

HUMAN SMUGGLING AND TRAFFICKING ECOSYSTEMS
– NORTH AFRICA AND THE SAHEL

2023 SERIES



**GLOBAL
INITIATIVE**
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

A photograph of a group of people, likely migrants, in a small, narrow boat on the water. The scene is dimly lit, possibly at night or in low light conditions. The people are packed closely together, some looking towards the camera. The boat is dark, and the water is dark with some ripples. The overall tone is somber and serious.

TUNISIA

INCREASED FRAGILITY
FUELS MIGRATION SURGE

JULY 2023

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INTRODUCTION

Tunisia began 2022 in the midst of a protracted political and economic crisis.¹ President Kais Saied succeeded in consolidating his authority, with the building of a new political order set out as a main priority. On 25 July, amid a low turnout, Tunisians voted in favour of a new constitution, which effectively strengthened the president's powers. The referendum came a year after Saied dismissed government and suspended parliament, which he later dissolved, fuelling a worsening political deadlock. While Saied's opponents claimed the new constitution only sought to enshrine one-man rule, many of his supporters viewed it as a crucial step towards curbing endemic political corruption. Further, Saied's supporters expected the new constitution to unlock long-awaited economic and governance reforms. However, persistent challenges affecting the delivery of key services such as water, health and waste management continued to deteriorate.

Over the course of the year, the country's economic crisis also worsened, with unemployment, underemployment and poverty mounting. Domestic financial difficulties and lack of economic reform were exacerbated by external factors, including the Ukraine war, which triggered an increase in the consumer prices of food staples, in turn leading to shortages of key goods. Despite promises to reverse the economic downturn, the government proved largely unable to reverse the dynamic of rising prices and declining economic options. These dynamics fuelled substantial pessimism about the prospects for positive change in Tunisia and drove heightened interest, for those able, in emigration abroad in search of better economic opportunities.

The combined economic and political crisis contributed to a migration wave from Tunisia that had been rising since early 2020.² In 2022, irregular migration soared to a new high, with 32 371 Tunisian and foreign migrants arriving in Italy, compared to 27 982 in 2011, which was the previous record. Similarly, interceptions by the Tunisian authorities saw a substantial rise, with 38 713 apprehensions at sea and in the country's littoral areas, up from 23 328 in all of 2021.³

Even as the overall level of irregular departures increased, some key patterns have shifted. A major change involved the demography of Tunisian departures. Traditionally, embarkations from Tunisia have overwhelmingly involved Tunisian nationals, usually young men.⁴ Over the course of 2022, growing numbers of women, children and entire families embarked, even as young men remained the largest cohort of irregular migrants. As well, the number of foreigners embarking

from Tunisia also grew. Between 1 January and 31 December, 27 495 foreign migrants – including several thousands who were rescued by the Tunisian armed and security forces after embarking from Libyan shores – were apprehended by the Tunisian government. This represents almost four times the share of sub-Saharan migrants compared to 2021, when foreign migrants represented just 31% of yearly interceptions.

Human smuggling networks remain the main option for Europe-bound Tunisian and foreign migrants. However, self-smuggling – involving migrants pooling their resources, procuring required materials for the sea-crossing and departing autonomously – continues to gain popularity, largely because it is seen as safer than reliance on smugglers.

While maritime routes remained the favoured avenue for Tunisians seeking to reach Europe, a record number also transited via the Western Balkans. For much of the year, movement along the Balkan route was facilitated by visa-free entry into Serbia. However, the popularity and use of this route slumped by December as Serbia – under EU pressure – moved to impose visas on Tunisian travellers.

The continued surge in irregular migration from and through Tunisia in 2022 confirms patterns observed since 2020. With the persistence of the factors influencing irregular movement from the country, the current migration wave is likely to be sustained into 2023. As the country faces a compounded crisis, demand and interest in migration is set to remain high, fuelling a flourishing smuggling market.

Methodology

This brief is based on the GI-TOC's field monitoring system. During 2022 – 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 inquiry areas for field research and validate field interviews collected by researchers.

Care has been taken to triangulate the information. However, the issues detailed in this brief are inherently opaque and the geographic areas covered often remote, volatile or difficult to access. Because of this, the brief should be viewed as a snapshot that will feed into future reporting and analysis from the GI-TOC that is planned to capture the rapidly evolving dynamics in Tunisia and the broader region.



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MOUNTING INTEREST IN MIGRATION AMID A TROUBLED CONTEXT

Tunisia entered 2022 facing substantial political and economic uncertainty, which further fuelled a migration wave ongoing since early 2020. During the year, President Kais Saied succeeded in consolidating his authority. However, the government's focus on the construction of a new political order came as Tunisians struggled with soaring inflation, shortage of key food items and growing poverty.

On 25 July, Tunisians voted in favour of a new constitution, replacing the document adopted in 2014 following the revolution. The referendum came a year after Saied dismissed the Ennahda-backed government and suspended parliament, which he later dissolved. While the voting involved a very low turnout, estimated at 30.5% – the lowest in a Tunisian poll since 2011 – the outcome was nonetheless a victory for the president.⁵ The new constitution effectively gave a more robust legal endorsement to the powers Saied had assumed with Decree 117 (issued in September 2021), which created a stronger presidency by giving the president broad powers to rule by decree, appoint cabinet and set policy directions.

The new constitution received a mixed reaction. While Saied's opponents claimed it only sought to enshrine one-man rule and staged protests in Tunis (see photo on page 4), many of his supporters viewed it as a crucial step towards ridding the country of a corrupt political class that had ruled Tunisia for the past decade. Saied's supporters, however, expected the new constitution to be a stepping stone for the President to address rampant unemployment, rising poverty and worsening public services, challenges that previous governments failed to tackle.

The new political order has done little, however, to address the ailing economy. With a crippling external debt and a 7.7% budget deficit, Tunisia faces a risk of a default.⁶ Despite a staff-level agreement with the IMF for US\$1.9 billion in funding, there has been no finalized agreement to date.⁷

The lack of agreement is largely due to opposition by Saied to the series of reforms required by the IMF. More broadly, he rejected any sort of external conditionality that could aggravate impoverishment. The president appears concerned with the possible political ramifications of extensive spending cuts or selling state-owned firms. Saied's success in eliminating high-profile opposition leaders means that



Empty shelves of mineral water and milk in a supermarket in Ariana, Tunis, September 2022.

© Chedly Ben Ibrahim/NurPhoto via Getty Images

he has little option – if reforms go forward – to shift blame for the resultant pain onto others. Since he alone will own the results, he is reticent to publicly endorse the deal. Nonetheless, he is yet to propose a credible and feasible alternative.

Domestic financial difficulties, lack of economic reform and a slow post-COVID-19 recovery have been exacerbated by external factors, particularly the economic effects of the Ukraine war, which hiked import prices of staples such as grains, sugar and vegetable oil.⁸ As a result, inflation steadily increased from 6.7% in January to 10.1% in December 2022.⁹

Throughout the year, shortages of specific food items, including sugar, coffee and bread, occurred on a sporadic, though sometimes persistent, basis throughout the country. For instance, subsidized vegetable oil was either missing entirely or available only in limited quantities. Such shortages affected citizens and small businesses dependent on such products. A traditional pastry maker in Kairouan explained in February that he had been struggling to source enough cooking oil to sustain his small business: 'I am forced to increase prices slightly, but I am worried I may lose customers. It is tough.'

Inflation and food shortages hit low-income families particularly hard, given their often limited coping options. As one taxi driver in Tunis noted, 'At least the wealthier people can find alternatives to these subsidized products; we just cannot afford the more expensive alternatives.'

This led to a rise in the poverty level, with the number of families in need climbing to over 960 000, amounting to around 4 million Tunisians, up from 310 000 families in 2010, according to the Minister of Social Affairs.¹⁰ In addition to families in need, the Tunisian middle class receded too, with at least 1.6 million middle class members falling into poverty over the past decade, bringing the total number of poor people in Tunisia to nearly 6 million.

In 2020, there was a slight improvement in the unemployment rate, which declined from 18.4% in the third quarter of 2021 to 15.2% during the fourth quarter of 2022.¹¹ Nonetheless, joblessness and underemployment remained extremely high, and remain priority concerns, in particular for youth.

