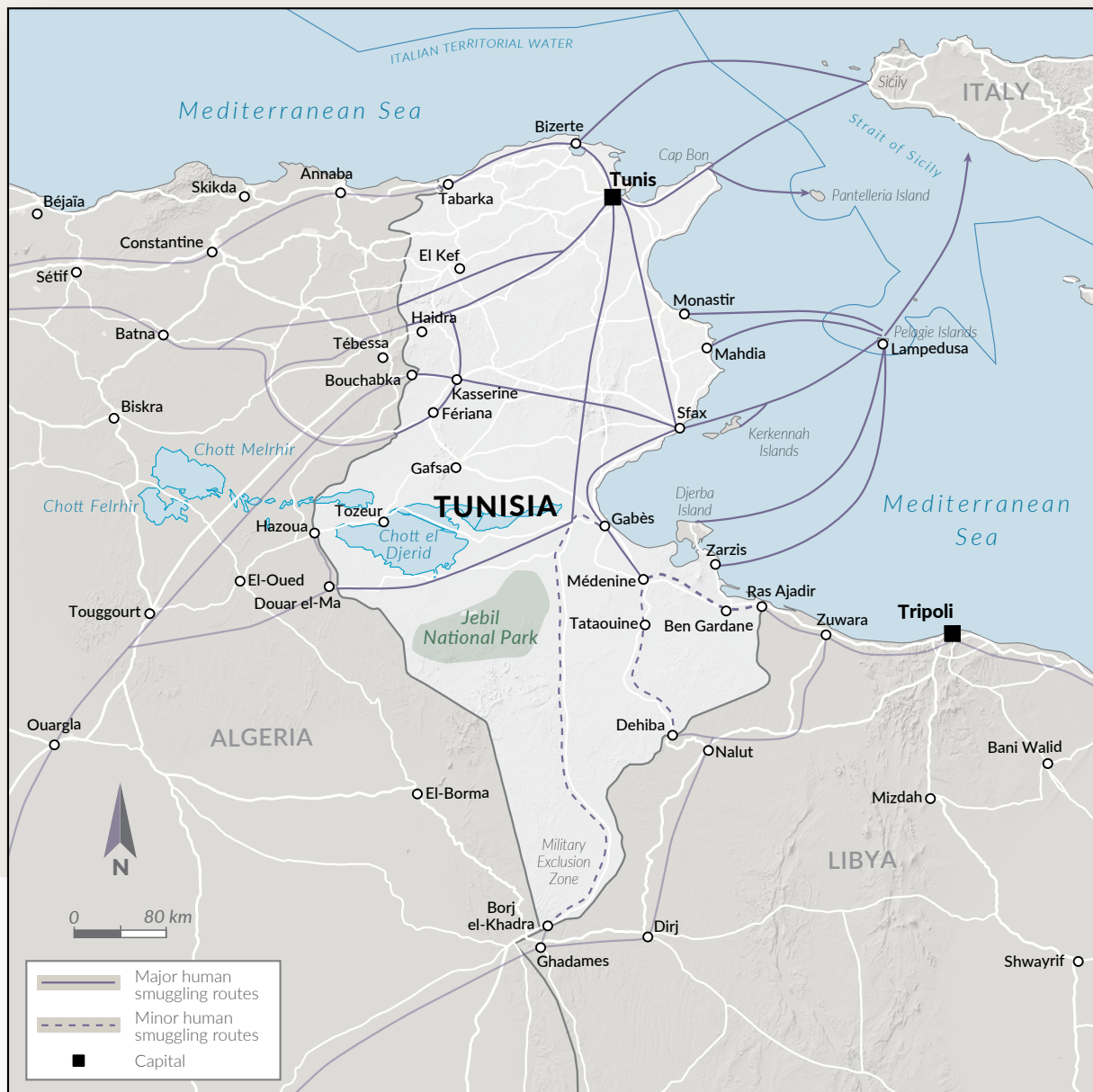
Obtaining a boat is a crucial step in the self-smuggling process. In addition to illegal channels, sub-Saharanans are now involved in boat construction, a major development that underlines the growing complexity of the local smuggling landscape. While at least one instance of this was identified in Mahdia in August 2022, frequency and volume has surged since then. Most construction is concentrated in Sfax, although an incident in Gabès in February suggests that foreign migrants may also be building boats in less high-profile departure areas.

Boats manufactured for migrancy are typically made of iron and wood. However, sub-Saharanans are also reported to be making small inflatable boats using plastic materials. Construction usually takes place in migrants' houses near departure points or in wooded areas close to beaches. It is unclear which nationalities are predominantly involved, but in at least two reported cases the migrants were from Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire. Some sub-Saharanans build boats for their own sea crossings, while others reportedly sell them to fellow migrants.

The growth of self-smuggling has implications for enforcement and migrant safety. Eschewing smuggling networks is likely to elevate the risk of interception, and migrants lack the connections with security officers necessary to facilitate their passage. Furthermore, self-smuggling has intensified the dangers of sea crossings for non-Tunisians due to low quality boats and inexperienced pilots. Despite these risks, self-smuggling is expected to increase further and contribute to sustained transit migration through Tunisia in 2024.

Interviews in 2023 indicated that, like foreign migrants, most Tunisian nationals preferred to travel with the assistance of a smuggler. Most interviewees stated that they would choose trusted and reputable smugglers to ensure safe passage and reduce the risk of fraud.





**FIGURE 5** Main human smuggling routes through Tunisia.

Unlike the smuggling networks used by foreign nationals, those used by Tunisians are broadly distributed. The main areas are concentrated in Sfax, both on land and on the Kerkennah Islands. However, a significant number of networks operate in the Nabeul, Sousse and Mahdia governorates. Departures from these points involve local residents and Tunisians from other parts of the country. The only hub where this is substantially different is Zarzis, where most migrants are from the city itself.

The cost of a sea crossing for Tunisian nationals in 2023 remained broadly in line with 2022. In Sfax, prices ranged from €1 340 to €1 787. In the north-eastern governorates, including Sousse and Nabeul, the cost was between €1 489 and €2 077. The highest prices appear to have been recorded in Sousse, up to €2 681.

According to interviews with Tunisian migrants who left the country in August and early September, planning a trip could take several months. One interviewee noted that his son began contacting smugglers in June and a trip was not confirmed until mid-August. Even when a journey was confirmed, interviewees noted that changes in departure dates were common, with reported waiting periods ranging from two weeks to two months.

The long timeframe may be due to a number of reasons, including the need for smugglers to recruit enough migrants for a full boat, inclement weather, or changes in the security environment. However, a key factor in delays is access to boats and equipment. Tunisians tend to avoid the rapidly constructed metal boats used by foreign migrants, which they perceive as minimally seaworthy and dangerous. Instead, they prefer wooden boats, which are seen as safer, even if this leads to delays in departure.

Interviewees indicated a willingness to pay higher prices for better boats with fewer passengers. In addition, some migrants reported cancelling trips when faced with situations they considered risky. This underlines the strong focus on safety among Tunisian migrants.

Self-smuggling continued in 2023, but did not appear to increase. Disappearances and accidents led to the perception in some areas that the practice is unsafe. This sentiment is not universal, but contrasts sharply with previous years when self-smuggling increased in popularity due to perceived security benefits.

Demand for departures from Tunisia is expected to remain high, fuelled by localized migration drivers – such as economic and political problems – and the continued expansion of the country's role as a transit destination.

## **Tunisia's multidimensional crisis fuels interest in migration**

An important factor behind the rise in clandestine departures and licit migration from Tunisia in 2023 was the worsening of the country's complex political, social and economic crises. Any potential resolution of these challenges was hampered by the country's slide into de facto one-man rule, which resulted in increased repression and civil rights violations, particularly against foreign migrants.

The foremost concern for Tunisians during the year remained the troubled economic environment. Most interviewees believed the situation to be deteriorating, describing it as 'unbearable' and 'difficult to adapt to'. While some economic indicators improved slightly, several factors, including a severe drought, uncertain financial conditions and the slow pace of reforms, impeded recovery. The poor outlook led to a reduction in the country's economic growth forecast for 2023, from 2.3% to 1.2%.<sup>7</sup> While inflation declined throughout the year, from 10.4% in February to 8.1% in December, it remained notably high, especially for food (12.3%), due to drought conditions and import restrictions.<sup>8</sup>

The lived experience of most Tunisians remained difficult, with little sign of improvement. People felt the effects of the crisis in their daily lives, struggling with price rises and recurring shortages of staples such as flour, milk and cooking oil. Small businesses were also affected, especially cafés, which faced a scarcity of coffee and sugar. A young Tunisian in Zarzis interviewed in May illustrated the impact: 'Last year was somewhat easier because the price hikes were only on certain items. Now they are affecting even the simplest things. We are struggling to afford the basics.'

