

NO
MORE

RESISTANCES AT THE BORDERS:

STORIES OF LIFE AND STRUGGLE BETWEEN ITALY AND TUNISIA

JANUARY
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PROJECT
MEM.MED
Co-created with



BETWEEN ASPHALT AND DUST:

REPRESSION, PROTESTS, AND MIGRANT SELF-ORGANIZATION TUNISIA'S MARGINS



Border Resistance is a monthly column that is part of the **NoMore: Monitoring Italian-Tunisian Border Practices project**, an initiative by **Mem.Med: Mediterranean Memory**, funded by **Oxfam Italy**. **The column** was created as a **collective writing and awareness-raising workshop**, where members of **Mem.Med, people on the move, and activists work together** to collect and share **stories from the borders**. **Through a narrative from the margins, the goal is to restore dignity and value to the experiences of those facing migration and to denounce the violence and injustices that emerge from border management policies.**

For the **January 2025 edition**, members of **Refugees in Libya and Refugees in Tunisia participated as co-authors**, and we thank them for their valuable and courageous contribution.

The column is coordinated by Ludovica Gualandi, **with graphic design** by Sofia Baraldo.

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"It was 2023, August or September, I don't remember exactly. That's when I arrived in Tunisia. Since then, I've been trying to offer support and fight for justice for all the migrants here. Through our voices, we just want the world to know what we are going through: we are not okay. Yes, the goal of everyone is to cross the Mediterranean for a better life, but it seems almost impossible. The Meloni government claims to fight traffickers, but in reality, they are fighting us, not them. They are throwing us into the desert, selling us to the Libyans. And from there, you have to find a way to free yourself from the prisons, and so on, in a continuous cycle. Many people have died, but it seems like no one wants to listen to us. They just follow what the Meloni government tells them to do. Anything that could bring justice and freedom, I support it. It's right that the world sees the truth, not what the Meloni government says. I am grateful to you for using your platform to make our voices heard."

Joy, young Nigerian woman, activist trapped in the olive groves of Sfax.

INTRODUCTION:

On the northern outskirts of **Sfax**, the economic capital of Tunisia, informal camps stretch hidden among olive trees. Beneath these **olive trees, symbols of roots and resistance** in Arab-Muslim culture, thousands of migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa seek refuge. However, what these spaces offer is a **precarious existence**, marked by extreme marginalization and international indifference. This **humanitarian crisis** has intensified in the past two years, beginning with the xenophobic speech given by the Tunisian president in February 2023. His words legitimized a series of **systematic violences**: mass evictions, layoffs, physical assaults, and repressive political measures. Forced to flee the cities, these people sought refuge in the countryside, living in inhuman conditions and becoming the target of a structural violence that affects both their physical security and their dignity.

Yet, amid these olive groves, alongside suffering and dehumanization, **stories of resistance and solidarity** emerge. Here, resistance means organizing to survive: it is the struggle of those who, despite the incessant losses on land and at sea, continue to **live, help, and denounce**. Among the protagonists of these stories are doctors, nurses, and other migrants who, by joining forces, provide assistance and save lives, **responding with acts of care to the necropolitics that abandons them to death**.

This episode of Resistance at the Borders aims to offer a dual perspective. On one hand, we will analyze the social and political processes that led to the creation of camps in the olive groves of Sfax and the daily violence that takes place there. On the other hand, we will give voice to the experiences of struggle and solidarity that oppose this regime of exclusion.

Through the testimonies of **Joy**, a young Nigerian "asylum seeker" in Tunisia who works in community nurseries; **David Yambio**, a member of the *Refugees in Libya* movement; **Josephus**, an active member of *Refugees in Tunisia*; and **Dr. Ibrahim**, part of the **"black medical team"** in the olive groves, we will explore how these people, overcoming geographical and political borders, have built **transnational networks of support and resistance**.