Several prospective Tunisian migrants interviewed throughout the year noted that the difficulty of finding suitable jobs in Tunisia was the principal factor driving their interest in migration. Underemployment and the poor purchasing power afforded by many Tunisians' current salaries were also significant factors. For instance, one interviewee from Medenine said in March that he intends to migrate, despite having a job in Tunis. He explained: 'I only make TND700 [€210] a month, despite working for long hours and under difficult conditions. That is not enough to live decently. I am only surviving, not living, in Tunisia.'

Dire economic conditions in Tunisia appear to play a dual role with regards to migration: they boost interest in irregular migration and create an expanding pool of migrants, while also acting as a restraining factor by curtailing prospective migrants' ability to save up for the journey. One young Tunisian told the GI-TOC that the only barrier keeping him from embarking on the journey is money to fund his trip: 'Mentally, I am no longer in Tunisia. I am only here because I don't have the money to leave.'

Persistent governance challenges affecting the delivery of public services such as water, health and waste management accentuated economic stresses. Public education, which has been undergoing significant challenges, is a prime example. The quality of public education has deteriorated since 2011, while the costs, even for public schools, of supplies and private tutoring, which is increasingly seen as a compulsory supplement to school courses, have steadily increased. These cost increases have disproportionately affected vulnerable families, some of whom can no longer afford to send their children to school.

As a result, Tunisia registers persistent, elevated school dropout rates, with nearly 1 million pupils leaving school between 2010 and 2020.¹² School abandonment is a challenge that predates the 2011 revolution. However, successive attempts by governments post-2011 to remedy this problem had little impact. The high number of dropouts is linked to the fact that many Tunisians no longer perceive education as a main lever for social mobility. 'Young people see their siblings and people in their circle struggle to find jobs; it demotivates them, and they end up leaving school,' explained a civil society activist.

Difficulties in procuring legal visas for travel or emigration is another driver of risky irregular sea-crossings, particularly for disadvantaged Tunisians. Several interviewees evoked challenges in obtaining Schengen visas and underscored that irregular migration was the only real alternative available to them. One young Tunisian interviewed in March explained 'I am planning on taking a boat because I want to see a different world. I know I have no chances of getting a visa. I do not care if I am eventually returned to Tunisia, but I want first to achieve my dream.' Applying for a Schengen visa often involves procuring an array of documents including bank receipts, proof of employment, payslips, tax declarations and proof of social security enrolment. This means that for many Tunisians working in the informal economy, which employs over 44% of the workforce,¹³ obtaining a visa is a far-fetched possibility.

The underlying political, economic and governance factors driving irregular migration have also fuelled growing legal mobility. While attempting the sea-crossing remains a primary option for disadvantaged Tunisians, growing numbers of educated and middle-class Tunisians opt for legal migration avenues towards various destinations including Canada, European states and the Gulf countries. Reliable data on the evolution of legal mobility across different sectors is lacking, but evidence of growing departures from specific professional sectors point at an increasing trend since 2011. For instance, the Order of Tunisian Engineers warned about the impact of the proliferating departures of Tunisian engineers on the entrepreneurial fabric of the economy, estimating that between 2 500 and 3 000 engineers have

left the country each year since 2014.¹⁴ Evoking similar worries, the Minister of Higher Education said in December that 90% of Tunisian engineering graduates leave the country each year.¹⁵

In the same vein, growing numbers of Tunisian doctors move to European countries – primarily France and Germany – upon their graduation, due to frustrations with low wages and poor governance of the public health sector. There are notable year-on-year increases in the migration of medical staff, with at least 970 doctors leaving the country in 2021, up from 570 in 2018.¹⁶ Skilled mobility deprives the Tunisian economy of a much-needed workforce and reduces the quality of public services like health and education that are already dwindling. Brain drain is particularly problematic as public education is heavily subsidized by the state, which means that the exodus of high-skilled migrants incurs palpable financial losses to the country.

However, EU countries are hardening their visa policies, with successful applications now involving a growing number of bureaucratic, financial and psychological hurdles.¹⁷ Moreover, with the rise of irregular migration from Tunisia, many visa applicants are perceived as potential irregular migrants, resulting in what many Tunisians perceive as unfair and arbitrary rejections.

Disagreements between EU member states and Tunisia on irregular migration dynamics, particularly returns of undocumented migrants caught by European authorities, have also influenced approaches to legal mobility by those states. For instance, in September 2021, France cut the number of visas issued to Tunisian nationals by 30% – and for Moroccans and Algerians by 50% – in a bid to propel these North African countries to cooperate more efficiently on readmission.¹⁸ In light of this, trust in legal mobility channels has been seriously undermined.

The challenges facing foreign irregular migrants in Tunisia

The number of undocumented foreign migrants living in Tunisia has increased considerably in recent years, although their total number remains unclear. Given the lack of visa requirements for many sub-Saharan countries, particularly in West Africa, most migrants arrive in the country by commercial air travel, living and working for various lengths of time before embarking for Europe. While most arrive legally, many migrants lapse into irregular status once their tourist or study visas expire. However, arrivals through land borders – notably with Algeria – also increased in 2022. Migrants hail from different countries, with Ivorians appearing to be increasingly visible. Other nationalities present in the country include Guineans, Chadians, Cameroonians, Sudanese, Nigerians, Togolese, Sierra Leoneans and Ghanaians.

It is likely that a combination of factors is behind the rising numbers of sub-Saharan migrants embarking from the shores of Tunisia. Rising departures by sub-Saharan migrants may be, in part, attributable to the expanding size of the sub-Saharan community in Tunisia, as well as the displacement of some foreign migrants from Algeria. In interviews throughout 2022, foreign migrants noted Tunisia was seen as an appealing destination and transit country for sub-Saharan Africans, particularly at a time of mounting hostility towards undocumented migrants across the region.

Some migrants who had been in Libya or Morocco before arriving in Tunisia noted that the country was a better alternative to these countries. For instance, one Cameroonian migrant, who previously lived in Morocco, observed that ‘in Tunisia, there are fewer attacks against sub-Saharans. The disadvantages here are residence permit applications and access to care.’

However, as Tunisia lingers in an acute economic crisis, sub-Saharan migrants have felt the impact of soaring food prices and the shortage of key food staples. Most migrants interviewed by the GI-TOC reported struggling with worsening economic stresses, particularly as many are employed in precarious jobs in construction, the service industry or the agricultural sector. Working in the informal economy poses severe protection challenges that affect vulnerable Tunisians and non-Tunisian workers, as many become victims of abuse. One Cameroonian migrant living in Zarzis, in south-east Tunisia, told the GI-TOC: 'I feel safe in Tunisia, but life here is tough. You can work for long hours under the sun for TND30 [€9.30].'

The irregular status of many foreign migrants entails difficulties in terms of access to services, while obtaining a legal residence permit remains very challenging for those seeking to settle in Tunisia. 'We do not have the possibility of having a work contract and the procedures for applying for a residence permit are complex,' noted one sub-Saharan migrant in Tunisia. Several migrants explained that they are unable to demand wage increases, despite the rising cost of life, due to their vulnerable situation.

In addition to economic difficulties, undocumented migrants in Tunisia encounter integration challenges, including racism, language barriers and lack of access to information. Relationships with the police are also marred, with many migrants fearing aggression from the police or being reluctant to report police aggressions for fear of deportation. The growing presence of undocumented migrants is commonly framed as a threat to national security.¹⁹ The portrayal of migrants as a threat does not only affect irregular migrants, but it also has consequences for those staying legally in the country, notably sub-Saharan students, who are sometimes vulnerable to unlawful action. Emblematic of this tense relationship, Greater Tunis saw a wave of arbitrary arrests of sub-Saharan migrants – including students – between December 2021 and February 2022.²⁰



Asylum seekers protest at the UNHCR office in Tunis, April 2022. © Yassine Gaidi/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

The increasingly visible presence of sub-Saharan migrants has sparked xenophobic tensions, which have affected irregular migrants, especially as this comes amid an acute socio-economic crisis. In recent years, tensions between sub-Saharan migrants and local Tunisian residents intensified in neighbourhoods hosting substantial numbers of migrants, specifically in the governorate of Sfax and in Greater Tunis, escalating at times into violent clashes.