Joblessness is another pressing concern. Unemployment stood at 16.4% in the fourth quarter of 2023, up from 16.1% in the first quarter.<sup>9</sup> For women, the rate was 22.2%. The stark discrepancy between meagre wages and the spiralling cost of living has fuelled widespread discontent.

We have endured a series of suffocating crises. Our family situation became difficult because of my father's inability to meet our needs. I left school last year to help. I worked with a mechanic for four months, but he could not pay me the agreed salary because his income was decreasing. I tried to migrate to Europe last summer, but I was deported from Lampedusa. I don't know if things will improve, but I know that I, my family and all of Zarzis have reached the brink.

*Interview with a young Tunisian in Zarzis, May 2023*

Throughout the year, uncertainty loomed over the fate of Tunisia's loan agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which was widely viewed as necessary for the country to avoid default. A staff-level agreement for loans of US\$1.9 billion was reached in October 2022. However, the financing was conditional on a series of reforms, which President Saïed has largely opposed, rejecting any external conditions that could exacerbate impoverishment. The president appears to be concerned about the potential political fallout from major spending cuts or the sale of state-owned enterprises. With key opposition figures in detention since February 2023, he has no way of shifting the blame for any negative effects.<sup>10</sup> Since he alone will bear the consequences, he has been reluctant to endorse the deal publicly. But he has yet to propose a credible alternative, instead pushing for the mobilization of domestic resources.

While the Tunisian government has reportedly drafted an alternative reform plan that largely excludes subsidy cuts, and which President Saïed is willing to support, the timeline for the formulation of the new proposal and renewed talks with the IMF is unclear. Nevertheless, the president remains strongly opposed to the initial deal, as evidenced by his decision in October 2023 to fire the minister of economy and planning, Samir Saïed, for claiming that an IMF package was essential for Tunisia.

Tunisia's many economic problems have been compounded by persistent governance issues, which have affected the delivery of public services such as water, education and health care. Parents interviewed in 2023 cited the deteriorating state of the country's education system, which continues to rise in cost, as a key motivator for exploring opportunities abroad. Frequent teacher protests in recent years have disrupted classes, leading to widespread frustration among parents and students. Worsening conditions in public schools have also contributed to concerns.

Another growing governance issue is water scarcity. Tunisia experienced below-average rainfall for the sixth consecutive year in 2023, and reservoirs across the country were at 22.5% capacity by mid-November,<sup>11</sup> down from 29% in November 2022.<sup>12</sup> The government introduced water rationing across the country in March, affecting even affluent areas such as Greater Tunis. The restrictions included night-time water cuts and a ban on water for agricultural use, and were enforced intermittently throughout the year.

While unprecedented in wealthier regions, the water rationing reflects what has become the norm in the interior and south-eastern governorates in recent years. According to an interviewee in Médenine, people there have become accustomed to prolonged water cuts, especially during the summer: 'We have complained repeatedly, but in vain. We just need to adapt.' There are fears that the worsening water situation could lead to widespread protests, as seen intermittently in previous years.

Water scarcity had a direct impact on the economy through its adverse effect on agriculture. The agricultural sector, which employs about 1.5 million Tunisians, had already faced substantial challenges in recent years, causing many to leave the industry. Although some farmers tried to adapt by migrating within the country or switching to other, equally precarious, employment, alternatives remain limited,







especially for the approximately 500 000 female agricultural workers. The worsening situation is liable to increase unemployment and poverty in the interior and south of the country. The effect also extends to the wider population, as reduced production means a shortage of crops for domestic consumption.

Governance challenges such as these would be difficult for any country. But addressing them has been complicated by President Saied's overwhelming focus on overhauling Tunisia's political system, which has consumed considerable executive and administrative time and energy.

The reform of the political system has also been marked by increased repression of the opposition. Some 18 people from across the political spectrum were arrested in 2023 on various charges, including conspiring against state security and stability, with the president describing them as 'traitors' and blaming them for price hikes and food shortages. The government also took steps to weaken political parties, including banning meetings at Ennahda and National Salvation Front offices across the country, further undermining structured opposition. Meanwhile, opposition-led protests denouncing democratic backsliding failed to attract significant popular support, underlining the inability of these actors to rally the public around a credible alternative to Saied's rule.

Police brutality is also a growing concern. While police violence is endemic, impunity is likely to increase. Some incidents during the year, such as the detention of two students for posting a satirical video critical of the police and a controversial drug law on Facebook in May, revived memories of the pre-2011 era. Although the students were released after a social media campaign, similar actions raised fears that hard-won freedoms were being eroded. Any perceived increase in police repression risks exacerbating feelings of *hogra* (contempt), a long-standing driver of migration.<sup>13</sup> When asked whether the risk of interception would influence the appeal of irregular migration, a young woman from Sousse responded: 'Not really, it seems that even if I stay in my house, I might get arrested at some point for breathing for free one day.'

Despite worsening political and social conditions, protest action decreased in 2023. According to the FTDES, 680 protests were recorded in the third quarter, down from 894 in the second quarter and 1 262 in the first.<sup>14</sup> The targeting of political and union activists may have influenced this decline. More significantly, hopes for government responsiveness plummeted, with most Tunisians interviewed for this research saying it was difficult to foresee positive changes in the near future.

Every time we get used to a bad situation and try to adapt, we discover that things can get worse. The high cost of living is suffocating. We lived every day hoping that the situation would improve, but the reality is proving us wrong.

*Interview with a Tunisian man in Zarzis, May 2023*

The multidimensional crisis fuelled an already growing interest in departing the country over the course of 2023. For many Tunisians, the unfolding economic and governance challenges accentuated stresses that had worsened in recent years, with migration becoming a viable last resort. One woman from Zarzis, whose husband died during a sea crossing in 2023, explained that he had only taken that step when their hopes had been completely eroded. Other interviews indicated that interest in and discussion of migration had proliferated. A woman who works in a factory in Monastir stressed, 'I hear women in the factory discussing whether it is possible for them to leave.' A young man in Zarzis simply remarked, 'All my brothers have left the country and I need to join them.'

Despite growing cooperation between European states and Tunisia to tighten border controls and reports of increased interceptions, those determined to migrate were not deterred, although fears of failure rose. Several interviewees who had been deported or had unsuccessfully attempted the crossing expressed an interest in trying again.

I have tried twice before. The first time, we discovered that the [boat] motor was not good after three hours, and asked a fisherman to help us return to shore. The second time, the smuggler defrauded us. The third will be soon.

*Interview with a young man in Zarzis, May 2023*

While acknowledging death as a serious risk of migration, several interviewees said the threat would not prevent them from boarding a boat. Various prospective migrants stressed that the dangers associated with migration, including death and fraud, could be greatly reduced by hiring trusted smugglers. Most had accepted that migration attempts were inherently hazardous. 'If you opt for *harka*, you need to know that anything can happen,' said one interviewee.

## **Drastic shift in policy worsens conditions for migrants**

Historically, foreign migration to Tunisia has had a limited presence in the country's political and public discourse, reflecting the low inbound flows. However, after gradually emerging as a contentious issue in recent years, migration sat at the heart of political debate in 2023.

On 21 February, President Saïed denounced undocumented sub-Saharan migration to Tunisia as a threat to the country's identity, linking it to an externally funded plan to alter Tunisia's demographic make-up. The president associated irregular migration with an increase in 'violence, crimes and unacceptable practices'.<sup>15</sup> Saïed's comments inflamed public opinion in Tunisia, exacerbating existing concerns about the impact on security and the economy of the growing influx of migrants. They also triggered substantial international backlash, prompting the government to soften its stance. Nonetheless, the incident marked a drastic shift in Tunisia's approach to irregular migration, and led to an acceleration in the number of foreign migrants leaving the country.

Following Saïed's statement, a structured nationwide crackdown on irregular sub-Saharan migrants ensued. Between late February and early March, more than 1 000 migrants were arbitrarily detained on the grounds of illegal stay or entry, although this also led to the arrest of people with legal residence documents, such as students. Restrictive measures were adopted, including new limitations on irregular migrants' use of public transport and the heightened enforcement of existing laws against renting to or employing irregular migrants, resulting in migrants being evicted from their homes and dismissed from their jobs.

Two days ago, the owner of the hotel where I had worked for a year told me, 'I don't want any problems with the government', so I had to leave my job.

