

HUMAN SMUGGLING AND TRAFFICKING ECOSYSTEMS
– NORTH AFRICA AND THE SAHEL

2026 SERIES



**GLOBAL
INITIATIVE**

AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

TUNISIA

THE NEW NORMAL: SUSTAINED
CRACKDOWNS, CONTINUED ABUSES

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CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Methodology	3
Key points.....	4
Pressure on migrants and smugglers continues to increase.....	5
Heightened littoral and maritime enforcement.....	5
Forced transfers and expulsions to land borders.....	6
Camp clearances.....	7
Repatriations	8
Migrant departures decline and ecosystems adapt	10
Enforcement drives down crossing attempts.....	10
Smuggling networks adapt as risks escalate	13
Lower crossings, higher risks.....	15
Overland smuggling: decline persists, adaptation deepens.....	16
Algerian border: low volume, displaced routes, higher predation risk	16
Libyan border: collapse in crossings but persistent commodity-linked facilitation	18
Outlook	20
Conclusion	21
Notes	23



INTRODUCTION

Between January 2025 and June 2026, Tunisia's irregular migration environment was shaped by the further entrenchment of restrictive policies and enforcement measures introduced in September 2023.¹ This shift followed a peak in 2023, when Tunisia overtook Libya as the primary departure point for irregular migrants attempting to reach Europe via the Central Mediterranean route.² Nationalist political rhetoric, prolonged economic stagnation and intensified enforcement across land and maritime borders reshaped the migration environment. These measures disrupted smuggling facilitation and reduced sea departures and land entries, but they also deepened vulnerabilities among irregular migrants stranded in the country, fuelling local tensions and heightening humanitarian concerns.

Tunisia's strategy to manage irregular migration continued to centre on reducing the perceived viability of irregular transit, thereby diminishing its attractiveness as a destination and a transit country. Land border entry became increasingly restricted, with some estimates suggesting entries in 2025 fell to fewer than 1 000 per month, a decline compared with 2024.³ In the first five months of 2026, entries remained low, at about 500–1 000 per month.

Onward smuggling towards Europe also declined. Only 4 861 arrivals from Tunisia to Italy were recorded in 2025, 25 per cent of the 2024 total (19 460 arrivals) and less than 5 per cent of the 2023 peak (97 667).⁴ This decline continued in 2026, with only 1 074 arrivals from Tunisia recorded during the first six months.

However, the reduction in successful arrivals did not equate to a collapse in smuggling efforts. Instead, it coincided with a sustained and intensive interception drive by the Tunisian government. Humanitarian sources estimated that about 12 000 migrants were intercepted at sea and returned to shore by the Coast Guard in 2025. Interception levels over the first half of 2026 are unclear, though the Italian Ministry of the Interior claimed on 10 March that the Tunisian Coast Guard had intercepted 2 528 people since the start of the year.⁵

Many intercepted migrants were subsequently expelled at the country's land borders, where they faced severe risks: abandonment in remote areas, exposure to violence or exploitation by criminal actors, and prolonged detention in Libya. In many reported instances, migrants experienced repeated cycles of cross-border expulsion, with migrants expelled into Algeria subsequently arrested and expelled into Niger.⁶

However, with at least 19 600–21 600 attempted sea departures between early 2025 and mid-2026, demand for crossings has not abated, despite high enforcement pressure. This persistence is partly

explained by the increasingly untenable conditions for migrants in Tunisia. Tightened internal controls, a systematic dismantling of informal migrant settlements in Sfax from March 2025 onwards, and a climate of insecurity shaped by openly xenophobic rhetoric at senior political levels have compounded migrants' vulnerability. Organizations providing protection assistance faced continued administrative obstruction, judicial harassment, and in several cases the imprisonment of staff, while some were ordered to suspend operations.⁷

As a result, migrants' access to humanitarian assistance deteriorated further.⁸ For many irregular migrants, one of the few remaining options was to leave, and in mid-2025 the government introduced its own return programme, facilitating returns primarily to West African countries of origin.⁹ Operating outside the International Organization for Migration (IOM) Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) framework, the programme was presented as a faster alternative. Unlike IOM AVRR, however, it does not provide reintegration assistance upon return, functioning instead as a rapid return mechanism within the broader context of intensified enforcement and camp dismantlement. On 8 June 2026, Tunisian media reported that 4 620 migrants had returned through the programme since its launch.¹⁰ Guinean nationals accounted for the largest share of returnees (more than 2 000), followed by Ivorians (over 1 000).

Concurrently, the IOM AVRR programme maintained high return rates, repatriating 8 853 people in 2025, a 28 per cent increase compared with 2024.¹¹ Between 1 January and 11 June 2026, the IOM repatriated 2 732 migrants.¹²



The Tunisian Red Crescent assists with a migrant rescue operation in January 2025. Despite sustained enforcement pressure, demand for sea crossings from Tunisia has continued. *Photo: Croissant Rouge Tunisien de Sfax*

Alongside humanitarian and human rights concerns, the enforcement model has three strategic vulnerabilities that threaten its sustainability. First, rather than eliminating smuggling networks, sustained enforcement has increased their adaptability. Sub-Saharan nationals have assumed greater roles as intermediaries, leveraging their embeddedness within migrant communities to evade detection. Recruitment and coordination increasingly occur through encrypted messaging platforms. At land borders, smuggling remains opportunistic: actors who traffic goods and fuel can rapidly scale up migrant-smuggling operations if conditions shift. Second, the structural drivers of migration through Tunisia remain intact. Despite heightened risks, the route is significantly cheaper than Libya – typically €450–€600 compared to at least €1 000 – and is still perceived by many migrants as less risky and violent. Third, heavy-handed and opaque enforcement complicate cooperation frameworks and increase reputational exposure for external partners supporting border-management efforts, potentially undermining Tunisia's international relationships in the longer term.

