Epilogue: Mobility and Racism in Sfax and Beyond

Khaoula Matri & Ann-Christin Zuntz

In 2023/4, Khaoula Matri and Ann-Christin Zuntz both directed projects on migrant and refugee livelihoods, and migratory policies, in Tunisian cities, funded by the UK-based Maghreb Action on Displacement and Rights Network Plus. In this interview[1]*, they reflect on how the racist speech of Tunisian president Kais Saied on February, 21st, 2023, and the ensuing racist attacks in Sfax in summer 2023 changed migrants' situation, and impacted Dr Matri's fieldwork. Dr Matri also situates the events in Sfax in the broader context of high-profile visits of European politicians such as Giorgia Meloni and Tunisia's 2023 agreement with the European Union, through which Tunisia secured €105m to fight people smugglers and around €15m for humanitarian organisations to facilitate voluntary return of migrants.*

Ann-Christin: Khaoula, I would like to start the interview with your field experience in Sfax in the summer of 2023 because it seems to me that it was a moment when things changed for migrants on the ground. Could you begin by telling us about what kind of local situation you found in the summer of 2023?

Khaoula: My first field visit to Sfax coincided with an important political event, namely the surprise visit of the President of the Republic, Kais Saied, to Sfax, which took place on June 10, 2023. This was a coincidence that allowed me to identify changes in several social areas and to document the gradual rise of tensions (Dahmani 2023). These tensions were reflected in the discourses of migrants, but also of Tunisians. Already in early June 2023, I noticed annoyance among the vendors and traders of the Bab Jebli market in the city centre. Dismay and disappointment were widespread. Nobody was satisfied: from the informal trade of the itinerant Tunisian street vendors to shop owners, the frustration was palpable. They expected a pragmatic and effective solution to what they called, among other things, the 'problems of the city of Sfax'. The urban question was central to their discourse: the question of pollution, the chaotic building in different corners of the city, the competition that some mobile vendors encounter (some say they were not able to sell on the pavements in the city centre), and the dirt everywhere, all of which were

1 The conversation took place over a video call on 8.11.2024; it was transcribed, the text reworked, edited for clarity and translated into English.

caused, in their eyes, by the presence of homeless[2] Sub-Saharan people. The occupation of the park's garden, located right next to the large market in Sfax, by Sudanese who had been living on the street for two or three months at the time, seemed to arouse the anger of consumers and shopkeepers alike. Female migrant vendors who spread their goods on the road were removed from the main street. The women were angry and felt humiliated by shop owners, passers-by, and potential customers.

The atmosphere was becoming more and more tense, and you could tell that everyone was frustrated and desperate for this visit. The Sub-Saharans were hoping for a solution or, at least, a change in their situation, while the inhabitants of Sfax were waiting for an answer to their concerns: the resolution of urban problems, pollution, the settlement of these migrants around the market, etc. In addition, Kais Saied's visit came just after that of Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen.

At the beginning of July, riots broke out after the death of a young Tunisian boy from the neighbourhood, killed by three presumed Cameroonian migrants. The attack was filmed by a local deputy, who then broadcast it in real time, almost live. The action seemed to represent a form of implicit mobilisation for revenge; and the situation quickly escalated from a political act or political discourse to a full-blown crisis in local society.

What had happened in Tunis in February and early March 2023 (and to a lesser extent in other cities) was essentially reproduced in Sfax: a real hunt for migrants. Groups of young people assembled to chase migrants from their homes. These riots, particularly violent, seemed almost orchestrated, like a staging of violence. Police forces were there, but without adopting a clear position. After a few days, the police were content to monitor migrants present in the public square, especially around the large roundabout in Sfax and the public gardens near the Medina. This staging of violence also raises the question of the presence of Sub-Saharan migrants, who went from being invisible, particularly in the city, to being increasingly visible through the media and social networks. I had the impression that it was a well-arranged and structured staging. The police forces were present without really understanding their role. Some migrants left the city, while others chose to sleep on the street, in the main square, protecting each other. Those who could afford to leave, left the city, but those who did not have the resources or a social network preferred to stay put. There was great ambiguity at the time: some migrants were fleeing the city, while others continued to arrive from the Algerian or Libyan borders, heading directly to Sfax. The authorities monitored, even protected, those present in the public square, in a notable official silence. In addition, other actions reinforced deportations to the borders of neighbouring countries. There were difficulties for some in getting around, bus (*louage*) and taxi drivers were forbidden to take (irregular) migrants in their vehicles, etc.