*Interview with a sub-Saharan migrant, February 2023*

There was also an increase in reports of verbal and physical violence, particularly in Sfax and Ariana. In a dramatic incident in Greater Tunis on 24 February, a building housing sub-Saharan students was surrounded and stoned by a mob, and a fire started outside the entrance.<sup>16</sup> While racism and aggression against sub-Saharan migrants is a long-standing issue, these explicit and relatively widespread physical attacks had little precedent.

The crackdown created an unprecedented climate of fear among Tunisia's sub-Saharan migrant community. The worsening situation prompted several statements from migrant associations and the embassies of key countries of origin, urging sub-Saharan migrants to stay in their homes and avoid confrontations with Tunisians. Those left homeless turned to their respective embassies, demanding repatriation. In response, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea and Mali launched emergency evacuation initiatives. Migrants from countries without diplomatic representation in Tunisia faced greater difficulties and many were forced to seek assistance from international organizations.

In response to the international outcry and advocacy by Tunisian businesses affected by the crisis, the government took measures to support the affected migrants and launched diplomatic efforts. On 5 March, it announced several relief measures, including one-year residence permits for sub-Saharan students and the waiving of overstay penalties. Authorities also tacitly urged employers and landlords to refrain from dismissing sub-Saharan employees or tenants in order to prevent homelessness. The situation was overwhelming, and was described by one NGO representative as 'unmanageable'. Arbitrary arrests were subsequently halted due to prison overcrowding, increased pressure on the courts and the resulting social emergency.

But despite the easing of government measures and the reduction in violence, the effects of the clamp-down persisted, compounding existing challenges for migrants, including poor economic conditions and limited options for regularization. Many migrants found it difficult to return to their jobs or to find new employment, exacerbating financial pressures. Employers were reluctant to rehire migrants due to concerns about police scrutiny. Landlords were similarly wary of renting to migrants. As a result, temporary displacement turned into long-term homelessness for those forced from their homes.

This in turn led to increased tensions, particularly in Sfax, where homeless migrants began to congregate in downtown areas. The city also saw an influx of migrants displaced from other governorates, as well as those arriving over land borders in an attempt to reach Europe. Citizens complained about the use of public gardens for makeshift camps, exacerbating existing public sanitation problems.



Sub-Saharan migrants flee to Tunis amid unrest in Sfax, 5 July 2023. © Houssem Zouari/AFP via Getty Images



There were also objections about street vending, with Tunisians claiming that migrants were occupying spaces designated for local traders. Migrants were blamed for worsening food shortages, as they were perceived as competing for limited resources. Reports of a potential EU–Tunisia agreement to return sub-Saharan nationals transiting through Tunisia intensified tensions.

In this rapidly evolving context, the risk of an implosion grew. Citizens of Sfax interviewed in early June stressed that the situation had become untenable. Yet the government failed to act. One activist noted that Sfax had been without a governor since January, and the regional authorities could not intervene without instructions from the central government. Months of growing anger boiled over in late June and early July, and skirmishes broke out between migrants and local people. On 3 July, a 41-year-old Tunisian man was stabbed to death during clashes. In retaliation, there was an upsurge in violence, assaults and evictions targeting sub-Saharan migrants.

In July, in an attempt to defuse tensions and restore order, the government carried out mass forced relocations of sub-Saharan migrants from Sfax to remote border areas. More than 2 000 people were arbitrarily arrested, loaded onto buses and taken to points near the Algerian and Libyan borders. Hundreds of migrants were abandoned in a militarized zone near the border with Libya.<sup>17</sup> There were reports of abuse by security forces, including beatings and the destruction of personal belongings including mobile phones and identity documents.<sup>18</sup> Stranded migrants faced significant health and safety risks, and a number of people reportedly died. Deportations were halted at the end of July, before resuming in mid-September (discussed in more detail below). These large-scale expulsions echo practices observed in other Maghreb countries, including neighbouring Algeria, but are unprecedented in Tunisia.

By late 2023, the situation for migrants in Tunisia had deteriorated even further. In September, forced relocations from downtown Sfax to rural areas left many migrants stranded in olive groves, facing homelessness, poor hygiene and limited access to food and water. The lack of medical care heightened health risks for vulnerable groups. Similar tensions were observed in Zarzis, in the governorate of Médenine, as the city had experienced an influx of migrants due to a resurgence of arrivals across the border with Libya (discussed in more detail in the following section).

Throughout the year, Tunisian civil society and citizens mobilized to assist. However, official hostility created significant obstacles. President Saïed's directive in July to the Red Crescent to oversee migrant aid introduced bureaucratic hurdles for other civil society organizations. Communication with central authorities became increasingly challenging, leading to difficulties in obtaining authorization to provide assistance, particularly in remote areas. Online anti-migrant defamation campaigns targeting activists added another layer of complication. In this context, activists had to tread carefully and keep a low profile to avoid attracting the attention of both the authorities and anti-migrant elements.

These factors pushed many migrants to plan an immediate exit, contributing to a surge in departures. For most migrants, returning home was an unappealing prospect. The arduous process of reaching Tunisia, often spanning months or years, made them more determined to reach their final destination. In an interview, one migrant insisted: 'I crossed countries for almost two years to reach Tunisia. It was really hard. I can't return to Cameroon now.' Concerns about unemployment and poverty at home also discouraged repatriation. Instead, many people focused on raising the funds for a trip to Europe. Several migrants noted that while they had already been considering this journey before February, the rapidly deteriorating security situation had accelerated their plans. Migrants also appeared willing to take greater risks, leading to an increase in dangerous sea crossings.

The rapid rise in movement and growing anti-migrant sentiment presented significant challenges for the Tunisian government and the migrant community. Effectively managing the increased flows was a daunting task, given Tunisia's domestic challenges and the deteriorating regional situation. The security-driven approach reflected a broader failure to develop a coherent response to the country's evolving role. Despite a decade of efforts, political dysfunction and institutional upheaval had hindered the implementation of a comprehensive migration strategy. Instead, reliance on ad hoc policies throughout the year damaged Tunisia's external interests and exacerbated human rights violations.

## **Increasing migrant flows into Tunisia**

The increase in transit migration through Tunisia has been driven by a remarkable and rapid rise in the number of sub-Saharan migrants. Since 2020, the volume of foreign migrants departing Tunisia has grown steadily. The GI-TOC has broadly assessed that this trend has been fuelled mainly by undocumented migrants who were long-term residents in the country.<sup>19</sup> The population of undocumented foreign migrants living in Tunisia has expanded over the past decade, although its total size remains unclear. Ivorians and Guineans are believed to be the most numerous of the West Africans in Tunisia, with estimates of 8 000 to 20 000 Ivorians and around 7 000 Guineans. Other nationalities present in the country include Malians, Sudanese, Chadians, Gambians, Cameroonians, Nigerians, Senegalese, Togolese, Sierra Leoneans and Ghanaians.

Tunisia's long-term migrant community was bolstered in 2020 by the arrival of migrants from Algeria, who had been displaced by COVID-19 restrictions and rising xenophobia. In interviews conducted at the time, most expressed an interest in working in Tunisia before attempting the crossing to Europe. However, the sheer number of foreign departures from Tunisia in 2023 suggests that the situation has changed. Foreign nationals, mainly from West Africa and Sudan, are increasingly transiting Tunisia in search of embarkation opportunities. This has led to some significant shifts in movement patterns in the Sahel, such as a displacement of routes through Niger to Algeria, as well as a change in the way foreign irregular migrants enter Tunisia.

Historically, given the absence of visa requirements for many sub-Saharan countries, particularly in West Africa (such as Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire), most migrants entered Tunisia using commercial air travel. Although many arrived legally, a significant number ended up with irregular status after their tourist or study visas expired.

While the visa waiver for many sub-Saharan countries remains in place, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic the Tunisian authorities tightened entry requirements for nationals from these countries, particularly Guineans and Ivorians. Previously, travellers from West Africa were only required to prove that they had sufficient funds to cover their stay and accommodation costs. However, since 2021, customs has required all travellers to be met at the airport by representatives of their intended establishment or institution, such as a university or hospital. Even if this condition is met, entry is not guaranteed. Rigorous screening specifically targets people between the ages of 11 and 40, presumably because of a perceived higher risk of intended irregular migration. According to interviews with activists and leaders within the migrant community, these restrictions have disproportionately affected Guineans and Ivorians, with increasing numbers of these nationalities being denied entry at the Tunis–Carthage airport.

These constraints have led to the use of fraudulent papers to secure entry into Tunisia, including fake documents indicating registration at educational institutions or medical care in private clinics. One interviewee in Guinea reported that some travellers submitted forged medical records to Tunisian clinics attesting to specific illnesses in order to obtain the documents needed to facilitate entry into the country. On arrival, they spent several days in the clinic, before travelling to embarkation zones in the south-east of the country.

