HUMAN SMUGGLING AND TRAFFICKING ECOSYSTEMS
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TUNISIA

CRACKDOWNS DISRUPT SMUGGLING AND FUEL NEW ABUSES

DECEMBER 2025

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INTRODUCTION

Since the record number of departures in 2023, Tunisia's migration landscape has undergone a significant change.[1] As a country of departure to Europe and a transit hub linking sub-Saharan Africa with the central Mediterranean, Tunisia occupies a pivotal position in regional migration dynamics. Developments along its land and maritime borders influence mobility patterns, smuggling economies and humanitarian conditions across North Africa and Europe.

In response to rising departures, Tunisian authorities have relied heavily on restrictive measures that cut across several levels of society. Politically, President Kais Saied has made statements that portray undocumented sub-Saharan migrants as an existential threat. Socially, such discourse has contributed to xenophobia and exclusion.[2] Economically, a shrinking job market and restrictions on informal livelihoods have constrained access to basic income-generating strategies.[3] At the level of law enforcement, intensified crackdowns at sea, at departure points, and along overland routes have disrupted smuggling networks and sharply curtailed departures from key parts of the coast.[4]

Although these measures have affected departure levels, they have not alleviated migration pressures. Instead, they appear to have intensified the drivers of irregular journeys. For foreign migrants stranded in the country, opportunities to exit are blocked, work options are narrowing, and exposure to harassment, eviction and violence has increased. Inland smuggling routes at the Algerian and Libyan borders remain active, though on a reduced scale, as networks adapt to enforcement campaigns.

As routes have closed, criminal practices have expanded. Criminal actors have increasingly exploited the growing vulnerability of migrants through kidnappings, extortion and other forms of abuse. Meanwhile, observers have reported that state authorities have relied more on forced transfers to remote land borders and on the International Organization for Migration (IOM)'s assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) programme to reduce the number of sub-Saharan nationals in the country.[5]

Taken together, these dynamics illustrate an irregular migration system in flux. Smuggling networks are under strain but risks are proliferating for migrants and affected communities. Enforcement-heavy strategies have sharply curtailed departures along key routes, but at the cost of new dangers for migrants, increased hostility and escalating humanitarian pressures. For many foreign migrants in Tunisia, options for mobility and livelihoods are becoming increasingly constrained.

The families of migrants who have gone missing at sea protest in Tunis on International Migrants Day.
© Hasan Mrad/DeFodi Images News

Methodology

This report is based on the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC)'s field monitoring system. During 2024 – the reporting period for this study – the GI-TOC 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 weekly. This data was used to formulate questions and inquiry areas and validate field interviews conducted by researchers.

Care has been taken to triangulate the information. However, the issues detailed in this report are inherently opaque and the geographic areas covered often remote, volatile or difficult to access. Because of this, the report 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.

Key points

- Since a record number of departures in 2023, Tunisia's migration landscape has been transformed by an enforcement-heavy approach that has sharply curtailed maritime departures, reportedly fuelling new abuses. Although crackdowns disrupted smuggling networks, they also deepened migrants' vulnerability, driving movement underground and heightening risks along land routes.
- Conditions for sub-Saharan migrants deteriorated dramatically in 2024. Widespread homelessness, economic exclusion, reportedly arbitrary arrests and xenophobic attacks led to a nationwide protection vacuum. Civil society organizations were targeted, resulting in the withdrawal of most humanitarian and legal support services.

- Recorded sea arrivals in Italy from Tunisia fell dramatically in 2024 compared to levels in 2023, but smuggling economies proved resilient. Sub-Saharan migrants took on an increasingly important role as recruiters, intermediaries and boat builders, ensuring that crossings continued despite intensified policing.
- Overland smuggling from Algeria shifted towards smaller, more fragmented networks, while flows from Libya declined sharply amid bilateral border enforcement. Within Tunisia, there was also a surge in kidnappings for ransom targeting sub-Saharan migrants, linking opportunistic gangs and smuggling actors.
- The authorities consolidated a dual removal system, combining forced transfers and expulsions to border areas in Algeria and Libya with assisted returns through the IOM. Although these measures took different forms, their objective was the same: to reduce Tunisia's migrant population.

CONDITIONS DETERIORATE FOR MIGRANTS ACROSS TUNISIA

Conditions for sub-Saharan migrants in Tunisia deteriorated sharply in 2024, according to GI-TOC monitoring. Across the country, migrants reportedly faced escalating insecurity that affected their livelihoods, housing, access to services, mobility and legal status. What had long been a precarious existence in Tunisia's informal economy has hardened into a systematic protection vacuum. The Tunisian state intensified restrictions, employers and landlords grew more reluctant to take risks, and civil society struggled to respond.

In this environment, migrants became increasingly reliant on existing solidarity networks within migrant communities. However, these cannot compensate for the absence of formal safeguards. The year revealed the extent to which daily survival was shaped not only by economic exclusion but also by entrenched hostility and systemic violence, conditions that in turn created fertile ground for smugglers and traffickers.

Economic marginalization lay at the core of migrants' vulnerability. Most sub-Saharan nationals were reportedly confined to the informal sector, where the lack of contracts or legal protections left them exposed to abuse, underpayment and unsafe conditions. Women were concentrated in domestic work and childcare, while men typically worked in agriculture, construction or waste collection.

Over the course of 2024, these already limited opportunities further contracted. Employers, wary of sanctions for hiring undocumented workers, reduced recruitment, and even those willing to offer jobs often did so on exploitative terms. In Sfax, contacts observed migrants working not for wages but in exchange for food, a practice that spread as desperation grew. In many cases, migrant workers' demands for payment were reportedly met with threats of denunciation and wage theft became widespread. Remittances – normally a crucial safety net – offered little relief, since undocumented migrants were barred from using banks or money transfer services and had to depend on peers with residency permits or student visas to access funds on their behalf.

This financial marginalization was compounded by severe barriers to housing and essential services. Discrimination by landlords was pervasive, with even documented migrants and students reporting repeated refusals.[6] Financial constraints and the legal risks associated with renting to undocumented foreigners further restricted access, leaving many unable to secure accommodation.[7]

Olive groves in northern Sfax have become home to migrant encampments. *© Yassine Gaidi/Anadolu via Getty Images*

Migrant homelessness became an increasingly visible phenomenon in key urban hubs such as Sfax and greater Tunis, though the extent varied by region. In part, this hinged on the denial of housing, which forced some to sleep outdoors in urban areas, in abandoned or unfinished buildings, or in overcrowded informal arrangements that heightened vulnerability to exploitation.

At the same time, informal encampments in olive groves around northern Sfax emerged as de facto settlement options, particularly for newly arrived migrants from across the borders or other parts of Tunisia. These sites typically consisted of makeshift shelters assembled from plastic sheets or discarded materials, with little to no access to water, sanitation or electricity. Contacts reported in 2024 that some migrants even regarded these camps as preferable to renting – not because they were safe or desirable, but because they eliminated the need for documentation and rent payments. However, life in these encampments was extremely precarious, marked by insecurity, repeated dismantlements and the constant threat of eviction, alongside the absence of basic services.

Impediments to health services also grew for migrants. In Sfax and Zarzis, migrants said routine police patrols around hospitals deterred them from seeking treatment – even when urgently needed – out of fear of arrest. While such patrols are common in large urban areas and not specifically directed at migrants, their presence heightened feelings of vulnerability. They often discouraged migrants from seeking public health care, leaving many reliant on costly private clinics or community fundraising to cover hospital expenses. However, access to public facilities was more uneven than entirely restricted, with some vulnerable migrants (including pregnant women) able to access public hospitals, particularly when referred by organizations such as the IOM.

Access to public transport was similarly fraught. While some bus drivers allowed migrants to travel, others turned them away for fear of repercussions, and police checks often led to expulsions from buses or minibuses. In many areas, ticket sales at official bus stations were refused, pushing foreign migrants towards clandestine transporters. These operators charged up to 10 times the usual fare for journeys such as the route between Zarzis and Sfax.

Aggressive policing and the lack of legal protection reinforced migrants' exclusion from services. Reportedly arbitrary identity checks, mass arrests and detentions were widely reported throughout 2024. Migrants accused of irregular entry or stay could be held for up to two months, in most cases without due process. Contacts reported an increase in confiscations of phones and belongings, and contact with family members or consular representatives was routinely denied.

Importantly, these practices targeted not only undocumented migrants but also individuals with valid papers. In Tunis, several students holding residence permits were nevertheless reportedly detained and released only after their universities intervened. Such cases underline how the distinction between documented and undocumented status has collapsed in practice, leaving sub-Saharan nationals especially vulnerable to reportedly arbitrary enforcement. This collapse of legal certainty blurred the distinction between regular and irregular status, making documentation effectively irrelevant. This erosion of protection not only undermined trust in state institutions but incentivized irregular strategies for mobility, since formal compliance no longer guaranteed security.

Migrants also faced greater risk of being subjected to forced transfers by Tunisian security forces, in which groups were reportedly rounded up arbitrarily and transported to remote areas on the border with Algeria or Libya. According to interviews and NGOs, these operations, an increasingly routine feature of Tunisia's migration management in 2024, placed migrants at risk of violence, abandonment or further.

Civil society offered little counterweight to Tunisia's growing climate of exclusion, not only because assistance was limited but because targeting became systematic. As early as 2022, leaked drafts to amend Decree 88 and Saied's denunciations of foreign funding signalled a shift towards tighter state control,[8] while the adoption of Decree 54 extended criminal liability to critics and journalists.[9] By 2023, official rhetoric linking migration to a 'criminal plot' fuelled racist attacks and framed migrant-support organizations as complicit, even as opposition parties and rights defenders faced arbitrary arrest under vague charges.

