



ADDRESSING ILLEGAL MIGRATION IN TUNISIA: THE NEED FOR A COMPREHENSIVE POLICY APPROACH

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Abstract

Following the 2011 revolution, Tunisia has grappled with a significant challenge posed by illegal migration, a complex issue shaped by an interplay of economic, political, and regional dynamics. High unemployment rates and limited economic opportunities compel many Tunisians to seek better prospects abroad, often resorting to irregular migration channels. Even more, political instability and conflicts in neighbouring regions have exacerbated this situation, acting as a push factor that propels individuals to seek refuge beyond their homeland. The resultant surge in undocumented migrants has transformed the country into a transit hub. This upsurge not only strains Tunisia's limited resources but also brings about social and economic consequences, impacting public services and intensifying competition in the job market. Effectively addressing this issue demands a comprehensive approach, necessitating reforms in economic policies, legal frameworks, and international collaboration. This policy brief advocates for a holistic approach, integrating domestic initiatives with international cooperation to confront the intricate challenge of illegal migration in Tunisia.

Keywords

illegal migration, Tunisia, economy, unemployment.

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1. Scope of the Problem

Illegal migration in Tunisia is a multifaceted challenge rooted in a complex interplay of economic, political, and regional factors. The country suffers from high unemployment rates, mounting poverty and limited economic opportunities, forcing a significant number of Tunisians to seek better prospects abroad. Tunisia's economy was severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, further exacerbating already-existing economic challenges. As of June 2023, the unemployment rate in Tunisia reached 15.6%, which is considered a drop from the all-time high of 18.9% in December 2011 (National Institute of Statistics, 2023).

In the same vein, the economic downturn in recent years further strained the country's democratic institutions and fuelled public frustration as the budget deficit reached 7.7 % in December 2022 (AI Monitor, 2022). In January 2021, protests erupted across Tunisia, exacerbated by anger over economic hardship, unemployment, and government corruption. Demonstrations took place in various regions, with protesters demanding political and economic reforms that were expected after the 2011 uprising. The government's response to these protests and its ability to address the underlying issues remain crucial for maintaining the stability of Tunisia's young democracy and addressing the surge of irregular and illegal migration in the country. Other financial strains in the country include food shortage and the rise of imported staples such as grains, sugar and vegetable oil, which are all repercussions of the war in Ukraine (Rahali, 2022). Increases in the price of goods led to the rise of the inflation rate in the country from 6.7% in January 2022 to 7.3% in June 2024 (Institut National de Statistiques, 2022/2024). As a result of the country's ailing economic situation and poor purchasing power, the poverty level in the country hit a record of roughly 4 million Tunisians according to the Minister of Social Affairs (Echaabnews, 2022). Dire economic conditions and inefficient governance challenge Tunisia, boosting interest in irregular migration especially among the young who desire to leave the country in search of better opportunities and prospects abroad (Abderrahim, 2023).

The lack of viable legal avenues often leads individuals to resort to irregular migration channels such as Lampedusa and recently Serbia, contributing to the rise in undocumented migration. Additionally, political instability in the country and conflicts in neighbouring regions act as prominent push factors, propelling individuals to seek refuge beyond Tunisia's borders. The resultant influx of undocumented migrants from Libya, Algeria and sub-Saharan countries not only strains the country's resources but also has far-reaching social and economic consequences. Overcrowded public services, increased job market competition, and potential social tensions underscore the urgency of addressing this pervasive problem.

According to a recent report by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, the population of illegal foreign migrants living in Tunisia has expanded since 2020. Though the exact number remains unclear, Ivorians and Guineans are believed to be the most numerous, with estimates of 8,000 to 20,000 Ivorians and

7,000 Guineans. Other nationalities in the country include Malians, Sudanese and Cameroonians (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2024).

A key issue to highlight is the rise of racism and xenophobic tensions in Tunisia in recent years following the increasingly visible presence of sub-Saharan migrants in the country (Abderrahim, 2023). Anti-migrant sentiments have risen sharply considering the challenging economic situation of the country and the controversial statements from Tunisian leadership, accusing sub-Saharan migrants of contributing to crime and economic instability. In February 2023, President Kais Saied claimed that the arrival of these undocumented migrants is but a part of a plot to weaken the country's identity and change its demographic landscape (Le Monde, 2023).

Tunisia is considered to be a transit country for many undocumented migrants from sub-Saharan countries who embark on risky journeys to Europe. The acute socio-economic crisis in the country together with the growing presence of these irregular migrants primarily in Sfax and Greater Tunis have led to the country's leaders framing this societal problem as a threat to national security (Assabah News, 2021).