A new trend has emerged, however, as the higher volume of transit migration in 2023 was not primarily driven by air arrivals. Rather, there was a sharp increase in land arrivals over the Tunisia–Algeria border and, to a lesser extent, the border with Libya.

## **Spike in human smuggling along the Tunisia–Algeria border**

The GI-TOC has tracked increasing arrivals from Algeria since 2020. At that time, job losses linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, deteriorating living standards, xenophobia and the risk of deportation to Niger or Mali prompted a substantial number of migrants living in urban areas in north-central and north-eastern Algeria to move to Tunisia. Interviewees in the western governorate of Kasserine estimated the arrival of thousands of migrants in the first half of 2020.

Living in Algeria wasn't easy for me. Sometimes, while working, people would throw stones at us for no reason. Even simple tasks like paying for food at a restaurant became discriminatory – if a dish cost 100 dinars for others, as a black person, I was charged 200 dinars. The same happened when taking a taxi. If a ride cost 300 dinars, I would be charged 500 dinars. This is in addition to the repatriation. Considering all these challenges, it was no longer possible to stay there.

*Interview with a migrant from Benin, Italy, November 2023*

The pandemic and related restrictions also affected commodity smuggling networks between Tunisia and Algeria, with border closures and heightened security hampering the movement of contraband items, such as fuel and food, or impeding the sale of smuggled goods. In the face of these challenges, networks all along the border – from Jendouba in the north to Kebili in the south – turned to transporting migrants, and this dynamic continued even after restrictions were lifted. At the time, this was seen as an indication that human smuggling across the border would increase, due to the intersection of rising demand and continuing economic weakness in the area.

This expansion has now occurred, with arrivals reaching unprecedented levels in 2022 and 2023. In 2023, interviewees in the western Tunisian governorates of Kasserine and Tozeur reported the arrival of hundreds of migrants daily. While official statistics on the volume and nationalities of migrants arriving across the border with Algeria were not publicly available, interviews with migrants and activists revealed that a diverse range of people were making this journey. In particular, Guineans and Ivorians, who traditionally entered Tunisia by air, began to take to land routes in substantial numbers.







The increase in land arrivals from Algeria is likely to be the result of the confluence of trends:

- Embarkation zones in Libya have developed a reputation for being dangerous. As one migrant from Burkina Faso, who left for Europe in 2023, explained, 'I opted for Tunisia because it is safer than Libya. In Libya, people are sold as slaves. In Tunisia, when authorities apprehend individuals, they transport them to the border with Algeria or Libya, but they don't sell people as slaves.'
- Law enforcement in other transit countries has intensified. In northern Niger, these measures have had a significant impact on movement to Libya through Agadez, with routes through Tahoua to Algeria becoming more popular. In addition, Guinean community leaders in Tunisia cited the introduction of electronic visas for travel to Morocco in 2018 as a factor prompting Guinean migrants to shift to Tunisia in 2021.
- The cost of travel for foreign migrants in Tunisia has fallen. Specifically, the introduction of metal boats in 2022 led to a substantial reduction in the prices charged for sea crossings, further incentivizing movement to Tunisia.
- A key element in the emergence of new routes is the time it takes for information about them to spread and for migrants, who often rely on word of mouth or the guidance of smuggling networks, to become aware of and adapt to alternatives.

As a result of these factors, Tunisia has increasingly emerged as a more favourable option than other North African countries for individuals considering the perilous journey to Europe. Migrants arriving in Tunisia from Algeria seem to fall into two categories: migrants who, for the reasons outlined above, considered Tunisia as their destination from the outset, and migrants who embarked on their journeys with a degree of spontaneity, leaving their home countries without a predetermined itinerary or destination. Most travel to Tunisia without relying on smugglers to oversee and organize their trips, traversing multiple countries before reaching their destination. This independent approach often involves a pay-as-you-go system, with migrants financing each leg of their journey separately.

In other cases, migrants are more organized and coordinate their trips from the beginning. According to interviews with migrants and activists, networks of sub-Saharan smugglers based in Tunisia have become increasingly active in arranging migrants' journeys from their countries of origin to Tunisia. These smugglers, who are mainly Guinean or Ivorian, often start out as maritime smugglers before becoming involved in overland routes.

Prospective migrants are often referred to Tunisia-based smugglers by friends and family members who have already travelled the route and reached Europe. One interviewee noted that migrants tend to rely on smugglers who have a good reputation among the community in Tunisia and a track record of organizing successful journeys. Contact with the smuggler often takes place on social media platforms, such as Facebook and TikTok. Some smugglers also advertise their services on these platforms.

One interviewee indicated that when sub-Saharan smugglers are identified or threatened with arrest, they often simply leave Tunisia for Europe. It is unclear whether they continue to arrange trips for migrants from there, although the GI-TOC has previously identified instances of former migrants based in Europe acting as organizers of overland smuggling.

Tunisia-based maritime smugglers collaborate with overland smugglers and transporters in various countries along the route to facilitate migrants' journeys. The services provided by Tunisia-based smugglers primarily consist of guiding migrants through the stages of the journey and acting as intermediaries between migrants and subcontracted local smugglers in transit countries. The fee structure typically involves migrants paying for different legs of the journey as they progress.

However, migrants' plans are fluid, and they may alter their choice of smuggler and route during the journey. One interviewee in Guinea observed that many migrants find it difficult to locate the smuggler recommended by the Tunisia-based organizer in their transit country, leading them to seek alternative options. In addition, some migrants may choose facilitators other than those recommended by their Tunisia-based smugglers, especially if they can find cheaper options.

These dynamics indicate that while there may not be well-structured transnational networks offering full package journeys to Tunisia and into Europe, there is coordination and collaboration, albeit rudimentary, between different groups on the routes to Tunisia. This may yet pave the way for increased sophistication and professionalization of these networks, also driven by the sustained demand for services and the need for smugglers to adapt swiftly to evolving enforcement measures.

The itineraries for these journeys are generally constant, regardless of how the travel is organized. Irregular migrants aiming to reach Tunisia first arrive in Algeria from hubs in Mali and Niger. In Mali, smugglers transport migrants in vehicles, such as lorries, from Gao or Kidal to the border with Algeria, with around 60 people per trip.

In Niger, most transit takes place through the western hub of Tahoua. From there, smuggler convoys – carrying 15 to 20 migrants per vehicle – head towards the Algerian border, often arriving near Assamaka. The migrants are then left to cross the border on foot. Once on the other side, Algerian smugglers pick them up and take them to border towns such as Borg Badji Mokhtar or Tamanrasset. From there, the migrants are clandestinely transported in lorries, buses or pick-up trucks, each carrying between 20 and 50 people, to zones in the north of the country near the Tunisian border, such as El-Oued and Tébessa. This journey costs around 60 000 Algerian dinars (€414). Less frequently, migrants use public buses to travel to towns near the border.

It is noteworthy that a number of migrants entering Tunisia from Algeria had previously been in Libya. Some migrants arriving in Tunisia in 2022 stated that they had travelled from Libya to Tunisia via Algeria because of the difficulty of entering Tunisia directly from Libya.

Cross-border movements between Algeria and Tunisia are often facilitated by smuggling networks from both countries operating along the border. In general, these groups transport migrants alongside contraband, which traditionally includes fuel and food. However, there was a discernible shift in the focus of these networks in 2023, with some altering their operations to concentrate exclusively on smuggling migrants. According to one interviewee, escalating demand played a key role in this change, in addition to the fact that the networks involved found migrant smuggling to be more profitable than commodities.

Algerian smugglers reportedly transport migrants to points near the border with Tunisia, but generally do not cross it. Migrants are dropped off a few kilometres away, divided into small groups of around 10 people and directed to slightly different crossing points. One migrant interviewee claimed that guides sometimes assist migrants near the border, although this information is unconfirmed.

In contrast, Tunisian smugglers who transport contraband from Algeria will take migrants from Algerian border areas to Tunisia. They may even move migrants across the border, carrying five to eight people per trip, although this remains unconfirmed. Prices for these land crossings reportedly range from TND450 (€133) to TND1100 (€326) per person.