Defining forced transfers and expulsions

In this report, the term 'forced transfers to border areas' refers to Tunisian authorities' reported practice of detaining migrants (including asylum seekers), confiscating their belongings (such as phones and money), transporting them to remote desert zones near the Libyan or Algerian border, and abandoning them there without shelter, food or assistance. 'Expulsions' refers to the formal or de facto removal of non-nationals from a state's territory, typically by forcing them across an international border. In the Tunisian context, this mainly occurs at the Libyan border, where Tunisian forces have reportedly handed migrants directly to Libyan security personnel. Many are reportedly subsequently detained, and face extortion and abuse. ■

This escalating climate of civil society repression culminated in May 2024, when Tunisian authorities launched a sweeping campaign against organizations working with migrants and refugees, targeting at least a dozen groups – including the Tunisian Council for Refugees (CTR), Mnemty and Terre d'Asile Tunisie – through arrests, raids and financial investigations.[10] The CTR, as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) principal implementing partner in Tunisia, played a central role in assisting refugees and asylum seekers; its closure therefore had significant implications for access to protection and services. At the same time, in mid-2024 the UNHCR was forced to suspend new registrations, further constraining migrants' access to international protection. Key figures from these organizations, such as Mustapha Djemali and Abderrazek Krimi of the CTR, were held in prolonged pretrial detention, while Terre d'Asile Tunisie and Saadia Mosbah of Mnemty saw their offices raided and assets frozen.

Alongside prosecutions, the government deployed administrative tools – including intrusive audits, restrictions on funding, and forced suspensions – intended to suffocate civil society. By mid-2024, even modest humanitarian initiatives were criminalized, pushing aid underground and deepening broader state efforts to control civic space. The targeting of civil society reportedly eliminated one of the last institutional counterweights to exclusionary state policy.

With independent organizations sidelined, migrants faced severe challenges in accessing legal advocacy and humanitarian aid, accelerating the shift towards informal networks and deepening the overall protection vacuum. Mutual aid networks among migrants, often organized along national or ethnic lines, became the backbone of daily survival.

Within these networks, resources were pooled to purchase food, pay rent or secure medicine. Informal leaders coordinated assistance and sought to mediate disputes, while families shared shelter when possible. In the Sfax governorate, the collapse of civil society support and the lack of viable housing options contributed to migrants coalescing in makeshift encampments. By the end of 2024, these sites were estimated to host about 20 000 people.[11] They functioned as extensions of solidarity networks – pooling resources and providing minimal security in numbers – but they simultaneously exposed migrants to heightened risks of eviction, law enforcement operations and public hostility. Their proliferation underscored how exclusionary policies did not eliminate the presence of migrants but drove it into ever more precarious and visible forms.

By the end of the year, the convergence of economic exclusion, housing discrimination, restricted health care and transport, reportedly arbitrary arrests and detention, and weak external support had produced a comprehensive protection vacuum. Migrants were left exposed to abuse on several fronts, with little recourse to legal or humanitarian assistance.

This environment fostered dependence on informal, illegal and exploitative networks. Smugglers and traffickers were well positioned to take advantage, offering transport, shelter or work that migrants could not otherwise access, but at the cost of deepening their vulnerability.

The deterioration observed in 2024 thus not only intensified the suffering of migrants but reinforced the very criminal economies that regional authorities sought to oppose. Tunisia's restrictive policies entrenched situations of abuse and dependency, ultimately compelling migrants to choose between irregular departure using smuggling networks or return through repatriation programmes.

TARGETING OF MIGRATION-RELATED CIVIL SOCIETY IN TUNISIA (2021–2025)

2021

25 July
President Kais Saied suspends Parliament and dismisses the prime minister, consolidating executive power. Start of systematic rollback of rights and civic freedoms.[12]

2022

February

- Saied says he will 'prevent foreign funding to associations', signalling tighter state control over NGOs.[13]
- Draft amendment to Decree 88 on associations leaked. Proposals include: prior approval from the prime minister's office for any foreign funding (article 18); mandatory vetting of all foreign funds by the Tunisian Financial Analysis Committee (article 35); prior authorization for international NGOs from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; and vague morality and security clauses allowing dissolution of NGOs.[14]
- Draft denounced by UN experts, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Tunisian NGOs.

September
Decree 54 ('anti-fake news' cybercrime law) adopted. Grants broad powers to prosecute journalists, lawyers and critics for 'spreading false information'.[15]

2023

February
Presidential statement claims irregular migration is a 'criminal plan' to change Tunisia's demographics.[16] The remarks fuel racist attacks and official hostility towards migrant-supporting NGOs, which the president depicts as complicit.[17]

March–June
NGOs report intensified audits, funding delays and surveillance. Pro-government media smear human rights associations as serving foreign agendas.

April
Ennahda leader Rached Ghannouchi arrested on charges of 'conspiracy against the state' following public remarks deemed to incite hostility towards the authorities.

September–October
Wave of arrests:[18] at least 97 Ennahda members detained;[19] opposition party leader Abir Moussi arrested and charged under Decree 54 with 'spreading false news' and 'undermining state security'.[20]

Throughout 2023
Journalists, activists and lawyers prosecuted under Decree 54, including Rached Tamboura, an artist, who is sentenced to two years in prison for 'offensive acts' against the president.[21]

October
Draft law 027/2023 formally submitted to Parliament to replace Decree 88, incorporating many of the restrictive provisions leaked in 2022.

2024

May

- Police raid makeshift migrant camps near IOM/UNHCR in Tunis. Hundreds of migrants are reportedly bused to border areas. These operations precede wider NGO repression.[22]
- Saied's National Security Council speech states that around 400 migrants were 'returned from the eastern border', apparently referring to expulsions towards Libya; and labels NGOs as 'traitors' and 'mercenaries' funded from abroad to 'settle Africans in Tunisia'.[23]
- Public prosecutor opens money-laundering investigations into several NGOs: former Terre d'Asile Tunisie director Sherifa Riahi detained under Law 2015-26;[24] CTR president and vice-president arrested and placed in pretrial detention for 'conspiracy to facilitate irregular entry' linked to hotel tender for migrant accommodation;[25] and police checks conducted at other NGO premises.
- Mnemty president Saadia Mosbah arrested; home and offices raided; assets frozen under anti-terrorism/money laundering law. General coordinator Zied Rouine interrogated.[26]
- Lawyer and media figure Sonia Dahmani arrested after condemning racism against black migrants.[27]
- Journalists Mourad Zeghidi and Borhen Bsaies arrested and sentenced to a year in prison for 'spreading false news' (later reduced on appeal to eight months).[28] Their sentences ended in January 2025, but both remain in detention under new money-laundering investigations.
- International Commission of Jurists issues statement condemning expulsions and NGO repression, citing violations of the principle of non-refoulement and freedom of association.[29]

2024

June–October
Amnesty and UN experts report systematic repression: raids, asset freezes, smear campaigns, prolonged detentions. Saied continues rhetoric framing NGOs as foreign agents undermining Tunisia.[31]

July
Arrest of Ennahda secretary-general Ajmi Lourimi.[30]

August
Human rights activist Sihem Bensedrine charged with 'fraud' and 'abuse of official capacity', seen as retaliation for past anti-corruption work. She is released following a Tunis Court of Appeal decision in February 2025 but remains subject to a travel ban.

September
Parliament removes Administrative Court's jurisdiction over electoral matters, further weakening judicial oversight.[32]

October
Former justice minister Noureddine Bhiri sentenced to 10 years in prison for 'inciting against government' on social media.[33] Bhiri was originally arrested in February 2023.

By December
Draft amendment to Decree 88 remains under parliamentary/ministerial review, not adopted. But its existence is used to justify audits, prosecutions and closures. Civil society actors describe the space as extremely fragile, with humanitarian and advocacy work on migration criminalized.

2025

February
Ennahda leader Ghannouchi sentenced to 22 years in prison on charges of 'undermining the integrity of Tunisian territory' and 'joining a gang that works to change the form of the state and commit hostilities against the president'.[34]

March–April
Mass 'conspiracy against state security' trial resumes, involving more than 40 opposition figures (including former MPs, lawyers and journalists) accused of plotting against the state. Rights groups describe it as a 'show trial' aimed at silencing dissent.[35]

April
- Human Rights Watch publishes report documenting systematic arbitrary detentions, political prosecutions and instrumentalization of judiciary to 'crush dissent'.[37]
- Lawyer Ahmed Souab detained under terrorism-related provisions for public criticism of judicial abuses, emblematic of extension of repression to legal professionals.[38]

June
Moussi sentenced to two years in prison for criticizing electoral commission and legislative process; conviction based on Decree 54, 'false information'.[36]

July
A Tunisian court sentences 21 high-profile politicians, ex-officials and party members to prison terms ranging from 12 to 35 years (including Ghannouchi, who receives a 14-year sentence), on charges of plotting against state security.

October
Nabeul citizen Saber Chouchane sentenced to death for Facebook posts deemed insulting to Saied and 'threatening state security'. His sentence is overturned days later by a presidential pardon and he is released.[39]

MARITIME SMUGGLING COMES UNDER PRESSURE ON LAND AND SEA

Maritime migration dynamics from Tunisia underwent significant shifts in 2024, shaped by enforcement pressures and evolving smuggling practices. Overall departures fell sharply from the record levels of 2023, partly due to sustained counter-migration operations and new sea interception practices. Yet organized smuggling networks proved resilient, continuing to rely on clandestine boat construction – particularly of metal vessels – while increasingly drawing in sub-Saharan migrants as key intermediaries in smuggling networks.

Departure locations remained centred on Sfax governorate, the focal point for foreigners embarking from Tunisia for the past half decade.[40] Secondary hubs in Mahdia, Monastir, Sousse and Nabeul were also active and in some cases saw expansions in activity. Overall, crossing costs showed remarkable stability, underscoring the resilience of smuggling networks in the face of the law enforcement crackdown. However, safety issues were acute, with frequent reports of fatalities and disappearances at sea throughout the year.

