

## Notes on Racism in Tunisia:

### Externalisation of Racism



We have documented the [racist campaign against sub-Saharan migrants](#) in Tunisia since February 2023 in detail on this page. These videos of thirsting and dying Black people are unbearable. But we must not look away. Just as we are not allowed to "[endure cruel images](#)", as the German Minister of the Interior demanded in 2016. News reports and articles at the time were staged with the aim of destructing the "welcome culture"; today these images are cruel reality.

We last [reported](#) on the situation of the Subariens in the informal camps [6 months ago](#). The situation has not improved. A representative of [Refugees in Libya](#) writes:

*The migrant's situation in Tunisia is soon turning into an epidemic. One of the volunteering doctors in Sfax wrote to us this evening:*

*"We have so many breakout diseases. We have up to 567 patients that are affected from the following diseases, Typhoid, Dysentery, Cholera, Syphilis"*

*He shared many pictures of newborns whose mothers were raped, children experiencing severe cholera and other diseases. Young men with severe cuts of machete resulting from attacks launched by Tunisian thugs and citizen militias.*

*"We can not solve the entire situation immediately but at least we can help cure those suffering at the moment, have pads for bleeding women, bandages to cover the wounds of these young men and provide clean drinking waters for the newborns."*

Refugees in Libya [has launched a fundraising campaign](#) to provide some people with basic necessities. A drop in the sand., though urgent and necessary.



Photo: <https://www.gofundme.com/f/urgent-medical-relief-equipments-to-treat-5000-migrants>

## Arab racism

[Racism is](#) deeply ingrained [in the Arab world](#) and is centuries old. The idea that Arab slavery was fundamentally different from the European transatlantic slave trade [has been thoroughly debunked](#). The trans-Saharan slave trade was still flourishing in the 19th century; the enslaved people at that time were exclusively sub-Saharan.

It is true, however, that Arab racism has only come to the fore in recent decades when it has been linked to staged pogroms, such as in Libya in 2000. [in Libya in 2000](#) when sub-Saharan were persecuted in connection with the Gaddafi regime's rapprochement with Europe. The raids against black Africans in northern Morocco in 2019 were even directly ["commissioned by Europe"](#). Beyond its importance in maintaining hierarchies and exploitative relationships, racism becomes a deadly social technique, especially when racist stigmatisation is systematically linked to the exclusion of population groups by states. We know this all too well [from the history of German anti-Semitism](#). The precarious connection between Hararra, racism and the sub-Saharan migration movements in Tunisia cannot be discussed in detail here. But perhaps it is useful to note a few key words.

## 2011 - 2017

Before the 2011 revolution, leaving Tunisia was a criminal offence. Among other things, the EU paid the dictator Ben Ali to keep the borders closed with the help of a [dictatorial regime](#). The more

successful this was, the closer Tunisia's relationship with the EU became. After the revolution, however, the EU was faced with a "[shambles](#)". 28,000 young people crossed over to Lampedusa within a short space of time. (Other, Islamised young people made their way to Syria.) These Harraga were mainly young people from the hinterland who had been waiting for their chance for a long time. It took more than a year for the Tunisian authorities, in cooperation with the EU, to slow down the crossings again. A look back at the [activities of Boats4People in 2012](#) makes the drama of the situation clear: the departure, the hopes, the drownings and the demand for ferries.

Since March 2011, around 200,000 people have fled from Libya across the border to Tunisia. If they were Black refugees, they were registered and interned near the border in the [Choucha camp](#). There was a UNHCR repatriation programme. a few were able to leave with a resettlement programme to the USA or Norway, and some managed to flee across the sea to Europe. There were numerous [refugee protests in Tunisia](#) at this time. The Tunisian authorities regarded these people as illegal aliens from the outset; there is [no functioning asylum system in Tunisia](#).