Migrant smuggling networks operate throughout the Algeria–Tunisia border area, but several key routes see particularly heavy movement:

- From Ouenza, El Meridj and El Kouif in the *wilaya* (province) of Tébessa in north-eastern Algeria to Haydrah and Foussana in the Kasserine governorate in west-central Tunisia.
- From the city of El-Oued in north-eastern Algeria to Rjim Maatoug in the governorate of Kebili in south-western Tunisia.
- From the town of Taleb Larbi, 86 kilometres east of the city of El-Oued, to Hazoua in the governorate of Tozeur in south-western Tunisia. The popularity of this route has reportedly declined due to the increased risk of interception, given the presence of official crossings on both sides of the border.
- Less prominent are the routes from Ouled Moumen in the *wilaya* of Souk Ahras in north-eastern Algeria and Mouneza in the *wilaya* of Tébessa towards the governorate of Kef in north-western Tunisia, from Bir El Ater in Tébessa towards the south-western governorate of Gafsa, and from Douar el-Ma in El-Oued to Matrouha in Kebili.



**Tunisian National Guard intercepts irregular migrants at the border, September 2023.** *Photo: Official Facebook page of the Tunisian National Guard*

Some migrant testimonies suggest that the Algerian authorities may tolerate or turn a blind eye to cross-border movement. One Cameroonian migrant, for example, noted that he had encountered Algerian security forces near the border at Tébessa, and that he and others in his group were allowed to proceed into Tunisia, after leaving their belongings and passports behind.

After migrants arrive in Tunisia, borderland smugglers typically do not provide them with additional services such as accommodation or transport within the country. While some choose to stay in the western governorates and work on farms to earn some money before moving to littoral areas, most travel immediately to larger coastal cities such as Tunis and Sfax.

In 2023, an increasing number of migrants opted to head directly to Sfax to embark to Europe. This marks a notable shift in the motivations behind choosing Tunisia. In the past, migrants arriving in Algeria tended to spend extended periods working in the country before attempting the journey to Europe. However, the current trend for newly arrived migrants to head directly to Sfax, either to embark or to find a smuggler, means that the transit time through Tunisia is now relatively short, with stays in the second half of 2023 averaging a few days to a few weeks.

Migrants travel to Sfax in various ways, either independently or with the assistance of overland transporters. Until the beginning of 2023, many migrants reached the city autonomously using public buses and *louages* (taxis for regional transport). However, this method declined in popularity from March due to Tunisian restrictions on the transport of undocumented migrants. Although some *louage* drivers still transport migrants, they do so in small numbers, usually carrying only one or two at a time.

Walking has become a common way to reach Sfax, with migrants following road signs and seeking directions from Tunisian passers-by, and sleeping in wooded areas along main roads at night. Migrants arriving in Kasserine, some 200 kilometres from Sfax, often have to walk for over three days to reach the city, while for those arriving in Kef, some 300 kilometres from Sfax, the walk takes around five days. In June, an interviewee in Sfax noted that migrants were seen entering the governorate in large groups of around 100 people. As the year progressed, migrants became more cautious due to increased security controls, and opted to walk through oases or olive groves rather than on main roads.

We're not Tunisians; we don't know the cities of Tunisia. All we know is that we need to get to Sfax before undertaking the crossing. So we look for Sfax on the signs and continue. We keep walking until we get there.

*Interview with a migrant from Benin, Italy, November 2023*

Migrants arriving in the south-western governorates of Gafsa, Kebili and Tozeur sometimes attempt to hide on phosphate trains heading towards Sfax. However, controls on these trains increased following the discovery that migrants were using this method of transportation. On 27 September, two sub-Saharan migrants were injured and taken to hospital after falling while trying to board a train in Ouled Chrait, about 18 kilometres east of the city of Gafsa.

Alternatively, migrants may be driven to Sfax by clandestine Tunisian transporters (commonly referred to in Tunisia as *transporteurs*), who often wait in border areas. Although this practice reportedly began in 2022, options proliferated in 2023 due to rising demand and increased controls on public transport. Trips from border areas to Sfax reportedly cost around TND100 (€29) per person. Migrants obtain contacts for *transporteurs* from Algerian or Tunisian cross-border smugglers. Alternatively, some migrants are referred by sub-Saharan intermediaries, often Ivorians, Guineans or Cameroonians, who work with maritime smugglers in Sfax.

In 2023, the Tunisian authorities arrested both Tunisian and foreign nationals for their involvement in the transport of migrants in places such as Kasserine, Gafsa and Sidi Bouzid.

Arrivals across the border with Algeria are likely to remain high. Interest in transit through Tunisia is still strong, particularly in the face of heightened enforcement or poor conditions on alternative migration routes through North Africa. An interviewee in Guinea noted that the deteriorating environment for migrants in 2023 did not significantly alter the perception of Tunisia as a safe transit country among Guinean nationals aiming to reach Europe. The persistence of migration triggers in countries of origin and the proliferation of organized networks facilitating movement are likely to be key factors in the continued influx of arrivals.

## **Resurgence of human smuggling across the Tunisia–Libya border**

The number of migrants arriving in Tunisia from Libya has increased steadily since April 2023. Irregular movement across the Tunisia–Libya border is not new; however, the rise in overland smuggling is a significant change from the more sporadic activity observed along the eastern border in recent years.

The increase in migrant movement across this border is an important trend to monitor. It is also striking given that the Tunisian government – with the support of international partners – has invested heavily in strengthening border security in this area. However, as the situation since April has shown, these initiatives, designed to thwart large-scale contraband smuggling and terrorist infiltration, are ill-equipped to deal with the current migration challenge.

There are no reliable statistics on the numbers and nationalities of migrants arriving over the border from Libya. However, according to interviews with migrants and activists, Sudanese nationals were the main nationality making the crossing in 2023, a trend that escalated from April when the internal conflict in Sudan broke out. Before then, Tunisia had received a small number of Sudanese asylum seekers. According to the UNHCR, 566 refugees were registered in Tunisia as of March 2023. By September, this figure had jumped to 2 275.<sup>20</sup> However, the actual number was estimated to be much higher. An interviewee with visibility on migration dynamics reported that many Sudanese refugees arriving in the country did not approach the UNHCR, but immediately travelled to Sfax to attempt the sea crossing. Sudanese asylum seekers arriving in Tunisia from May onwards fell into two categories: those who had been living in Libya before the conflict and those directly displaced by the war in Sudan. The second group appeared to make up the majority of new arrivals, although this was difficult to confirm. Other nationalities entering the country from Libya included migrants from Chad, Somalia and Eritrea, and less frequently Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire.

Prices for journeys from Libya to Tunisia fluctuated throughout 2023, influenced by the market for smuggling services and the level of enforcement along the border. In the first half of the year, the cost of crossings ranged from €177 to €296. Prices then reportedly rose to €570 in July and August, apparently due to high demand, particularly from Sudanese refugees. It is estimated that the average of 10 arrivals per day in May and June increased to 60–150 per day in August.

Growing demand reportedly triggered a rise in smuggling activity along the Tunisia–Libya border, which in turn drove the price of the crossing down to an average of €60 in the first half of September. A crackdown by the Tunisian authorities in the second half of the month caused prices to increase again throughout the autumn.

Irregular movement between Tunisia and Libya is often facilitated by smuggling networks. Most of the groups providing services to migrants do so as part of a broader set of activities centred on the smuggling of food and fuel. The composition of these networks varies. However, they often involve a combination of Tunisian and Libyan actors, including traders, drivers, intermediaries and members of the Tunisian and Libyan security forces. Other individuals also participate on an ad hoc basis, including shepherds and – reportedly – people working for humanitarian organizations, especially in Libya. Migrants interviewed reported few difficulties in contacting smugglers to assist them in travelling from Libya to Tunisia. Contact with smugglers can take place in Tripoli, but is more common at or near departure points close to the border.

It has become easy to find a smuggling network, but it remains difficult to trust them. Your money may be stolen.

*Interview with a Sudanese migrant, Zarzis, June 2023*

While commodity and human smuggling networks are active along most of the Tunisia–Libya border, they are concentrated in the Médenine governorate, along the northern third of the border. Some also operate in the more northerly areas of Tataouine governorate, close to the Dehiba–Wazin border crossing, although human smuggling is uncommon here.