Migrant embarkations drop sharply

In just one year, Tunisia shifted from being the main departure hub in the central Mediterranean to a secondary route. In 2023, 97 667 people were recorded reaching Italy from Tunisia.[41] In 2024, only 19 460 arrivals were recorded – less than a fifth of the previous year's total – reducing Tunisia's share of arrivals to just 29%.[42] As a result, Libya re-emerged as the dominant departure location for Italy-bound migrants, accounting for nearly two-thirds (63%) of arrivals, followed at a distance by Türkiye and Algeria (4% each).[43]

Even though fewer migrants reached Italy from Tunisia, official data suggests that attempted crossings remained high in 2024. Tunisian authorities reported 30 281 interceptions at sea between January and May, compared to 21 652 over the same period in 2023.[44] By the end of the year, Tunisian officials claimed nearly 80 000 interceptions,[45] exceeding the 69 963 reported in the first 11 months of 2023.[46]

When both arrivals and interceptions are considered, total departures dropped from roughly 167 000 in 2023 to about 99 000 in 2024, indicating that the decline was less dramatic than arrival statistics alone suggest. The significant decrease also shows that migration pressure on the Tunisian route remained intense. The data therefore underscores the volatility of departure dynamics and the persistent demand for movement across the central Mediterranean, even when arrivals from Tunisia visibly declined. It should be noted, however, that totals combining arrivals and interceptions are indicative rather than exact, since these are only recorded figures, and some migrants may attempt several crossings and be counted more than once.

In 2023, smuggling networks in Sfax operated at unprecedented scale, generating more departures than Tunisian patrols could contain, meaning that many boats evaded interception and reached Italy. By contrast, since the launch of a broad counter-migration campaign in September 2023, enforcement measures have been applied more systematically, extending inland as well as across coastal areas during 2024. As a result, even as the number of Tunisian maritime interceptions increased, the overall number of attempted departures fell. While alternative explanations cannot be fully excluded – such as gaps in interception reporting, or smuggler use of riskier routes leading to more undetected shipwrecks – the GI-TOC's assessment, based on evidence of intensified crackdowns elsewhere in the country, is that enforcement measures played the decisive role in driving the decline of attempted departures.

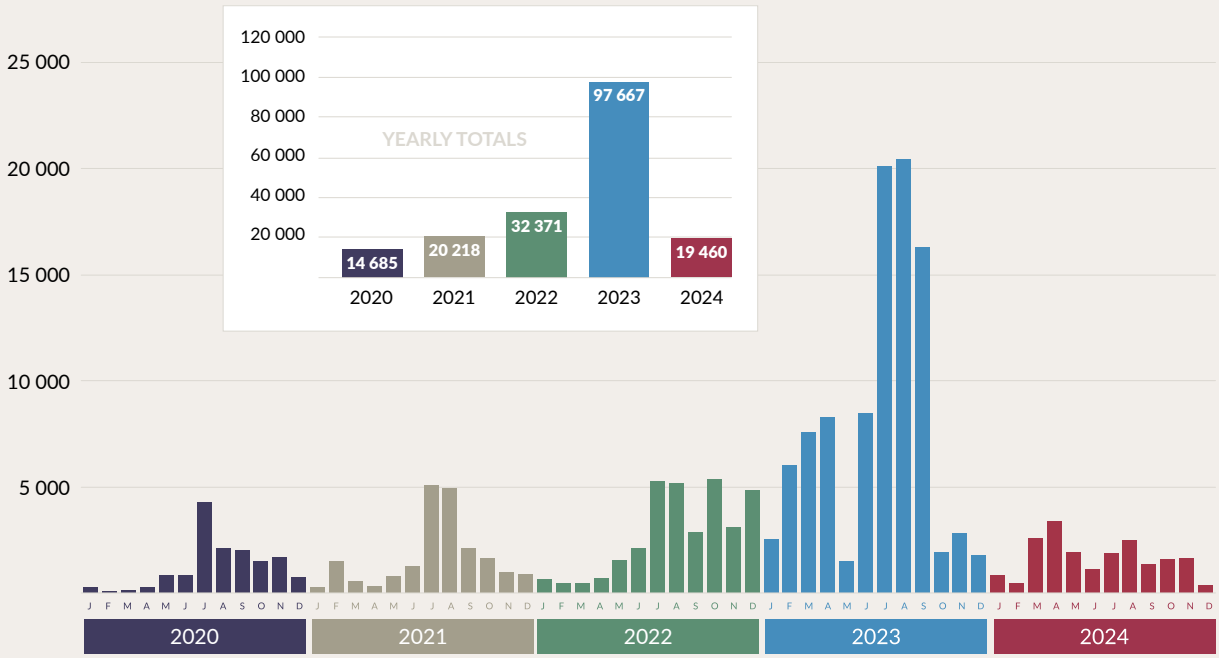

FIGURE 1 Monthly arrivals in Italy from Tunisia, 2020–2024 (annual totals inset).

In 2024, Tunisian and foreign arrivals to Italy declined substantially compared to the high levels recorded in 2023, with the decline particularly pronounced among foreign nationals. Of the 19 460, 60% (11 749) were foreign nationals, mostly from sub-Saharan Africa, with Guineans accounting for 29% (3 373) and Malians for 12% (1 352) of all foreign arrivals. The remaining 40% (7 711) were Tunisian nationals, a marked decrease compared to 17 322 Tunisian nationals in 2023 and 18 148 in 2022.

This demographic pattern differs slightly with Tunisian interceptions. According to official data and the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES), about 80% of those departing were foreign nationals, primarily from sub-Saharan Africa.[47] This suggests that foreign nationals were disproportionately affected by interceptions and less likely than Tunisian nationals to reach Italy. Several factors help explain this divergence. Boats carrying sub-Saharan migrants are more likely to be intercepted because of differences in crossing methods and boat quality. Many sub-Saharan migrants face greater financial constraints and therefore opt for cheaper, poorly constructed metal boats, often piloted by inexperienced people, which are more vulnerable to interception and shipwreck. By contrast, Tunisian nationals – who generally pay higher smuggling fees – more often use established smugglers with safer boats and a track record of successful crossings, making them harder to intercept. These differences not only shape interception rates but help explain why fatalities are disproportionately concentrated in metal-hulled vessels used by sub-Saharan groups.

Viewed over time, 2023 stands out as an atypical year: between 2018 and 2022, Tunisians consistently represented a significant share of arrivals, but in 2023 this pattern was disrupted by an exceptional surge in sub-Saharan nationals. The 2024 figures thus suggest a rebalancing towards earlier dynamics, with Tunisians once again accounting for a sizeable share of arrivals, though within a much smaller flow.[48] The numbers highlight the volatility of migration dynamics from Tunisia. They point to the adaptability of smuggling networks and the potential for large-scale departures to be curtailed when enforcement conditions change.

A migrant boat intercepted by the Tunisian coastguard, May 2024. *Photo: Official Facebook page of the Tunisian National Guard*

Shipwrecks continue off the Tunisian coast

Shipwrecks occurred regularly off Tunisia's coast during 2024, although the scale of the phenomenon is difficult to fully assess. Two factors complicate measurement: migrant vessels frequently disappear without confirmation of their fate, and Tunisian authorities do not publish consolidated or reliable statistics on dead and missing migrants.

The FTDES estimates that at least 621 migrants died or disappeared off Tunisia during 2024, down from 1 313 in 2023. Available data suggests that fatalities were concentrated in metal-hulled boats, which are cheap to build, poorly constructed and frequently overloaded. While there are no official statistics on the geography of shipwrecks, reports circulating on social media suggest that most incidents occured off the coast of Sfax, which also accounted for most departures from Tunisia.

The human toll is starkly illustrated in interviews. A Guinean woman who survived a shipwreck off Sfax in October 2024 recounted: 'Our third attempt was catastrophic. We were shipwrecked, and I lost my fiancé and our child. From that moment everything changed. I had no support, no work, nothing left in Tunisia. I decided the adventure was over; I had lost everything.' ■

Several factors probably contributed to the decrease in attempted sea departures from Tunisia in 2024. First, the broad counter-migration campaign launched in September 2023 continued. It involved tighter controls along land and maritime borders, which slowed the pace of arrivals in Tunisia and imposed informal restrictions on the mobility of irregular sub-Saharan African nationals in the country. Migrants who succeeded in entering Tunisia faced greater difficulty in accessing coastal embarkation hubs. Enforcement efforts particularly targeted overland smuggling networks that transported migrants directly from the Algerian border to embarkation hubs in Sfax.

Steel sheets used to build boats seized in Nabeul, Tunisia, April 2024. *Photo: Official Facebook page of the Tunisian National Guard*

Tunisian security forces intensified enforcement in 2024 against the supply chains that enabled maritime crossings. Raids were carried out on boat-building workshops, and individuals accused of supplying equipment were arrested. In April, for example, authorities dismantled a network specializing in the illicit supply of steel used for boat construction in Sfax. According to official reports, the network was led by a man using his deceased brother's identity and involved company heads in Nabeul who sold the steel sheets, transporters moving the materials in small lorries and boat builders in Sfax.

Second, a main element of the campaign has been the continuation of forced transfers of intercepted migrants to border areas. Until late 2023, coastguard units typically disembarked intercepted migrants ashore and released them immediately, a practice often believed to result in repeat departure attempts. Since September 2023, however, many intercepted migrants have instead been forcibly transferred to the Libyan or Algerian borders, to curtail opportunities for re-embarkation and remove them from the country. The practice has not been implemented consistently, however. In many cases, migrants continued to be released upon disembarkation without formal procedures. The rationale for these differing outcomes is unclear; while a lack of transport capacity may explain some cases, the overall application of these measures appears inconsistent.

Inconsistent post-disembarkation procedures

A central feature of Tunisia's maritime interception approach in 2024 was its inconsistency: some migrants were expelled to land borders, others were released immediately and still others were held temporarily but freed when logistical capacity was exhausted. The lack of a consistent approach reflects the ad hoc nature of enforcement and the constraints faced by Tunisian authorities in managing large numbers of intercepted migrants. Collected interviews illustrate this inconsistency.

A Guinean man described two failed crossings in the summer of 2024: 'The first time the maritime police arrested us, beat us, stripped us and left us at the shore. The second time, they also dropped us back at the shore and let us go.' Others recounted expulsions to land borders. A Guinean woman said: 'We tried three times between March and October 2024. The second time, the Tunisian navy caught us at sea. They sent us to the desert, to the border between Algeria and Tunisia, and we tried to return. As soon as we got back, another departure was being prepared so we tried again, but that attempt ended in a shipwreck.'

