Introduction

Ann-Christin Zuntz

> Mohsen Lihidheb started his personal migration museum in Zarzis (southern Tunisia) in the 1990s. A former postman, he used to find messages in bottles on his local beach and reply to the senders, and also send his own messages. Later, he began to pick up migrants' belongings, alongside shells and fishbones. Occasionally, he has found human bodies, which he has buried. Over time, his collection, the Musée de la Mémoire de la Mer et de l'Homme (Museum dedicated to the Memory of the Sea and of Humans), has grown to fill an entire building and the courtyard of his house. Although Lihidheb is not a trained archaeologist, he catalogues his findings, trying to infer information about migrants' stories. He speculates that a shoe with a worn sole might have belonged to someone from Sub-Saharan Africa who crossed the desert on foot. He uses the found objects to raise awareness on two issues that are intertwined in Tunisia's coastal regions: environmental pollution, and dangerous, often deathly, migrations. The material traces of the mobilities crisscrossing Tunisia, whose owners are usually absent and unknown, point to a paradox at the heart of the country's migration landscape (cf. El Ghali 2022): the (in)visibility of Sub-Saharan Africans who figure prominently in European and, more recently, in Tunisian policy discourse, but who try to remain unnoticed in everyday life to avoid violence at the hands of Tunisians and local authorities.
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> Interview with the author (October 2021)

The following chapters shed light on the nexus between (im)mobility, border policies, and (in)visibility in Tunisia: commuting in Tunis, begging in Sfax, Sub-Saharan African and Syrian migrations to North Africa, as well as the forced return of young Tunisians. Drawing on a wide range of data – from large-scale surveys and ethnographic research with aspiring and actual migrants, to urban planning documents and key stakeholder interviews – they highlight intricate entanglements of (in)visibility in policy discourse and on the streets. Neither mobility nor immobility are inherently bad. Rather, as proponents of the 'regimes of mobility' approach (e.g. Glick Schiller 2013) have argued, people's ability to move or stay put is shaped by their positioning within exclusionary power structures. In the chapters, powerlessness may translate into stuckness – for example, when low-in-

come fringes of Tunis are excluded from public transport networks (Bouzid, this volume) – or into forced mobility. By way of illustration, young Tunisians hope to overcome barriers to social mobility – e.g., access to decent work – by moving from the country's poorer interior regions to coastal cities, and, for some, across the Mediterranean (Kreuer/Gertel, this volume). In a similar vein, precarious mobilities might force people on the move to conceal their presence, but some, like the Syrian women begging in Tunisia's big cities, also become exposed to the public eye (Zuntz et al., this volume).

Considered a country of emigration for Tunisians before 2011, Tunisia has since turned into a hub for diverse migrations and mobile populations, hosting 59,000 migrants, mostly from Sub-Saharan Africa (Institut National de la Statistique/Observatoire National de la Migration 2021), and more than 12,000 asylum-seekers and refugees registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR 2024). Domestically, the country's migration and asylum legislation perpetuate a 'patchwork of laws, bilateral agreements, exemptions and informal practices' (Natter 2022: 144). Tunisia signed the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, and its 2014 and 2022 Constitutions acknowledge the right to political asylum, but this has not yet been translated into domestic asylum law (Ben Achour 2019; Amnesty International 2022). For most migrants, and even for refugees with protection status, there is no clear pathway to residency permits and access to the formal labour market, let alone Tunisian citizenship (Nasraoui 2017; Geissler 2019). Internationally, Tunisia has concluded a series of bilateral agreements, for example with Italy and France, and accords with the European Union (EU), receiving development funding in exchange for hardening its borders (for an overview, see Martini/Mergisi 2023). In 2023, Tunisia signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the EU, securing 105 million Euro to fight people smugglers and around 15 million Euro for humanitarian organisations to facilitate 'voluntary return' of migrants. Almost immediately, the Tunisian government announced that it would not accept as returned migrants Sub-Saharan Africans who had passed through Tunisia on their way to Europe (Doyel et al. 2023). Meanwhile, members of Tunisia's security forces, paid by EU funding, routinely beat and sexually abuse migrant women (Guardian 2024).

In European policy discourse and media, Tunisia is now framed as a 'transit country' for Sub-Saharan Africans and as the EU's new frontier. This is partly borne out by statistics: Tunisia has recently overtaken Libya as a main country of departure in the Central Mediterranean, and since 2022, more Sub-Saharan Africans than Tunisians have arrived in Italy (Martini/Megerisi 2023). After the hate speech of the Tunisian president and ensuing racist attacks, boat crossings departing from Tunisian beaches were at a record high in summer 2023 (Doyel et al. 2023). Yet, such framings are highly political in themselves, as perpetuating a narrative of uncontrolled EU-bound migration serves to justify the further enhancement of bordering measures (Düvell 2012; Crawley et al. 2017). Both the Tunisian state and the EU have taken a securitised approach to migration, portraying Tunisia as a prime target for combatting smuggling and human trafficking (El Ghali 2022; Natter 2022; Meddeb/Louati 2024). Significant protection gaps, and state and community violence against migrants in Tunisia are well documented (e.g. Badalič 2019; Bisiaux 2020; El Ghali 2022). Indeed, the lived reality of border violence is discussed in multiple chapters in this collection: blatant deception, in the form of forced returns and empty promises of assistance for deported Tunisian emigrants (Garnaoui, this volume),

but also, less conspicuously, through lack of urban governance in low-income neighbourhoods with a significant presence of Sub-Saharan African migrants (Kahloun/Frische, this volume).

