The Trap of 'Voluntary Return'
Forced Returns of Tunisian Migrants

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> Tawfik: 'I have spent 23 days in the detention centre of Bologna, going through much suffering and discomfort. I met the centre's judge. Sometimes detainees can also meet with some associations defending undocumented migrants, if they are able to pay 500 Euros to cover the fees for a lawyer and to submit an asylum application – sometimes their families send the money. I refused to do all that because I knew it was hard for me, and because I couldn't take it anymore. I had a drug conviction, so I had no chance. I caused a lot of problems throughout these 23 days. They came to wake me up to send me back to Tunisia, I was on sleeping drugs and I had a nightmare, I told them: No! I'm not going back! The security guards are always afraid of people's reactions during deportation.
> A friend of mine advised me: If you do the same thing next time, they'll tape you up and put you on the plane, take fate into your hands, it's better'.
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> Tawfik, Tunisian Harrag (Tunisia 2017)

Tunisia is a country of origin of an increasing number of migrants on their way to Europe. Those who flee Tunisia to reach Europe are known as *harraga*. This reflects the irregular and clandestine practice of migration, termed *harga*. It is a fairly recent phenomenon that followed the closure of the European borders after the Schengen Agreement in 1985. *Harga*, translates from the Maghrebean dialects as 'the act of setting something on fire'. It echoes what these young *harraga* do when they burn their identity cards to avoid being identified by the police, and thus reducing their chances of being deported to their country of origin. The *harraga* also symbolically 'burn' the borders (i.e. ignore their meaning and enforcement). In an act of vindication of the law and embodied crossing, they traverse the Mediterranean in makeshift boats to reach Europe, an 'El Dorado', according to their collective imagination, for which they risk their lives. Examining irregular immigration means understanding borders as institutions and production devices of new subjectivities and collective imaginaries. Both national and administrative borders shape subjectivities and symbolic perceptions of those who are exposed to the violence of

Western power (cf. Sha'ath, this volume). The West presents itself as a universal model of governance and order, unleashing ambivalent feelings of both desire and hatred towards it (Garnaoui 2022). It is through these lenses that this chapter follows the trajectories of Tunisian migrants, those who are deported, and those who chose a so-called 'voluntary return' – going through the procedures of assisted return.

Policies of Externalising Borders and the 'Voluntary Return' Scheme

In this chapter, I will shed light on the hardest and most stigmatising step in the journey of an irregular Tunisian migrant, that of expulsion, sometimes referred to by NGOs as 'voluntary return', a measure implemented as part of the policy to externalise European borders. Externalisation encompasses a wide range of practices aimed at transferring part of the management of migratory flows – that would otherwise be the responsibility of so-called countries of arrival – to 'transit countries', or countries of origin, or to private operators. The externalisation of borders should be scrutinised distinctively because it unleashes a new set of tools for the repression and borderisation of space, population, and desires in the countries of origin. Subsequently, these practices raise the crucial question of the reintegration of young people who have spent many years working in risky and irregular jobs in a peaceful environment (i.e. Europe).

In 2014, the Tunisian government signed a Political Partnership Agreement with the EU, which facilitates the issuing of visas reserved for a small, ultra-qualified elite of Tunisian nationals; and committed itself to a 're-entry agreement' that would ease the procedures of returning to its soil, not only for its nationals who were deported from Europe, but also for third-country nationals who had transited through its territory (Bisiaux 2020a). This partnership is bolstered by anti-trafficking programmes, which are intended to 'protect the victims', but instead have frequently been repressive and often aim to criminalise the migrants themselves. For migrants acknowledged as victims of trafficking, the so-called 'voluntary return', organised in cooperation with the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), remains the preferred solution by authorities. In 2018, 60 victims of trafficking were reintegrated into their countries of origin with the support of the IOM (Bisiaux 2020b).