In other cases, expulsions were attempted but not fully carried out, seemingly due to logistical shortfalls. A Guinean woman intercepted in March 2024 recalled: 'We were stopped 3 kilometres from international waters. The National Guard threatened to capsize our boat, even though there were children on board. They took our engine and transferred us onto a large vessel. At the port, there were many black people with their hands tied. Seven buses were lined up to transfer people, but when there were no buses left, our group was released. We walked back to Kilometre 11 [informal settlement] on the outskirts of Sfax.' ■

Finally, the decline in 2024 should also be viewed in the context of the exceptional surge of 2023. In February 2023, President Saied delivered a speech linking irregular sub-Saharan migration to a 'criminal plan' to alter Tunisia's demographic composition. This sparked widespread arrests, evictions and harassment, and many migrants who had been contemplating departure accelerated their plans, producing an unprecedented spike in crossings. This one-off surge amplified 2023 figures, making the sharp fall in 2024 partly a reversion to earlier levels, in addition to the result of tighter enforcement.

Human smuggling resilience increases

Despite enforcement pressures, embarkations from Tunisia have continued, underscoring the resilience of the country's smuggling ecosystem. This resilience is manifest in the smuggling networks and the linked boat-building industry.

First, embarkations facilitated by human smugglers remained the dominant method of irregular departure from Tunisia in 2024. Self-organized journeys, which had risen between 2022 and 2023, declined under heightened enforcement, further consolidating the dominance of smuggling networks.[49] While networks continue to be led mainly by Tunisian nationals, their composition and operating methods shifted under the pressure of sustained enforcement. Increasingly, sub-Saharan migrants – especially from Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Cameroon, Senegal and Sudan – became central actors in the maritime smuggling economy.

This involvement has taken diverse forms. Sub-Saharan migrants act as coordinators, recruiting passengers, collecting fees and assembling groups for departure, while relying on Tunisian counterparts for access to boats and knowledge of departure points. Others serve as intermediaries, linking prospective passengers with Tunisian smugglers. In many cases, migrants have piloted boats, either as volunteers or after being nominated by group members and receiving only minimal training. According to local contacts and interviews with migrants, while migrants had fulfilled some of these tasks in previous years, in 2024 they assumed an increasingly critical and visible role in all of them.

Steel boats hidden in a clandestine boat-building workshop in Sfax, Tunisia, April 2024. *Photo: Official Facebook page of the Tunisian National Guard*

A boat, outboard motors and fuel intended for use in a sea crossing seized in Monastir, Tunisia, May 2024. *Photo: Official Facebook page of the Tunisian National Guard*

Several factors help explain this shift. Targeted enforcement against established Tunisian smugglers has weakened traditional networks and created space for new actors to emerge. Sub-Saharan migrants, embedded in tight-knit communities in Tunisia, are able to operate with lower visibility to law enforcement and tap into existing social ties for recruitment. For many, economic precarity also plays a role, pushing individuals to take on smuggling-related responsibilities as a source of income.

The growing involvement of sub-Saharan migrants poses new challenges for security forces. These actors are harder to identify and prosecute due to their lack of formal documentation, and their integration within migrant communities makes infiltration more difficult. Their operations also tend to be smaller in scale, more informal and highly adaptable, complicating surveillance and targeted crackdowns.

The second crucial element of the resilience of Tunisia's smuggling ecosystem lies in its clandestine boat-building industry, which remained central to maritime departures in 2024 despite heightened enforcement. Metal boats have become the primary mode of transport for sub-Saharan migrants, largely due to their affordability and ease of clandestine production. Typically 6–8 metres long and designed for 30–35 people (but often overloaded with 40 or more), they are welded from low-carbon steel sheets bought in hardware stores and scrapyards.

In 2024, clandestine boat building continued to operate primarily in Sfax through workshops in industrial areas, private homes and even olive groves. Intensified surveillance forced builders to accelerate construction, reducing quality and increasing the risk of shipwrecks. As one contact in Sfax explained in May, 'Enhanced surveillance has affected boat-building workshops, leading to shorter construction timelines due to fears of raids by authorities.'

FIGURE 2 Main human smuggling routes through Tunisia.

As in human smuggling, a key development in this industry in 2024 was the growing role of sub-Saharan migrants in boat construction. Initially dominated by Tunisian builders, production has increasingly shifted to migrant-run workshops in informal camps. A Cameroonian welder in Sfax explained: 'Around late 2023, we started picking up the same welding techniques used by local Tunisians. By the beginning of 2024, we had small workshops on the outskirts of Sfax.' Cameroonians, Senegalese and Guineans with metalworking skills are particularly prominent, providing labour and new organizational autonomy to migrant communities. This expanding sub-Saharan involvement has reduced dependence on Tunisian actors and fostered new forms of self-organization in migrant communities.

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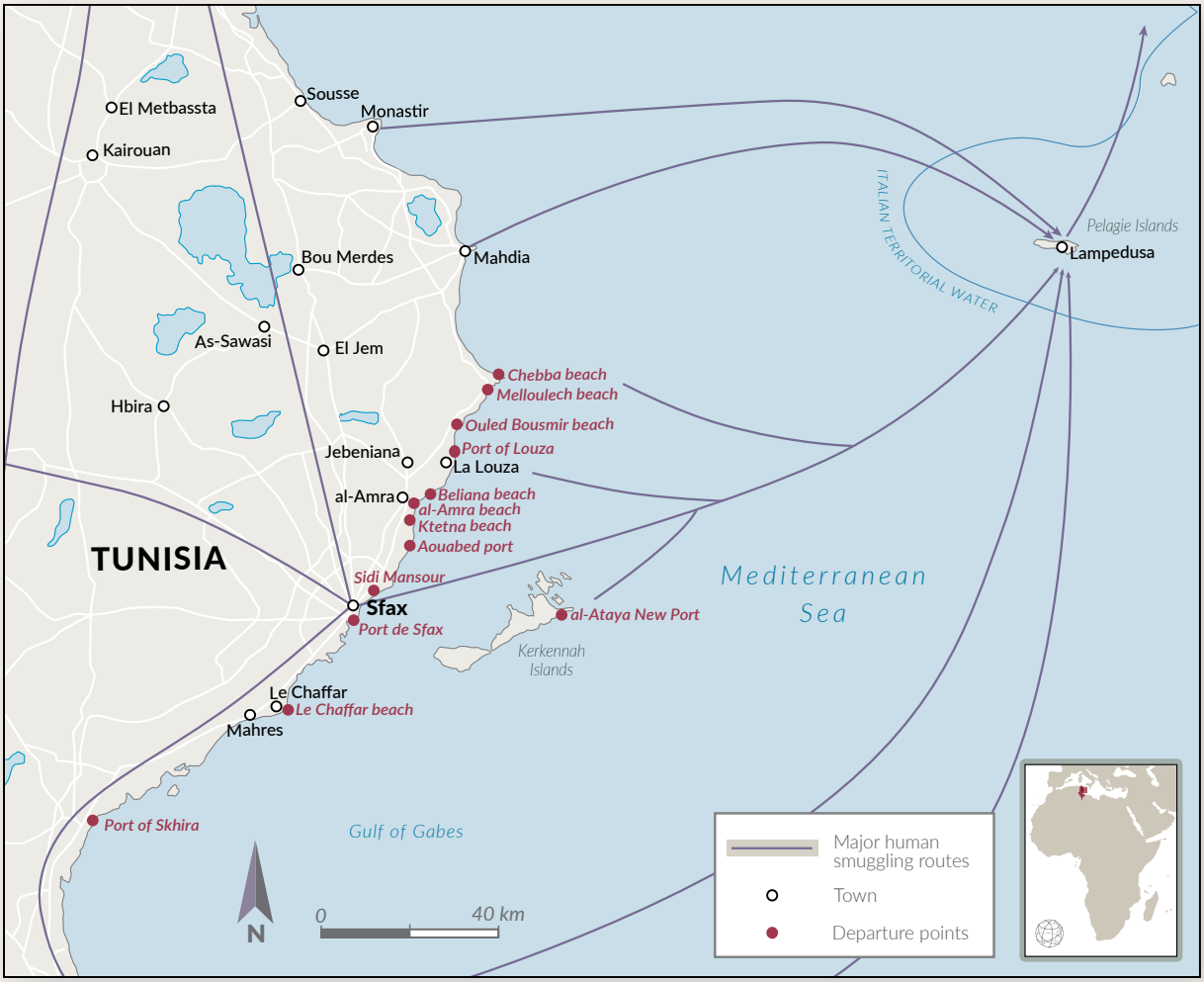

FIGURE 3 Main locations for departures to Italy from the Sfax coast.

Departure points and prices

During the year, boats were launched primarily from long-standing hubs. Networks serving Tunisian nationals operated along the entire coastline, but those catering to foreign migrants remained concentrated in the central governorates of Sfax and Mahdia. In Sfax, activities were centred in the northern areas of al-Amra, Msetria and La Louza. Amid sustained security activity, some operations shifted north from Sfax to Mahdia, where small fishing ports and secluded beaches provide discreet access to international waters. Departures were reported mainly from Chebba and Melloulech, though Mahdia has not developed into a consistent high-volume hub. Elsewhere, smuggling in the governorates of Monastir, Nabeul and Médenine (mainly around the town of Zarzis) were sporadic and opportunistic.

Prices for maritime departures varied depending on type of boat, nationality of migrant and point of departure, but overall were broadly stable compared with 2023.

- Sfax: Voyages on steel-hulled boats cost TND800–TND2500 (€238–€744), while safer wooden boats cost about TND5 500 (€1 636).
- Zarzis: Journeys typically use old fishing vessels, with fees of about TND4 000 (€1 190).
- Sousse and Nabeul: Higher-end crossings cost TND6 000–TND10 000 (€1 786–€2 976).
- Prices are not fixed and can be heavily negotiated. A sub-Saharan smuggler interviewed in January 2025 explained: 'Some people go for free if they bring clients. If someone knows the going rate, they pay less. But if they don't, I can charge them double or triple.' This highlights how smuggling networks flexibly adapt pricing based on migrants' resources, knowledge and bargaining power.