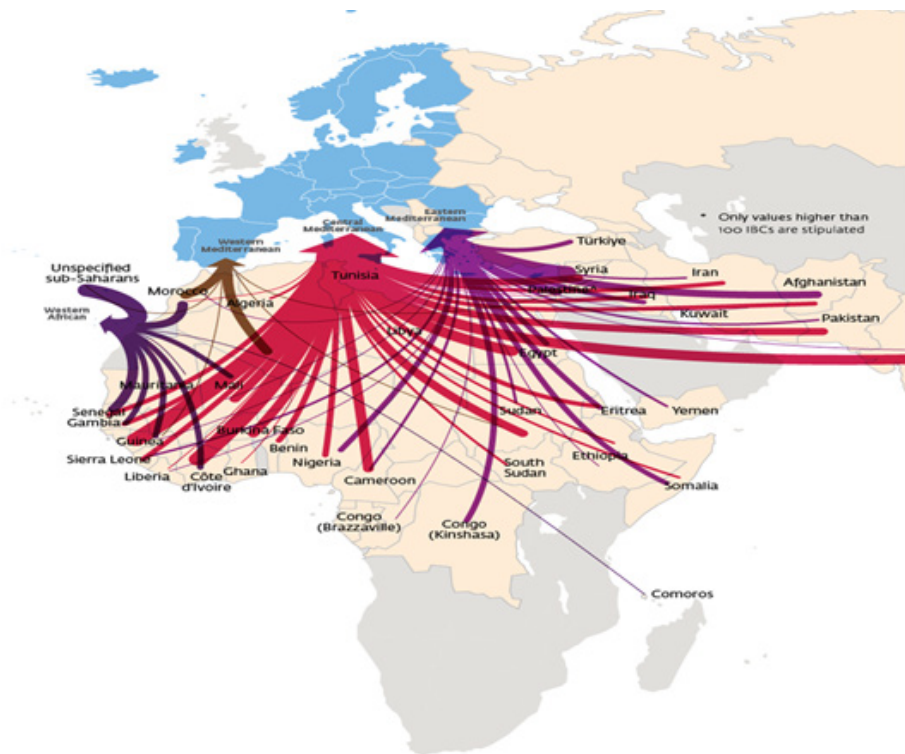


Figure 1: Migratory Routes into Europe
Source: Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (2023)

Political instability has significantly shaped the irregular migration landscape in Tunisia. Episodes of political unrest, ambiguity, and transitions since the 2011 uprising have played a pivotal role in encouraging irregular migrants to leave the country. In this sense, the absence of political stability generates a sense of insecurity, compelling people to embark on irregular migration journeys in pursuit of a more stable and secure life. Moreover, concerns related to restricted political freedoms and instances of human rights abuses amplify the factors propelling individuals to engage in irregular migration channels. In fact, ever since President Kais Saied dissolved the elected parliament and seized most of the powers in his hands in July 2021, basic rights and freedoms have been jeopardized and major political opponents have been jailed (Human Rights Watch, 2023). On the eve of the presidential elections, which were held on October 6, 2024, tensions rose across the country. A pre-election assault was waged as more opposition members were arrested or harassed while judicial independence was undermined. Three candidates, including Saied, were approved by Tunisia's Electoral Commission to run October's presidential election, ignoring a court ruling to reinstate three different people (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

The intricate dynamics of political instability not only diminish confidence in the domestic political process but also act as a catalyst for those seeking refuge in regions perceived as politically more stable. Recognizing the profound impact of the troubled economic and political context on irregular migration underscores the necessity for comprehensive policies. These policies should not only address the root causes of political and economic instability but also account for the associated consequences on migration patterns in Tunisia.

2. Policy Alternatives and Recommendations

Despite the surge of illegal migrants from Tunisia and the growing number of maritime departures from the country to European shores, the dossier of illegal and irregular migration remained low political priority until 2023 (Abderrahim, 2023). Official Italian figures disclose that at least 12,083 individuals arrived to Italy from the Tunisian coast from the start of 2023 until 13 March of the same year. This number reflects an increase of 788% compared to the same period in 2022 (Agenzia Nova, 2023). According to a report by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime in 2024, an estimated 97,306 migrants arrived to Italy from Tunisia in 2023, just over three times as many as in 2022 (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2024). Security-based approaches were used by governments to curb the number of illegal departures from Tunisian shores. Considering the troubled political context and the ailing economy of the country, socio-economic and political reforms have been publicly demanded and prioritized by different governments since the 2011 uprising. It was only after tragic boat disappearance off the coast of Zarzis in September 2022 that President Saied started voicing this alarming issue when he promised to ensure accountability for any shortcomings in the handling of the tragedy. In July 2023, the Tunisia Interior Ministry announced that more than

900 migrants have drowned off Tunisia's coast in their perilous sea voyages to Europe (France 24, 2023).