In contrast to the policies of forced return of irregular migrants (after irregular immigration or non-renewal of visa/residence permit in the European host country), voluntary return is a policy for managing migrant populations banned from residing in Europe after failing to obtain the right of residence. To encourage them to return to their country of origin, this policy offers forms of support and integration for migrants who are forced to leave European territory. It is carried out both in the country of immigration (Europe) and in the country of origin, through procedures run by immigration and foreign affairs ministries, international cooperation institutions, and civil society associations. Assisted return, integration, and reintegration schemes refer to a set of programmes implemented by the institutions regulating voluntary return, in order to assist the migrants concerned, with the aim of facilitating their 'way back' and economic integration (e.g. by covering the cost of return journey, training courses, and assistance in setting up projects, etc.). In general terms, these schemes refer to the aid granted by Eu-

ropean countries combating irregular migratory flows, to countries providing migrants. This aid consists of building reception facilities for returning migrants, supporting the personal projects of selected migrants, financing civil society projects to support the socio-professional integration of migrants. The implementation of these various objectives of the asylum and voluntary return policy is entrusted to Tunisian state actors, such as the Tunisian Ministry of Employment and Training, the Ministry of Social Affairs, the National Institute of Statistics, National Migration Observatory, the Office for Tunisians Abroad, and foreign state actors, such as the Italian Ministry of the Interior, and the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, or the French Agency for Development.

Methodology

To carry out this ethnographic study, I adopted the method of multi-sited ethnography, a mode of constructing a research space that assumes that the subject of study is a cultural formation produced in different spaces, and encourages us to follow the circulation of the subject through different contexts (Marcus 1995). I conducted some twenty interviews in three periods. Between July 2016 and December 2020, I surveyed three territories of immigration and emigration: Tunisia, Paris and Berlin. I mention this period as background information; it does not have a particular 'time of beginning' or 'time of ending', because these field investigations are part of my personal history, during which I came into contact with 'the migratory subject', before I began my research work on my doctoral thesis. This fieldwork was supplemented by another field survey of the families of missing migrants, of migrants who had been expelled, or of 'voluntarily returnees', as part of my post-doc research between September and December 2021. In my doctoral research, I have grasped the multiplicity of aspects of the individual journeys that the overall categories of *harraga* tend to homogenise. I have followed for each case, the different phases that shaped their journeys, namely the phases of departure, arrival, or deportation if necessary. I also have taken into consideration the immigrants' relationship with family and death, while paying particular attention, from a psychodynamic standpoint, to their fears, hopes, and representations of elsewhere.

To conduct my ethnographic fieldwork with voluntary returnees, I used two previously designed interview grids. The questions, drawn from both a psychological and ethnographic approach, aim to gather as much information as possible on the migrants' lives and their individual experiences, as well as their opinions concerning the programmes and measures in place to welcome and integrate them. Moreover, the questions also aim to identify the assets and shortcomings of these programmes. In this context, I not only interviewed migrants who had returned to Tunisia and have been integrated in voluntary return programmes, I also interviewed various state actors, and foreign actors located in Tunis, and observed their activities through participant observation.

EU institutions, working on assisted return and reintegration programmes for migrants, emphasise the economic and financial elements as means of reintegrating migrants who return voluntarily to their countries of origin. This approach undoubtedly stems from the fact that migration policies consider the causes of immigration to Europe

to be solely economic, placing the blame on economic underdevelopment and material poverty in the countries of origin (cf. Gubert 2010). As a result, the proposed programmes for countries like Tunisia emphasise professional integration, project support, financial aid, and the like.

For me however, it was necessary to understand the reasons why the Tunisian migrants I met had left, even before considering the actions and proposals of the organisations that would support them when they returned home 'voluntarily'. This is a way of assessing the changing expectations concerning assistance once they return. By the same token, it is important to re-examine the notion of 'voluntary return' and to determine how and on what terms the decision, the desire, and the will to return are constituted. The question then becomes, to what extent could these mechanisms for voluntary return be generalised?

The interviews I conducted escape a homogeneous framing concerning the reasons and motives behind departures. Immigration is predominately part of a complex itinerary, constituting a heterogeneous subjectivity (cf. Gertel/Grüneisl, this volume): often, one cannot separate the anthropological, psychological, and economic desires that determine a decision to leave. Moreover, these departures are frequently not conceived as a final immigration. The people I met did not consider their immigration as a permanent settlement in the host countries (e.g. France or Germany). Immigration is perceived rather as a quest for a better life, a life that is, however, also sought in the interstice of an unfixed mobility. As a result, the cases that emerge overlap with a plural societal background: visa applicants from all social backgrounds, job seekers who want to settle permanently, or those who want to live as workers between two societies. For the latter, immigration is a form of permanent mobility. Their subjectivities and collective lives are built around this dual identity: migrant and Tunisian.