The dynamics observed in 2024 underscore the adaptability and persistence of the maritime smuggling economy in Tunisia. Enforcement campaigns reduced overall arrivals in Italy and altered routes, but they did not completely dismantle the underlying structures sustaining irregular crossings. Instead, smuggling networks adjusted: sub-Saharan migrants became increasingly embedded in the business, and clandestine boat building adapted to pressure. Stable crossing prices and the continued availability of embarkations highlight how market logic prevails even under sustained enforcement. At the same time, recurring shipwrecks, often involving poorly built metal boats, illustrate the ongoing human cost of irregular maritime migration from Tunisia. These trends suggest that while enforcement can shape the scale and geography of departures, it has limited impact on the drivers of demand and the resilience of smuggling networks.

The financial dynamics of human smuggling in Tunisia

The Tunisian human smuggling economy links clandestine migration directly to financial crime, blending cash transactions, bribery and money laundering. Though based on a simple model – migrants paying for passage – it is sustained by intermediaries, flexible pricing and reinvestment in legitimate-looking enterprises. The result is an adaptive ecosystem that continues to generate profits despite enforcement pressure.

Pricing and payments

- Direct transport is the core revenue source, though networks increasingly profit from selling navigation advice and equipment to 'self-smugglers'. Prices are negotiated face to face, reflecting mistrust of digital communication platforms and fear of infiltration.
- Rates fluctuate widely depending on vessel type, weather, patrol activity and migrants' desperation. Summer crossings are costlier, while off-season trips are cheaper. Vessel quality is a major factor: prices for unsafe metal boats – mainly used by foreign migrants – fell from €617–€1 389 in 2021 to €236–€740 in 2023, whereas prices for safer fishing boats rose from TND4 000 (€1 190) in 2020 to about TND7 000 (€2 083) in early 2024 as enforcement and equipment costs increased.

- Payments are almost entirely cash-based, typically in two instalments – an advance to reserve a place and a final payment upon departure. Tunisian dinars dominate, but euros, US dollars and Libyan dinars also circulate. Migrants and smugglers avoid bank transfers to limit traceability.
- The system's informality leaves migrants bearing all the financial risk: no receipts are issued and failed crossings mean total loss of funds. Attempts to secure proof – such as voice messages – are unreliable due to widespread fraud by intermediaries.

Costs, profits and corruption rents

- The *harrak* (network leader) manages recruitment fees, transport, equipment, fuel, safe houses and collaborator payments. *Samsara* (recruiters) are paid per head, while transporters and facilitators are compensated after departure. Disputes occasionally arise over unpaid shares.
- Despite high expenses, smuggling remains profitable. A *harrak* in Sfax organizing a trip for 45 sub-Saharan migrants at TND2 000 (€595) each grosses TND90 000 (€26 775). After estimated outlay costs of TND70 000 (€20 833), the organizer keeps about TND20 000 (€5 952). When passengers are Tunisians, who typically pay double, profits rise sharply. These earnings, far above legal wages in Tunisia, sustain smuggling despite penalties and rearrests.

Storage, laundering and community ties

- Smugglers protect and recycle profits through both simple and sophisticated methods. Smaller sums are carried by hand or hidden in homes, while larger amounts are buried, converted to gold, or channelled through bank accounts opened in relatives' names or with the help of corrupt employees. Investments in cafes, grocery shops and property provide laundering outlets and sources of social legitimacy, with under-declared sales and cash payments used to avoid detection.
- Community acceptance is equally important. Smugglers distribute profits through loans, gifts, jobs or help with paperwork, creating reciprocal obligations that ensure discretion and local protection. This informal network functions as insurance alongside official bribery, embedding smugglers in their communities.
- Overall, Tunisia's smuggling economy operates through resilient, trust-based financial systems that blend informal and formal tools. Rising costs for vessels, fuel and bribes have encouraged diversification and more professional laundering of proceeds. Disrupting these financial circuits – rather than focusing solely on border control – is essential to undermining the trade's profitability.

OVERLAND SMUGGLING DECLINES AND ADAPTS

Despite the growing focus on maritime departures in 2024, overland smuggling across Tunisia's borders with Algeria and Libya remained a central, though evolving, component of irregular mobility. These routes continued to channel most arrivals into Tunisia, either as direct entry corridors or secondary pathways leading to coastal hubs such as Sfax and Sousse. Field evidence and official data suggest that overland movements were shaped by reinforced border controls and the gradual weakening of large, organized networks. Along the Algerian frontier, smuggling adapted through smaller, more flexible structures and a diversification of migrant nationalities. On the Libyan border, by contrast, intensified bilateral coordination and rising domestic pressures led to a sharp decline in cross-border activity.

Algerian border smuggling adapts

In 2024, the Algeria–Tunisia border was the main entry point for irregular migrants into Tunisia, continuing a trend observed since at least 2022. While estimated entries were lower than in 2022–2023, shifting enforcement practices, evolving smuggling structures and changes in migrant profiles reshaped how crossings took place and the risks involved. There was also a gradual diversification of nationalities among those arriving via Algeria, with stronger representation of migrants from Guinea, Cameroon, Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia and Sierra Leone. The number of Sudanese asylum seekers, many of whom had first transited Libya or Niger before reaching Algeria, also rose.

The main entry corridors were consistent in 2024: Ouenza, El Meridj and El Kouif in Algeria's Tebessa region continued to channel most crossings into the Tunisian governorates of Kasserine and El Kef, with additional entries recorded in the Kebili, Gafsa and Tozeur governorates. From these inland points, migrants typically moved towards coastal hubs such as Sfax, Sousse and Tunis.

Most migrants travelled in smaller, fragmented groups, often moving part of the way on foot or using local drivers for short segments, rather than relying on a single organized network for the entire journey. This reflected broader changes in the organization of smuggling in the region. According to the FTDES, of 379 migrants interviewed in Tunis, Sfax and Médenine, over 60% reported entering Tunisia overland via Algeria, compared to 23% via Libya.[50] Although these findings point to Algeria's continued role as the main entry corridor, they should be read with caution, as respondents may not all have arrived in 2024.

There was a shift, however, away from large, well-organized convoys in 2023 towards smaller, fragmented groups. Furthermore, journeys in 2023 were often organized end-to-end by established facilitators. This changed in 2024, with migrants increasingly negotiating travel one segment at a time. Each leg of the journey, from the Algerian frontier to Kasserine or El Kef, then to Sfax and onward to the coast, was typically managed by different drivers or intermediaries. The initial cost of land entry across the Algeria–Tunisia border was broadly stable compared to 2023, at about TND300–TND1 000 (€89–€298) per person. Once inside Tunisia, migrants also had to pay local transporters, who charged TND100–TND300 (€30–€89) per trip for internal movements between governorates. The accumulation of these successive payments, border crossing fees and internal transport costs raised the overall expense of a full journey.

Migrants were forced to pay repeatedly along the route, faced sudden diversions and were more exposed to opportunistic actors. For instance, a Nigerien migrant reported paying to travel from Algeria to Kasserine, only to be diverted to Gafsa at short notice due to increased National Guard patrols.

Those unable to pay for smuggler transport sometimes resorted to long treks: one Sudanese asylum seeker reported walking for five days to reach Sfax, while a video circulating in late May showed migrants walking at night in Al Fahs, Zaghouan governorate, after crossing from Algeria and heading towards Tunis. Others sought alternative means of travel, such as attempting to board phosphate trains in Gafsa, Kebili and Tozeur, although heightened controls made this increasingly difficult and risky.

The fragmentation of routes and the localization of smuggling in 2024 amplified risks for migrants. They were often stranded between stages of travel, dependent on ad hoc accommodation arranged by local intermediaries. In Kasserine, interviewees described being left in precarious housing while awaiting onward transport, and some migrants reported being forced to pay inflated fees or risking robbery.

The Ras Ajadir border crossing between Libya and Tunisia, which had been closed for over three months, reopened in July 2024. *© Hazem Turkia/Anadolu via Getty Images*

Another change has been in the amount of publicized enforcement activity. In 2023, Tunisia's National Guard announced roughly one coordinated operation per month, often spanning several governorates and targeting not only migrants but also the infrastructure that supported onward travel from the Algerian border to the coast in Sfax, such as vehicles, boats and facilitators. By contrast, 2024 data indicated a decline in publicly reported enforcement to an average of one publicized operation every two months.

The focus also narrowed geographically: most interventions were carried out within a single governorate, particularly in Kasserine, rather than being coordinated across several jurisdictions. In November 2024, for example, five separate vehicles carrying sub-Saharan African migrants were intercepted on the Kasserine–Sfax route; the drivers reportedly intended to facilitate irregular sea departures by cooperating with maritime smugglers. The actors involved appeared to be small-scale, ad hoc smugglers with limited organizational capacity, rather than nodes in larger transregional networks.

Although public National Guard reporting in 2024 focused less on joint operations, there was evidence of informal coordination with Algerian security forces, particularly in the early detection of migrant groups before they crossed into Tunisia. Several contacts in mid-2024 described patterns where National Guard units in Kasserine appeared to anticipate incoming groups, suggesting prior notification from Algerian counterparts. While such coordination may have limited large-scale convoys, it did not appear to disrupt smaller-scale, opportunistic crossings, which were increasingly prevalent.

Tunisian authorities reportedly continued to transport detained migrants from urban centres such as Sfax and Tunis to the Algerian border. Reportedly, groups were left in remote areas of the governorates of El Kef, Kasserine and Beja, often without assistance and with limited access to food and water. These measures increased the physical risks of already fragmented journeys and further eroded migrants' ability to access protection or humanitarian support.

The 2024 trends pointed towards a less visible and more fragmented smuggling landscape at the Algeria–Tunisia border. Diversified migrant profiles and smaller, less organized groups moving by foot or in short transport segments made journeys more precarious, with repeated reliance on local facilitators and greater exposure to robbery, kidnapping and abandonment. Enforcement, meanwhile, became less coordinated and more localized, with Tunisian authorities reportedly continuing to relocate detained migrants to remote border zones. The result was a landscape in which crossings remained frequent but increasingly unpredictable, dangerous and shaped by short, opportunistic arrangements rather than reliance on established networks.