But unlike in 2023, there was little contact between the refugees and the Tunisian population in 2011/12 and there was no racist mobilisation. Harraga and Choucha coexisted: Tunisian youths tried their luck at leaving for Lampedusa, while the Black refugees were interned. Racist hostilities were limited to the guards of the Choucha camp. Incidentally, the last inhabitants of the camp were [abandoned](#) in the desert [in Algeria](#) after it was closed in 2015 - an approach that is relevant again, today.

When the number of crossings rose again in 2017, it was again [mostly Tunisian young people](#) who fled the economic misery and dashed hopes in the Tunisian hinterland. This trend continued in the years leading up to the coronavirus crisis; Tunisian migrants were [the largest group](#) among the registered boat arrivals in Italy, with many Tunisian harraga also managing to land in Italy unnoticed in order to avoid deportation.

Meanwhile, tens of thousands of Black people, probably 15 per cent of the population, lived relatively undisturbed in Tunisia for years, working as domestic helpers, craftsmen, construction workers or studying in the coastal towns.

## 2018 - 2024

There was a major turning point at the end of 2018, when an increasing number of Black Africans fled from Libya to Tunisia to escape the [atrocities of the militias and the so-called coast guard](#). During the war in 2019, their numbers increased even further. The Tunisian authorities frantically tried to stop the [refugee movement to Tunisia](#). But even during this time, there were no racist attacks from the population. The newcomers from Libya were an important economic factor on the southern coasts in the midst of the crisis: they bought the locally produced steel boats that were quickly welded together, although [many of them died](#). The informal economy that characterises everyday life in Tunisia also benefited from the transit of the sub-Saharan boat people. Meanwhile, the Tunisian Harraga set off from the northern coasts in large wooden boats in order to reach Europe as unnoticed as possible.

After the coronavirus pause, the number of crossings rose again in 2021 and 2022. In 2022, the proportion of non-Tunisian boat people exceeded the 50% mark.<sup>1</sup> And in the summer of 2023, after the [reopening of migration routes via Agadez](#), the number of [crossings to Lampedusa](#) reached new highs.

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<sup>1</sup> FTDES Monthly Reports, cited in Echoes 4, <https://civilmrcc.eu/echoes-from-the-central-mediterranean/echoes4-jan2023/>

Italy and the EU were extremely alarmed. The EU Commission had already discussed a [Draft Action Plan Tunisia](#) at the beginning of October 2021; in April 2022, after further negotiations, it was announced [Tunisia refuses cooperation with Frontex but will set up an "integrated border surveillance" system](#). This announcement referred to a [revision of the Draft Action Plan of February 2022](#), which detailed the following on cooperation between the EU and Tunisia:

*Tunisian nationals were the first nationality in irregular arrivals in Italy in 2021 (around 25%). For its part, the Central Mediterranean route was the most active irregular route and Italy was the first country of irregular entry into the EU. The EU will support Tunisia in achieving a reduction in irregular departures of migrants from Tunisia, both Tunisian and third-country nationals, which have increased significantly in 2020 and 2021. The EU will continue to work on improving Tunisia's border management capacities to prevent Tunisian efforts to prevent irregular departures from the Tunisian coast, conduct rescue operations and strengthen reception capacities and facilities. The EU is counting on Tunisia to continue these efforts.*

*- The EU will continue to work on improving Tunisia's border management capacities and strengthening the search and rescue system to save lives. The EU supports efforts to prevent irregular departures, to manage irregular inflows from Libya and to combat migrant smuggling and human trafficking.[...]*

*- The EU will support Tunisia in its efforts to manage the increasing number of migrants [...]*

Documents will only shed light on the content of the intelligence and diplomatic meetings during this period in the future. The [document](#) published by Statewatch [in February 2022](#) gives some indication of the bilateral and EU-official contacts that took place.

As is well known, President Saied decided in February 2023 to launch a [racist campaign against sub-Saharan migrants](#). At their meeting with Saied in June 2023, Meloni, von der Leyen & Co not only offered their best wishes, but also promised more than [1 billion euros for a "historic migration agreement"](#). However, the promised budget support was linked to an IMF agreement that did not materialise - Saied's government was bitterly disappointed. Meanwhile, 250 million euros were channelled into "border management", primarily for [more boats, mobile radar equipment, cameras, vehicles, spare parts and engines](#) for the Tunisian security forces.