The Sub-Saharan African students were more or less spared; they remained in the background of the situation. The majority of them preferred to avoid appearing publicly, and going out or mingling with 'illegals' and undocumented immigrants. This first phase

2 In French the word for 'homeless' is '*sans domicile fixe*' or of 'no fixed abode', which has a slightly different connotation than the English term.

lasted about two months, from July to the end of August and the beginning of September 2023.

I visited the city several times, at least four times, and the configuration of the large square in Sfax changed considerably. At times, the number of people occupying in the Place de Ribat, just in front of the large fountain of the Grand Rond-Point, increased, while at other times, it decreased. In short, the social landscape changed as the weeks went by. At the same time, on the road, there were always migrants preparing to cross the Mediterranean. With a bottle of water and a small bag, they walked on foot, heading towards the outer areas of the city. The testimonies of some migrants were very moving, because they had not expected such violence and hostility. At the same time, Tunisians keep telling them to leave their homes, even if they were in solidarity or did not oppose their presence, as they themselves were threatened, either by the police or by their neighbours.

Ann-Christin: At that time, how were you received as a researcher?

Khaoula: It wasn't easy, both emotionally and practically. On the one hand, I never approached the people present in the public square after the July riots. I walked around like a pedestrian, stopping most of the time to listen to discussions or exchange short conversations in front of businesses, as a citizen. My presence focused mainly on observations of places, of reactions, and I was particularly attentive to the temporalities of this unusual urban landscape: the different times of the day, then in the early evening, and sometimes late at night, etc., as well as the reconfiguration of this central urban space. Over a few months there was a cycle of a rise in hostility, followed by fairly upfront tensions, then a relaxation, and the cycle began again. But at a certain point, some regulars of the city, in this case Sub-Saharan Africans, managed to reorganise their lives. We can adapt even in chaos, in the sense of developing means of survival with the means at hand. Of course, they had been evicted from their homes and lost all their (relatively modest) possessions and money, but for example, those who maintained friendly relations with Tunisians had the opportunity to go and shower at a local's home, then return to the public square, look for something to eat and then come back. Those who could afford it could sit in nearby cafes and restaurants, despite the spatial segregation, to shelter from the scorching sun, take a nap (discreetly) and charge their mobile phones, before this was banned. Others were able to find work during the day to earn a small income and spent the night on the street.

While the situation in the main square, which was highly covered in the international media and on social media, continued, there were also the peripheries, a little away from this media and political over-visibility. In the olive groves and on the outskirts of the working-class neighbourhoods, some Sub-Saharan Africans avoided being seen. On two occasions, I visited a group of about fifty people, including seven women and three children, without asking them any questions, but simply accompanying a trusted person who knew most of them. These people had nowhere to go and preferred to stay away in the olive groves, not far from a well where they could access water.

Another important aspect of this period, in July 2023, was the introduction of restrictions on money transfers. No one could withdraw money without a valid passport and a

three-month visa. Moreover, a poster, present in all Tunisian Post offices, indicated that it was necessary to present a valid passport for any withdrawal of money.

I avoided mixing with other professionals, even though there were a lot of experts, journalists, and humanitarian workers on the ground. I have forgotten the exact day, but during a visit – I think at the beginning of August – there were already delegates from the embassy of Burkina Faso. The scene was almost surreal: on one side, people were sleeping on the streets on cardboard boxes, and on the other, people in neat clothes – either from the IOM [International Organization for Migration] or diplomatic delegations – were discussing and observing the situation. Simultaneously, journalists were omnipresent, which further politicised and complicated the situation. This politicisation may have contributed to transforming the image of Sfax, representing it as a more accessible departure spot for migrants. The information was circulating so quickly that other migrants may have interpreted it as an opportunity to speed up their entry into Tunisia and attempt the crossing of the Mediterranean. In other words, the information was perceived and interpreted in different ways. For example, narratives about deportations at the Algerian and Libyan borders served as a catalyst, influencing migrants' decisions and trajectories.[3]

