

Cutting the Keys to the Mediterranean: Tunisia in the context of Migration

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My name is Brendan Van Crout, a final-year International Relations undergraduate at the University of Exeter. From 11 to 20 April, I had unprecedented access to NGOs, academics and citizens' movements that deal with migration, particularly in the state of Tunisia and the wider Middle East and North Africa region. I will discuss my experiences and thoughts from a short but intensive trip to Tunisia.

Overview

This collaborative trip was arranged by the University of Exeter and Taa Marbouta Language Centre, based out of Carthage, Tunis. They have my utmost gratitude for bringing together such a diverse field of perspectives and for sharing their own experiences regarding Tunisia's relationship with the movement of people. In particular, I would like to thank Dorra Agrebi (academic and co-founder of Taa Marbouta), Ahmed Aziz Ayara and Yesmine Kerouat. Their generosity with time and knowledge was invaluable.



Image: Tunisian Parliament Building and the monument remembering Mohamed Bouazizi on Tunis Public Square.

Background

There have been numerous events that have led to what some have coined a 'migrant crisis' and others the natural human instinct to move. In the wake of the 2011 Arab Spring, Tunisia became a fledgling democracy. The West celebrated the transition with social media posts and public memoranda. A new constitution was drawn up and a brave new world lay ahead of Tunisia. These congratulations were all that would be afforded by Europe though.

The academics I met on this trip introduced me to the constantly developing relationship between Europe and Tunisia, and it is one that Tunisian people have been actively pushing against. This is Europe's attempt to recruit Tunisia as 'the gatekeeper' of Europe, or act as an EU 'buffer zone' for offshored border control. Discussions between Tunisia and Italy regarding a project around the Mediterranean have given integrity to the suspicions of the people.

Indeed, many people do migrate from various parts of Africa through Tunisia, intending to cross the Mediterranean. But a dangerous precedent is set when a state is seen as a thoroughfare of migration pathways and an externalised border force. It signals that Europe wants a quick fix, not a solution, to the perceived 'crisis'.



Image: Students from the University of Exeter and L'Institut Supérieur des Etudes Appliquées en Humanités de Tunis after a roundtable on Migration Studies.

The Problem

This governmental and state-state issue has huge social implications within Tunisia. Valentina Zagaria, an academic working in Tunisia, introduced me to a new term that continued to crop up throughout my trip: *Harga*, or *Harraga*. This means 'to burn' or 'burning' in reference to people who burn their papers, their passports and any identifying documents, an action often undertaken before attempting to cross the Mediterranean to avoid being identified. Ms Zagaria compared this to Tunisia in 2011, where we witnessed a revolutionary *harga*, searching for a life with more dignity. A life with more humanity. The struggle of an entire nation is felt by countless individuals waiting by the coast and trapped in detention centres throughout Tunisia. This burning is necessary as access to Europe is nearly impossible through formal visa applications. This is confirmed through stories from students to established academics who have had visas denied. The reasoning is often 'insufficient evidence of the intention to return to Tunisia'. Denial of a visa once often means it will be denied indefinitely.

The psychological implications, as explained by Prof. Wael Garnaoui, are humiliation and punishment. Citizens are punished for being residents of the Global South and prevented access to Europe. We then see the development of immobilisation trauma as the knowledge that one may never reach this destination leads to feelings of immense inadequacy or grief. This immobilisation is manufactured, partially, through language. People migrating are often referred to as 'irregular' or 'illegal'. This language subscribes to an epistemology that is rooted in colonisation. It supports the relationship between Europe and its 'Orient' by dehumanising the person migrating and criminalising their mobility.

The people are not just immobilised outside the country, but within it too. A representative from WeYouth, a Tunisian youth-led organization, informed me that thousands of migrants had been moved from living within Sfax to an olive orchard about 25 kilometres outside the city. There is no permission to leave, they are not allowed to buy food and water from the local shops and citizens are not allowed to help them in any way. The government has effectively imprisoned thousands.

The Government

The Tunisian government has not established a meaningful legal framework around migration. When entering the country as a migrant, one is labelled as 'illegal' or 'irregular' and a blind eye is turned to them. The person is then sent away, at risk of imprisonment or violence. A representative of Avocats Sans Frontières informed me that it was common to find people from sub-Saharan Africa, who have come to Tunisia as migrants, arrested for offences like illegally distributing alcohol. The person is targeted because of their skin colour by the police force, they are searched and if they happen to have two beers in their bag then a crime will be fabricated. These incidents reflect the systemic racism, homophobia and wider corruption within the government.