Since underlying migration pressure remains largely unchanged, the limited number of migrant arrivals from Tunisia is best understood as mobility constrained by enforcement rather than as a durable reduction in the demand to move. This posture is inherently fragile: enforcement can suppress movement in the short term, but it does not resolve the structural drivers that sustain onward intent.

Although domestic and external incentives favour maintaining this approach, Tunisia is operating under acute economic and social strain – weak growth, high unemployment, inflationary pressures and fiscal stress – alongside further centralization of executive authority and a continued narrowing of institutional pluralism. Available reporting indicates that protest activity rose sharply in 2025, largely driven by economic and political grievances.¹³ Reports also point to numerous self-immolations in 2025 (estimated at more than 20 incidents), many occurring in front of public institutions.¹⁴ Such acts carry particular historical salience as a signal of acute social distress, given the widely recognized catalytic role of Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation in the events leading to the 2011 Tunisian revolution.

This combination of sustained hardship and constricted political space increases the risk of rapid escalation in the event of a trigger. Internal political turbulence or external shocks – such as renewed conflict dynamics in the Sahel or neighbouring states – could intensify push factors and erode the country's capacity to sustain enforcement, which could affect its containment posture.

Methodology

This brief is based on the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) field monitoring system. Between January 2025 and June 2026, the reporting period for this study, data was collected 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 and validate interviews conducted 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 planned future GI-TOC reporting and analysis of rapidly shifting dynamics in Tunisia and the broader region.

Key points

- During the reporting period, Tunisia experienced sustained high enforcement and sharply reduced movement. Recorded sea arrivals to Italy fell to 4 861 in 2025 – the lowest level since 2020 and around 5 per cent of the 2023 peak – and only 1 074 arrivals were recorded in the first half of 2026. Entries into Tunisia decreased to fewer than 1 000 per month. About 10 000 people were repatriated in 2025 and 4 000 in the first half of 2026.
- The government's approach to irregular migration involved the systematic dismantling of informal migrant settlements; systematic expulsions in remote border areas; intensified maritime interceptions; and a climate of insecurity fuelled by racist rhetoric introduced by President Kaïs Saïed in 2023 and mirrored by parliamentarians in 2025. Civil society organizations linked to migration faced severe restrictions, with some actors imprisoned and others forced to cease operations.
- Rather than eliminating smuggling networks, sustained enforcement strengthened their adaptability. Sub-Saharan nationals assumed greater roles as intermediaries, leveraging their embeddedness within migrant communities to evade detection. At land borders, smuggling remained opportunistic, with actors who traffic goods and fuel capable of rapidly resuming migrant smuggling if conditions shift.
- The structural drivers of migration through Tunisia remained intact. Despite heightened risks, the route was significantly cheaper than Libya and perceived as less violent and less extortive. An estimated 16 000–18 000 attempted sea crossings occurred in 2025 and at least 3 602 in the first three months of 2026, demonstrating that demand persisted even under maximum enforcement pressure.
- The current situation represents suppressed mobility under high enforcement rather than a durable reduction in underlying pressure. The mechanics that enabled rapid expansion in 2023 – low-cost crossings, decentralized smuggling networks and online recruitment – could be reactivated quickly if enforcement eases, authorities become overstretched or a new regional trigger emerges. Tunisia is quiet but not stable, and the system is one shock away from disruption.



PRESSURE ON MIGRANTS AND SMUGGLERS CONTINUES TO INCREASE

In 2025, Tunisia's authorities sustained a migration management approach driven above all by one goal: shrinking the number of migrants in the country. Steps that first took shape in 2023 and became more entrenched in 2024 moved beyond improvised expulsions into a more structured set of removal pathways operating in parallel. On the one hand were coercive practices – most notably forced transfers and expulsions towards Libya and Algeria. On the other hand were organized returns to countries of origin that no longer relied solely on the IOM AVR program: in 2025, the state introduced its own repatriation scheme. Despite major differences in procedure and appearance, these channels served the same end: reducing the migrant presence in Tunisia, whether through direct coercion or through returns chosen under intense constraint. The sections that follow analyze each pathway in turn.

Heightened littoral and maritime enforcement

Enforcement efforts during 2025 and the first half of 2026 continued to target departures at sea and before embarkation. As well as intercepting boats, authorities patrolled departure areas, including the olive groves in northern Sfax, and continued dismantling informal migrant encampments. These operations also disrupted smuggling logistics by uncovering boats and equipment prepared for future departures, increasing operational pressure on smugglers and boat builders.

Maritime interception operations were active across the coastline. Several examples illustrate the geographical range and scale of interceptions. On the night of 16–17 March 2025, Coast Guard units intercepted several boats off Sfax and Mahdia, rescuing 612 sub-Saharan migrants and recovering 18 bodies from separate incidents.¹⁵ In April 2025, maritime units in Bizerte reportedly prevented the departure of a group attempting to use a stolen 15-metre fishing vessel, recovering the boat and arresting a suspected organizer.¹⁶ In June 2026, the Coast Guard reportedly intercepted 66 migrants off Nabeul.¹⁷

Migrants are seen aboard a Tunisian Coast Guard vessel after being intercepted in March 2025. Photo: Still from a video on Facebook



However, authorities progressively curtailed public reporting on maritime operations, issuing only sporadic statements throughout 2025 and the first half of 2026. This opacity appears rooted in political sensitivities surrounding interceptions. While interceptions prevent departures, they also result in migrants being returned to, or remaining in, Tunisian territory rather than reaching Europe. This dynamic has become politically contentious, as many Tunisians perceive repeated interceptions as contributing to a prolonged presence of irregular migrants. Limiting official communication may therefore reflect an effort to avoid drawing public attention to an issue that is politically sensitive and widely debated. The resulting information blackout severely hampers reliable trend analysis, particularly regarding the ratio of attempted versus successful crossings.