All of this seems contradictory. Sfax seemed to be both a city where the maximum number of migrants were pushed back and, paradoxically, a point of attraction for those hoping to cross the Mediterranean to reach Lampedusa.[4] This contradiction is one of the effects of the politicisation of the migration situation in the city. On the one hand, organizations such as the Red Crescent were present, distributing meals, sandwiches, juice, and water to the people there. On the other hand, a parallel trade developed around the main square of Sfax. For example, some nearby restaurants served daytime meals only to locals and North Africans, for the most part. But in the evening, these same restaurants were more frequented by Sub-Saharan migrants than by the city's population. There was thus a form of 'appropriation' of the urban space. During the day, migrants were scattered everywhere, seeking shade around buildings. But at nightfall, the city centre in front of the Medina belonged to them in a way, since it was almost deserted by other pedestrians.

There was a very striking contrast. At night, the density of the migrants' presence was particularly visible, but their range of circulation narrowed considerably. In the evening, there were almost no migrants, especially men, outside a small space around the public square, extending no more than 150 to 200 meters. The women, on the other hand, remained grouped together in a smaller corner of the square. During the day, on the other hand, their presence was more diffuse: they were found in the vicinity of the market, behind the Ribat, in the small gardens of the surrounding neighbourhoods, etc. At night, the police presence was more marked, not only to protect the migrants, but also to avoid any confrontation, as several clashes had already taken place there.

3 Tunisia regularly deports migrants to the Libyan and Algerian borders. In 2024, mass expulsions into the desert continued: By March, 28th, 2024 a total of 8,664 people had been intercepted at the Tunisian-Libyan border (Al-Jazeera 2023; ARD Mediathek 2024).

4 Lampedusa is an island halfway between Tunisia and the Italian mainland, belonging to Italy, and a common landing point for Mediterranean crossings.

There was a real staging of violence, characterised by rejection and relentlessness, justified by the need to 'defend the city' against what was perceived as an 'invasion'. A discourse was circulating that these migrants 'have no morals, respect nothing, and are a threat to women'. They were considered a danger, and they had to be attacked in the name of 'honour, dignity and even virility'. It was under this banner that many young people mobilized to 'restore order'.

In this context, the Tunisian president's visit was seen as a form of state disengagement. In the absence of a clear response from the authorities, some felt that it was up to them to impose social order themselves. The authorities might have consciously played on this dynamic. It was only after the violence in Sfax that we understood that this staging might have been a negotiation strategy of the Tunisian government, targeted especially at the Italians.

Ann-Christin: Just to come back a little more to the broader context of 2023. There was the famous hate speech of Said in February 2023 (Le Monde 2023; cf. Parikh, this volume). Would you agree that this marked a turning point in Tunisia's migration policy?

Khaoula: The speech marked a turning point in the management of the Sub-Saharan African presence inisia. Indeed, all previous governments, including that of Hichem Mechichi, had adopted a *laissez-faire* approach, avoiding openly addressing this issue and seeking to manage it without making it a real political issue or a social problem that occupied public opinion. Kais Saied is the first president of the Republic to have openly raised this issue. However, by the end of 2022, Sofien Ben Sghaïer, president of the Tunisian Nationalist Party, had already launched a media campaign against Sub-Saharans. This campaign benefited, among others, Kais Saied, who took up certain elements of this nationalist and xenophobic discourse against migrants' presence. In addition, this rhetoric was instrumentalised by some deputies, especially those representing the city of Sfax. Among them is Fatma Mseddi, who continues to mobilise the inhabitants of Sfax against migrants and calls for their repatriation, as well as another member of parliament who filmed the murder scene. These events marked the beginning of a new phase in the management of Sub-Saharan African migration in Tunisia.

Ann-Christin: You might have had the opportunity to read the article by Cassarini/Geisser (2023) who argue that Saied's speech also marked a transition to a new form of identity populism. How much did Saied's speech transform politics in Tunisia beyond the management of migration?