Tensions over the presence of irregular migrants peaked in early 2023. In late February, Tunisia witnessed a crackdown on sub-Saharan irregular migrants throughout the country. The government accelerated an official arrest wave of undocumented migrants while verbal and physical violence against sub-Saharans, both regular and irregular migrants, spiked. The campaign against irregular migrants came following controversial comments by President Kais Saied denouncing the influx of undocumented sub-Saharan migration to Tunisia as a threat to the country's demography. The president's remarks came at a time of growing anti-migrant sentiment and mounting public concerns about the security and economic impact of the influx of migrants.

In the aftermath of mounting attacks against migrants, the Tunisian authorities attempted to appease tensions by sending some reassuring messages and warning against acts of vigilantism against migrants, while doubling down on the need to limit irregular migrant flows. Faced with a domestic and international backlash, the government launched a series of measures in favour of migrants and stepped up diplomatic engagement with countries of origin. Yet, the rapidly evolving context in Tunisia had immediate implications for migrants across the country. For sub-Saharan migrants, rising levels of anti-migration discourse have reinforced a climate of fear and compounded existing difficulties, which are likely to have a lasting impact.

Evolving place of migration in the political and public debate

Despite the prominence of Tunisian migrants along key migration routes, the migration dossier remained very low on the political agenda for much of 2022. Nonetheless, President Saied underlined in several instances the need to develop a comprehensive approach to migration, stressing that security-based approaches alone cannot address this issue. The constant influx of migrants from Tunisia, underpinned by complex factors, makes it challenging to find quick tangible solutions. On this score, the president has been forthcoming in stating that the government cannot offer an immediate solution to irregular migration. Instead, he called for enhancing international cooperation to counter transnational smuggling networks.

However, irregular migration featured more recurrently in the president's discourse following the tragic boat disappearance off the coast of Zarzis in September. As protests spread in the south-eastern town pressuring the government to speed up search and rescue, Saied promised to ensure accountability for any shortcomings in the handling of the tragedy while blaming the tragedy on smugglers and opponents who instrumentalize migration to stir chaos in Tunisia.



People protest against the government's controversial search and rescue operations for a boat capsized off the coast of Zarzis, Tunisia, November 2022. © Tasnim Nasri/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

While during 2022 the migration-focused political rhetoric tackled mostly Tunisian irregular departures, foreign migration into and out of Tunisia emerged more prominently in the public discourse. Discussions on foreign migrants' presence in Tunisia became more common in the media, with a heightened focus on the economic, social and security risks emanating from persistent irregular migration into the country. This denotes a shift from historical patterns where issues linked to foreign migration have had only limited salience in Tunisian political and public discourse, reflecting the reality that, for most of the post-independence period, the country saw very limited inbound migratory flows.

However, in early 2023, migration evolved into a contentious political issue. Speaking to a meeting of the National Security Council on 21 February, President Kais Saied denounced undocumented sub-Saharan migration to Tunisia as a threat to the country's demography. According to the president, the flow of migrants is the result of a long-standing and externally financed plan to settle sub-Saharans in Tunisia, with the aim of alienating the country from its Arab Muslim identity. In his comments, Saied equated persistent irregular migration with an increase in 'violence, crimes and unacceptable practices'. The president ordered the government to take urgent measures to stem the flow of migrants, by mobilizing at diplomatic, security and military levels to counter this threat.

The president's remarks triggered substantial, and seemingly unexpected domestic and international reactions, which in turn piled pressure on Tunisian authorities. As a result, the government started back-paddling on its stance by enacting a series of ad hoc measures in favour of migrants and stepped up diplomatic engagement to appease tensions. Nonetheless, Saied's statement placed migration at the heart of the political debate. This issue is likely to continue to gain traction in the year ahead, especially since flows of foreign migrants into and out of Tunisia are set to continue.



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THE CHANGING DYNAMICS OF HUMAN SMUGGLING FROM TUNISIA

Reflecting the deterioration of economic conditions, irregular migration from Tunisia set a new record in 2022, with interceptions by Italy surging past the previous record, set in 2011 in the wake of the Tunisian revolution. In 2022, 32 371 irregular migrants arrived in Italy from Tunisia, up from 27 982 in 2011.²¹ Another 6 782 Tunisian irregular migrants were intercepted by European border forces on the Western Balkan route, the highest volume yet recorded.

This surge in movement also led Tunisian security and defence forces to intercept between 29 723 and 38 713 irregular migrants at sea and in the country's littoral areas (with the latter estimate likely encompassing some migrants who departed from Libya).²² Either number represents a notable increase in comparison to 2021, when 23 328 interceptions were recorded. While interception data by the Tunisian authorities is not consistently detailed enough, data drawn from interceptions by the Tunisian navy and media reports indicates that apprehended Tunisian migrants hail from across the country and come from varied age groups, reflecting dynamics observed in previous years.

There were a number of shipwrecks in 2022, with the Forum tunisien des droits économiques et sociaux (Tunisian forum for social and economic rights, FTDES) estimating that at least 581 migrants went missing or lost their lives at sea during 2022.²³ While it is difficult to determine with accuracy the nationalities of the migrants, sub-Saharan migrants accounted for at least 200 deaths and disappearances. It is likely, however, that the actual number is higher, given that some boat disappearances go unreported.

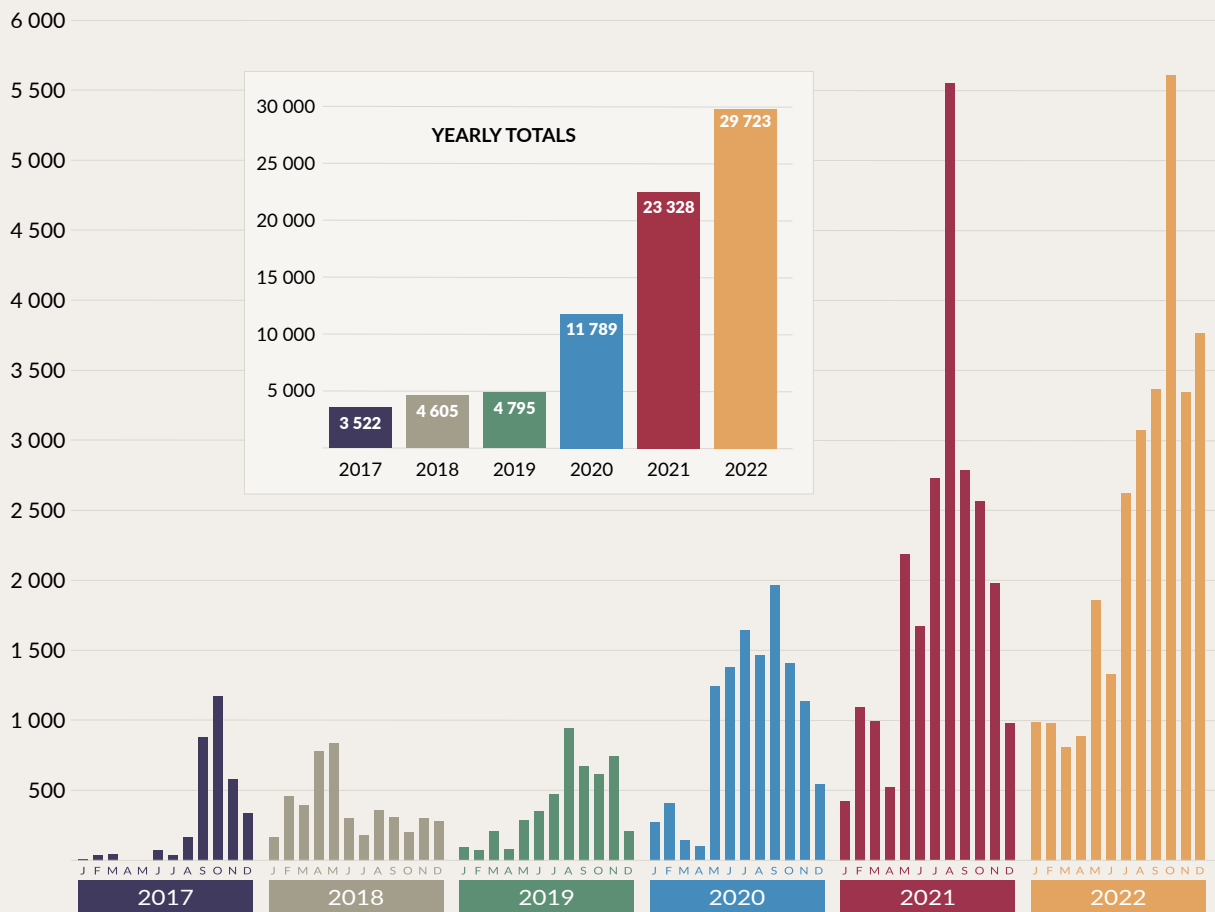


FIGURE 1 Total number of interceptions by Tunisian security and defence forces per month.