Forced transfers and expulsions to land borders

In 2025, forced transfers to Tunisia's land borders remained a central operational tool for reducing migrant presence. What began as an episodic response in 2023 and became more routine in 2024 continued to function as a repeatable pathway linking sea interceptions and inland policing to expulsions to Libya and Algeria.¹⁸

Quantifying the scale of expulsions is challenging, with rights groups reporting divergent figures. The World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) estimated that more than 26 600 expulsions occurred in 2025, including 19 100 towards Algeria and 7 500 to Libya.¹⁹ The proportion stemming from maritime versus inland operations is unclear. Amnesty International documented at least 70 collective expulsions affecting more than 11 500 people between June 2023 and May 2025.²⁰ Despite divergences, there is broad agreement that many migrants are being removed to border areas, underscoring an intensifying coercive containment framework.

Across 2025, expulsions were typically preceded by interceptions at sea, often after departures from the Sfax coastline, or arrests on land carried out through raids, street stops and ID checks in a wide range of locations extending beyond embarkation areas.²¹ After interception or arrest, individuals were generally held for hours or days (in some cases longer) in a mix of official security facilities and improvised holding sites, frequently described as overcrowded and unsanitary, with recurring allegations of intimidation, poor access to medical care, restricted communication and physical abuse. From there, people were transported overland – often via Médenine governorate in Libya-bound cases – in

guarded convoys using security force vehicles and, at times, unmarked or commercial transport. Reports regularly described harsh transfer conditions, including deprivation of food and water and violence during transit, as well as additional short-term detention at intermediate holding points.²²

At the border, practices diverged by destination. In Libya-bound cases, expulsions reportedly ranged from formal handovers to Libyan security actors to abandonment in remote desert areas with migrants ordered to walk into Libyan territory. Several accounts described apparent coordination during handovers – including friendly interactions and radio communication – and some alleged material exchanges between Tunisian and Libyan personnel. Those who entered custody on the Libyan side frequently faced renewed detention in facilities linked to security forces or armed groups, increasing exposure to risks of extortion, abuse and prolonged confinement.

In Algeria-bound cases, reporting pointed more consistently to informal ‘drop-offs’ in remote areas near the border without clear evidence of operational coordination between Tunisian and Algerian authorities; individuals arrested in Algeria were often moved onwards and, in some cases, ultimately expelled south towards Niger.

Overall, the 2025 pattern suggests a consolidated chain of removal: interception or arrest, short-term detention, long-distance forced transfer to the Algerian or Libyan border and expulsion at or across the border, followed, for many, by immediate re-detention in Libya or onward removals in Algeria.

Camp clearances

Inland enforcement operations became a characteristic of Tunisia’s migration management approach during the reporting period. In late March 2025, authorities initiated a sustained campaign to dismantle informal migrant settlements in northern Sfax, particularly targeting al-Amra and the KM21–KM37 corridor. These olive grove encampments accommodated thousands of sub-Saharan migrants and became focal points of local complaints about security concerns, agricultural damage and public health issues. The National Guard thus framed operations as restoring order and sanitation. Several dismantlement operations were accompanied by media coverage, publicly showcasing the enforcement response and reinforcing public messaging that the authorities were acting against irregular migration.



A makeshift migrant camp near Sfax is dismantled in April 2025. Such operations have become characteristic of Tunisia’s approach to migration management.

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During the operations, an estimated 7 000 people, mostly sub-Saharan irregular migrants, were uprooted. Despite official assertions of rights-respecting procedures, reporting in civil society channels and on online networks indicated forced removals, denial of access to belongings and occasional violence, though allegations of large-scale expulsions to land borders during these operations could not be independently verified.

Dismantlement operations primarily displaced migrants rather than resolving their presence. Many relocated into smaller and more dispersed settlements, moved to urban areas to seek income for onward travel or, in fewer cases, attempted movement towards Algeria or Libya.

Camp dismantlement also coincided with a broader shift towards accelerated 'exit' options, including the rollout of a state-administered return channel operating alongside the IOM's AVR. Only a minority accessed formal return mechanisms in the immediate aftermath of the dismantlement, according to contacts. Instead, there were reportedly temporary increases in departure attempts after early-phase operations.

Repatriations

In 2025, repatriations were further entrenched as a core pillar of Tunisia's migration management, alongside forced transfers to land borders. As conditions worsened and pathways to regularization, stable livelihoods or onward movement were limited, return became an increasingly common option for migrants seeking an exit from deteriorating circumstances. The dismantling of informal camps in the Sfax area in late March 2025 intensified this pressure, accelerating displacement and reinforcing return as one of the few practicable routes out.

Within this environment, the IOM's AVR was the principal structured channel for return. The IOM reported that it assisted 8 853 people with voluntary return in 2025, a 28 per cent increase compared with 2024.²³ Between 1 January and 11 June 2026, a further 2 732 migrants were repatriated by the IOM.²⁴ In November 2025, foreign minister Mohamed Ali Nafti stated publicly that approximately 10 000 irregular migrants had been repatriated in 2025, though comprehensive official breakdowns by channel, nationality or month were not made available.

A key development in 2025 was the introduction in June of a parallel, state-administered 'voluntary return' programme operating outside the AVR framework and presented as a faster alternative. Public messaging framed the initiative as a humanitarian complement to camp clearances, with the state covering the airfares of those wishing to depart. Operationally, the programme reportedly centred on the KM21 site in northern Sfax, where migrants registered and received basic support – food, temporary accommodation, basic medical attention and clothing – while consular travel documents were arranged, after which they were transported by bus to Tunis–Carthage International Airport. Reported stays at KM21 averaged roughly two weeks, with occasional accounts of small cash assistance. On 8 June 2026, media outlets reported that 4 620 migrants had returned through the scheme since its inception.²⁵ Guineans accounted for the largest share (more than 2 000), followed by Ivorians (over 1 000).