Besides being painted as 'criminals' and 'security threats', migrants, especially women, are also portrayed as 'victims'. Since 2011, security-oriented approaches to migration management in Tunisia have been complemented by 'soft' bordering measures, as international donors have engaged with Tunisia's newly emerged civil society to increase migrants' protection – but not their rights (Cassarini 2020; Cuttita 2020; Dini/Giusi 2020). Two chapters in this collection attend to migrants' newfound humanitarian visibility: while some local governments have been praised by international donors for their pragmatic and welcoming approach to migration, Ben Media and Sha'ath's contributions remind us that some European border policies present themselves as 'progressive'. Their chapters capture the recent trend in foreign assistance for supporting localisation efforts and participatory development. However, conflicts arise when there is little room for meaningful participation for irregular migrants, and despite good intentions, municipalities remain enmeshed in multi-scalar structures of migration management, through which they take part in monitoring migrants on their territory.

On the ground, productions of invisibility are the flip side of migration management. Several chapters address the entanglements of (im)mobilities and invisibility, suggesting that deliberate unknowing is a strategy of the powerful to deny the presence and rights of marginalised populations. Despite Tunisia's international commitments, migrants and refugees are absent from its domestic legal frameworks, and there is little coordination between state authorities and civil society actors providing assistance to mobile populations (Ben Media, this volume). These intentional absences allow the Tunisian government to refuse being turned into a more permanent 'host country' for Europe's unwanted migrants against its will. On the city level, the needs of migrants are not reflected in urban planning documents (Kahloun/Frische; Sha'ath, both this volume), and municipalities know little about undocumented local residents. However, visibility can also be reclaimed by migrants themselves. During the Covid-19 pandemic, unprecedented forms of civil society support alerted Tunisian municipalities to the presence of vulnerable migrants on their territory (Sha'ath, this volume). At times, visibility can be tactical: in Bhar Lazreg, Tunis, Sub-Saharan African women set up street stalls and open hair salons targeted at Sub-Saharan African customers (Parikh, this volume). In a context in which access to decent labour, accommodation, childcare, and even public space is shaped by race, these women challenge racial fault lines by asserting their presence in the public eye. Meanwhile, in big Tunisian cities, Syrian women beg at central roundabouts, while Syrian cuisine has become popular among upper-class circles, and Syrians open restaurants, cater to weddings, and even dance in talent competitions on Tunisian television (Zuntz et al., this volume). In a nutshell, migrants in Tunisia may be forced into exclusionary forms of (in)visibility that make it difficult for them to make a living, but they also creatively engage with visibility, at times flying under the radar, at times making their presence seen and felt.

On a final note, the chapters in this volume broaden our understanding of Tunisia's borders: besides the country's sea and land frontiers, there are other borders resulting, for example, from unequal capabilities (Gertel/Grüneisl, this volume). Invisible and un-

official, but sometimes just as efficient, these borders divide the more affluent coastal cities from the impoverished interior of the country, and upper and middle-class areas in the capital from low-income neighbourhoods in flood-prone suburban zones with poor sanitation and informal housing. While media reports and policy discourse focus on spectacular sea crossings, the chapters reveal mobilities of various magnitudes, including urban and regional. Often, mobilities cut across scales: Bhar Lazreg, a neighbourhood of Tunis studied in two chapters (Kahloun/Frische; Parikh, both this volume) is home to significant numbers of undocumented Sub-Saharan African migrant workers – it is also bypassed by transport arteries connecting different parts of the capital. Many migrants experience both lack of access to mobility within cities and stuckness in Tunisia, as they can neither return to their home countries – due to Tunisia's penalty system imposing huge fines on those who overstay their visa – nor cross the borders of a highly securitized European Union.

Our comparative study of mobilities towards, within, and emerging from Tunisia shows that poor and marginalised people travel for longer, are forced to take detours, end up paying more, and their movements are potentially riskier. Commuters in low-income areas in outer Tunis have to wait and pay more for private transport to access schools and workplaces, and women feel unsafe at night (Bouzid, this volume). In a similar vein, Syrian refugees have used dangerous and costly smuggling routes across the Sahara to reach Tunisia. Adopting a cross-scalar perspective helps us connect the dots between waiting for a bus on the outskirts of Tunis and waiting to cross the Mediterranean. While public discourse in Tunisia and Europe plays out 'migrants' against 'citizens', we show the similar bordering logics at work, restricting, delaying, and circumventing the movements of Sub-Saharan African migrants, Tunisian emigrants, and suburban travellers (cf. Cassarini 2020). Such insights help us denaturalise migration policy categories, asking instead what processes 'migrantise' mobile people from the Global South and even marginalized Tunisian citizens, i.e., turn them into vulnerable migrants (Anderson 2019). Hence, the study of (im)mobilities in Tunisia turns out to be a diagnostic of systemic, interlocking factors that stifle mobile people's aspirations for a dignified life: of hardening EU borders and allegedly 'softer' approaches to migration management across the Mediterranean, but also of issues affecting the general population, including changed labour relations, increasing precarity, und urban sprawl.