SOURCE: GI-TOC monitoring

Several shipwrecks involving children accompanied by their parents throughout the year have underscored the mounting trend of departures by entire families. One such incident occurred on 22 September, when a family of four (two children and their parents) lost their lives at sea. The family was on board a boat carrying 17 migrants that had departed from the beach of Tbolba, in the governorate of Monastir. Earlier in August, another two deadly shipwrecks left at least 21 people dead, including three women accompanied by their children.

The first shipwreck occurred off the coast of the Kerkennah Islands on 9 August, while the second happened off the coast of Monastir around 15 August. In both cases, the boats were carrying only Tunisian migrants, hailing from different governorates, including Sfax, Monastir, Sousse, Kasserine and Sidi Bouzid.

In several instances, shipwrecks involving Tunisian nationals triggered social protests. The most high-profile and sustained example was the disappearance off Zarzis of a migrant boat carrying around 18 migrants from the region, including a baby, on 18 September. Protests in the south-eastern town lasted for weeks, evolving from demands for the government to step up search-and-rescue operations into anger with the government's handling of the disaster and broader discontent with the state's long-standing marginalization of the region.

In addition to steady pressure on Tunisia's maritime borders, the smuggling of sub-Saharan migrants across the country's land borders spiked during 2022, with most irregular entry attempts occurring along the border with Algeria. The Tunisian army thwarted a total of 3 601 attempts of illegal entry into Tunisia along the country's eastern and western land borders during 2022,²⁴ while the National Guard intercepted at least 600 migrants. Most of the migrants seeking to reach Tunisia hail from sub-Saharan countries, with many having previously been in Algeria. The inflow of sub-Saharan migrants from neighbouring Algeria has increased since the COVID-19 pandemic, with migrants attempting to reach Tunisia due to job losses and fears of deportation.²⁵ These factors continued to propel land crossings into Tunisia during 2022, with the governorates of Kasserine, Jendouba and Kebili registering particularly elevated levels of arrivals.

Foreigners, women and children migrating in greater numbers

Even as 2022 saw the continuation of a broader surge in movement from Tunisia, the profile of those embarking expanded. Traditionally, embarkations from Tunisia have overwhelmingly involved Tunisian nationals, usually young men. However, there has been a rise in foreigners, women, children and entire families migrating irregularly from Tunisian shores.

The first major shift involved sub-Saharan migrants, who accounted for a significant share of monthly interceptions by Tunisian authorities throughout the year. This development broke with longstanding dynamics in which Tunisians accounted for most interceptions. In 2022, 27 495 foreign migrants – involving several thousands who were rescued by the Tunisian armed and security forces after departing from Libya – were apprehended, most hailing from sub-Saharan countries, accounting for around 71% of all interceptions by Tunisian forces. This represents a substantial increase from 2021, when foreign migrants represented just 31% of interceptions.

Rising Tunisian interceptions of foreigners paralleled a sharp rise in arrivals in Italy of foreigners embarking from Tunisia, rising from around 4 000 in 2021 to around 13 900 in 2022. However, while both sides reported concurrent rises, a discrepancy existed, with absolute numbers and the percentage of foreign migrants far lower in Italy than in Tunisia. This incongruence suggests that foreign migrants are more vulnerable to interceptions by Tunisian authorities. This dynamic can be explained by several factors, including a change in how foreign migrants undertake the sea crossing (detailed below).

There was also a tendency for differing percentages of Tunisians and non-Tunisians to be intercepted at different times in the year. Foreign migrants accounted for most monthly interceptions during the autumn and winter months, when demand for migration and prices normally decrease. Tunisians, on the other hand, were more likely to undertake the sea crossing during the warmer months of the year, when weather conditions are more favourable.

According to UNHCR data, sea arrivals in Italy indicate that migrants originating from Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea were main groups of foreigners embarking from Tunisia. However, it is clear that a broader set of nationalities are embarking from the country, involving a mix of Sub-Saharan nationals and migrants hailing from other North African countries. There has been a growing trend among young Moroccan migrants, for example, to embark from Tunisia, though absolute numbers remain limited.

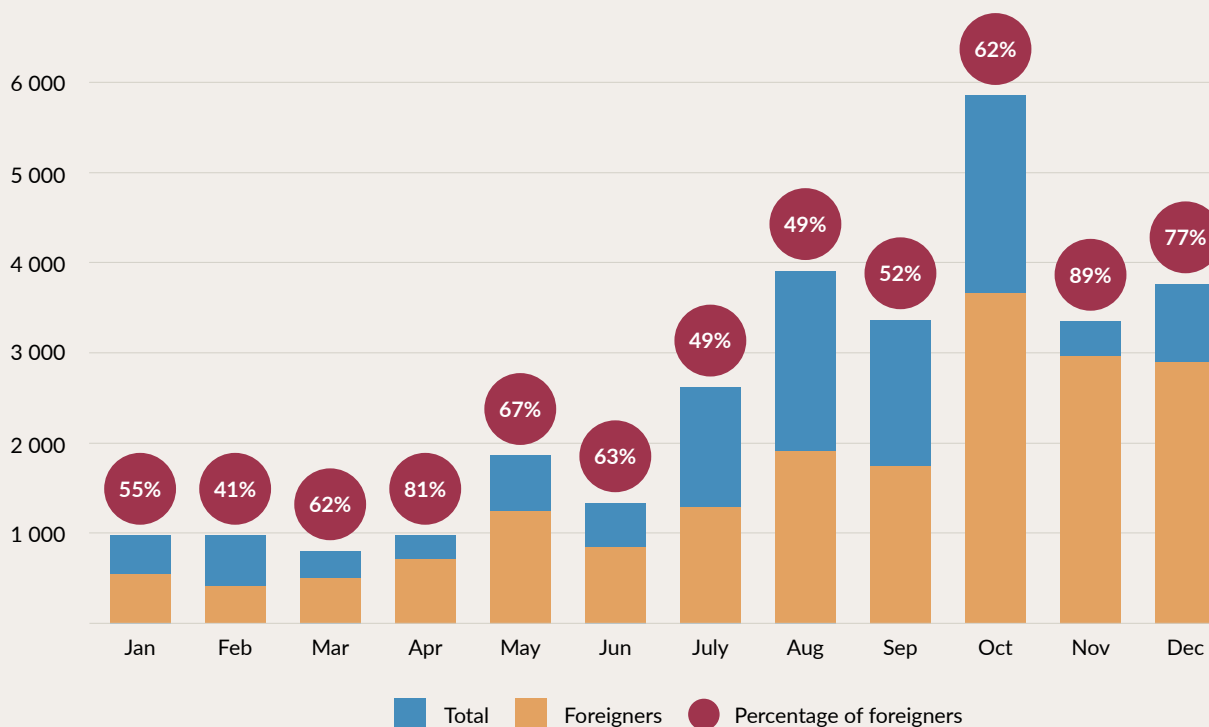


FIGURE 2 Proportion of foreign migrants intercepted by Tunisian security and defence forces, 2022.