Khaoula: The discourse itself initiated a new phase, legitimised by an emotional and reactive activation of national identity. The speech was also based on themes related to state security, conspiracy theories, and law enforcement. Afterwards, he tried to qualify his remarks by adopting a more conciliatory tone: '*Africans are our brothers, I love Africans, Tunisia belongs to Africa, etc.*' But in practice, [the speech] largely fuelled an identity-based populism with the aim of strengthening his legitimacy and mobilising the population against the presence of Sub-Saharan African migrants. This issue has thus been transformed into a societal problem, a topic of public discussion and worry, and supported by

some parts of society. To properly exploit this 'problem', it was 'necessary' to activate the collective imagination by playing the identity card. It can be read as a calculated strategy to evoke the Arab-Muslim identity in this specific context. But behind this discourse was a broader agenda, particularly in connection with the agreements with Italy and the European Union on the management of migration flows.

Ann-Christin: So far, we have talked a lot about the Tunisian government, but this also happens in the context of European externalisation policies. Have the latter also entered a new phase?

Khaoula: Yes, we could say that the summer of 2023 was a phase of negotiation, especially in the relations between Italy and Tunisia, in connection with the externalisation of European borders. The figures show that during the summer of 2023, departures from the Tunisian coast were particularly high. However, in the summer of 2024, this rate dropped drastically. This data does not come from the Tunisian authorities, but from the Italian Ministry of the Interior. During my field study in Lampedusa in 2024, all local actors confirmed a significant decrease in arrivals compared to the previous year. While they were overwhelmed by migratory flows in 2023, the summer of 2024 marked a clear reduction in the number of arrivals on the island. This is obviously linked to the agreement reached with Giorgia Meloni in April 2024 [to curb migration to Italy in exchange for hundreds of millions of Euro], a politically successful deal for both leaders.

However, from the point of view of living conditions, the situation of migrants has deteriorated considerably. In Sfax, forced displacement of migrants took place in early September 2023, just before the start of the school year. Buses were used to evacuate them to nearby villages such as El Amra and Jebeniana. Those who remained or continued to arrive no longer headed for downtown Sfax but for these rural areas, where resources are limited and political representation is almost non-existent. Thus, the management of the 'migration issue' has taken a new form: in Sfax, under pressure from the locals, the authorities preferred to shift the problem rather than solve it. After a few months, the issue gradually disappeared from the media, resurfacing only occasionally and episodically.

Ann-Christin: So, is this the end of the migration spectacle in Sfax [that you described earlier]?

Khaoula: The end of the spectacle that returns. The great urban staging has come to an end, but the tensions have not dissipated. Clashes continued to break out between the National Guard and some Sub-Saharan African migrants, including when the security forces entered the olive groves to displace them, going so far as to burn their makeshift tents and rob them. New red lines have been drawn. Those who travel on the main road to these villages risk being turned back.

The city of Sfax has seen increased militarisation. After September 2023, the presence of Black migrants in the neighbourhoods decreased: they were gradually erased from the urban streets. During a field trip between the end of January and the beginning of February 2024, I went to the olive groves, accompanied by a trusted person. I met many migrants there, organised in small groups.

During these informal exchanges, none of them mentioned having experienced racism from the villagers. The majority of them organised collectively to survive. Among them, some Sudanese held refugee cards. There were migrants of various nationalities. They grouped together mainly according to their linguistic and ethnic communities, forming improvised networks of solidarity in these remote areas.

Ann-Christin: Were the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) present on the ground?

Khaoula: UNHCR was noticeably absent from the field, and this absence was often criticised. During an exchange with a Sudanese man who has a doctorate in law, he showed me his certificate and sent it to me later on WhatsApp to testify about his journey:

> I was in Libya, I tried to cross the Mediterranean, but I failed. I was caught and sent away. Then I was in the south of Tunisia under the protection of the UNHCR, but they did nothing for me. Now I'm here only to attempt the crossing. UNHCR is doing nothing for the Sudanese. We contest our situation, but it's useless.

He was carrying his refugee card, a valuable document in his eyes, but which had no real administrative value. Unlike UNHCR, the IOM was present on the ground, as it was one of the only agencies able to identify and register migrants. In January 2024, I was told that more than 2,000 people had been identified in these areas, and IOM was distributing blankets, hygiene kits, and, occasionally, food. On the ground, I was able to observe that most of the migrants had blankets and kits bearing the logos of UNHCR and IOM. However, aid remained insufficient. At first, relations with the inhabitants of El Amra [the village near the olive groves] were relatively peaceful. A certain hospitality was evident, especially in the form of access to drinking water and electricity: some villagers allowed migrants to charge their phones or stock up on food items along the main road. One particular case struck me: that of an Ivorian woman who had arrived at the end of August (2023) after a long journey through Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. She knew exactly where to go and had settled directly in the olive groves. According to her, the inhabitants of the village were 'very welcoming':

> We, the migrants, can access water, there are some inhabitants who allow us to charge our phones, when we go out on the main road to buy food. There are even teenagers who have told us that there were plainclothes policemen approaching, and that we had to flee.