In the following section, I present the example of a migrant who was expelled from European territory on several occasions without having gone through the assisted voluntary return scheme, with his last expulsion dating from 2012. This will be followed by two additional cases of migrants who have been part of 'voluntary return' schemes.

The Case of Tawfik: *'Take your Life in your Hands, it's Better'*[1]

The excerpt that follows is from an interview with a Tunisian *harrag* currently living in a town in the Tunisian Sahel. It is the story of Tawfik, who, in the opening quote, already shared with us the moment of deportation from the detention centre in Bologna. His insightful account (2017) depicts an experience of deportation that many other *harraga* have gone through. Tawfik has been deported three times from Europe following his multiple attempts to settle there. I chose to focus on his words first to familiarise the readers with the complexities of the individual fate of migrants on a psychological, social, and political level. To me, his situation seems to be a typical example of a deported *harrag*.

1 The original wording is: '*Prends ta tombe dans ta main, c'est mieux*'.

They came to wake me up to send me back to Tunisia. It happened in the morning. I was not expecting their presence and I was shocked. When I finally agreed to follow them, I gathered my belongings and they took me to the airport in Milan, where I got on the plane like any other passenger. During the journey to the airport, they were talking to me to keep me calm. I didn't want to come back tied up! However, the security guards left once the plane doors were closed. They are *gawri* (European foreigners), they come whenever they want, do whatever they please; they treated us like that because our government is screwed (*mnayeka*) and weak. Even the President of the Republic himself is an alcohol dealer. He doesn't even recognise God. Do you think a liquor salesman would worry about his people? No way! Would he care for the poor? Of course not, he's going to put all that shit in prison, they're just terrorists to him. That's what they do to us. What's more, he's closing the borders, the last chance for a poor young Tunisian like me is the harga. It's the only chance we have, I'll either die or I'll get to the other side of the shore, and even on the other side I don't know what's going to happen to me, nothing is guaranteed, neither the good nor the bad is granted. Just leave us alone, we want to try our luck, let us be! [his tone gets tense].

A lot of rich people are 'burning up' too – they also chose immigration. A friend of mine, whose father is a millionaire, chose to immigrate just for freedom's sake. He wanted to try, but his father tracked him down in Europe and brought him back. He wanted to go around, to visit, to have fun because the borders are legally closed. If you happen to be under the age of 35 and you want to visit Turkey, you have to have parental authorisation. It's just scandalous! Even this deal with Italy was made by that scumbag Beji Caied Sebsi! He makes 10 billion a year and acts as a border guard, he owns cars and boats, and so on. Harga has become a bit difficult, especially in my hometown. They installed a special police unit to control irregular immigration. The chief of the brigade however does a horrible job of control, he applies too much pressure, you must know that the best departure point is my hometown, there was only one accident that happened in 2014 and it was the police that caused the death of these people; the boat was overturned by the waves from an intervening coastguard boat.

WG: How was the welcome in Tunisia following your last deportation?

Two policemen welcomed me, and then the language changed. I started to regret my return, I'm sick and tired of being told bad words. They asked me a few questions like 'why did you migrate'? etc. I had to give them a bribe (*baksheesh*) to set me free on the same day. But then they didn't let me free, they brought me instead to the centre of Tunis to the headquarters of the border administration. I spent a first night in the notorious Bouchoucha prison. The conditions are awful. In the morning, I appeared before the judge and was fined 200 Dinars. Normally, they should have given me 3,000 Euros (the amount due for each deportee), as noted in the agreement between Berlusconi and our government, but the state steals this money and fines you! Who is willing to live in this country after all of this? But then I thought: 'It's better to escape from exile'. I met people who were in Europe for five years and up to 30 years, the 'trap of exile' starts after five years, if you have not regularised your situation and you don't return before five years are up, you will find yourself spending 25 to 30 years, and the trap will get you.