The second major shift in migrant profiles during 2022 involved women and children. While men remain the largest cohort of Tunisian arrivals in Italy, a growing number of families, women and minors attempted to reach Europe irregularly. During 2022, 1 057 Tunisian accompanied minors (up from 655 in 2021) and 2 515 unaccompanied minors (up from 2 076 in 2021) arrived in Italy, constituting 19% of total Tunisian arrivals. Some 919 women were also intercepted by Italian authorities, up from 584 in 2021.

This dynamic is reflected on the Tunisian side, with authorities noting an increasing presence of women in interceptions by the security and defence forces, although exact numbers are not available. Between 1 January and 13 September, for example, authorities intercepted 401 women and 412 minors. One Tunisian NGO estimated that, in total, some 500 Tunisian families arrived in Italy via the maritime route in 2022.²⁶

As outlined previously, a combination of factors drives irregular migration from Tunisia, including unemployment, poor wages, worsening poverty and deteriorating public services. All these dynamics are salient to families and minors contemplating the journey, but for these groups there are also extra dynamics that are significant.

For example, families planning to leave for Europe interviewed for this research stressed a sense of insecurity in Tunisia and a perception that, if they were to stay, their children would be unlikely to enjoy a decent future in the country. 'There is nothing to live for here – no political stability, no security, no good health system, the education is getting from bad to worse. Why would I stay and make my daughter live the same thing?,' said one man interviewed.²⁷

In some cases, families with young children were motivated by the entrenched belief that travelling with children will give them privileges in Europe, including protection from deportation and education and care for the children. As one interviewee considering migration with his family explained, 'If you have kids under 18, there are more chances of legalizing your stay.' It is also for these reasons that an increasing number of pregnant women undertake the sea crossing, aiming to deliver their babies in Europe, a phenomenon that was until recently only observed among foreign migrants, according to the spokesperson of the National Guard.

Interviewed families who planned on a maritime migration attempt indicated that they preferred to arrange migration through smugglers. Reportedly, some smugglers seem to incentivize this, allowing minors under 12 to ride for free, if the parents only bring two children and keep them close, so as not to take up too much space. In other cases, smugglers charge half price for transporting a minor.

Nonetheless, some migrant families engaged in self-smuggling, which involves migrants sourcing the vessels, motors and fuel, and departing autonomously. In one such attempt, the National Maritime Guard intercepted a boat carrying two families (a total of 15 individuals), who had departed from the northern governorate of Bizerte in July.²⁸ However, self-smuggling of families remains rare, with smugglers viewed as the safer option for families travelling together. 'A friend of mine contacted a smuggler for us. It is foolish to self-smuggle your family. You are not only risking your life but also the lives of your family,' said one Tunisian migrant from Sousse.²⁹

The factors driving the departure of unaccompanied minors are slightly different from those driving families, and are likely to be linked to the deprioritization of child policies and the deterioration of public education. 'Many of the school dropouts represent immediate candidates for clandestine migration,' noted one civil society activist. Struggling with heavy pressures and worsening conditions, families are also no longer able to play a mentoring role for youth. Consequently, minors are often left to themselves, spending time aimlessly in the streets and the cafes, which is where the idea of clandestine migration often starts to take shape.

While previously families resisted their children's attempts to leave Tunisia clandestinely, often seeking to dissuade them from risking their lives at sea, worsening socio-economic conditions have meant that many families are no longer convinced that their children can have a decent future in the country. As a result, many families finance the migrant's trip to Europe while striving to ensure a safe sea crossing for their family members by looking for 'trusted smugglers'. In addition to financing the trip, families support irregular migration of children by liaising with smugglers and coordinating with relatives abroad, who will often take in the minors in the destination country. As one young man from Sousse said: 'Once the family hears that their child arrived in Europe, they will support them. Whether they accept it or not [...], they will always feel that they have the duty to secure their kid's life, so they will contact relatives and friends to at least help for the first few days, and also for work.'³⁰

Rather than a 'solitary attempt', irregular migration has turned into a 'family undertaking' over the last decade, as noted by one Tunisian sociologist.³¹ Irregular departures of families and minors from Tunisia are set to continue, driven by a worsening socio-economic situation for families.

Maritime human smuggling dynamics

Mirroring dynamics observed in recent years, migrants embarking from Tunisian shores often choose between two key smuggling methods: human smuggling networks, which have remained the principal avenue for undertaking the sea crossing, or self-smuggling. While previously smuggling networks were the sole option for foreign migrants attempting the sea crossing, this dynamic has shifted, with an increasing number of foreign migrants opting for self-smuggling to lessen reliance on smugglers.

Generally, smuggling networks catering to Tunisian nationals are active all along the country's coastline. Networks catering to foreign migrants are mostly concentrated in the centre governorate of Sfax and the southern town Zarzis, in Medenine governorate. While human smuggling networks have operated in Tunisia for over two decades, smuggling networks remain small, often involving a handful of personnel, and highly distributed across the country's coastline.³²

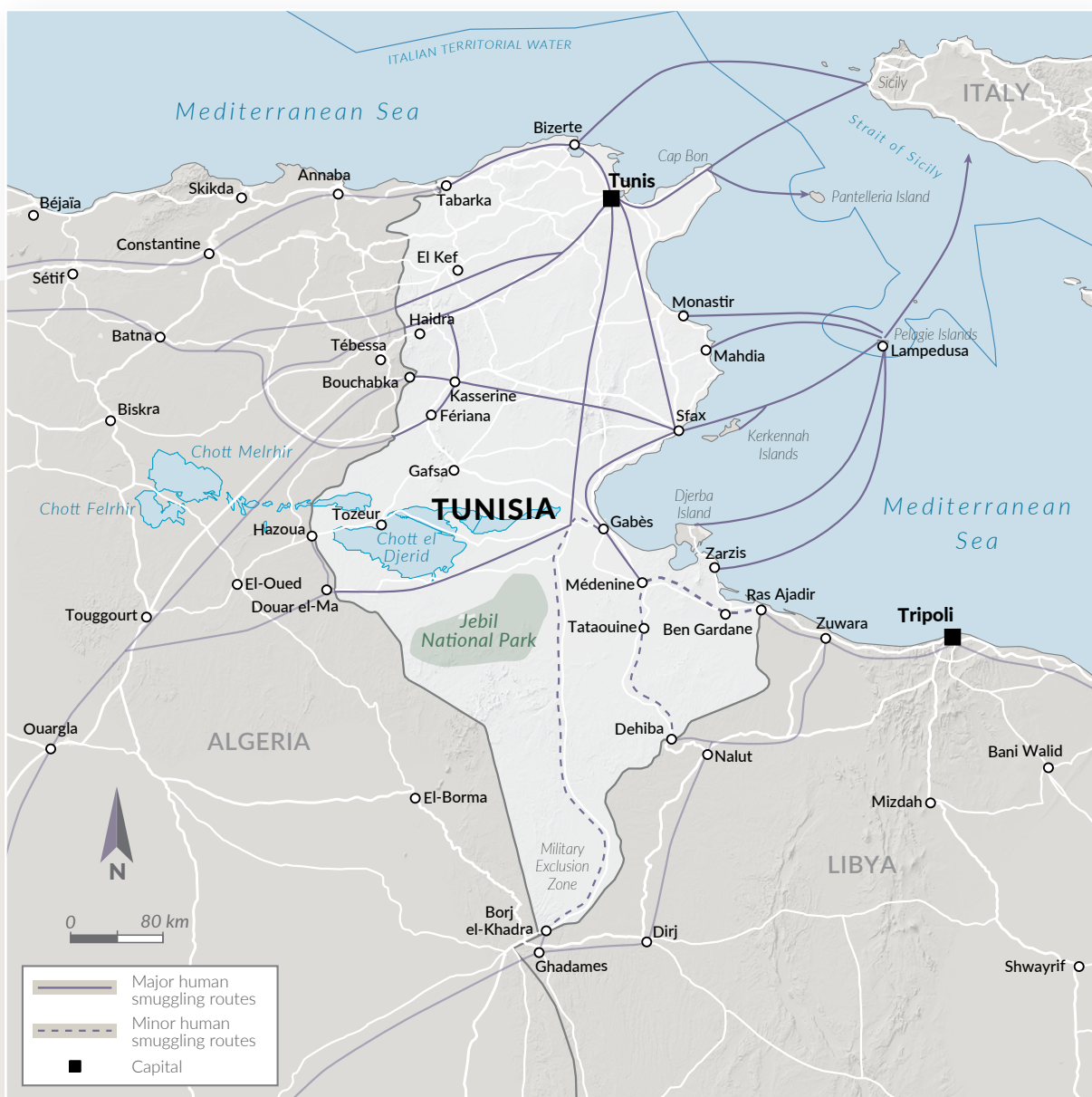


FIGURE 3 Human smuggling routes through Tunisia, December 2022.