Unlike AVR, the government programme appears not to provide reintegration assistance in countries of origin, functioning primarily as a rapid exit mechanism embedded within a broader enforcement and camp-dismantlement context. While most participants appear to have made the decision to enrol themselves, the scheme's opacity and the wider coercive environment blur the boundary between

voluntary return and returns undertaken under intense pressure. There may also be a limited number of cases involving forced return, including allegations that some arrested girls involved in begging were placed on state-organized return flights, according to GI-TOC contacts. These claims are difficult to verify given restricted transparency.



Migrants are repatriated through the IOM-assisted return programme at Tunis Carthage Airport in June 2025. The IOM assisted more than 8 800 people with voluntary return in 2025. *Photo: IOM Tunisia*



MIGRANT DEPARTURES DECLINE AND ECOSYSTEMS ADAPT

Tunisia's maritime migration landscape in 2025 was characterized by a profound contraction in departure volumes set against persistent underlying demand. The enforcement intensification that began in late 2023 had become firmly embedded by 2025 (4 861 arrivals), producing the lowest recorded arrival figures to Italy from Tunisia since the route expanded in 2020 (14 685 arrivals). While arrivals were lower in 2019 (3 633), that preceded the rapid rise of the Tunisia route observed from 2020 onwards.²⁶

Three mutually reinforcing trends shaped the reporting period: a sharp drop in recorded arrivals and attempted departures alongside increasing uncertainty about the scale of departures; a splintered, opportunistic smuggling market that persisted on low operating costs and consistent demand, while pushing people into riskier routes and practices; and a broadened containment approach combining the systematic dismantlement of migrant encampments and the introduction of a state-led repatriation programme, pointing towards more managed and selective humanitarian exits.

Enforcement drives down crossing attempts

The impact of enforcement can be seen in the sharp contraction in sea arrivals from Tunisia to Italy. UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) data indicates that during 2025, only 4 861 people arriving in Italy had departed from Tunisia, representing just 7 per cent of the country's 66 316 arrivals.²⁷ This marked a 75 per cent decline compared with 2024 and a 95 per cent reduction compared with 2023. The first quarter of 2025 witnessed an 89 per cent year-on-year decline, with only 419 arrivals. While figures rose modestly in the second (1 577) and third (1 905) quarters, even the traditional July–September peak period was 71 per cent below 2024 levels. A drop to 960 arrivals in the fourth quarter confirmed that the absence of seasonal recovery reflected structural constraints rather than temporary disruptions – marking Tunisia's steepest sustained reduction since the route expanded in 2020.

The contraction continued during the first half of 2026, with 1 074 arrivals from Tunisia recorded, compared with 1 966 during the same period in 2025. This represents a further 46 per cent year-on-year decline. However, the pattern was uneven: Q1 2026 recorded 458 arrivals, slightly above the 419 recorded in Q1 2025, while Q2 fell to 616 arrivals, compared with 1 577 in Q2 2025. This suggests that the route remained structurally constrained, although with limited and uneven departure activity rather than a complete halt.

Maritime interception data reinforced this downward trajectory. According to humanitarian contacts, authorities made around 12 000 interceptions in 2025, a sharp decline compared with 2024, when an estimated 30 000 interceptions were made. The predominant nationalities intercepted included Guineans, Sierra Leoneans, Ivorians and Cameroonians. The simultaneous fall in arrivals and estimated interceptions suggests a genuine reduction in the number of attempted departures, rather than merely enhanced efficiency in interceptions.

In 2025, Tunisians remained the largest nationality among people arriving in Italy after departing from Tunisia, although the nationality composition shifted somewhat compared with 2024. According to UNHCR data, Tunisians accounted for 37 per cent of arrivals from Tunisia, compared with 40 per cent in 2024. Guineans accounted for 27 per cent of 2025 arrivals, followed by Ivorians (8 per cent), Malians (5 per cent), Cameroonians (4 per cent) and Sudanese (3 per cent); other nationalities together accounted for the remaining 18 per cent.²⁸ Overall, arrivals in Italy from Tunisia fell by 75 per cent, from 19 460 in 2024 to 4 861 in 2025, indicating a broad contraction in arrivals from Tunisia.²⁹

The nationality composition of arrivals started to shift during the first half of 2026. Of the 1 074 migrants who arrived in Italy from Tunisia, 55 per cent were Tunisian nationals and 45 per cent were foreign. While arrivals declined among both groups in absolute terms, foreign nationals experienced a proportionally steeper decline, resulting in Tunisian nationals accounting for a larger share of total arrivals.

Despite the rise in the percentage of Tunisians arriving, this did not mark the beginning of a Tunisian surge. The number of Tunisian nationals reaching Italy has declined markedly in recent years, from 17 322 in 2023 and 7 677 in 2024 to 1 828 in 2025 and 586 in the first half of 2026.³⁰ This sharp decrease appears to reflect a combination of structural disruption and behavioural changes. Intensified enforcement significantly curtailed the operational space for smuggling networks and disrupted departure infrastructure, reducing the predictability and availability of organized crossings. Tunisian migrants' departure decisions are closely tied to perceived safety and likelihood of successful arrival. Unlike many foreign nationals, they have traditionally relied on more structured arrangements – often involving higher fees, wooden boats, and organizers considered experienced or reputable – that require time to assemble passengers and secure vessels.³¹ As enforcement pressures heightened interception risks and fragmented established operators, the feasibility of organizing such crossings and the perceived prospects of success appear to have diminished, probably reducing willingness to attempt the journey.

Notably, there is little evidence that heightened Tunisian enforcement has displaced migrant departures into Libya. Arrivals from Libya to Italy and Greece continue to reflect the characteristic passenger profile: mainly migrants from South Asia, the Horn of Africa, Egypt and Sudan. There was no significant reported increase in departures by West African communities that would typically depart from Tunisia, such as Ivorian and Guinean nationals.

The limited reports suggesting displacement involved Sudanese refugees. During the reporting period, the GI-TOC received information indicating that Sudanese who had planned to depart Tunisia were in some cases re-evaluating, with embarkation points in eastern and western Libya more attractive.