However, despite this local mutual assistance, the situation of migrants remains precarious, marked by uncertainty and the absence of real institutional solutions.

Ann-Christin: Are we talking about hundreds of people or thousands, and are there proper 'camps'?

Khaoula: As far as I know, it was a few thousand migrants. It all depends on what you mean by 'camp'. I took a few photos, without wanting to document everything, but they do show the presence of several makeshift tents set up by the migrants. A Sub-Saharan African, who had helped IOM distribute supplies, told me that at least 1,500 kits had been distributed and that other makeshift camps existed nearby. The Tunisian authorities have gradually restricted the space occupied by these migrants, both to better control them and to redefine borders within the city itself. This concentration of migrants also facilitated the logistical management of humanitarian aid distributed by IOM and the Red Crescent, which operated under the supervision of the Tunisian Ministry of Interior. But beyond the humanitarian aspect, this grouping also allowed for increased control. The camps were about a kilometre or less from the main road. All entrances and exits to the village were under surveillance. During my travels, by taking several roads to access it, I could see that each access point was controlled. It is also known that Italy has provided equipment and logistical support to the Tunisian authorities, thus strengthening the means of surveillance and control of these migrant populations.

Ann-Christin: At the time of our interview [in November 2024], are these people still here?

Khaoula: Yes, indeed. There was a turning point a few months ago, as the people of El Amra felt neglected and ignored, which created growing tensions, especially as the presence of Sub-Saharan migrants increased. The situation has started to spill over, and what was a purely local issue has taken on a wider dimension, not least because of the increased interceptions at the borders, especially at sea, but also at the border with Algeria, where arrivals continue. Previously, many locals temporarily employed migrants for tasks like picking olives, but the pressure of public opinion to avoid aiding migrants also took its toll. Last year around the same time, some migrants moved secretly at night, often by back routes, to escape the authorities and find temporary work – it is hard to say yet if the situation will be the same this year. Women worked as domestic servants, young men on construction sites or in the olive harvest. This allowed them to earn some money, but these opportunities have disappeared because of new movement restrictions. Bans on working, housing or renting houses, and restrictions on migrants' movement, have intensified frictions between migrants and villagers. The media discourse, fuelled by social media, has taken a vicious turn, mobilising the local inhabitants against Sub-Saharan African migrants. On Facebook pages, there were viral messages such as:

> No to the settlement of Sub-Saharan Africans in Tunisia, no to the presence of Sub-Saharan Africans, no to the externalization of European borders in Tunisia.

This is often accompanied by accusations of food theft, violent assaults, and internal conflicts among migrants. This discourse has been politicised and further amplified, in particular with the support of some members of parliament, who have taken up exclusion discourses on violence and migratory invasion. Public authorities have put in place new constraints and practices, and these positions have been widely shared on social media. Part of the local population, particularly through online mobilisation, has reinforced this opposition to the presence of migrants.

Ann-Christin: If I can just come back to the question of local authorities: we have seen that for a few years now, there have been municipalities in Sousse, Ariana and Tunis that have pursued a slightly more participatory approach with migrants, and they have also received European funding to do this. But you just said that there are also new constraints for local actors. What is the power of municipalities?