Prices charged by smugglers to migrants tend to vary based on the period of departure, the migrant's nationality, the point of departure, quality of the boat, and the number of people on board. For instance, during the summer months in 2022, prices reported in Sfax ranged between TND5 000 and TND6 000 ((€1 479–€1 777) for foreign migrants, and between TND4 500 and TND5 000 (€1 333–€1 479) for Tunisians. Prices can drop to as low as TND2 000 (€592) during the winter months.

The rise in smuggling and self-smuggling has ignited the growth of an illicit business around boats. Boats can be sourced through agents in departure hubs who trade in stolen, old, burnt or damaged boats and motors. The agent illegally buys boats from fishermen, individuals owning leisure boats or those trading in stolen boats. The agent will then repair the boat to sustain one more trip and resell it to prospective migrants. The price of a boat starts at TND4 000 (€1 184), with costs reaching as high as TND30 000 (€8 894), depending on the quality of the boat.

Moreover, illegal boat-making workshops are now operating in coastal areas, often close to popular departure points. They generally employ limited numbers of individuals in the construction process. To avoid police controls, some boat manufacturers have set up their workshops inside their houses. Security forces have targeted such workshops, with several dismantled in Sfax and Monastir. In one instance, on 22 November, the National Guard in Jebeniana, a key smuggling hub in the governorate of Sfax, seized a quantity of iron transported in two trucks that were headed to a boat-making workshop in the area.³³ According to the spokesperson of the National Guard, some licit boat-making companies have proven to also have illicit activities, including clandestinely manufacturing boats destined for irregular migration.³⁴

In some instances, migrants involved in self-smuggling have sought to build their own boats. In a striking instance during August, the National Guard arrested a group of 31 sub-Saharan migrants who were building a boat in a forest near the beach in Mahdia.³⁵



A boat that was being built by a group of sub-Saharan migrants in a forest near the beach in Mahdia, August 2022. © Facebook

Smuggling of sub-Saharan migrants from Tunisia

Irregular departures by sub-Saharan migrants from Tunisia have proliferated since the beginning of 2022. The growing share of foreign migrants leaving from Tunisia underscores the country's mounting importance as a destination and transit hub. While smuggling networks remain the main option for foreign migrants headed to Europe, many migrants are also resorting to partial self-smuggling to lessen reliance on smugglers.

Historically, most Europe-bound sub-Saharan migrants transiting Tunisia embarked with the assistance of smuggling networks, actors who also served Tunisians. While this remains the case, some smuggling networks have begun to cater only to foreigners. Sub-Saharans are increasingly involved in the human smuggling business, often acting as intermediaries and, to a lesser extent, as organizers and coordinators.

Most sub-Saharan migrants appear to prefer transiting with Tunisian smugglers, who continue to dominate the business. Security is a primary concern for migrants, with multiple interviewees perceiving Tunisian smugglers to be safer, given their experience and knowledge of the terrain. This is in spite of the fact that perceptions of such smugglers are often quite negative, with most interviewed migrants describing them as 'thieves' and 'inhuman'.

Meanwhile, migrant perceptions of sub-Saharan smugglers, whose numbers remain very limited, vary. While a small number of migrants reported that they trust neither Tunisian nor sub-Saharan smugglers, most migrants perceived sub-Saharan smugglers to be the lesser evil, describing them as more flexible and easier to negotiate with than Tunisians, given their awareness of the conditions of the migrants.

Reaching out to smugglers happens by liaising with an intermediary, often a sub-Saharan national, to identify pricing and book a place on a boat. According to interviewees, contacting intermediaries is easy, given their prominence within migrant communities. 'Everybody knows them. Sometimes they approach us and ask if we want to leave,' noted one migrant in Zarzis. In addition to finding candidates within their network, intermediaries tend to resort to sub-Saharan migrant groups on Facebook to recruit remaining candidates for an imminent trip.

Once the desired number for the embarkation is reached, the smuggler sets a date for the trip, with the departure day and time often only communicated to the migrants at the last moment. Candidates usually gather a few days before the trip in urban areas close to the embarkation point. On the day of the sea crossing, they are often transported in pickups or trucks, sometimes hidden under other materials, to the departure zone.

There is a growing trend among smugglers to send groups of sub-Saharan migrants out on their own, with one of the migrants, often someone with some maritime experience, assigned to pilot the boat. 'Tunisian smugglers now train sub-Saharans for this because it is dangerous for Tunisians to be found with us,' explained one Cameroonian migrant. The smuggler provides the 'captain' with instructions, teaching him to read a compass and to steer the boat.

This shift is reportedly due to a change in the police handling of smugglers who are found to be transporting foreign migrants. Reportedly, smugglers are being charged in some instances with human trafficking, implying heavier prison sentences and fines than smuggling, as per Tunisia's 2016 anti-human trafficking law.



Tunisian National Guard arrests migrants hiding in a truck headed towards an embarkation point, 18 October 2022. © *Tunisian Interior Ministry*

Prices for sea crossings charged to sub-Saharan migrants vary depending on departure location and the season. During the high migration season, the cost of irregular migration was in the range of TND3 500–TND6 000 (€1 036–€1 778) for embarkations from Sfax and Sousse and TND7 000–TND8 000 (€2 074–€2 371) from Zarzis. During winter, however, prices can drop to as low as TND2 000 (€592), particularly in Sfax, when demand for migration ebbs. Importantly, transport prices have risen in recent years, driven by the increased demand for migration and the greater cost of materials used for sea crossings, including the price of fuel. Many migrants perceive these prices to be elevated, especially considering the increased risk of interceptions and shipwrecks.

While human smuggling networks remain important for foreign migrants, sub-Saharan migrants are increasingly engaging in self-smuggling, propelled by a dwindling trust in maritime smugglers and the high number of shipwrecks. Unlike self-smuggling involving Tunisians, attempts by foreign migrants in Tunisia do still involve a Tunisian actor, often a smuggler, who is used to procure a boat and, occasionally, to assist the group in deciding on the departure time and location, as well as to provide GPS coordinates and instructions on piloting the boat. 'Sometimes we contact Tunisian smugglers to go with [us], but sometimes we contact them only to help us buy a boat,' explained one sub-Saharan migrant.

While self-smuggling remains limited among sub-Saharans, the rise of this smuggling method could have several consequences for migration enforcement and the safety of migrants. First, forgoing smugglers may raise the likelihood of migrants being intercepted. Moreover, the shift in smuggling methods could make the sea crossings more dangerous, with foreign migrants embarking even during challenging weather, despite the lack of adequate expertise, and using poor-quality boats. It is important to stress, however, that the risk of shipwrecks remains even when migrants resort to travelling with human smugglers.

It is unlikely that the high number of apprehensions and rising number of shipwrecks will dissuade migrants from transiting Tunisia. One interviewee noted that, for many migrants, the worst-case scenario would be repatriation following interception. For many, the failure of one migration attempt means having to go through the same process of saving up for the cost of the journey and reattempting the crossing to Europe. As one Cameroonian migrant stated: 'My wife and I attempted the sea crossing twice this year, and we were intercepted each time. We won't stop until we reach Europe.'³⁶

International smuggling via Tunisia remains rare but is emerging

While most foreign migrants embarking from Tunisia meet and contract with human smugglers once in the country, there are signs that some more structured international structures are emerging. To date, this has primarily been seen with Moroccan irregular migrants. The case of one group of migrants from Casablanca, who ultimately disappeared at sea in December 2021, offers an insight into how international smuggling through Tunisia occurs.