Under benevolent observation by the EU, the racist attacks reached [catastrophic proportions](#) in the following months and have continued at a deadly level to this day. Above all, it is now the security forces that are maintaining the racist pressure on Black migrants. Thousands [live in informal camps](#) in olive groves, which are tolerated and sometimes supported by many Tunisians, but are regularly destroyed by the security forces. Intercepted boat people are abandoned in the desert. And the Tunisian coastguard is working increasingly effectively, although the consequences of the latest developments, a Tunisian sea rescue zone, cannot yet be assessed.

The [UNHCR data sheet from 2 September](#) shows that the number of arrivals in Italy from Libya and Tunisia has fallen by 64% compared to the same period last year. So far this year, 14,000 people have arrived in Italy from Tunisia. And the "success" of racism against Black migrants is reflected in the ethnicity of the boat people: In 2023, people from Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire were the strongest groups among the boat people. This year, it is Bangladeshis and Syrians, followed by Egyptians and Tunisians.

The [Alarmphone](#) writes:

*In the first six months of 2024, an estimated 800 people have died or disappeared, and we know that the actual number is even higher. An estimated 30,000 people were forcibly returned to Tunisia*



*by the Tunisian authorities and around 10,000 were returned to Libya by the so-called Libyan Coast Guard with continuous support from the EU and its Member States.*

## **The Externalisation of Racism**

It is certainly a relevant observation that the latent racism in the Arab populations is often and quickly hidden behind an [anti-colonial victim narrative](#), which in turn serves the construction of the national. It was not difficult for Saied to effectively transform his nationalist narrative into a racist dispositive.

Saied is in a dilemma: he wants to be confirmed in office in October. His democratic legitimacy is (not unjustifiably) being questioned. He is under pressure to justify himself both internally and externally. The sun is burning, a drought has broken out. He has no money to satisfy domestic demand and stop inflation. The more effectively the coastguard closes the borders, the greater not only the suffering of the black migrants, but also the resentment among Tunisian youth. Saied had to channel the impending social protests; the racist dispositive seemed to him to be an easy way out.

The president is said to sympathise with the hopeless Tunisian youth and would like to clear the way to Europe for them. After all, the emigrants' remittances make up 5% of Tunisia's economic balance sheet. Saied also wants to avoid cuts in the state sector and subsidies and would rather forego IMF loans and budget support from the EU than betray his clientele. Meanwhile, social development has stagnated since 2011; nothing has changed for the better since the revolution.

Tunisian young people suffer from the same restrictions on leaving the country and attacks by the Tunisian coastguard as sub-Saharan migrants. It is all too easy for them to think that they would have easier access to Europe without their black competitors. Immigration since 2018, which intensified in the summer of 2023 after the opening of Agadez, has put Europe on the map and significantly worsened their chances. However, the message that keeps coming from Europe is that the visa issue will only be addressed once the Black migrants have somehow been stopped and repatriated. In Tripoli, Meloni has [recently emphasised](#) the connection between the perspective of migration and racism.

Europe, which actually needs new people, is closing its borders to the south [against all reason](#). The European racism of border closures is paving the way for Tunisian racism to flourish. Across the Mediterranean, Europeans are inducing a racism of competition for the ticket. Whether Arab or Black is almost irrelevant in Europe. This competition reinforces the racism of Tunisian youths.

The borders are to be kept tight; the electorate in the USA and Europe is a driving factor in this context. The mediation forms of Western democracy are reaching their limits. Tunisian racism is driven by the EU's border closures. There is this latent Arab racism, but only under European influence does it become a deadly project, as it was in Libya and Morocco. In this sense, despite the specific Arab roots of racism there, we must speak of an externalisation of racism.

Saied has allowed himself to be turned into Europe's stooge, who works all the better the more he is kept short of cash. Saied's Tunisia has no chance.