Sudanese notwithstanding, the lack of broader displacement may well hinge on cost and perceived safety. For many migrants, Tunisia is a more affordable and marginally safer alternative than other available options, such as Libya. Passage aboard small metal boats from Tunisia typically costs €450–€600, compared with about €1 000 for places on inflatable dinghies or small wooden vessels departing western Libya (and €500–€1 200 from eastern Libya). Migrants interviewed along Sahel

transit corridors and in the Nigerien city of Agadez consistently cited cost differentials as a decisive factor sustaining movement towards Tunisia despite diminishing departure prospects. The outcome is a deterrence plateau: enforcement constrains opportunity without eliminating intent.

These dynamics mark Tunisia's transformation from a major departure zone to a low-volume, high-risk transit country. Controls have suppressed successful crossings and many attempted departures without addressing underlying mobility drivers, and aspirations ensure continued demand even as pathways narrow. The result is a structurally repressed, elevated-risk corridor characterized by fewer departures that are more clandestine, more dangerous and increasingly invisible to external monitoring.

Shipwrecks continue off the Tunisian coast

Drawing on contacts, media sources and search-and-rescue statements, the GI-TOC identified 71 maritime incidents reported online during 2025. Given severe data gaps, these figures represent a substantial undercount of shipwreck incidents linked to Tunisian embarkations.

Across documented incidents, 347 migrants were reported dead or missing (158 confirmed deaths and 189 disappearances). While this figure is lower than the 612 people the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES) estimated to have died or gone missing in 2024, and the 1 313 people estimated in 2023, the decline probably reflects both reduced departure volumes and systematic under-reporting.³²

Recurrent factors leading to shipwrecks included overcrowding, poorly constructed metal vessels and limited navigational expertise. In several cases reported online, Coast Guard tactics, including engine disablement and rapid approach manoeuvres, allegedly contributed to capsizing.³³ Sub-Saharan nationals appeared to be primarily affected, reflecting the reality that they constitute the majority of those attempting crossings, as well as structural vulnerability such as financial constraints, which affect vessel quality. ■

A maritime rescue operation in January 2025. The past year has seen a contraction in sea arrivals from Tunisia to Italy, reflecting increased enforcement. *Photo: Croissant Rouge Tunisien de Sfax*



Smuggling networks adapt as risks escalate

Under sustained enforcement pressure, smuggling operations did not collapse but reorganized. Sfax retained its position as the primary maritime departure hub, with launches continuing from al-Amra, La Louza, Jebeniana, Msetria and Sidi Mansour, albeit at reduced frequency compared with 2024. Intensified pressure in Sfax pushed some activity northward to Mahdia, with departures from Chebba, Salakta and Melloulech. Smaller departure pockets persisted in Monastir, Nabeul and Zarzis. However, this spatial distribution reflected opportunistic and fragmented mobility rather than systematic geographic relocation.

Smuggling networks across coastal zones have adapted their operational methods rather than ceasing activity. Smugglers increasingly emphasized speed and discretion, launching boats within narrow windows that coincided with reduced visibility, adverse weather or periods of limited enforcement presence. Other adaptation tactics included coordinating parallel launches to stretch patrol resources; deploying decoy vessels to divert enforcement assets; withholding departure coordinates for as long as possible; and restricting information flows to small, trusted circles.

While allegations of official collusion surfaced periodically and have been reported in the past, available evidence is insufficient to assess the prevalence of such practices in 2025 and 2026, and whether they have increased or decreased compared with recent years.³⁴

These operational shifts maintain smuggling capacity by reducing the window for detection. They also elevate safety risks because faster, more concealed departures leave less time for checks on vessels and engines. Further, when boats depart in poor visibility or adverse weather, or when patrol assets are diverted by parallel launches and decoys, distress cases may also be more difficult to detect in time or overwhelm response capacity, increasing the probability of undetected departures, shipwrecks and delayed search-and-rescue response.

In another shift, while Tunisian facilitators retained control over vessel access, logistical infrastructure and local protection arrangements, sub-Saharan migrants increasingly assumed key roles as coordinators, intermediaries and boat captains. While this trend first emerged in 2024, it accelerated over the reporting period, particularly within Guinean, Ivorian, Cameroonian, Senegalese and Sudanese communities.

This shift reflects how sustained enforcement pressure pushed Tunisian organizers further underground, opening operational space for lower-visibility foreign smuggling actors with deep social embeddedness in migrant communities. The resulting structure is one of mutual dependency: Tunisian actors maintain strategic oversight while sub-Saharan participants absorb the high-exposure, front-line roles, insulating Tunisian organizers from direct law enforcement risk. Smuggling networks have reconstituted into smaller, adaptive formations that are simultaneously harder to detect and more dangerous for the migrants they transport.

As operations have moved further underground, migrants have lost practical means of verifying smugglers' reliability, competence or track records, increasing their exposure to inexperienced captains and overloaded and poorly equipped vessels. For example, following 27 deaths in the shipwreck of a boat that reportedly departed from Sfax in late December 2024, an audio recording published by the Facebook page L'actualité captured a Guinean woman, who died in the incident, describing a malfunctioning engine and an inexperienced designated captain who 'made them go round in circles' before water began entering the vessel.³⁵



MAP 1 Main human smuggling routes through Tunisia.

Reported prices in 2025 and 2026 were broadly stable compared with 2024: €450–€600 for metal boats, €800–€2 000 for wooden vessels and €500–€1 200 for inflatable dinghies. Three factors restrained fare increases: competition among a fragmented network of operators; migrants' limited financial means; and the spread of low-cost, migrant-built metal boats that reduced overheads.

Payments are made in cash, in Tunisian dinars, typically split between a deposit and a final payment before departure. Price stability reflects a route where capacity continues to meet demand, consolidating Tunisia's position as a low-cost crossing that has grown increasingly unreliable and perilous.