Between October and November 2021, 38 young Moroccans travelled to Tunis from the Mohamed V Airport in Casablanca. The group all came from Sidi Moumen, a low-income neighbourhood in Casablanca.

The group's itinerary was reportedly arranged by a Moroccan living legally in Europe. Such arrangements are reportedly common, with former irregular migrants often building on their own experience of undertaking the journey to develop human smuggling activities.

The migrants in the Sidi Moumen group reportedly paid for a more organized form of travel, a package that included the cost of the plane ticket from Morocco to Tunisia and the sea-crossing to Italy. An interviewee in Morocco indicated that a full package for such trips typically costs between €2 000 and €4 500, pricing broadly confirmed by the statements of family members of the Sidi Moumen group, who indicated that each migrant in that group had paid around €4 200 for the trip. This high price led many in the Sidi Moumen to borrow to cover the cost of the journey. Nonetheless, most reportedly saw it as an investment in safe travel to Europe, given that they were reportedly promised a secure ferry crossing from Tunisia to Italy.

A first instalment, reportedly €500, was paid to a middleman in Sidi Moumen. Once this payment was done, plane travel between Casablanca and Tunis was arranged, with migrants arriving in the latter city over several weeks. Moroccans are able to enter Tunisia visa-free and can stay in the country for up to three months, meaning at this point the group remained legal.

Group members then travelled to the town of Skhira, 100 kilometres south of the city of Sfax. There the group embarked on a large boat on 16 December, along with passengers from Egypt and Syria. It is likely that the smugglers in Skhira were a local Tunisian network, with European-based Moroccan smugglers normally relying on local smugglers and intermediaries in countries of origin and transit to arrange the sea-crossings.

The last time the boat was seen occurred the same day, when a vessel with mechanical issues reportedly made contact with workers on a petroleum platform offshore from Sfax governorate. The workers offered to call for assistance, but the boat passengers reportedly refused, and insisted on carrying on towards Italy. Contact was then lost with the group, with bodies recovered on 25 and 28 December.

While tragic, the itinerary of the Sidi Moumen group underscores that international smuggling networks are increasingly active in Tunisia, though the degree and prevalence for various nationalities is unclear. It is likely that this is driven both by Tunisia's increasing prominence as a departure location and limited alternative options. In particular for Moroccans, Tunisia is increasingly seen as a safer and surer option than Libya, with less risk of abuse in detention facilities, in turn leading smugglers to re-route their activities. However, international networks remain dependent on local Tunisian human smugglers for

operations, though the interplay between the two is often complex and poorly understood. It remains to be seen how international smuggling to and through Tunisia will develop, especially if the feasibility of the current long-term transit migration system, with foreign migrants living for extended periods in the country before embarking, becomes infeasible.

Increased enforcement in response to rising departures

Throughout 2022, Tunisian authorities reportedly sought to increase enforcement, leading to high numbers of interceptions. A total of 1 023 smugglers and middlemen were reportedly arrested during the year, along with the seizure of 978 boats and 106 cars used for transporting migrants to departure points.³⁷

There is also evidence of Tunisian authorities engaging in pre-emptive measures to halt irregular departures. In one instance, a family of seven was arrested at a police checkpoint while taking a regional taxi (known as a *louage*) from the interior governorate of Kairouan to coastal Mahdia, from where they intended to embark. Moreover, numerous arrests occurred in littoral areas while migrants were in the process of preparing for the journey.

The authorities further increased surveillance in forests close to the beaches, which serve as hideouts for migrants, who often conceal themselves between trees or hide in abandoned buildings awaiting the departure time. Some prospective migrants noted in interviews that they perceived border controls in Tunisia's littoral to be increasingly strict, leading many to prefer moving via alternate options, such as through the Balkans route (detailed in the following section), despite the higher cost of such options.

Border controls appear to have been tightened especially in departure hubs – notably, Sfax. One controversial aspect of enforcement involves the Tunisian government imposing entry restrictions on Tunisian citizens travelling to the Kerkennah Islands, a traditional smuggling hub in the governorate.³⁸ While restrictions on entry to the islands, in a bid to halt embarkations, were reported in previous years, such measures were particularly enforced during July and August, with Tunisians seeking to take the ferry being asked to show their ID documents and justify their visit. The government's approach triggered criticism on social media over restrictions on the movement of Tunisian citizens within the country. In general, restrictions on entry to Kerkennah appeared to have slowed down departures from the islands.

However, smuggling groups operating from the islands managed to circumvent these restrictions. Some smuggling networks, for example, began clandestinely transporting migrants from Sfax to Kerkennah using fishing boats. Others recruited people to transport migrants in their personal cars, creating the impression that they were friends on a visit to the islands. Such one-way trips to the islands cost in the range of TND700–TND1 000 (€207–€296). Overall, the restrictions on entry to Kerkennah succeeded in impeding access to the islands, particularly for foreign migrants, leading embarkations to continue to overwhelmingly occur from mainland Sfax.

The resilience of smuggling networks – and their capacity to adapt to shifting contexts – presents a major challenge in terms of border control. As noted previously, smuggling networks in Tunisia remain largely small and localized, meaning that increasing counter-smuggling efforts can disrupt the business, but not eradicate it. When a network is dismantled, another emerges, especially as the high demand for migration sustains this lucrative business.

Rising Tunisian movement along the Balkans route

A notable development in late 2021 and 2022 was the growing popularity of the Western Balkans route among Tunisians. While migrating through the Balkans route tends to be more expensive and complicated than maritime options for Tunisian migrants, the journey is perceived to be safer and surer.

This itinerary is not entirely new, with the route seeing some limited use since the early 2010s.³⁹ However, its importance had been limited, with EU border and coastguard agency Frontex reporting only 1 339 Tunisians intercepted on the route between January 2009 and December 2021. In contrast, in 2022, 6 782 Tunisians were apprehended on the route, with a continual month-on-month increase in arrests, underscoring a substantial shift in the itinerary for Tunisian irregular migration. As with maritime migration, on the Balkans route most Tunisian migrants were young men, though a growing number of women and accompanied children appeared on the route during the second half of 2022.

Interviews and media reports suggest that a far larger number of Tunisians arrived in Europe successfully via the Western Balkans route. Interviewees in Tataouine governorate noted that thousands of young people from the region took the route in 2022. Other studies suggest that between 12 000 and 15 000 migrants from Tataouine arrived in Europe using this route in the first eight months of the year, although these numbers remain unconfirmed.⁴⁰ While Tataouine appears to be somewhat of an outlier, with an extraordinarily high level of migrants using the Western Balkans route, it underscores that even the sharp spike in migrant interceptions recorded by European authorities on the route may represent only a fraction of its actual usage.

For Tunisian migrants, the Western Balkans itinerary typically begins at the Tunis-Carthage International Airport, from where migrants travel legally to Serbia, taking advantage of the visa-free entry into the country. Migrants typically travelled first from Tunisia to Istanbul. While some migrants continued directly to Belgrade, most spent several days in Turkey, to make their trip appear more 'touristic' and hence lessen the risk of being turned back in Belgrade, before booking a second flight to Serbia. Reportedly, a growing number of networks in Istanbul cater to the Tunisian migrants, arranging plane tickets, as well as a 'travel partner' for male migrants (typically a woman who accompanies a male traveller to Serbia, as single men appear to be more at risk of being turned away at the airport in Belgrade).

Once in Belgrade, migrants chose between seeking the assistance of a smuggler or self-smuggling. Most commonly, Tunisian migrants opted for smugglers offering passage from Serbia to Hungary. Migrants typically got into contact with smugglers prior to leaving Tunisia, with agreements then finalized, often by WhatsApp, once the migrant arrived in Belgrade, or in person when the migrant arrived at the smuggler's gathering point along the border. In some cases, intermediaries working with human smuggling groups also waited for migrants at the exit of the Belgrade airport or at hostels catering to Tunisian migrants who arrive without first having found a smuggler.

There are two main packages offered by smugglers operating along the Serbia–Hungary border. The more expensive package, known as *taslima* ('delivery'), is a package deal, involving a land crossing from Serbia to Hungary, after which migrants are transported by car to Vienna. Throughout the year, the price for this package ranged between €2 500 and €4 000. The second package is known as *takatie* ('crossings'), and is more basic, involving only the border crossing. As part of it, smugglers provide migrants with ladders for climbing the two fences separating Hungary and Serbia.