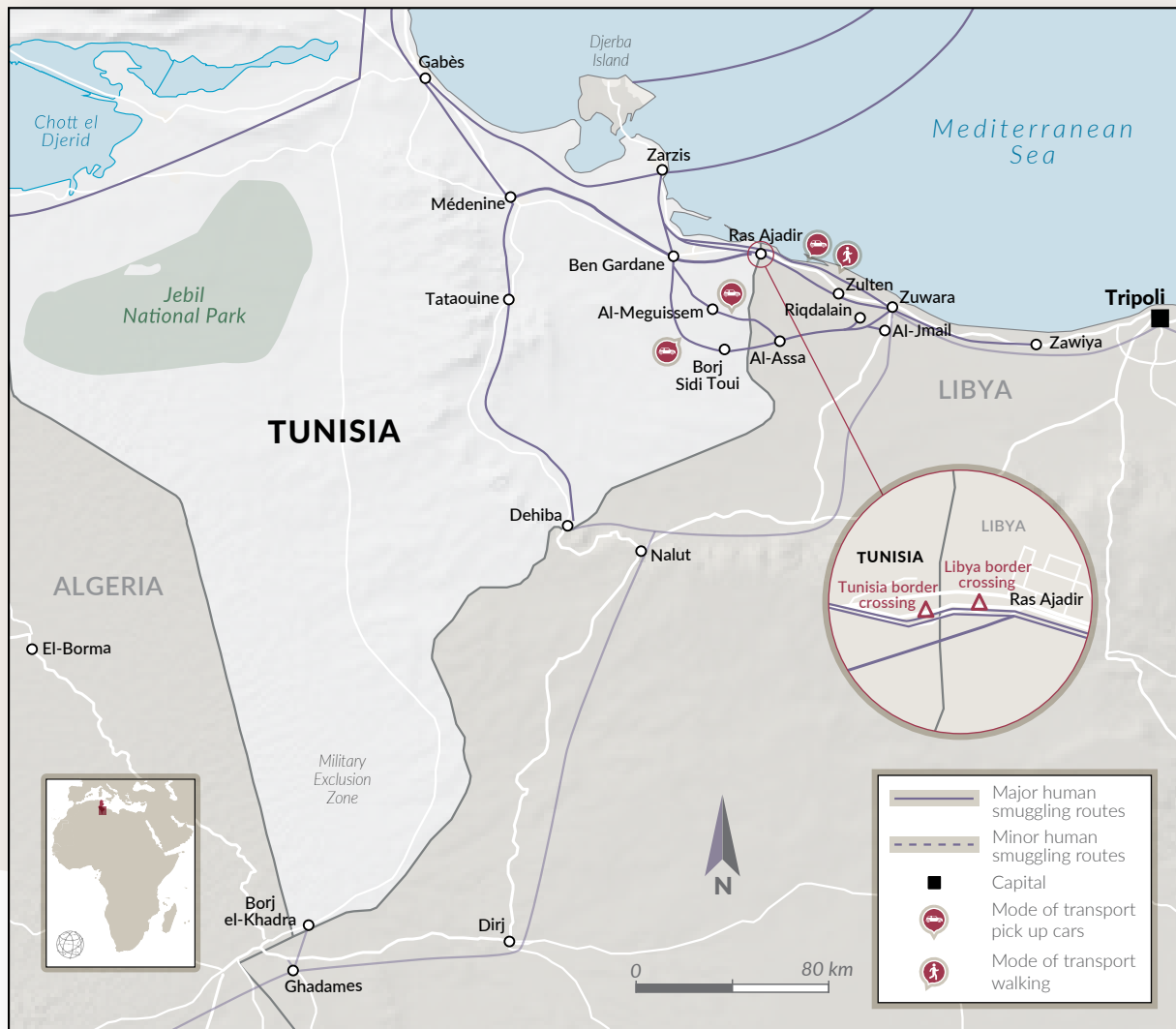
The process of transporting migrants from Libya to Tunisia begins with a gathering at a meeting point near the border, such as Zuwara, Zawiya, al-Jmail and Riqdalain, several days before the journey. At the time of departure, migrants are loaded into lorries or pick-up trucks, which may also contain contraband goods, and hidden under a thick covering tied with rope. The number of migrants transported on each trip varies, with small cars carrying two or three migrants and larger trucks carrying dozens.

Smuggler convoys then head through the desert region near al-Assa in Libya. Some migrants reported being blindfolded along the way to prevent them from memorizing the route or identifying complicit security officials. After passing al-Assa, the convoys enter Tunisia, usually through the al-Meguissem desert area, approximately 25 kilometres east of Ben Gardane. Tunisia's border wall, a berm ditch system, runs through this area. Smugglers lay wooden planks across the ditch to enable migrants to cross. Once across, they are picked up by Tunisian transporters who take them to Ben Gardane.

Another smuggling route passes through the Ras Ajadir border crossing. Migrants are transported in pick-up trucks, hidden among other commodities, or in the boots of cars. These smugglers rely on collusion with individual members of the security forces on both sides of the border to ensure their vehicles are not searched. The use of this route to move migrants appears to be less common, as most migrant smuggling takes place across the open desert.

Migrants using the Ras Ajadir route are more likely to depart from Zuwara or Zawiya, while those travelling through the desert are more likely to leave from al-Jmail or Riqdalain. Migrants using either route also set off from Zulten.

There was little indication of similar movements through the Dehiba–Wazin border crossing in 2023. The reasons for this are unclear, but may relate to the relative remoteness of the area and the heightened risk of detection for migrants travelling from there to urban areas on the Tunisian coast.



**FIGURE 6** Smuggling routes along the border between Tunisia and Libya.

Desert crossings are the riskiest option along the Tunisia–Libya border, as smugglers' vehicles may be pursued by Tunisian security or military forces operating in the area. Both have a relatively permissive approach to the use of force. Since the Tunisian government stepped up border control measures in 2016, there have been several cases of Tunisian smugglers being shot or killed in car accidents while fleeing from armed forces. Such incidents often cause anger in Tunisian border communities.

One migrant recalled an encounter from April 2022, involving her friends who were trying to reach Tunisia: 'The Tunisian army fired at the wheels of the car, causing it to lose balance. The Tunisian driver sought help from another Libyan car and fled to Libya, leaving the migrants in the desert. A pregnant woman who was in the convoy lost her life, while the rest walked back to Libya.'

Some migrants cross the Libya–Tunisia border independently of smuggling networks. These journeys are usually made in small groups of around 10 people, often equipped with a GPS device bought in Libya, the cost of which is shared by the migrants. Many migrants from countries such as Sudan, Cameroon and Sierra Leone reported relying on GPS navigation to reach Tunisia.

However, this form of passage may involve some reliance on smugglers. Specifically, migrants sometimes pay smugglers to transport them in vehicles from Libyan border towns such as Zuwara to a point on the Libyan coast near the Tunisian border, and then continue the journey independently. Smugglers' assistance may also include liaising with and bribing security officials to ensure that migrants can continue their journey on foot, thereby reducing the risk of arrest in Libya.

We left Sudan at night in groups and were transported in cars to Libya. We stayed in Libya for three days. Then a car took us to the Tunisian border, and we walked until we reached Zarzis.

*Interview with a Sudanese asylum seeker, Zarzis, June 2023*

The route used by those travelling unassisted is slightly different to the overland smuggling routes detailed above, usually involving transit through the area north of the Ras Ajadir crossing, often along or near the coast.

Once in Tunisia, migrants travelling independently then continue towards Zarzis, some 80 kilometres from Ras Ajadir. To reduce walking time and avoid arrest at checkpoints along the road, some may attempt to secure transport by vehicle. Before the Tunisian government restricted their use in March, the main means of transport to Zarzis was a *louage*, at a cost of €1.20 per ticket.

Most *louage* drivers, however, continue to comply with the restrictions on transporting migrants. Some drivers may agree to transport one or two people to avoid trouble with the police. Much less commonly, migrants may seek the assistance of Tunisian drivers transporting smuggled contraband from Ben Gardane to Zarzis. Given the large number of smugglers' cars moving through the city, it is relatively easy to identify such vehicles. This form of transport is not often prearranged.

Alternatively, migrants will walk all the way to Zarzis, either following the main road or using less frequented routes. This option appeared to grow in popularity from July, when restrictions on the transport of migrants in *louages* were tightened. Some groups of migrants may be guided by a person who has travelled the route before and is familiar with it. In some cases, experienced guides will work as smugglers and are paid by migrants for their services.

We relied on GPS to enter Tunisia. A Sudanese person with us knew the way well. When we reached Tunisia, there were people who helped us find the way to Zarzis.

*Interview with Sierra Leonean migrant, December 2022*

According to interviews with migrants, independent travel became more prevalent during the second half of 2023, especially among Sudanese people. Most migrants resort to this option because of limited financial means.

Self-smuggling entails many risks, as migrants can become lost or separated from their companions. There are also difficulties in carrying enough food and water for the journey. Interviewees have indicated that some deaths have occurred during attempts at clandestine migration. Moreover, without the help of smugglers, autonomous travellers may be pushed back into Libya by Tunisian security forces or, although it is less likely, arrested.