Finally, I paid a lot of *baksheesh* to get out of Bouchoucha. In the next morning, they come to wake us up, by shouting, 'wake up, motherfucker'! Mothers are being degraded to rubbish bins in Bouchoucha. I'm really regretting going back to Tunisia, even the food: spaghetti with *harissa* … it's shitty. You will only experience humiliation in Bou-

> choucha. They saw my wallet and wanted to pressure me into paying more bribes before releasing me, by telling me, 'you are from the Sahel, you're privileged'. However, I arrived at home late in the afternoon at about seven o'clock. I was met by my mother and by my family. I was happy. My mother's support meant a lot to me. My sisters came by, and it was a real party, nobody made me feel bad, no bad feelings. But I couldn't stand the journey from Italy to here, especially in Tunisia with the borders, the food, the police, the *baksheesh*, the humiliation, the corruption etc. I'm fed up. Things have changed a bit after the revolution though, if we were under Ben Ali's regime, they would have tortured me for migrating, they would have put me in the position of a roast chicken. I am not willing to live here any longer. If they won't pay attention to me, I'm going to get myself destroyed.

Tawfik's testimony makes visible the impact of European migration policies on the disintegration, his reshaping of and, ultimately, the persistence of his identity building narratives constructed in his country. Tawfik's story shows the ordeals he endured – the risky and painful crossing, the prison sentence, the lack of any welcome worthy of the name, surviving in the target country thanks to drug trafficking, the systematic deportation by the European authorities to his country of origin – affected his identity: all this only served to fuel the inner psychological conflicts. It reveals that, in spite of the multiplicity of failures experienced and suffered by the migrant and the disappointment that follows, the West remains an ideal that orients subjective identities: far from definitively diverting the migratory desire towards other goals, the multiple obstacles placed in the way of its realisation only serve to fuel it and idealise it as a taboo that must be defied.

The Case of Lamya: An Externalised 'Dream'

Lamya, 40 years old, from Mellassine, Tunis, is a shopkeeper who is also a 'returning migrant' with whom I was able to talk. Her story also challenges the economic conception of immigration. The decision to immigrate to Europe came at the time when she was going through a divorce. Using a tourist visa, she travelled with her two children to France to escape a situation of social pressure and relationships that demeaned and stigmatised her new status as a divorcee.

This quest is inspired by a later experience of mobility, since Lamya used to work in the commerce business between Tunisia and Turkey, and thus mobility experiences are part of her personality, as is her openness to other cultures. This can be a valuable when trying to integrate in France. However, as in several other cases, my interviewee found herself confronted with the status of immigrant in the host country, and thus constrained her ability to act and emancipate herself. Lamya and her children were caught up in the bureaucratic systems of institutions in charge of organising the reception of asylum seekers and refugees on French soil: hospitalised because of her diabetes, anguished by this separation from her children, unable to find a regular job or housing as long as her immigrant status and legal situation were not settled, she was compelled to follow the vicious circle of police and social services designed for migrants. Threatened by the Obligation to Leave French Territory procedure, which follows the logic of the anti-

migration fight adopted by the French government, Lamya accepted the French Office of Immigration and Integration's (OFII) proposal, which pushed her to choose a 'voluntary' departure. Without this, she wasn't able to return to Tunisia as she could not return without proving herself somehow. She thus took the offer of financial support from the immigration authorities as an opportunity to regain a symbolically acceptable status in her native society. The OFII had promised her financial aid and assistance to start a coffee shop project in an upscale neighbourhood in Tunisia. She accepted the offer of 70,000 Dinar (approximately 22,000 Euros). However, Lamya's testimony sheds light on the scars of believing this deception, and the regret of having accepted the seeming solution of 'voluntary' return.