Libyan border smuggling in sharp decline

On the border with Libya, migration flows into Tunisia declined notably in 2024, continuing only at a slow and uneven pace. Reliable estimates of the number and nationalities of new arrivals are unavailable. However, local contacts in Zarzis – a key first stop for migrants arriving from Libya – and Ben Gardane consistently reported a sharp reduction throughout the year. According to contacts, arrivals averaged about 100 people a week during the first two months of 2024, decreasing steadily in subsequent months. By the end of the year, reported irregular arrivals rarely exceeded 10 individuals a month. The limited scale of arrivals makes it difficult to identify dominant nationalities with certainty. Local contacts nevertheless reported that Sudanese nationals were the majority, with smaller groups of Eritreans, Chadians, Somalians and others.

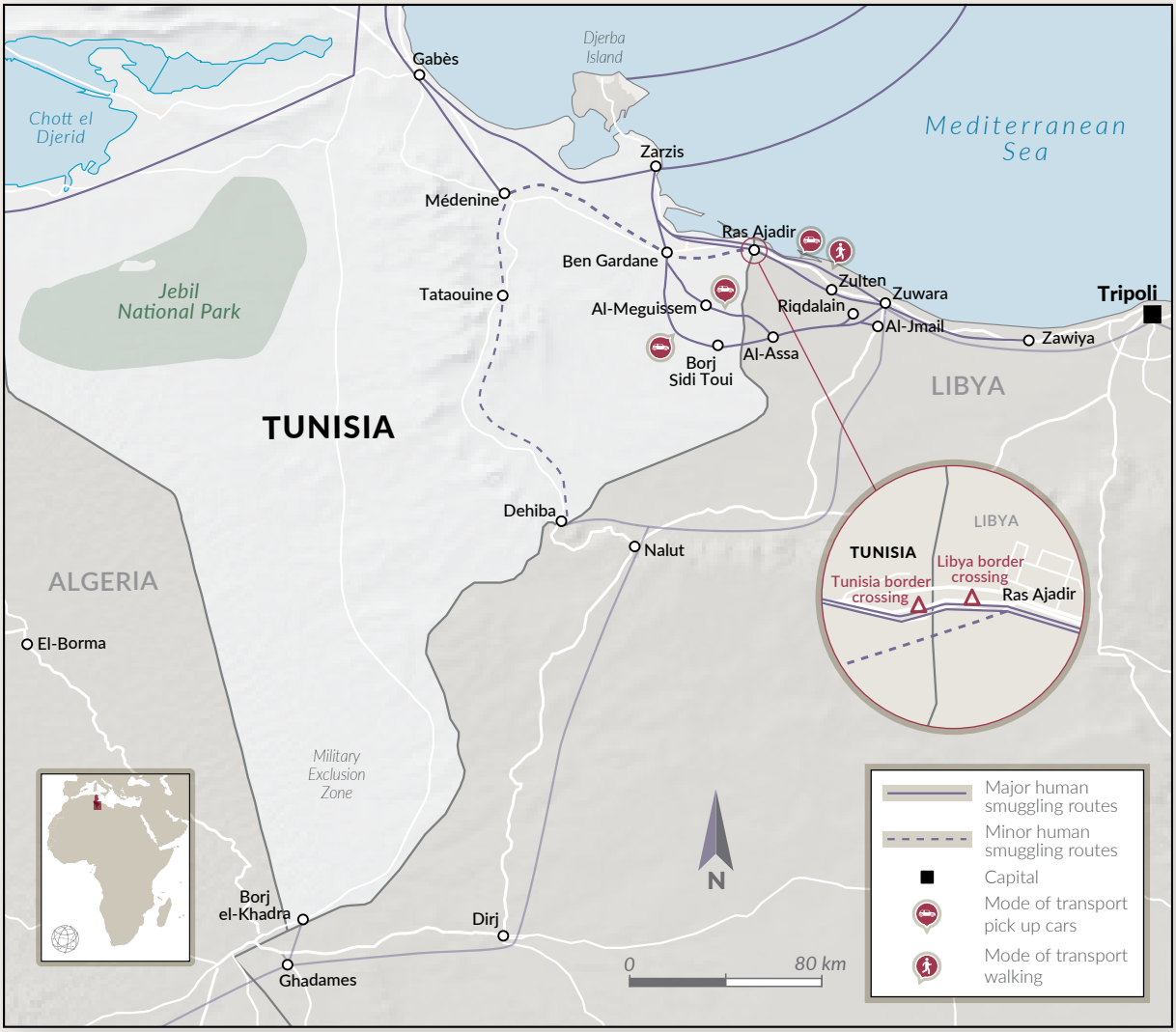

FIGURE 4 Main human smuggling routes on the Libyan border.

Overall, the dynamics marked a significant reduction from the peak in August 2023, when more than 150 daily arrivals were recorded. That surge, driven mostly by Sudanese nationals fleeing the conflict that erupted in April 2023, temporarily pushed smuggling activity upwards and disrupted previously stable low-level movement patterns observed along Tunisia's eastern border. By contrast, the 2024 decline indicates that cross-border movement along the Tunisia-Libya border has once again become sporadic and largely concealed.

Several factors appear to have contributed to the reduction in cross-border movement. First, from September 2023, Tunisian authorities reinforced controls along the Libyan frontier, significantly constraining smugglers' operating space. These measures did not halt smuggling altogether but curtailed entries into Tunisia.

In addition, irregular migration through Libya appears to have been affected by increased bilateral co-operation on border security. In August 2023, Tunisia and Libya concluded a border security agreement after tensions over Tunisian mass pushbacks earlier that summer. It appears that Libya's Border Guard and Desert Patrol, commanded by Mohammed al-Shibani (al-Marhani) and deployed around al-Assa, 50 kilometres south of Ras Ajadir, then stepped up apprehensions of migrants attempting to cross into Tunisia and detained those expelled from Tunisia. According to contacts in Libya, the force ramped up patrols with new vehicles and equipment supplied by the Ministry of Interior. On 12 December 2023, Tunisian interior minister Kamal Feki and his Libyan counterpart, Emad Trabelsi, visited Ras Ajadir together, pledging tighter coordination, electronic monitoring and information sharing.

Second, Tunisia's broader environment – shaped by continued maritime interceptions, restrictive government practices and growing public hostility – is likely to have discouraged further arrivals. This deterrent effect is difficult to measure, but several risks reported by migrants illustrate how movement into Tunisia has become increasingly unattractive. Migrants attempting to cross have reported exposure to theft and violence. For example, three Sudanese men interviewed in late 2024 described being robbed shortly after entering Tunisia. Moreover, migrants intercepted at the border risk being forcibly transferred by Tunisian security forces to Libyan border forces, for detention in Libya. In many reported cases, detained migrants have then been extorted.

The enforcement push reflects Tunisia's broader restrictive stance on transit migration, as well as mounting local pressures in southern Tunisia. Zarzis – a town in south-eastern Médenine governorate, only 75 kilometres from the Libyan border and astride a key transport route linking the frontier to Sfax and Tunis – experienced a sharp rise in arrivals via Libya in 2023. The influx of migrants and asylum seekers led to a visible increase in the homeless population, estimated by local contacts to number in the thousands by late 2023. This concentration, in a town of about 42 000 residents, triggered protests in early 2024. While no direct causal link can be established, the unrest may have reinforced Tunisian authorities' resolve to further tighten border management and deter new arrivals.

This combination of factors – reinforced state enforcement, bilateral coordination, domestic pressures and the hostile environment facing migrants – helps to explain the notable decline in movement across Tunisia's eastern frontier in 2024.

Although overall flows declined, irregular migration movements that persisted between Libya and Tunisia continued to be facilitated by organized smuggling networks operating on both sides of the border. Human smuggling is one component of a well-established cross-border illicit economy that also includes fuel, food, cement, cigarettes, electronics and carpets. Migrants are often concealed in vehicles carrying contraband, hidden under thick coverings tied with rope. This practice enables smugglers to exploit well-established trade routes and methods historically used for commodity smuggling.[51] Smugglers typically provide only transportation; no accommodation or onward support is offered once migrants reach Tunisian territory.

Local contacts reported that the main entry point in 2024 remained the desert area of al-Assa, particularly through the al-Meguissem desert area, about 25 kilometres east of Ben Gardane. Here, smugglers reportedly lay wooden planks across the border ditch and berm, allowing migrants to cross on foot. Other land routes were described as less active during the year. Smuggling through the Ras Ajadir crossing point – a major conduit in 2023, with migrants hidden among commodities or in car boots – declined significantly in 2024.

Information on smuggling fees is limited, but available reports suggest that crossing from Libya into Tunisia cost between TND4 000 and TND7 000 (€1 190–€2 083) per person during 2024. Payment practices are generally straightforward: migrants pay the driver before departure. The main reason is that upon reaching the border area, either within or just outside Tunisian territory, the driver quickly drops off the migrants and departs to avoid detection by security forces.

Independent crossings without smuggler assistance appear to have declined significantly in 2024. These journeys previously involved small groups of about 10 people pooling resources to buy GPS units in Libya and navigating across the frontier, often north of the Ras Ajadir crossing along or near the coast.[52] Local contacts reported that this route saw little or no activity during 2024.

By contrast, cases documented in late 2024 suggest that 'independent' entries can happen as a by-product of violence and abandonment in Libya rather than organized self-directed journeys. In December 2024, a Chadian man reported being kidnapped with 43 others near Zuwara, beaten and left in the no man's land at the border, from where he entered Tunisia on foot. A Sudanese man recounted being kidnapped by a group impersonating the Libyan police, tortured after failing to pay a ransom and later abandoned in the desert near the Tunisian border with about 100 others. He recalled crossing on foot into Tunisia before being apprehended and beaten by Tunisian security forces. He also described seeing his uncle, injured and unable to walk, being left behind to die as the group fled back towards Libya.