Khaoula: May 2024 was a watershed moment with increased criminalisation of the illegal presence of migrants. The discourse changed dramatically: instead of simply controlling migration flows, the Tunisian state intensified repressive measures, targeting not only the migrants themselves, but also the actors who support them. The authorities targeted those in the public administration or in civil society who were perceived to facilitate or support the integration of migrants. This has led to notable arrests, such as that of the former mayor of Sousse, who was arrested and interrogated. Similarly, the president and secretary general of the Tunisian Council for Refugees were arrested. The atmosphere has become increasingly tense, with associative actors under pressure. For example, an executive director of an organization called Afrique Intelligence, a Cameroonian, was forced to urgently flee to escape prosecution. The arrests of Sherifa Riahi, the former director of Terre d'Asile Tunisie, and Saadia Mosbah, the president of the Mnemty Association, also illustrate this repression. NGO and humanitarian actors who work for the rights of migrants are now being targeted, and it does not seem that any of these actors are safe. As a result, a climate of fear has been established, where all those who support migrants, directly or indirectly, find themselves threatened by authorities that are increasingly firm and determined to eradicate any form of solidarity with migrants.

Ann-Christin: Is it still possible to do academic research on immigration? Do researchers feel under the same threats?

Khaoula: My field strategy of being invisible and avoiding the authorities was essential for my research. This allowed me to have more relaxed and natural conversations with my interlocutors and to escape the surveillance of public authorities. In some cases, by simply presenting myself as a local, I was able to conduct my observations without arousing suspicion. Even in situations where repression was present, I managed to maintain a certain distance while obtaining relevant information. However, conditions have clearly changed, and the situation has become more complex from 2024 onwards. With the intensification of repression and increased surveillance, it has become more difficult for me to continue my work on the ground in a safe manner. Migrants in Sfax, especially those with whom I used to be in contact, are now almost immobile, threatened, and unable to leave their neighbourhoods. The repression has therefore not only reduced their mobility, but also increased their vulnerability.

Cases of ransacked houses, direct threats, and arrests of foreign journalists testify to the worsening situation and the climate of fear that is spreading. But from a distance, I continue to follow the movements of some migrants, which shows that despite the repression, some are still trying to find alternative options to living in these conditions. The situation in Zarzis, from where some migrant women are moving to El Amra, highlights the increasingly difficult conditions: the lack of work, especially during the winter

months, the reluctance of landlords to rent their homes to migrants, and pressure from the authorities. This phenomenon in Zarzis, which seems to reproduce what happened in Sfax, shows that the situation is systematically problematic. The general conviction among migrants, despite their suffering, is that they are in a temporary situation, but the trap in which they find themselves seems to make any exit from the crisis increasingly uncertain. Migrants find themselves in a double-bind, with hopes of leaving but also increasing restrictions and threats where they are.

Ann-Christin: You had mentioned before that there are other groups of foreigners such as Syrians who were not affected by the current anti-immigration climate. How do you explain that there are Syrians, Libyans, other North Africans who haven't really experienced discrimination and racism in such a way?

Khaoula: The first form of discrimination observed is clearly racial, and it manifests itself mainly in facial identification. During our survey, we conducted interviews with Tunisians to understand their perception of hospitality, views on Sub-Saharan Africans, migration in general, and the presence of Sub-Saharan Africans in particular. We found that black Tunisians were arrested during police checks (in times of tension), in shared taxis, or on the street, simply because they were perceived as Sub-Saharan Africans. Some Tunisians said they felt compelled to say they were Tunisians to escape racial discrimination, verbal and physical assault, and intimidation. This phenomenon is accompanied by a normative discourse that legitimises xenophobia and negrophobia, a discourse that we do not see manifesting itself in the same way towards Syrians, Libyans, or Algerians ('supremacy' of whiteness). These groups, although foreign, share identity traits with Tunisians, such as skin colour or cultural elements, which allows them to benefit from different treatment than Sub-Saharan Africans, who are stigmatised and excluded by political actors and the media.

Syrians and Libyans enjoy particular acceptance because of their common language, Arabic, and their supposed Islamic beliefs. As far as Syrians are concerned, there is a certain solidarity that is based partly on what is happening in their country, but also on social and cultural proximity. They are perceived as close to 'us', almost as part of 'our own' sphere, in the sense of identity. Tunisians are familiar with their artistic production, such as soap operas, films, artistic figures, and even music. This makes 'them' more acceptable, unlike Sub-Saharan Africans, who are perceived as foreigners, with notable cultural and social differences. Algerians and Libyans, on the other hand, are seen as close neighbours, temporarily present for specific reasons, and part of more privileged social categories, such as the middle or upper middle class. The majority of Libyans residing in Tunisia, for example, can afford to rent houses, frequent quality hotels, tea rooms, restaurants, and entertainment spaces, thus contributing to the local economy. They can be seen in hospitals, private clinics, and sometimes in the education and service sector. Algerians, although they come mainly during the summer season, also stay at hotels and contribute to the economy as consumers. There is a certain familiarity with them thanks to informal trade, especially around smuggling and cheaper products (cf. Amri; Shâfi'i, both this volume), as well as close geopolitical ties, which have always been maintained smoothly by the Tunisian authorities.