Crying, Lamya told me how she was greeted by an OFII agent in Montpellier and how the agent asked her: 'What is your dream'? Stunned, she replied, 'you want to know my dream?! Is that really what you want to know? I dream of having a coffeeshop in El Menzah or El Nasr'. The agent replied, 'you'll eventually get everything you desire'. And for two hours, he sketched in front of her, on a large sheet of paper, the coffeeshop and gave an estimation of the construction expenses like a 'real architect of dreams'. Lamya believed him and signed the 'voluntary return' paper. Once back, she went through long and complex procedures that at best yielded small projects (often small businesses) unrelated to her experience and initial aspirations. Finally, after two long years of waiting, she received the mere sum of 5,000 Dinars to realise her dream project. She became part of an unprecedented discourse, a 'new trap' – 'voluntary return' – that creates new migration lies about the humanitarian West. She emphasised that she had been 'deceived' by the French migration authorities and the entire chain involved in the reception process in partnership with the OFII – she never received the promised sum. In this new situation, her precarious economic conditions are added to the stigmatisation and social control she already experiences in her home country. She adds that her neighbours and relatives had mocked her. On the one hand, she returned to Tunisia 'with nothing, empty-handed' and on the other hand, her neighbours thought that she was getting a pay-check from European organisations. She adds:

> When I leave my house, they think I am going to get money from the European associations. Several people in my neighbourhood wanted to leave for Europe and return voluntarily to take advantage of the promised aid like me. I am really devastated because I got nothing, and they [those in her neighbourhood] misunderstood me.

The Case of Fadel: Psychosis of Procedures

The different experiences described by here provide us with information about the anxieties and fears that accompany returning: the fear of 'falling back into the same situation that preceded the departure to Europe', to quote Fadel, another interviewee, who returned from Germany. This interviewee's itinerary illustrates the link between the voluntary acceptance of a return and structural constraints. If Fadel accepts and signs his 'voluntary' return to Tunisia, it is because a life of relentlessly harsh irregular migration makes returning to Tunisia seem acceptable again. Like many of his fellow Tunisian ir-

regular migrants, as soon as he arrived in Europe, he joined drug-selling networks, one of the few economic activities easily accessible to people who are not allowed to work due to their status. In Germany, as soon as Fadel was arrested, he was identified by the authorities as an irregular immigrant to deport. For eleven years, he received official letters reminding him of the obligation to leave European territory. In prison, after being identified as Tunisian through collaboration between Tunisian and German authorities, he accepted his fate: deportation was inevitable. Resisting this decision would mean perpetuating his irregularity and risking prison. Thus, the choice to return is based on the reality of a life doomed by irregularity, prison time, delinquency, and shady economic activity. Their economic activity, though often shady, is usually in the service of Europeans, especially executives and the well-off.[2] This dimension of feeling like economically useful members of society, supports the claims and demands expressed by the migrants I met: they claim rights and call for compensation, which they believe they have legitimate right to. Fadel's account reveals the conditions of irregular existence that shapes the 'acceptance' of a forced return:

> It's true, when I arrived in Germany, I didn't find the image I was hoping for. I certainly found people who welcomed me. They were Tunisian friends. But their lives were difficult: they had irregular and illicit work. I had no choice but to join them, taking on the risk of further exposing myself to the police. I had other options, such as going to Italy or to a country other than Germany, but the problem remained the same: no one would help us with the paperwork, with finding housing and a job. I found myself with people who had spent 10, 15, 20 years in this irregular situation. In a nutshell, I found something other than what I expected. The reality was all about the scramble, the endless crossing from one country to another without being able to work in any other way but irregularly. During my time in the German jail, the authorities called on Tunisians whose job was to detect other Tunisians among the arrested migrants. They recognise us not only by our language, but also by appearance. The Tunisian authorities then authorised our return. I had no choice, I was so exhausted from witnessing the injustice, and I have witnessed many of my friends suffer the worst of injustices. It wears you out. I signed my return to Tunisia in prison.

Upon returning home, migrants talk about their new strangeness and feelings of alienation in a society that had undergone much transformation while they were away. Some emphasise the loss of former social networks, which means more obstacles to securing a job and a steady income. Others point to the loss of family members or simply the loss of their former role within the family unit, which exposes them to forms of isolation compared to life before migration. It is in this sense that the people I met are subjects damaged by the experience of immigration and 'voluntary return'. And it is for this reason that the issue of rehabilitation and assistance is a matter of rights. Fadel clearly explains

2 This makes it possible to understand the pain of the returnees, who emphasise in their interviews that the alienation is experienced on both sides of the Mediterranean: through the loss of the relationship with their home society (after their return) and through the suffering during their (illegal) work, which is not recognised in the immigration society.