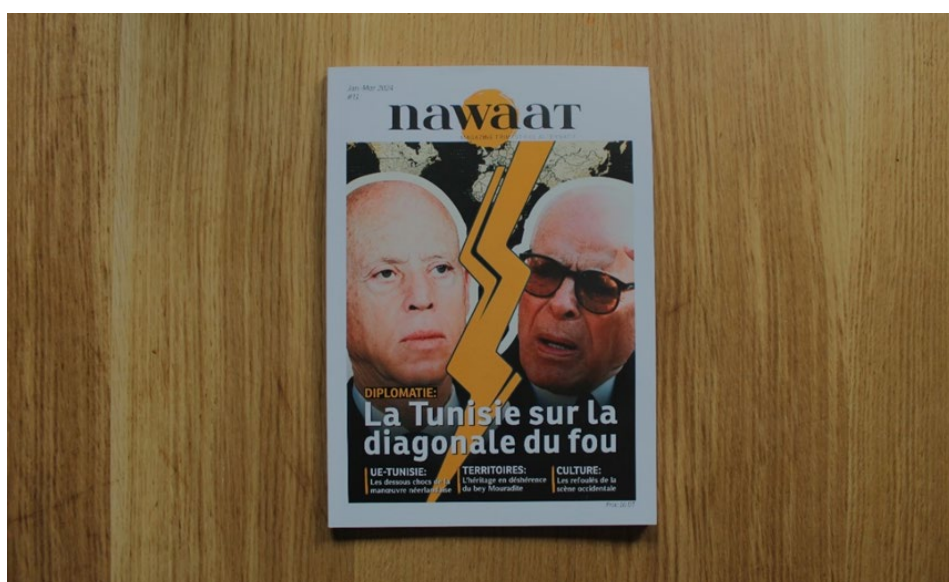


Image: The front cover of Nawaat's most recent print edition Jan – Mar 2024

Firas Kefi, an investigative journalist from Nawaat, said that it is becoming increasingly dangerous to be a journalist in Tunisia. Tunisia's Freedom of Press rankings have dropped from 74th to 122nd in a handful of years. It seems that the grace period of transitional democracy is over as the government withdraws freedoms once enjoyed by the Tunisian people. Censorship

is rife and far-right demagoguery is taking social media by storm. Those who house people migrating have their addresses publicised, leading to a myriad of consequences with no government protection. From every angle, the government tries to immobilise people migrating and fights a war of attrition under the guise of a manufactured threat. The language used is critical once again as the far-right have created a narrative parallel to Israel and Palestine. They use the same language, such as 'settler', 'settlements' and 'colonising'. This narrative is accepted as truth by the far-right and is used as anti-immigration propaganda and, as Mr Kefi states, 'the government is in a different dimension on [migration]'.

The Grassroots Organisations

I had the chance to speak to representatives of global institutions, such as the United Nations, with thousands of employees. None of these groups left an impact as great as the Zarzis Fishermen Association and the parents of the 18/18 Movement. They are the definition of grassroots organisations dedicated to helping people. They receive no funding from the government and have little media coverage regardless of the critical work they do.

Many who try to cross the Mediterranean do not survive and appear back on the shores of Tunisia to be buried in unmarked graves. In 2022, a group of young people left the coast one day hoping to reach Europe and did not make it. Some claim the government sank the boat. No survivors were found, and many are still lost. The parents of the victims created the 18/18 Movement and work to connect families with their loved ones by exhuming those in unmarked graves and logging their DNA data. One of the parents said that they do this because finding his son is not enough, and that he needs to find all of the others to be at rest. The Zarzis Fishermen Association conducts similar work when at sea, rescuing people, recovering bodies and reconnecting those lost with their families.



Image: Tuna fishing boats in the Port of Zarzis, home to the Fishermen Association

These people are driven by compassion and selflessness. They work without corporate buzzwords and they ask for no reward. It is citizens' groups like these that will bring justice to the people when the government do not. They have my thanks for talking with me on such a sensitive issue and my greatest condolences. I hope they find peace.

Closer

Tunisia is in a precarious position and the government's response to migration has outraged thousands of people. I am incredibly grateful for this frontline access and as a student of International Relations, it has been invaluable to my understanding. Whilst education and the media are still heavily colonized, it is experiences like these that are critical to getting the real picture. It provides young people with the tools to critically assess the headlines and question what's in front of us. We must subscribe to the language used by those migrating to understand the truth.

Thank you to the University of Exeter and Taa Marbouta for organising this trip.

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