As for Libya and Algeria, the question of their impact on the migration situation has never really been addressed by the Tunisian authorities. For example, even though the Tunisian president may have expressed concerns, he has never directly criticised neighbouring authorities. Rather, it is a logic of cooperation that reigns. Ultimately, the general rule is that the poorest, the most vulnerable, especially Sub-Saharan Africans, are the ones under the greatest pressure. That said, the Tunisian climate towards Sub-Saharan Africans mirrors the attitude towards Tunisians and North Africans in European countries.

Ann-Christin: Everything you've said is fascinating. We have to understand that this is not just a question of European pressure, there are also political dynamics that are internal to Tunisia and the region.

Khaoula: I am very critical of Europe's hypocrisy. We talk all the time about human rights, asylum, and refugee protection, but we turn a blind eye to certain crises. Take Sudan, for example: a civil war that is ravaging the country, hundreds of thousands, even a few million displaced, but it is one of the least publicised and least prioritised wars for international NGOs and agencies like UNHCR. Why? Because it does not directly threaten Europe. The UNHCR has even stopped registering new asylum seekers from Sudan since June 2024, which means that thousands of people fleeing the war can no longer access recognition of their refugee status. This is not mere negligence; it is a deliberate policy. Europe does not want to manage these flows of refugees and outsources the management of migration to countries such as Tunisia, providing it with equipment, funding, and even political legitimation to ramp up the repression against migrants.

Ann-Christin: And why is that?

Khaoula: The European hypocrisy is blatant, and Italy is a glaring example of this. They have signed agreements with Libyan militias, knowing full well what happens in detention centres in Libya: torture, slavery, human trafficking. It's common knowledge. NGO reports, journalistic investigations, testimonies from migrants – everything is documented. The same is true of Tunisia. The deportations to the desert, the racist violence, the deaths at the borders… It's no secret. It has been filmed, mediatised. Yet, Europe continues to finance these policies, to sign agreements, such as the July 2023 Memorandum, just to calm the European far right. They no longer even try to hide this strategy. What matters is preventing migrants from arriving, no matter the human cost. And then there is Palestine. The war is spreading to Lebanon, and Europe, which claims to defend human rights, all the while actively supports a brutal occupation. Double standards. We protect Ukrainians (and rightly so), but the Sudanese, the Palestinians, the Sub-Saharan Africans? Nothing.

What is new and perhaps interesting is that the issue of externalisation of borders is no longer just a scientific or political concept (cf. Medien; Sha'ath, both this volume). In Tunisia, more and more people are talking about it, understanding what it means: that their country has become a barrier for Europe, a bulwark against migrants, to the detriment of human rights and even their own sovereignty. People are beginning to say

that we are subject to Italy's injunctions, that we have become the guardians of the Italian border. We are powerless in the face of this European power. That is to say, as long as there is an asymmetry in the balance of power, it is impossible to analyse the situation in Tunisia without placing it in a broader framework (Garnaoui, this volume). This includes the country's internal problems, the return to populist authoritarianism and the growing threat to civil society. We cannot understand these dynamics without considering them in the context of the externalisation of borders and the relationship of dependence between the countries of North Africa and the European Union.

Ann-Christin: This might be a perfect conclusion to the interview. It was very interesting, is there anything else you wanted to highlight?

Khaoula: I would like to come back to immobility and mobility, as well as the inequalities related to it. These dynamics can be observed at several levels. We have seen the hardening of European borders and the way in which Tunisia has reproduced them in the space of a year and a half. This perfectly illustrates the unequal power relations at play, and demonstrates that mobility is not an acquired right for all citizens of the world. This is becoming more and more evident, even in the most mundane conversations between Tunisians and in their interactions with European foreigners. This is what makes hierarchical relationships and power asymmetries even more visible and striking in everyday life.