While movement across the Tunisia–Libya border is mainly one directional, departures from Tunisia to Libya do occur, although less frequently. Often, these involve people who have attempted the sea crossing from Libya and have been intercepted by the Tunisian authorities. Their decision to return to Libya is often influenced by the difficulty of finding work in Tunisia and the lower cost of passage from Libya. As with entry into Tunisia, migrants travelling from Tunisia to Libya either rely on smugglers or undertake the journey independently.



The main route used by smugglers is through the desert region of al-Assa, which, as outlined above, is also used to enter Tunisia. Migrants travel from al-Assa towards Zulten or Zuwara through al-Jmail. Movement into Libya also occurs through Ras Ajadir. If security is high at the border, migrants are taken south of the crossing, either through Dahret Alkhus or Burj al-Arbaeen, where they are picked up by Libyan smugglers – often from Zulten, al-Jmail or Riqdalain – and transported to Sabratha or Zuwara. The price of the journey to Libya varies, but usually costs between €40 and €150 for both the border crossing and travel through the land border.

While departures from Tunisia to Libya remained low in 2023, it is possible that this could change. Deteriorating conditions in Tunisia have not yet caused a spike in movement to Libya, mainly because conditions in Libya are perceived to be worse. However, increasingly scarce employment opportunities and difficulties in making the crossing to Europe may encourage migrants to leave Tunisia. In September, several Sudanese asylum seekers in Tunisia expressed their disappointment with the situation and said that it was leading them to consider returning to Libya. They reported that some had already made the journey back.

## **Increased smuggling challenges enforcement capacity**

In 2023, Tunisia grappled with growing smuggling activity at its maritime and land borders. However, the country still lacks a cohesive approach to dealing with these mounting migratory pressures. Despite efforts over the past decade to develop a comprehensive migration strategy, political dysfunction and frequent institutional shake-ups have meant that no government has yet been able to develop a clear policy vision for migration, let alone implement it. Responsibility for foreign irregular migration remains fragmented across several ministries, with bureaucratic challenges and resistance to change limiting effective coordination.

The Tunisian government has tended to view foreign migrants largely as a security issue, a dynamic reinforced by President Saied's inflammatory remarks in February. In practical terms, this means that most of the responsibility for irregular migration continues to fall to the Interior Ministry, particularly the National Guard and its associated coastguard component.

Throughout 2023, the National Guard's maritime and land units implemented strict controls in key embarkation areas, and occasional spikes in departures led to a substantial increase in the operational tempo. Enforcement efforts were primarily concentrated in Sfax, but were also carried out with varying levels of intensity throughout the coastal governorates. Operations included land and sea patrols; raids on safehouses and migrant assembly points, often in forested areas near departure beaches; arrests of smugglers, intermediaries and illicit boatbuilders; interceptions of migrant vehicles; and boat seizures.

Increased enforcement was accompanied by persistent allegations of excessive force against migrants. In particular, there were repeated claims made by Tunisian and international NGOs, such as Alarm Phone, that coastguard officials used violence, including physical assault, during interceptions.<sup>21</sup> There were also reports of migrants' boat engines being removed and stolen, leaving migrants stranded at sea.

The coastguard denied these claims. One interviewee further explained that the confrontations were due to resistance by migrants during interceptions, including the use of Molotov cocktails. Such encounters have been recorded, with footage showing migrants threatening to throw children into the sea or set themselves on fire. According to the interviewee, the coastguard first attempt to negotiate, but if this fails, they pursue and stop the boat. The coastguard also admitted to destroying boat engines to halt vessels.

In 2023, there was a noticeable increase in cooperation between fishermen in Sfax and Mahdia and the coastguard in rescue operations. According to an interviewee in Sfax, there were numerous instances in which fishermen, upon witnessing a migrant boat on the verge of capsizing, proactively initiated rescue efforts and promptly informed the coastguard.

However, there were also reports of fishers pirating migrants' boats, seizing their engines and fuel, and leaving them stranded at sea in precarious conditions. The equipment was then sold on the black market to smugglers or other migrants. As evidence of the existence of such practices, in August the National Guard apprehended four people from Monastir who were on board a fishing vessel that was chasing a boat carrying Tunisian migrants.<sup>22</sup> They were arrested after footage of the incident was circulated on social media. The rise in piracy targeting migrant boats poses an additional risk to the lives of migrants attempting the sea crossing to Europe.

The enduring collusion between smuggling networks and security officers poses a significant enforcement challenge.<sup>23</sup> Smugglers and boat builders reportedly leverage relationships with corrupt officers for protection, information and operational facilitation. Complicit officials may discreetly inform smugglers of search warrants, enabling them to evade arrest by relocating to areas away from their usual residence. The collaboration provides continued protection for illicit actors even after arrest and imprisonment. Smugglers may also use these relationships to offer bribes to facilitate their release.

Nonetheless, counter-smuggling measures appear to be able to disrupt operations, if only temporarily. Throughout 2023, periods of increased security were followed by a temporary decline in smuggling. However, these activities were not eradicated. Smuggling groups are resilient and often adapt quickly to heightened controls, by changing the location of their activities or strengthening alliances with individual security forces. The small and dispersed nature of Tunisian smuggling networks means that arrests and the dismantling of networks often lead to the creation of new groups to meet continued demand. Similarly, enforcement efforts at Tunisia's land borders continued to be offset by persistent arrivals.

It is crucial to note that enforcement efforts have inherent limitations, particularly regarding sustainability over time. Activities in 2023 involved an exceptionally high operational tempo for Tunisian security forces. In addition, these efforts took place in a relatively stable security environment, where competing challenges such as terrorism and social unrest were minimal. As noted above, protests declined substantially during the year. This landscape could change if other security concerns emerge.

The longer-term viability of counter-smuggling measures hinges on the priorities of the authorities and the human and logistical challenges faced by the coastguard. While EU assistance can help address logistical challenges, limited human capacity is likely to continue to affect enforcement efforts.

## **Forced transfers become a go-to tool in migration management**

In the second half of 2023, the Tunisian government increasingly resorted to the forced transfer of migrants – mainly to and across the borders with Libya and Algeria – in order to manage tensions in key embarkation areas and attenuate migratory pressures.

The forced transfer of migrants is not an entirely new practice for Tunisian authorities. In recent years, civil society organizations have detailed several cases of small groups of migrants being moved to the borders with Libya and Algeria. Nonetheless, these operations have generally been limited and sporadic. From July, however, the Tunisian security forces appeared to adopt a more structured and

widespread transfer and expulsion campaign. The shift in approach began following an outbreak of violence between migrants and the local community in Sfax (see above). The government attempted to address these tensions and prevent the spread of unrest by arresting large numbers of migrants in the governorates of Sfax and Médenine.

Most of those detained, estimated to be over 1 000 migrants, were reportedly transported in buses to desolate areas along the border with Libya. Stranded in remote locations, they had little access to food and water. Interviewees reported that in the early days of the crisis, migrants attempting to enter Libya were forcibly pushed back into Tunisia by Libyan forces.

Other migrants were deported to areas close to the Algerian border, in the governorates of Tozeur, Beja, Gafsa and Kasserine. The precise number of migrants moved to these locations is unclear, with estimates ranging widely from a few hundred to over a thousand.

By the end of July, the forced transfer operations had largely ceased. However, they resumed and expanded in September, when a week-long spike in arrivals in Italy, involving 12 733 migrants, led to the launch of a comprehensive anti-smuggling campaign. This included the deployment of senior Interior Ministry officials and additional security forces to Sfax.<sup>24</sup> This increase in personnel, heavily publicized by the authorities, was likely intended to counter allegations that a deliberate relaxation of border controls in Sfax had caused the surge. In addition, enforcement was stepped up along the land borders with Libya and Algeria, to deter migrants from entering the country and prevent them from reaching coastal areas.

A final element of the counter-migration campaign was an expansion of forced transfers and expulsions. This included a change in the way intercepted migrants were dealt with. Previously, the coastguard had typically released migrants as soon as they reached the shore. This approach was established at a time when Tunisian nationals accounted for most interceptions, with longer-term detention probably deemed impractical due to the limited capacity of prison facilities. However, this process continued as foreign migrants began to make up the majority of those intercepted, leading to criticism that the releases were encouraging rapid repeat embarkation attempts.

From mid-September, the National Guard shifted its approach, transferring migrants intercepted at sea to border areas. On 10 October, for example, Human Rights Watch reported that the National Guard had transported 100 intercepted sub-Saharan migrants to the governorate of Kef, aiming to expel them into Algeria.<sup>25</sup> However, Algerian officials largely blocked the migrants' entry, leaving them trapped in remote areas.