The metal boat economy remained foundational to this cost structure despite repeated enforcement campaigns. Since 2022, metal boats have dominated departures, particularly for sub-Saharan passengers departing from Sfax, due to their affordability, concealability and rapid assembly. Standard metal boats are 6–9 metres long and 2–2.5 metres wide.

Following crackdowns since late 2023, initial fabrication by Tunisian welders has shifted to sub-Saharan builders using local techniques, with assembly sites relocating from warehouses to migrant settlements in olive groves. For migrants awaiting departure, participating in boat construction also provides rare income-generating opportunities. For organizers, it reduces visibility and production timelines – with boats sometimes constructed within two days – and maximizes profits, with material for each vessel costing €800–€1 000. Once completed, vessels loaded with 40–50 passengers can generate gross revenue of €18 000–€30 000 per journey. However, the artisanal nature of boat construction and regular overcrowding have increased the risk of shipwrecks.

Lower crossings, higher risks

Overall, Tunisia's maritime migration dynamics in 2025 and 2026 did not signal deterrence success but a phase of compression and adjustment. The country's counter-migration approach rested on restricting movement, fragmenting networks and selective humanitarian gestures. State measures extended significantly inland. Maritime enforcement, camp clearances and government-run return options projected control and responsiveness, but in practice entrenched displacement and drove smuggling network adaptation. Notably, within this context there were few formal efforts to create viable legal routes for migration or residence, or to introduce effective safeguards against abuse, arbitrary detention and expulsion to border areas.

As a result of enforcement, recorded arrivals from Tunisia fell to a small share of overall Central Mediterranean crossings, yet attempts continued amid limited and opaque official data. Smuggling operations did not disappear; they adapted. More visible, hierarchical structures gave way to smaller, agile groups rooted in migrant communities, relying on low-cost metal boats, stable prices and improvised tactics that are more difficult to disrupt and more dangerous for those on board.

What has taken shape is a leaner and harsher system: lower volumes, greater instability, and higher risks for undocumented migrants who have few alternatives. Without substantial shifts in the underlying drivers of movement, the latter half of 2026 is likely to see a continued low-volume but high-risk route: more geographically dispersed, structurally flexible, and still shaped by the economic and political incentives that persisted throughout the reporting period.



OVERLAND SMUGGLING: DECLINE PERSISTS, ADAPTATION DEEPENS

Tunisia's land borders with Libya and Algeria during the reporting period were characterized by sustained suppression of irregular movement, yet the underlying smuggling infrastructure remained adaptable. Both land borders experienced sharp declines in crossing volumes compared with 2023 peaks, driven by intensified enforcement, heightened risks on both sides, and Tunisia's increasingly hostile environment for migrants. According to OMCT estimates, irregular land arrivals into Tunisia declined from approximately 2 000 per month between November 2024 and April 2025 to about 480 per month between May and December 2025.³⁶ During the latter period, the Algerian border was the principal entry corridor, accounting for an estimated 3 500 arrivals compared with about 350 from Libya. Nonetheless, these routes continued to channel most irregular entries into Tunisia. Established commodity smuggling routes continued to operate at reduced scale, and networks demonstrated capacity to adjust tactics, shift geography and maintain readiness for potential reactivation.

Algerian border: low volume, displaced routes, higher predation risk

Irregular movement from Algeria into Tunisia stayed low and discreet in 2025, suppressed by sustained border securitization amid shifting crossing patterns and heightened risks along inland routes. Despite the overall decline in irregular land arrivals into Tunisia, the Algerian border remained the principal land entry corridor, according to GI-TOC contacts and OMCT reporting.³⁷

In 2025, National Guard patrols reportedly increased, surveillance intensified, and sustained operations targeted established crossing routes, especially in the Kasserine governorate. Security forces also deployed additional personnel and equipment, including drones and specialized units, while mobility restrictions and route surveillance made traditional crossing corridors increasingly difficult to use. In early 2026, counterterrorism operations in Kasserine further disrupted established crossing patterns, temporarily pushing movement into more remote terrain and creating short-lived shifts in routes used to cross into Tunisia.



MAP 2 Main human smuggling routes on the Algerian border.

Within this enforcement context, smuggling adapted tactically and organizationally. The dominant model remained ‘drop-and-walk’: facilitators drop migrants near the frontier on the Algerian side and direct them to proceed on foot, typically at night, using informal rural tracks and landmarks (including old railway lines) to minimize facilitator exposure. Enforcement pressure pushed drop-off points into more remote terrain, lengthening crossings and increasing risks of exhaustion, injury, disorientation, extortion and assault. Networks also rebalanced towards commodity smuggling. After late-2024 disruption, fuel and food smuggling largely resumed by the second half of 2025, while human smuggling stayed constrained and became opportunistic – small numbers of migrants, moved alongside goods on short routes involving ad hoc arrangements rather than the dedicated, high-demand systems of 2022–2023.

Movement also shifted geographically: first towards Bouchabka, then south of Kasserine city via Thélepte and Hassi El Ferid, and by mid-2025 northward into Kef and Jendouba, although Kasserine reportedly saw a slight increase as an entry zone in early 2026 as enforcement patterns fluctuated. In the north, crossings were reported via Kalaat Senan and the Bou Jebr mountains (Kef) and Babouch near Ain Drahem (Jendouba). Forested terrain offers concealment but increases exposure to environmental hazards and abandonment, especially for women and minors. Migrants typically paid €500–€1 000 for the Algeria–Tunisia segment, with staging and transport still stronger on the Algerian side.

Violence and coercion intensified along routes in western governorates (notably Kasserine, Kef and Siliana). Kidnapping-for-ransom networks and opportunistic criminality expanded: one monitor estimated roughly 200 ransom kidnappings in the first half of 2025, with reported ransoms commonly €460–€950. Some abductions reportedly began in Algeria through deception by supposed smugglers; others occurred post-entry in Tunisia, with victims taken to isolated sites (including near Sfax) for extortion and torture.