why returning home requires care, support for reintegration, and reparation for a life spent in Europe, when regularisation has failed. He adds,

> I lived for 11 years in Europe, but when I returned to Tunisia, I realised that this period spent there was wasted: I have lost the contacts that could have helped me here. Besides my family that supports me, I don't have anybody that I can turn to for help or that I can rely on. Coming to terms with the fact that that all those years in Europe were in vain was the hardest part. Over there, the only problem was the risk. I managed my life well: I had a job, I earned money, and I even was able to send some to my family. Here, I will have to start all over again if I want to get by.

The first issue mentioned by the returnees is the lack of coordination and communication between the authorities of the European deportation countries and their Tunisian counterparts. When a migrant is sent back 'voluntarily', no effective reception mechanism is put in place to ensure a smooth transition and return. Fadel states:

> When I arrived at the airport in Tunisia, I was received in a humiliating manner by an authority officer who knew nothing about my previous life and allowed himself to insult and slap me. Another person on board of the same return flight as mine had lost all of his contacts in Tunisia. When he arrived, he did not even have the address of his own parents. It felt like being thrown in at the deep end. I was fortunate that my parents accepted me and took me back in. Sadly enough, this is not the case for everybody.

'A burdensome and oppressive bureaucracy' is the catchphrase used by the returnees to describe the financial assistance procedures offered by various stakeholders to help in the economic reintegration of the selected persons. Other testimonies overlap and underline the weight of bureaucracy involved in setting up projects, filling in applications, or obtaining quotes. Ayman emphasises:

> I was promised 5,000 Euros, but I had to chase that sum for three years. When I opened my store, I had to provide billing quotations. It took three years for a project that should have taken less than a month. They won't give me the money in cash or make the procedure any easier. I had to go back and forth between several offices and associations. Nobody wanted to assume any responsibility and I got lost in the hierarchy. Just not transparent who was in charge. I had gone through hell. It's the same pace as the Tunisian administration, if not worse. Why would a file take four months to finally be transferred between two offices located in the same building or the same street? I keep on telling them that I need a single contact instead of several people who refer me to other people. We are after all just numbers, files … . What's taking so long? We are talking about a small sum of money. Why all this sprawling bureaucracy? When I got stuck in this long process, I got distracted by what I could've done on my own or together with other people. I ended up chasing, for three years, a project and an administration that consumed all my time and energy.

Another major point revealed by the interviewees is their condemnation of the 'illusory project'. Although the returnees benefitted from small amounts of aid allowed by the migration schemes, they claim to have signed their acceptance of return only after being

promised assistance in setting up successful, large-scale projects. But once they have returned, they find themselves entangled in long and complicated procedures that lead, in the best-case scenario, to small projects, often small-scale businesses, that are ill suited to their skills and experience, and don't meet their initial expectations. They all condemn the lack of information, and misinformation provided at the beginning of the 'voluntary return' procedure. Another migrant, Ahmed, interviewed in Tunis in 2020 described this situation as follows:

> I had signed up for my voluntary return following a promise of support to start a restaurant. I was told that I would be granted support to practice my profession as a chef. When I returned, I was offered funding that did not allow for anything compared to the promises at the beginning. The procedures took three years. I was invited to conferences and debates that I didn't understand. I had to attend and do what was asked of me so as not to miss out on the steps that I thought would lead to the promised help. Eventually I was fired from a job only because of a trip to attend a meeting in a hotel, which at the end didn't benefit me at all.

Conclusion

According to a manager of an Italian aid project supporting 'voluntary returns', the sum of 5,000 Euro allegedly dedicated to the returnees in fact covers payment for staff working in the programme (trainers, participation in seminars and meetings, etc.), while the returnee only receives the remainder. My research on those who participated in a 'voluntary' return scheme reveals, among other things, the way in which agencies and donors, in the context of neoliberalism, do entrap irregular migrants, and simultaneously reinforce policies that externalise borders.