After crossing into Tunisia, migrants typically first proceed on foot to Ben Gardane before continuing to Zarzis, particularly the Hassi Jerbi district, and from there travel north, often to Sfax. A Guinean migrant told the independent media collective Nawaat in 2024: 'I entered Tunisia two months ago across the border with Libya. I went to Sfax to work in olive harvesting to collect money to cross the border.'[53]

From Zarzis, there are different ways for migrants to reach Sfax. The most common involves taking a seat in a nine-passenger inter-city minibus, which typically costs less than TND20 (€6). However, undocumented migrants increasingly face difficulties buying tickets directly: some sellers refuse to issue them, forcing migrants either to ask others to purchase tickets on their behalf or to negotiate directly with drivers. In these cases, fares can rise steeply, reportedly reaching up to TND150 (€45). Although there are no official bans, such restrictions have been inconsistently enforced since 2023. Others avoid this risk by hiring clandestine transporters using private vehicles, which offer faster and safer journeys at a higher cost of about TND250 (€74). A further alternative is to travel by minibus to Médenine, where ticket purchase is easier, before continuing to Sfax.

While Sfax remains the main hub for migrants seeking temporary work and preparing for maritime departures, some attempt to travel further north in pursuit of crossing opportunities. A Sudanese woman recounted that after entering Tunisia near Ben Gardane and passing through Médenine and Zarzis, she travelled as far as Oued Zitoun near Bizerte to attempt a sea departure. The crossing failed: she was intercepted by Tunisian authorities at sea and subsequently expelled to the Algerian border near Tébessa.

Developments in 2024 illustrate how irregular migration across the Tunisia–Libya border has contracted into a sporadic and highly precarious phenomenon. Flows that spiked in 2023 have diminished under the combined effect of stricter enforcement, bilateral coordination, local pressures and a hostile reception environment in Tunisia. Smuggling networks remain active but operate on a reduced and more concealed scale, while independent entries are rare and seem to occur as a by-product of violence and abandonment in Libya. These dynamics show that the Libyan frontier has shifted from being a relatively porous entry point into Tunisia to one where movement is limited, concealed, and associated with heightened risks and vulnerabilities.

KIDNAPPINGS FOR RANSOM SURGE ON INLAND ROUTES

The risks facing migrants in Tunisia accelerated in 2024 as kidnap for ransom gangs expanded in scale and visibility, heightening insecurity among undocumented communities.

The phenomenon was not new: cases had been reported since 2021, particularly in Sfax and Ariana, which host large populations of sub-Saharan migrants. Early incidents were typically small in scale, targeting one to four victims, usually for money to finance sea crossings. Most victims were sub-Saharan migrants, though isolated cases involved others. In December 2021, for example, a Tunisian child was abducted in Nabeul by a sub-Saharan migrant demanding TND75 000 (€22 320), before police were able to secure the child's release in Ariana.[54] A month later, a European businessperson in Tunis was kidnapped by sub-Saharan nationals, who extorted €5 000 from him before police intervened.[55] In November 2022, Tunisian security forces rescued a Guinean migrant in Sidi Salah, north of Sfax, after he had been abducted by sub-Saharan nationals who sent ransom videos to his mother demanding payment of TND5 000 (€1 488).[56] In Sfax, kidnappings escalated after April 2023 amid rising homelessness among undocumented migrants, particularly those sheltering in a makeshift camp in the Bab Jebli neighbourhood in the city centre.

The trend reportedly intensified substantially in early 2024, with a proliferation of gangs and expansion of existing groups' activities, as reported by migrants, humanitarian organizations and local contacts. Reliable figures are elusive, but estimates ranged from several dozen to several hundred victims in the first four months of 2024.

According to local contacts, victim accounts and social media posts by sub-Saharan migrants, abductions were concentrated in the Sfax governorate, particularly in the north near olive groves. A smaller number occurred in the city centre and nearby areas, including Sidi Mansour, 8 kilometres north of Sfax.

Near the Algerian border, the Kasserine–Sfax corridor was repeatedly identified as a hotspot for kidnappings, with ransom demands ranging from €250 to €550, and at least one case involved a smuggler handing a migrant woman over to abductors.

Finally, a few incidents were reported in greater Tunis between late 2023 and early 2024, though activity there was limited by heightened security. The concentration of kidnappings in Sfax and along the Algerian border reflects how conditions of heightened vulnerability in remote areas and informal encampments shaped the geography of the phenomenon.

Kidnapping for ransom in Tunisia is carried out mainly by organized networks whose composition has developed over time. From late 2023, there was a noticeable increase in Tunisian nationals becoming involved in operations, often assisting with logistics. Roles within kidnapping networks also appear to be differentiated. Sub-Saharan actors were often described as directly luring victims, guarding them and negotiating ransoms, while also managing detention sites in rented apartments or warehouses. Tunisian involvement was reportedly more limited. Only one migrant interviewed in early 2024 alleged that he had been kidnapped and tortured by a group of Tunisians, while more commonly locals were said to provide logistical support, such as driving or hiring vehicles that transport victims from abduction sites to a detention facility.

There is also reportedly a degree of interconnection between kidnappers and human smugglers in several parts of the country. In Sfax, according to local contacts, a small number of smugglers handed over newly arrived migrants to kidnappers in exchange for a fee. In addition, some smugglers' transporters (responsible for moving migrants from the Algerian border to Sfax) were reportedly complicit, redirecting people to kidnappers instead of smuggler warehouses. Independent Tunisian drivers who transport migrants to Sfax without the involvement of maritime smugglers were also accused of handing migrants over to gangs. According to one migrant's social media post in early 2024, this way transporters could earn twice what a migrant would pay them, with fees at the time ranging from TND50 (€15) to TND300 (€89).

Migrants wait outside the International Organization for Migration headquarters in Tunis. *© Fethi Belaid/ Anadolu Agency via Getty Images*

Overall, available evidence suggests a fragmented landscape in which diverse actors – from migrant-led gangs to opportunistic Tunisian transporters – exploited the vulnerability of new arrivals. The extent and structure of collusion between kidnapping and smuggling actors is difficult to verify, though reports of collaboration have exacerbated fears among migrants seeking to reach Europe. Contacts regularly interacting with migrants noted growing concerns about the risk of abduction, while several anonymous posts in sub-Saharan Facebook groups throughout 2024 explicitly warned migrants to be wary of transporters operating near the Algerian border.

The process of kidnapping for ransom involves several stages: identifying a target, abduction, isolation, ransom demands, negotiation and release. Undocumented migrants of sub-Saharan origin were the main targets. At the Algerian border, victims often appeared to be chosen at random, while in coastal areas abductions appeared more deliberate, often carried out by acquaintances. Some kidnappers targeted individuals of the same nationality, which increases the likelihood of luring them in and facilitates communication during ransom negotiations. Others abducted people they already knew, drawing on prior knowledge of their movements. For example, a Sudanese asylum seeker reported that his two female cousins, who were abducted in Sfax in February 2024, were taken by a Kenyan acquaintance they had met on arrival in October 2023.

Social media platforms, particularly Facebook, were also reportedly used to lure victims under false pretences. Kidnappers posed as smugglers advertising places on boats, arranging meetings in isolated areas where victims could be abducted.

Once a target was identified, the kidnappers selected a time and place for the abduction. Victims were sometimes deceived with offers of shelter while awaiting passage to Europe, while others were forcibly taken from streets or olive groves. Violence, threats and coercion were common. After abduction, victims were confined in so-called safe houses, typically rented apartments or dwellings. According to one contact, some gang leaders rented several houses at once, either within the same neighbourhood or in different districts, to reduce the risk of detection.

After the abduction, kidnappers typically contacted the victim's relatives to demand ransom, using phone calls, WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger. In one case, a Sudanese man whose cousins had been abducted reported that he had been contacted through a Facebook account that was later deleted. Victims were sometimes forced to call their families directly, with kidnappers monitoring conversations.

Ransom demands appear to have varied depending on perceived family resources, with amounts usually ranging between €400 and €1 500. Payments were made either through transfer services such as Western Union and MoneyGram or in cash delivered by trusted intermediaries in Tunisia. Families often tried to negotiate, but kidnappers did not always reduce their demands. One victim said that his family had sent half the requested amount (€1 000), but that he had remained captive until he managed to escape.

Kidnappers maintained pressure by sending videos of victims being beaten or tortured. Detention duration depended largely on the speed of ransom payment. While most cases ended with release, some victims were re-extorted or handed to other groups for further ransom if they were believed to come from wealthier families. Those whose families could not pay were left in extremely vulnerable conditions. According to contacts in Sfax, women were reportedly subjected to prolonged sexual exploitation and men were coerced into forced labour, though details are scarce.

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Families often sought help when a relative was abducted, though most avoided going to the police, fearing arrest and deportation. Many migrants also perceived the police as unresponsive, particularly amid heightened tensions since 2023.

Some turned instead to local civil society organizations or humanitarian actors. Families reportedly felt safer approaching these entities, which could then notify the police. However, mistrust was widespread, particularly among newly arrived migrants, who feared that humanitarian agencies might share their information with authorities. As one Sudanese interviewee explained, 'I did not reach out to any NGOs for fear that they might betray our trust.'

In parallel, Facebook pages dedicated to migrant protection became important channels for reporting disappearances and kidnappings. These pages also circulate warnings about unreliable smugglers. With the activities of NGOs and civil society groups increasingly curtailed, such online information-sharing networks function as a crucial informal protection strategy for migrants in Tunisia.

Overall, the surge in kidnappings in Tunisia marked a serious development that deepened the precarious situation of undocumented migrants. Abductions inflicted physical and psychological harm while fostering a climate of fear and insecurity in migrant communities. Reported links between kidnappers and smugglers underscored the complex and shifting dynamics at play, even if the extent of their collusion is difficult to verify. Rather than a single, organized structure, the phenomenon appeared fragmented, involving diverse actors from sub-Saharan-led groups to opportunistic transporters. Amid limited formal protection avenues, migrants increasingly relied on informal support networks, leaving them highly vulnerable to exploitation by criminal groups.

TUNISIAN AUTHORITIES ACCELERATE THE REMOVAL OF MIGRANTS

In 2024, Tunisian authorities consolidated a migration management strategy built around a single imperative: the removal of migrants from the country. What began in 2023 as a set of ad hoc expulsions hardened into a dual removal system in which two pillars operated side by side: forced transfers to Libya and Algeria, and repatriations to home countries through IOM's AVRR programme. Although different in form, the measures served the same objective of reducing Tunisia's migrant population, whether through outright coercion or through returns chosen under conditions of extreme duress.