Limited, sporadic citizen-led interdictions surfaced in Siliana (captured in social media clips), appearing spontaneous rather than organized but reflecting a hardened local 'border control' discourse.³⁸ Overall, enforcement reduced visibility but pushed movement into harsher terrain and higher-predation environments, rather than removing underlying incentives or infrastructure.

Libyan border: collapse in crossings but persistent commodity-linked facilitation

Irregular movement from Libya into Tunisia remained low in 2025, consolidating a decline recorded in 2024, before increasing slightly in early 2026. Even so, estimated entries remained well below pre-2023 low-volume levels. In transit hubs for recent arrivals, such as Ben Gardane and Zarzis, the presence of sub-Saharan irregular migrants has reportedly remained low since late 2023.

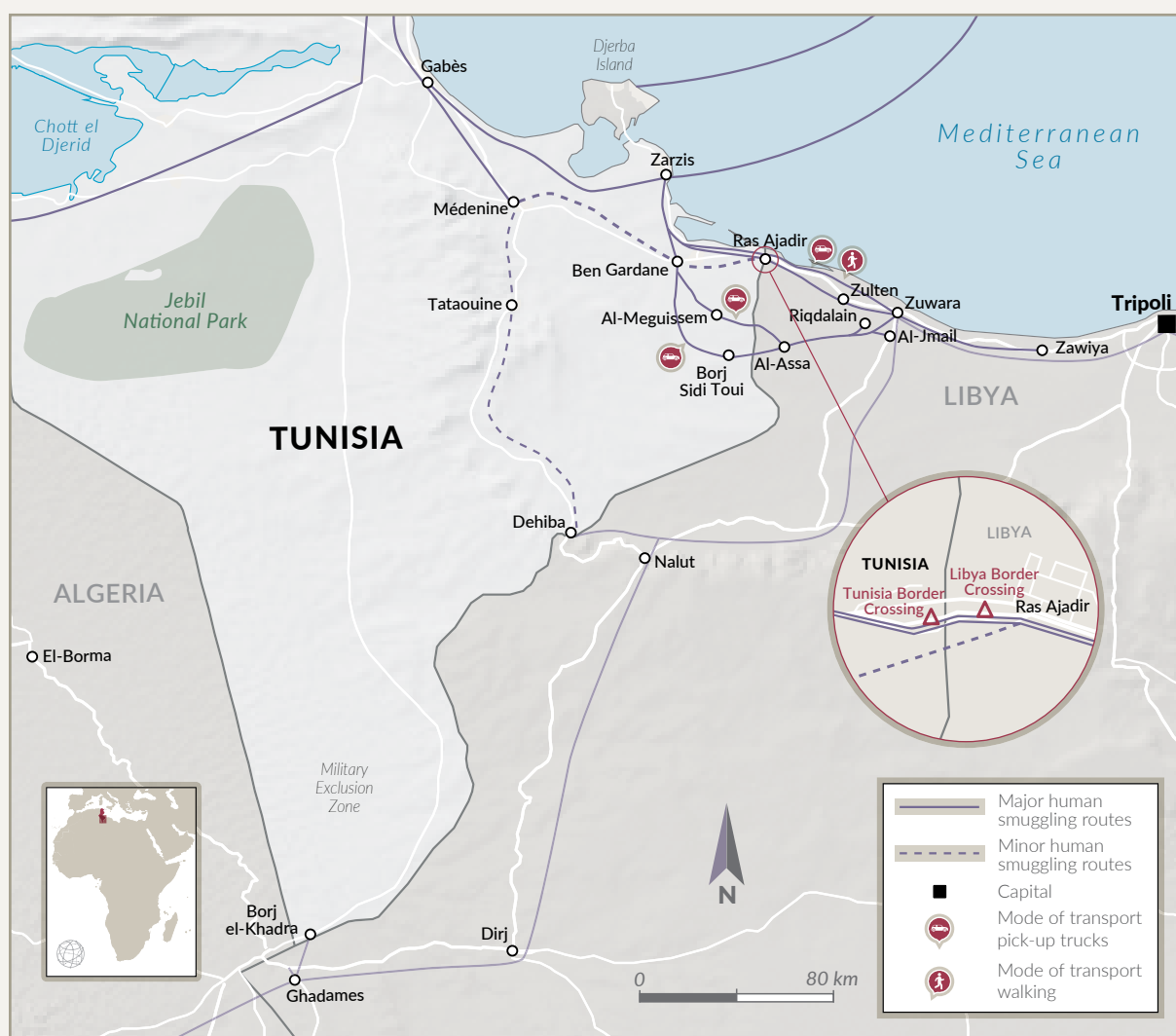
The limited movement across the frontier was probably due to three reinforcing factors: intensified patrols and interdiction on both sides since late 2023; Tunisia's increasingly hostile environment for migrants (including theft and expulsions to border areas); and high abuse risks on the Libyan side (including apprehension, forced return, detention and ransom dynamics reported by migrants). The modest increase observed in early 2026 appears to have been linked to instability in the Libya–Chad–Niger tri-border area, secondary movements by migrants previously expelled from Algeria, and negotiated releases from detention facilities in western Libya.

Nonetheless, limited cross-border smuggling did occur. Four corridors remained relevant: Ras Ajadir and adjacent side paths; al-Assa desert routes; the Nalut–Tataouine desert route (declining in mid-2025 as Libyan security forces, including the Ministry of Interior's Border Guard and Desert Patrol and Stabilization Support Apparatus patrols,³⁹ intensified control and anti-smuggling operations); and the Wazin–Dehiba crossing point, comparatively quiet and less controlled due to difficult al-Ghazaia/Nafusa terrain.

Contacts along the north-western part of the border with Libya noted that crossings were limited and in small groups during the first half of 2025. The second half of the year saw a reported southward shift, with 50–100 weekly crossings through more entry zones around al-Assa, Nalut and Ghadames, though movements remained sporadic and fragmented.