Another aspect of the renewed forced transfer campaign focused on migrants in governorates known for high numbers of embarkations. The arbitrary detention of migrants and their subsequent deportation to Libya took place mainly in the governorates of Sfax and Médenine (including Zarzis and Ben Gardane). According to an interview with a migrant, in one case in the governorate of Mahdia 43 people were arrested in Chebba on 1 November and transported to Libya.

Many of the expelled migrants interviewed for this research reported being arrested in public places, including streets, cafés, markets and transport stations. The operations reportedly took place mainly at night or in the early morning.

In September, around six-thirty in the evening, I encountered a National Guard patrol as I was returning from work. They asked me if I was carrying any identity documents. I said no, as I was afraid that they might tear up my passport. Suddenly, they handcuffed me.

*Interview with a Nigerian migrant who was detained in Zarzis, November 2023*

In most cases, detainees received no explanation for their detention or information about their destination. One Syrian migrant claimed: 'They told us that we would be transferred to another place that is safe. No other information was provided. We asked questions to try to understand the situation better, but in vain. We were warned to move carefully, or they would use force on us.'

Once apprehended, migrants were reportedly held for a short period of time, usually a few days to a week, before being driven to the border. Others were taken directly to the border from their point of arrest. There is some ambiguity about what happened at the border. Some migrant testimonies suggested a degree of coordination between Tunisian and Libyan actors. A number of migrants recounted being handed over to the Libyan authorities and detained in various places, including in Nalut, Zuwara and Tripoli.

Around two in the morning, they packed us like sheep into large vehicles with no windows. We quickly reached the border with Libya. The Libyan police picked us up and put us on a bus, and then took us to a fenced and heavily guarded place in Zuwara.

*Interview with an expelled migrant, November 2023*

In other instances, migrants appear to have been abandoned in border areas and only found by Libyan forces later. Some interviewees in Libya suggested that the Tunisians had deliberately left migrants in areas regularly patrolled by Libyan forces. These accounts hinted at the emergence of an informal system for transferring migrant detainees from Tunisia to Libya, although it appears to have been ad hoc and inconsistently applied. Information about the underlying agreement remains unclear.

A notable element of the forced transfers in July and after September was the level of force reportedly used by Tunisian security forces. In July, a number of migrants claimed to have experienced physical abuse, the destruction of identity documents and the theft of personal belongings by security forces. Mobile phones were reportedly confiscated to prevent migrants from filming the abuse. A number of family separations were also reported. More broadly, a number of those expelled reportedly died or went missing, due to the lack of water, food and medical care in the border areas.<sup>26</sup>

The violence reported in July reportedly resurfaced and intensified in transfer and expulsion operations from September onwards. There were consistent reports of migrants arriving at the al-Assa detention centre on the Libyan side of the border (a makeshift holding facility in the desert area between the two countries, about 60 kilometres south of the coastal border) with injuries sustained in Tunisia. A number of migrants interviewed claimed they had been verbally abused, physical assaulted and threatened with weapons by Tunisian security personnel when they attempted to resist apprehension. Many of those expelled also claimed that their money, phones and passports had been confiscated. The Tunisian government has consistently denied any allegations of abuse of migrants, asserting that the country provides necessary protection for migrants while also maintaining its border security.<sup>27</sup>

The resurgence of forced transfers and expulsions exacerbated the climate of fear for migrants and asylum seekers. Several migrants said that they felt increasingly threatened by arbitrary arrests and forced relocations. Some in Sfax and Zarzis moved to safer governorates in the north, such as Tunis and Sousse.

However, there was little evidence to suggest that the increased incidents of abuse deterred foreign migrants from attempting to enter or re-enter Tunisia. Rather, acute security concerns in Libya appeared to encourage even those expelled from Tunisia to attempt to return there.



## CONCLUSION

In 2023, Tunisia experienced an exceptional year in terms of migration dynamics, with a significant acceleration in human smuggling and irregular departures. The country assumed a pivotal role in the regional migration landscape, overtaking Libya as the main transit hub to Europe. Several rapid and significant developments influenced movements from and through Tunisia.

Internally, the country's dire socio-economic situation continued to drive interest in departures among Tunisian nationals, as many struggled with unemployment and reduced purchasing power. Tunisians felt the effects of the crisis in their daily lives, facing challenges such as price hikes and recurring shortages of essential foods. For many Tunisians, the worsening economic and governance challenges exacerbated stresses that had expanded in recent years, and migration became a viable last resort.

Against the backdrop of the deteriorating economic situation, anti-migrant sentiment gained traction, with irregular migrants increasingly perceived as an economic and security threat. The growing negative sentiment was accompanied by a shift in the government's stance on irregular migration. Throughout the year, undocumented people faced restrictions on access to housing, employment and transport, which accelerated their interest in leaving the country.

The surge in movement in 2023 was also fuelled by a notable increase in transit migration through the country. In contrast to previous years, when departures of foreign nationals from Tunisia mainly concerned long-term undocumented residents, the significant number of foreign migrants leaving Tunisia in 2023 indicated a shift in patterns. During the year, there was a sharp rise in land arrivals across the Tunisia–Algeria border and, to a lesser extent, the border with Libya. Foreign nationals, predominantly from West Africa and Sudan, increasingly arrived in Tunisia in search of opportunities for onward travel.

The rising land arrivals were partly driven by regional developments over the last several years, including heightened concerns about insecurity in Libya and the law enforcement measures in northern Niger that disrupted movement from Agadez to Libya. As a result, the routes via Tahoua to Algeria came to be used more heavily. Furthermore, the fall in the price of sea crossings for foreign migrants played a significant role in encouraging flows towards Tunisia. The introduction of metal boats in 2022 had substantially reduced the cost of crossings, making Tunisia a more attractive option than other North African countries for people considering the dangerous journey to Europe.



Over the course of 2023, the growing demand for smuggling services by foreign migrants appeared to lead to a proliferation of networks and a diversification of services offered. Groups serving foreign migrants, for example, increasingly offered inexpensive passage on iron-hulled boats, while other networks offered passage on inflatable dinghies and fishing vessels.

While Tunisian and foreign migrants continued to rely on smuggling services, self-smuggling continued to gain popularity in 2023. Although previously more common among Tunisian migrants, self-smuggling became increasingly popular among sub-Saharan migrants, who saw it as a cheaper, though not necessarily safer, option. The prevalence of self-smuggling among foreign migrants underlined the growth in coordination within the migrant community.

Significantly, networks of sub-Saharan smugglers based in Tunisia have become increasingly involved in coordinating migrants' journeys from their countries of origin to Tunisia. A growing number of sub-Saharan nationals initiate contact with these foreign smugglers and intermediaries to enquire about the availability and prices of sea crossings even before arriving in Tunisia. These dynamics indicate that while there may not be well-structured transnational networks offering comprehensive package journeys to Tunisia and into Europe, there is rudimentary coordination and collaboration between the different groups operating on the routes to Tunisia. This interplay may pave the way for the greater sophistication and professionalization of these networks, also driven by the sustained demand for services and the need for smugglers to adapt swiftly to evolving enforcement measures.

Against a backdrop of entrenched migration drivers in Tunisia and in key countries of origin, demand for departures from and via Tunisia is expected to remain elevated in 2024, fuelled by the country's expanding role as a transit hub. There remains considerable uncertainty over Tunisia's economic future, particularly as President Saïed continues to reject an agreement with the IMF, raising concerns about a potential default on external debt. While negotiations on a revised agreement are reportedly underway, the timing and likelihood of a new deal remain unclear. At the same time, migrant flows across the Algerian border are expected to remain high. The enduring presence of migration incentives in origin countries, coupled with the proliferation of organized networks facilitating movement, are anticipated to be major drivers for a continued influx of arrivals.

While interest in migration is expected to stay elevated, the level of departures is likely to be influenced by a combination of factors. These include the capacity of security forces to manage increased migratory pressures, and how smuggling networks will adapt to changing enforcement strategies. It remains uncertain whether the deteriorating conditions for migrants and asylum seekers in 2023 will deter more people from attempting to cross via Tunisia. So far, there is little evidence to suggest that increased cases of abuse have dissuaded foreign migrants from attempting to enter or re-enter Tunisia. Instead, acute security concerns in Libya appear to be encouraging even those expelled from Tunisia to seek to return there. A Sudanese refugee, who was deported from Tunisia to Libya and subsequently released from detention after his brother paid a €900 ransom, returned to Tunisia in October: 'I was happy to be released, but not happy to stay in Libya. My brother helped me find a smuggler who took me back to Zarzis for TND1 000 [€295]. I am now in Zarzis again, but I have no refugee card. I called the UNHCR and told them what happened to me, but they didn't help. I am exhausted and afraid that I will be arrested again.'



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