Strengthening measures to control borders is a critical aspect in addressing the complexities of illegal migration not only in Tunisia but also in North Africa and the Sahel region. This unequivocally requires a coherent and multifaceted strategy to fortify the country's boundaries and regulate the movement of individuals across them. Considering the geographical proximity between Tunisia and Europe, the imperative for effective border control should be amplified. This entails deploying advanced surveillance technologies such as radar systems, drones, and monitoring equipment to augment situational awareness along the borders. Simultaneously, bolstering the number of skilled personnel including border patrol agents and immigration officers is imperative to sustain a robust and vigilant presence. To support these initiatives, the European Commission agreed to disburse a package worth 67 million euros aimed at strengthening Tunisia's capacities to combat human traffickers and tighten border controls (Hayden, 2023). In July 2023, the EU and Tunisia signed a memorandum of understanding for a financial assistance loan of 900 million euros, contingent upon an International Monetary Fund (IMF) program (EU-Tunisia Memorandum of Understanding, 2023). The macro loan encompasses budgetary support and a generous aid package intended to strengthen economic ties and fight irregular migration (Carnegie Middle East Center, 2024).

A critical dimension of enhanced border control involves upgrading infrastructure. This may encompass the construction of physical barriers such as fences or walls strategically placed to discourage illegal crossings. Improved infrastructure serves not only as a deterrent but also streamlines the processing of legal border crossings, thereby contributing to overall border security. Collaboration with neighbouring countries – primarily European counterparts – is indispensable, with joint initiatives like intelligence sharing and coordinated patrols fortifying regional security and addressing the inherent challenges posed by illegal migration. Moreover, the integration of biometric technology and modern databases plays a prominent role in elevating the effectiveness of border control. This enables more precise identification and tracking of individuals entering or exiting the country. The technological synergy forms the basis of a comprehensive border management system, addressing security imperatives while facilitating the flow of legal trade and travel. Implemented judiciously, enhanced border control measures significantly

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augment a country's capacity to manage migration, fortify national security, and fulfil international obligations.

Legislative reforms represent a fundamental avenue for addressing the multifaceted challenges associated with illegal and irregular migration in Tunisia. A comprehensive approach often involves revising and fortifying immigration laws to provide authorities with the necessary tools to manage migration flow effectively. This may include amendments to enhance border enforcement, streamline legal immigration pathways, and impose stricter penalties for illegal entry or residence. By establishing clear legal frameworks, Tunisia can better regulate the status of migrants within its borders while upholding human rights standards. Legislative reforms can also focus on creating pathways for legal migration, facilitating processes for asylum seekers and implementing mechanisms for repatriation or deportation in cases of irregular residence.

Additionally, reforms may address issues related to human trafficking, smuggling, and the protection of vulnerable migrant populations from Tunisia, neighbouring countries and Sub-Saharan countries. Ensuring that the legal framework aligns with international norms and conventions is crucial for fostering cooperation with the global community. Public awareness campaigns may accompany legislative reforms to educate citizens about the legal implications of illegal migration and the avenues available for legal entry. Overall, legislative reforms play a pivotal role in shaping a coherent and just response to illegal migration, providing the legal foundation for enforcement agencies, protecting the rights of migrants, and promoting international collaboration in addressing this complex issue.

International cooperation stands as a cornerstone in the efforts to effectively address illegal migration in Tunisia. Given the transnational nature of migration, collaborative initiatives with neighbouring countries and international organizations are essential for developing comprehensive strategies. Tunisia's engagement with European countries and regional partners is critical for fostering a coordinated response to migration challenges. This cooperation extends beyond mere information exchange to include joint operations, intelligence sharing, and the development of regional policies that address the root causes of migration. Diplomatic efforts to establish agreements on repatriation, border management, and the protection of human rights contribute to a cohesive and unified approach.

Furthermore, collaboration with international organizations, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) enables Tunisia to access resources, expertise, and best practices in managing migration flow. These partnerships facilitate capacity-building initiatives for Tunisian authorities, ensuring that they are well-equipped to address the complexities of irregular migration. By actively participating in regional and global dialogues on migration, Tunisia can contribute to shaping international frameworks that balance security concerns with humanitarian principles. Strengthening international cooperation not only enhances Tunisia's ability to manage its

own migration challenges but also fosters a shared responsibility and solidarity in addressing the broader global issue of migration.

3. Conclusion

For years, Tunisia has been facing the complex and evolving challenge of irregular migration, which is shaped by a daunting mix of economic insecurity, social inequality and political volatility. Chronic instability in the Sahel region and neighbouring countries such as Libya and Sudan has further aggravated the situation with waves of outbound migration that transformed the country into a transit hub of undocumented migrants to Europe. Addressing illegal migration in Tunisia necessitates a comprehensive approach that includes enhanced border control measures, legislative reforms, and robust international cooperation. Adopting this holistic strategy is required for Tunisia to effectively manage the challenges of illegal migration and safeguard national security. Once effectively implemented, these concerted efforts can create a sustainable framework that not only mitigates the complexities of illegal migration within Tunisia's borders but also aligns with international standards, contributing to shared understanding and cooperative solutions on the global stage. ✨

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