Human smuggling along the border was linked to broader commodity-smuggling networks. Movement was typically in small groups at night, with 2–10 migrants transported in pick-up trucks, 4x4s, vans, and – near the Ras Ajadir port of entry – closed cargo trucks disguised as produce/electronics transport. In riskier stretches, smugglers made migrants walk across desert terrain, and near al-Assa they have reportedly used improvised methods such as wooden planks to negotiate border berms. Bribery reportedly became less reliable as Tunisian units were frequently rotated.

Prices for the Libya–Tunisia leg were €100–€500, varying by corridor and enforcement intensity (roughly €100–€200 in Wazin–Dehiba; €350–€500 around al-Assa/Nalut). South Asian migrants reportedly faced much higher prices (€2 330–€2 920), according to contacts with visibility on the border, and a rarely offered €3 000 ‘premium’ package included accommodation and transfer towards coastal departure points. Such independent, self-directed crossings detailed by the GI-TOC in 2023 are now rare.⁴⁰ Once in Tunisia, migrants are typically transported via Ben Gardane towards Zarzis or Médenine en route to Sfax.



MAP 3 Main human smuggling routes on the Libyan border.



Patrols by the Tunisian National Guard increased along the Libyan border in 2025, limiting cross-border movement. Photo: Still from a video on Radio Tataouine's Facebook page

Outlook

Migrant movements across Tunisia's borders with Libya and Algeria in 2025 and the first half of 2026 remained highly constrained, shaped by intensified security measures, growing risks on both sides of the frontiers, and an increasingly hostile environment for migrants in Tunisia. While long-standing smuggling routes continued to function at a reduced, more discreet scale, the broader collapse of cross-border flows marked a return to pre-2023 patterns rather than a permanent shift.

Emerging developments, including limited South Asian use of Tunisia as a secondary departure point from Libya and slowly changing perceptions among some migrant groups, show that both corridors remain fluid and could reactivate if regional conditions change. The northward displacement of Algeria–Tunisia crossing points from Kasserine to Kef and Jendouba, and the limited resurgence in Kasserine in early 2026, demonstrate the geographic adaptability of smuggling networks under pressure. Meanwhile, the existence of criminal violence – particularly kidnapping for ransom – underscores how enforcement-driven displacement increases migrant vulnerability without eliminating underlying movement incentives.

For now, however, movements remain fragmented, small in scale, and heavily conditioned by law enforcement efforts, insecurity, shrinking protection space and the enduring flexibility of established smuggling networks. Despite reduced visibility and diminished activity, underlying smuggling infrastructure remains intact, as networks adjust routes and tactics rather than exiting the market. Any easing of enforcement pressure or sustained increase in demand could prompt rapid resurgence in crossings, underscoring the elastic and durable nature of border facilitation systems along Tunisia's eastern and western borders.



CONCLUSION

In 2025 and the first half of 2026, Tunisia's migration governance further consolidated around an enforcement-led logic of containment and removal. This approach is likely to persist over the coming year. Tunisian authorities continue to frame migration as an issue of security and sovereignty, while European partners retain strong incentives to sustain reduced arrivals. Funding, equipment and operational coordination are therefore likely to continue under existing programmes. As a result, a return to the high departure levels observed in 2023 appears unlikely in the short term, with policy continuing to prioritize interception, surveillance and return capacity.

However, fewer arrivals to Europe from Tunisia should not necessarily be interpreted as a long-term reduction in the drivers of migration from the country or attempted departures. The effectiveness of the current model depends on sustained political commitment, operational capacity and external support. Maintaining lower departure levels requires ongoing security deployments, administrative pressure, financial assistance and effective cooperation with international partners. At the same time, enforcement has not eliminated the drivers of irregular migration or the networks that facilitate it. Instead, smuggling facilitation networks have adapted by operating in smaller, less visible and more flexible configurations, allowing departures to continue despite heightened enforcement.

Rather than reducing migration overall, sustained enforcement in Tunisia has contributed to a redistribution of migration pressure across the Central Mediterranean. Libya is the primary departure point, while the share of departures from Tunisia and Algeria fluctuates. Tunisia became the principal departure hub in 2023 before Libya regained that position, illustrating how migration routes shift in response to changing opportunities and constraints. Forced expulsions to Algeria and Libya reinforce this dynamic by redirecting migrants into migration systems characterized by detention, exploitation, repeated expulsions and, in many cases, onward migration. Containment in Tunisia therefore does not necessarily reduce migration but displaces movements and the associated humanitarian risks across the wider region.

Domestic conditions are likely to reinforce these dynamics. Although economic growth improved in 2025, persistent unemployment, fiscal pressures and declining living standards continued to generate public dissatisfaction. Protests throughout 2025 and 2026 reflected these pressures, while authorities expanded measures against opposition figures, journalists and civil society organizations. Organizations providing migration assistance, legal aid and human rights monitoring have faced particular pressure, with several suspension orders reported by mid-2026. These developments are

likely to sustain emigration aspirations among Tunisians, reinforce anti-migrant rhetoric directed at sub-Saharan communities, and weaken the organizations that provide protection, assistance and independent oversight.

The near-term outlook points to generally low but uneven departures from Tunisia, accompanied by sustained returns and periodic expulsions. Smuggling facilitation networks have demonstrated a capacity to adapt, increasingly operating in smaller, less visible and more flexible configurations. As a result, launch operations are likely to persist and be less predictable, with temporary increases when enforcement intensity shifts, weather conditions improve or alternative routes emerge. At the same time, the current equilibrium remains vulnerable to regional and domestic shocks. Renewed instability in Libya, breakdowns in international cooperation, concentrated displacement or domestic unrest could alter migration dynamics. Moreover, the high number of deaths and disappearances recorded in the reporting period demonstrates that reduced arrivals in Europe still coexist with acute humanitarian costs. Rather than resolving migration pressures, Tunisia's current approach is more likely to redistribute them geographically while increasing the vulnerability of those who continue to move.



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