Forced transfers and expulsions to land borders

The forced transfer of migrants to and across the borders with Algeria and Libya, which began after violence broke out between migrants and residents in Sfax in July 2023, expanded later that year and by 2024 had become a relatively systematized government strategy to manage tensions in embarkation areas and reduce migratory pressure.[57] It became a routine measure deployed by security forces in coastal and inland governorates. In fact, in a televised speech at a National Security Council meeting on 6 May 2024, Saied said that Tunisia had deported 400 sub-Saharan migrants to Libya and would not serve as a resettlement or transit country.[58]

Throughout 2024, authorities arbitrarily arrested migrants in various locations, including the olive groves of Sfax and public places such as streets, cafes, markets, and bus and train stations.[59] While most arbitrary arrests reported occurred in the Sfax governorate, the practice was also reported in other governorates, including Médenine, Sousse and Monastir. From there, groups were loaded onto buses and transported hundreds of kilometres away to remote desert areas along the Libyan and Algerian borders. Typically, detainees received no explanation for their detention or information about their destination. The World Organisation Against Torture has estimated that in 2024, Tunisian authorities forcibly transferred more than 9 000 people to the Algerian border and at least 7 000 to the Libyan border.[60] The GI-TOC has not been able to independently verify these numbers.

The practice was not confined to inland raids, however. Most migrants intercepted at sea were also systematically transferred to land border areas, either immediately or after a few days in detention. Many reported being stripped of their possessions, abandoned in remote areas and ordered to walk out of the country. Whereas in previous years the coastguard often released those disembarked in Tunisia after failed crossing attempts, after September 2023 and throughout 2024 this practice was replaced by systematic inland transfers.

The GI-TOC conducted several interviews with people who were forcibly transferred from Tunisia to Libya in 2024. Migrants recounted being handed over directly to the National Guard and detained briefly in holding sites (including military barracks) before being transported by bus to the Libyan border. They described being disembarked in coastal towns and taken without explanation to the interior, where they were abandoned in desert areas. This process curtailed the possibility of release for those intercepted at sea, linking maritime operations to the broader policy of expulsions to land borders, though in practice the use of forced transfers after disembarkation was inconsistent. At times, the choice of border destination appeared to be influenced by the demographic composition of migrant groups or a person's original point of entry into Tunisia. According to two contacts, women and children were more often deported to the border areas with Algeria rather than those with Libya. However, this pattern does not appear to have been consistent.

Algeria

Several contacts have assessed that the number of expulsions to Algeria was high in the first half of 2024, though it is difficult to confirm whether deportations increased or decreased compared with 2023. According to various sources, at least 4 000 people were expelled to the border with Algeria in the first half of 2024, but it is important to note that there are no official statistics for this.

Migrants were dropped in remote areas near the border in the governorates of El Kef, Kasserine and Beja, and reportedly pressured to cross into Algeria. Based on interviews with deportees and reports from contacts, there did not seem to be any coordination of such informal deportations between Tunisia and Algeria. On the contrary, Algerian authorities reportedly frequently attempted to push migrants back into Tunisia.

Notably, there were several instances in which migrants were deported from Tunisia to Algeria and subsequently from Algeria to Niger. In one case, a migrant from Burkina Faso was deported by the Tunisian authorities after being intercepted at sea in December 2023. He was forced into Algeria near Tebessa and took a taxi to Algiers, where he was arrested by the police on 19 February and deported to Niger.

Libya

Expulsion operations to Libya also continued in 2024, with contacts estimating that several thousand individuals were forced out of Tunisia in the first half of the year. Patterns of transfer suggest a degree of coordination with Libyan authorities. Migrants forced into Libya by the Tunisian authorities were generally intercepted by the Border Guard and Desert Patrol, although some were also intercepted by the Nalut branch of the Stabilization Support Apparatus. Some migrants appear to have been abandoned in border areas and found later by Libyan forces, though contacts suggested the Tunisians deliberately left migrants in areas regularly patrolled by Libyan forces.

Irregular migrants stranded near the Libya–Tunisia border, July 2023. *© Hazem Turkia/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images*

In other instances, repeated migrant interviews 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 Nalut, Zuwara and Tripoli. Some migrants said they observed exchanges of money and fuel canisters between the Libyans and the Tunisians during the handover process. A video that emerged in May supports these claims, as it appears to show a line of migrants moving from what is purportedly a Tunisian vehicle towards a group of Libyan vehicles associated with the Border Guard and Desert Patrol.[61]

These accounts suggest the emergence of an informal system for the transfer of migrant detainees from Tunisia to Libya. Information on the underlying agreement of this coordination is unclear.

Forced deportations pose significant human rights risks for migrants. Many face verbal and physical violence during the process. They are also regularly threatened with weapons to force them to obey orders. Additionally, police reportedly confiscate migrants' phones, making it challenging for them to contact their families and confirm their whereabouts. Migrants deported to Libya are at a greater risk of being held captive and extorted for ransom. For instance, interviews with two migrants in February 2024 indicated that they were subjected to beatings and extortion in Libya. In mid-February, a migrant contacted a Tunisian activist, stating that he had been part of a group intercepted at sea by the Tunisian coastguard in late January. In February, the migrants were deported to an area near the border and forced to cross into Libya, where they were reportedly detained. The migrant claimed that he and two others were being held in a house in a Libyan border area, with €1 000 each being demanded to secure their release.

Repatriations

In parallel with these overt forced transfers to the border, 2024 also saw the consolidation of repatriations. In May, Mounir Ben Rjiba, secretary of state to the foreign affairs minister, stated during a parliamentary hearing that the government was negotiating agreements with key countries of origin to promote voluntary returns of irregular migrants. He also said the number of repatriation requests and the frequency of repatriation flights were rising.

Most repatriations in 2024 took place through the IOM's AVRR programme as a core instrument of migration management. Officially framed as a humanitarian solution, offering migrants the option to return to their countries of origin with logistical and financial support, it has been perceived by some human rights organizations as a complementary mechanism to the forced transfers, enabling the state to present removals as voluntary while pursuing the same objective: reducing the migrant population.[62]

Assisted voluntary returns from Tunisia rose sharply in 2024 to more than 7 000, up from 2 557 in 2023 and 1 614 in 2022. The increase reflected the expansion of the programme and the government's reliance on it as a means of reducing the migrant population. The IOM, in collaboration with the Tunisian Red Crescent, appeared to intensify its registration campaign in various makeshift camps in the olive groves throughout 2024. Through this outreach, AVRR-related medical care and other support services were also reportedly provided to tens of thousands of vulnerable migrants, offering a form of assistance that is beneficial to migrants and acceptable to the authorities.

Several migrants interviewed about their experience with AVRR in 2024 described their return as voluntary, affirming that they were not forced into the programme. A Guinean migrant who was repatriated in November 2024 explained why he had engaged in the programme: 'It was because I no longer had a choice … My wish when leaving Guinea was to cross the sea and reach Europe. But that project did not work out. I no longer had a choice; I had to return to Guinea. No one put direct pressure on me, but given all the suffering I experienced, I had no other option. I had to resign myself because there was no alternative. So I decided to return to my country.' Indeed, escalating hardship and limited alternatives were cited as the main drivers behind many decisions to leave. Repeated evictions, unemployment, lack of access to health care and the risk of forced transfer to border areas created conditions in which return seemed the least damaging option available. The IOM says returned migrants benefit from tailor-made reintegration assistance, including continued medical support, to help them rebuild their lives in their home countries.

CONCLUSION

Tunisia's migration strategy in 2024 produced some of the short-term outcomes sought by the authorities: departures from key coastal areas declined, smuggling networks were disrupted and assisted voluntary returns increased. These measures allowed the government to project an image of control to domestic audiences and to reinforce its narrative that irregular migration can be contained through decisive enforcement.

Yet these effects were achieved through systematic repression rather than sustainable solutions. Migrants in Tunisia now face shrinking livelihoods, exclusion from services and the constant risk of forced transfer to remote border zones. Civil society organizations, once a fragile buffer providing humanitarian assistance and advocacy, have been curtailed through raids, prosecutions and financial restrictions. This has left migrants exposed to daily insecurity without reliable recourse to protection or support.

Crucially, the state's enforcement approach has not reduced demand for mobility. Instead, it has displaced it into more precarious and violent channels. Alongside the weakening of established smuggling structures, increasing migrant vulnerability opened space for exploitative practices, including incidents of kidnapping, extortion and forced labour. What has taken shape is not the dismantling of the smuggling economy but its reconfiguration into forms that are harder to monitor, more abusive and ultimately more dangerous.

The consequences extend beyond Tunisia's borders. Expulsions into Algeria have contributed to cascading deportations across the region, including onward transfers that in many cases reached Niger. These secondary movements strain already overburdened humanitarian actors in the Sahel and increase the exposure of migrants to abuse along the route. Transfers into Libya are particularly alarming, as they directly reinforce the country's entrenched detention and extortion economy. Evidence of Tunisian authorities handing migrants to Libyan security actors suggests cross-border arrangements that lack external transparency or accountability. Such practices risk embedding a transnational system of coercion in which migrants are treated as commodities to be exchanged, detained or ransomed.

Tunisian authorities dismantle a migrant camp in al-Amra near Sfax. *© Fethi Belaid/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images*

By the end of 2024, Tunisia had institutionalized removal as the organizing principle of migration governance, either through forced transfers and expulsions to land borders, or through AVRR. Both serve the same objective of reducing the country's migrant population, though in different ways: forced transfers directly expose migrants to violence and abuse, while reliance on AVRR takes place in a context where choices are heavily constrained, often making so-called voluntary return a last resort rather than a genuine option. Without a fundamental recalibration towards protection, accountability and safe mobility, Tunisia's current trajectory risks deepening a cycle of repression and exploitation that will reverberate across the wider region. Ultimately, Tunisia's approach demonstrates how enforcement-led migration control can suppress departures in the short term while entrenching instability, predation and a humanitarian crisis over the medium to long term.

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