The people I met suffered from mental health problems due to the conditions of their return to Tunisia, as well as their migration and family experiences. The feelings of isolation and alienation experienced by these immigrants is reinforced by the fact that the people surrounding them are not aware of their true return situation and of the experience of irregular migrants in Europe. In the interviews, these migrants stated that they did not receive any kind of psychological support from Tunisian or European government agencies. Nonetheless, they believe that there is a great need for moral support, for integration, and for the recognition of the mental suffering that manifests from their experiences and new lives in a society that is hostile to them upon their return. The people I encountered suffered from acute depression, feelings of isolation, and other illnesses. One of them emphasised that he needs therapy to deal with the dark thoughts that invade him as a result of his migration experience: unable to sleep regularly because of nightmares from his past life in Europe, he cannot get rid of them without space to reflect critically on the years of irregular migration. Another explains that she isolates herself because she does not feel understood by her relatives and neighbours. She is singled out, made to feel accountable, and constantly lives with a sense of guilt. She adds that she aims to find a space where she can meet people who have similar experiences, and a place where she can reflect on her experiences and be accepted and understood. The analysis

of these three personal trajectories demonstrates how the phenomena of irregular immigration and 'voluntary return' of migrants are interwoven into the social and mental spaces (imagination, dreams, psychology) of Tunisians as a whole. The sheer scale of the phenomenon has a profound effect on social representations and mental patterns, requiring both general and specific thinking about policies for managing migration and the NGOs that work alongside migrants.

The case of the voluntary return migrants shows that if despair and hopelessness grip this group of people, the repercussions on society as a whole are imminent: the frustration of returning migrants is likely to amplify the feeling of hopelessness and the migratory lie that encourages other young people to risk their lives on the irregular and dangerous routes to Europe. The migratory myth can be summed up through a particular perception of Europe, as an idyllic earthly paradise that miraculously provides a solution to all the immigrant's problems (rent, work, documentation, status, dignity, etc.). This lie is fuelled by a discourse on Europe disseminated in the countries of origin by returnees. The migratory lie is a fantasy about Europe that is out of step with the real condition of immigrants. But when they return to their country of origin, instead of deconstructing this lie, immigrants simply reproduce and reinforce it. In the current political context of externalising borders, the lie is also externalised in the sense that the discourse on assisted or voluntary return could replace the migratory discourse on Europe. Given the fact that the promise of a better life is changing places, that the promise of Europe is moving to Tunisia, often enabled by NGOs, most of those who have integrated in voluntary return schemes find themselves caught in the trap of this lie.

The fear of deportation and the concern of being sent back, taped in a plane, reinforces the humiliation both of individuals and their country of origin. In fact, many *harraga* consider that the origin of this humiliation is rooted in the marginalised and alienated status of their country in the face of European tutelage, and the political accountability that the country of emigration (Tunisia) takes on. They believe that because they are not recognised or protected by their own country, European countries can justify their belittling treatment. This situation consolidates a racial hierarchy and in turn reinforces the urge to migrate. This desire is forged in the quest for power, far away from the country whose youth are being subjugated and humiliated by the Western superpower. In turn, the reasoning behind the policies of migratory repression express this desire to subjugate countries of origin. This situation is further politicised: it gives rise to a certain awareness of life in Tunisia in order to justify the act of illegal migration. The politics of hierarchy between Europe and Tunisia are reinforced at the time of deportation. The expelled migrants then experience a situation of externalised European violence. They are aware that these policies transform their own countries into 'guardians' and protectors of the European borders by repressing the local population. They are also aware that these policies are a continuation of existing internal police repression. In short, they return to the misery they have tried to escape on several occasions. As Tawfik has told us, the humiliation experienced in the homeland has an even more bitter taste than that endured from the European police.

Most stakeholders and researchers in the Western world or in the South of the Mediterranean advocate for the reintegration of irregular migrants in their host countries or countries of origin, yet very few examine the impact of the externalisation of

borders and its mechanisms, such as the 'voluntary return' scheme, on people and on their daily lives. It is therefore important that researcher apply a qualitative framework, and use an epistemology of situational knowledge and ethnographic research, as an approach to forge a space for the voices and experiences of the victims of this scheme. It is about producing a kind of knowledge addressing marginalised populations, rather than only the dominant groups and their procedures of administration and management of minority groups.