FIGURE 4 Tunisian migration through the Western Balkans.

Some prominent smugglers working on the Western Balkans route have risen to fame among Tunisian migrants, including a smuggler known as 'Kazawi' (nicknamed after his hometown, Casablanca) and another known as 'Tétouani' (named after Tetouan in Morocco). The largest smuggling networks are often referred to as 'states', an expression that illustrates the breadth and capacities of such networks, which can extend across several countries, employ dozens of people and offer different services, including transport and accommodation. Reportedly, the sustained high demand for migration along the Western Balkans route has led to the emergence of new smugglers, including Tunisians operating in Turkey and Serbia.

Social media plays a key role in the activities of smugglers. Some smuggling networks use social networks, particularly Facebook and TikTok, to publish daily lists of arrivals, documented videos of migrants getting off cars near the border with Austria, and videos of migrants in their final destinations thanking the smugglers for their services. These videos reassure families awaiting news from their relatives while at the same time advertising smuggling services and maintaining a strong reputation of the smuggling network. The latter point is particularly important amid the growing competition among networks active along the Serbia–Hungary border.

A limited number of Tunisian migrants rely on self-smuggling from Serbia to Hungary. This method is particularly common among migrants with limited financial means. There are two main routes used by do-it-yourself migrants travelling via the Western Balkans route: 'the road of the triangle' (*trik el-mouthalath*) and 'the road of the park' (*trik el-mahmia*). The 'road of the triangle' refers to the tri-border area between Serbia, Romania and Hungary. On this route, migrants first cross the Serbia–Romania border, then head towards Hungary. On 'the road of the park' route, migrants cross the border from north-west Serbia into Croatia near Sombor, then continue towards Hungary. After reaching Hungary, migrants rely on trains to reach Western Europe. Self-smuggling, however, is largely perceived as risky, leading most migrants to rely on smugglers

It remains to be seen, however, whether the Western Balkan route will continue its rise in importance for Tunisian migrants. In October 2022 the Serbian government announced imposing visas on Tunisian travellers, starting on 20 November. The decision came following pressure from EU countries on Serbia to change the policy.

The announcement led to a short-term spurt in movement as many Tunisians attempted to reach Serbia before the new visa requirement came into force, especially as a significant number of migrants were already in Turkey waiting to continue the journey. However, a hardened stance on Tunisians' entry at the Belgrade airport led to many Tunisian travellers being denied entry into Serbia even before 20 November.⁴¹

It is likely that the new restrictions on Tunisians' entry into Serbia will reduce the appeal of this route to a great extent. However, the visa imposition could also trigger a shift in how migrants arrange their journeys across the Western Balkans towards Western Europe. Chiefly, Tunisian migrants attempting to travel along this route will need to start their journeys from Turkey, as do other migrants from the Maghreb countries.

During November, some smuggling groups active along the Serbia–Hungary border advertised overland transport services for Tunisian migrants from Turkey towards Serbia. Moreover, some migrants who found themselves stuck in Turkey were reportedly approached by agents offering fraudulent documents, including EU residence permits, to facilitate their entry into Europe. Thus, removing the visa requirement may increase the importance of transnational smuggling networks and make the journeys taken longer, more expensive and more dangerous.

Nonetheless, given the new visa requirement and the steady increase in the prices of migration along this route, it is probable that the number of Tunisians taking this path will decrease significantly. Maritime options are likely to be seen as cheaper and less complicated. One young Tunisian stressed, 'I've heard of a Tunisian smuggler in Belgrade who can help you get a visa to Albania, then facilitate your travel into Serbia, but I am not sure I would go for it. It is very expensive, and the route is too long.'



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CONCLUSION

For Tunisia, 2022 was a difficult year. Citizens and foreigners living in the country grappled with soaring prices, shortages of basic food staples, weakened purchasing power and rising poverty. Despite promises to improve the economy and respond to people's demands, the government was largely unable to offer tangible solutions and inspire confidence. The country's economic growth remained slow and was unable to absorb the large number of job seekers, driving high levels of unemployment. External shocks, notably the war in Ukraine, compounded existing difficulties, plunging the country into further uncertainty.

The deterioration of the situation in Tunisia has driven a spike in both regular and irregular migration. Many highly qualified people have left the country in recent years, including from critical sectors such as health and education, further putting a strain on the delivery of public services. Many more are actively seeking visas to work in Europe, the Gulf or North America.

For those unable to access legal pathways, the choice is effectively to endure the status quo or leave through irregular means. Throughout 2022, growing numbers of Tunisians and foreign undocumented migrants in Tunisia chose irregular departures. As a result, human smuggling routes and methods diversified, and the prices of journeys have increased. While Tunisian and foreign migrants continued to rely on smugglers' services, self-smuggling continued to gain in prominence during 2022. Formerly a dynamic seen mostly among Tunisian migrants, sub-Saharan are increasingly experimenting with self-smuggling, seeing it as cheaper although not necessarily safer.

It is not only maritime routes that gained momentum, however. Land routes through the Western Balkans saw the arrival of thousands of Tunisians before the EU moved to close this route to citizens of Tunisia.

The first six months of 2023 saw a substantial acceleration in human smuggling and irregular migration, with 30 549 arrivals to Italy from Tunisia by 26 June.⁴² Tunisian authorities intercepted another 23 500 migrants. Foreign migrants living in Tunisia have driven this surge to date, accounting for roughly 86% of arrivals to Italy.⁴³ Their departure from Tunisia has been fuelled by a sharp deterioration in conditions. Between late February and early March, many migrants were evicted from their houses and dismissed from their jobs while facing the risk of arrests and violence. This action was prompted, in part, by a denouncement by President Saied of undocumented sub-Saharan migration to Tunisia during a National Security Council meeting in late February, where he claimed it was a threat to the country's demography.

The rapidly changing context created a climate of fear and fuelled migration among undocumented migrants in the country. While Saied later changed track and sought to assuage the fears of the migrant community, the damage has largely been done. As one sub-Saharan migrant bluntly stated: 'We don't feel safe here, and this pushes us to take even more risks to cross the Mediterranean.'⁴⁴

While irregular migration from Tunisia by Tunisians has stood far below that by foreign migrants, it too is exceeding historic norms. Between 1 January and 30 May, 7 353 Tunisian irregular migrants departed from their country for Italy, up from 4 316 during the same period in 2022. This rise in Tunisian departures is a potential predictor for coming months. Normally, there is a seasonal fluctuation in departures from Tunisia, with more foreigners migrating during winter months and Tunisians generally embarking from mid-summer to mid-autumn. Dynamics in 2023 followed this pattern, albeit with a far higher level of aggregate departures by foreigners. It is likely that departure levels for Tunisian nationals will begin to rise sharply in the coming months.

This likelihood is exacerbated by a continued deterioration of socio-economic conditions in Tunisia, with rising unemployment, price increases and recurrent shortages of food staples. 'Last year was somewhat easier because the hikes were on certain items. Price hikes now are even affecting the simplest things. We struggle to afford the basics,' noted one young Tunisian.⁴⁵

There is substantial uncertainty about whether the economic situation will stabilize, with Saied continuing to reject the agreement with the IMF, leading to a growing risk the country will default on external debt. Negotiations on a revised package are reportedly occurring, though if and on what time frame a new agreement can be signed remains unclear.

Against a background of entrenched structural crises, elevated migration levels are likely to be sustained and continue to increase in the second half of 2023. It is likely that a mix of factors will influence the magnitude of departures. These include how the socio-economic situation will evolve – for both Tunisians and foreign migrants –, the security forces' capacity to deal with heightened migratory pressure and how smuggling groups adapt to shifting enforcement dynamics.

Even if the socio-economic situation stabilizes, in 2023 irregular migration from Tunisia is strongly likely to exceed the record level seen in 2022. The pool of migrants already actively planning to leave through legal or irregular channels is large and it seems there is little that can dissuade them from this goal. As one young man in Zarzis said: 'All my brothers left the country, and I need to join them.'⁴⁶

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