David will tell us about the birth and goals of Refugees in Libya, a movement that emerged from protests between 2021 and 2022 in Tripoli, where a large part of the Sudanese community led the protests, denouncing the inhumane conditions faced by migrants in Libya and the inactivity/ineffectiveness of major organizations like UNHCR. Josephus, on the other hand, will reconstruct the struggles led by Refugees in Tunisia, inspired by the Libyan experience, organizing protests outside Tunisian UNHCR and IOM offices to demand protection and effective interventions. Josephus's life trajectory in Tunisia, exemplifying a widespread condition, will allow us to understand the processes that led to the informal camps in the olive groves of Sfax. **Both will outline a picture of systematic violence, institutional abandonment, and radical resistance, showing how migrants have managed to transform vulnerability into collective strength.**



Ph. Giovanni Culmone, iron boats used by Sub-Saharan migrants for the crossing piled up in the port of La Louza, October 2023

Joy will show us the vibrant soul of the tireless "feminine" struggle, offering a critical and radical perspective on the condition of those who burn the borders. Doctor Ibrahim will share with us, through his accounts, the meaning of militancy, the respect for human rights, and the right to health wherever one may be. These **stories, interwoven with daily solidarity practices and the denunciation of injustices, represent a counterweight to dehumanization.** They invite us to rethink the concept of the border as a place of encounter and solidarity, of struggle and reconstruction of the imaginary, recognizing not only the shared humanity that unites us but also the effort and determination required to make that border a springboard for a fairer world.

FROM THE FAILURE OF INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS TO TRANSNATIONAL SOLIDARITY: THE CASE OF THE REFUGEES IN LIBYA AND REFUGEES IN TUNISIA MOVEMENTS

The current **informal camps among the olive groves in the Sfax area** are the result of a **long and complex process**, rooted in a combination of **local factors and international pressures**. On one hand, the incendiary speech by Tunisian President Kais Saied on February 21, 2023¹, marked a pivotal moment, institutionalizing and legitimizing a latent racist and xenophobic violence. His words sparked an unprecedented hate campaign, characterized by urban violence, rapes, armed attacks, arrests, and raids that devastated the lives of thousands of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. This crisis is the product of a collapsing Tunisian political and economic system, historically marked by the marginalization and discrimination of migrants, increasingly permeable to the border externalization policies imposed by the European Union and Italy.

1. Melting Pot Europe, In Tunisia, it is State Racism: Voices from the Sub-Saharan Community, February 28, 2023, available at: meltingpot.org

In recent years, **Tunisia** has found itself at the center of an increasingly profound **economic, political, and social crisis**, marked by rising unemployment, inflation, price hikes, and a mobility control system that particularly affects Sub-Saharan communities². The year **2023** marked a crucial shift in **Tunisia's role as the main transit point in the Mediterranean's migratory geography**³. In 2016, Libya was the primary departure point for migrants heading to Italy, with 180,000 people crossing the Mediterranean from its shores⁴. However, since **2017**, the **European Union has funded** a series of **border externalization mechanisms in Libya**. The implementation of these measures has led to a gradual shift in migration routes towards Tunisia, consolidating its status in 2023 as the main migratory crossroads in the Mediterranean⁵. Since 2017, the increase in migratory flows from Sub-Saharan Africa, intensified by the agreements between Italy and Libya, has intersected with the **chronic absence of an asylum law in Tunisia and with an economic regime based on national preference**, which hinders migrants' regular access to work⁶.

Ph. Ludovica Gualandi, demonstration in Tunis against the country's authoritarian drift, May 2024.



2. Melting Pot Europe, Populism, Sovereignism, Anti-Corruption, and Conspiracism: Saied's Narratives to Strengthen His Hegemony, October 17, 2024, available at: meltingpot.org
3. Meddeb, H., & Louti, F., Tunisia's Transformation into a Transit Hub: Illegal Migration and Policy Dilemmas, Carnegie Middle East Center, 2024.
4. Jess, I., Migrant Protest under Migration Management Practices: The Case of the 2023 Migrant Protests in Tunis, 2023.
5. The Economist. (2023, May 3). Why are migrants to Europe fleeing from and through Tunisia? The Economist.
6. Borderline-Europe, Diary from Tunisia No. 2, available at: borderline-europe.de



This context has created ideal conditions for exploitation, leaving many migrants in a state of social invisibility and making them particularly vulnerable to marginalization and abuse. It is also important to emphasize the extremely difficult, if not nonexistent, access to healthcare.

International organizations formally tasked with providing support and protection, such as **UNHCR and IOM**, have shown profound inadequacy in responding to the most urgent needs of migrants and refugees. Their operations, especially in complex contexts like Libya and Tunisia, highlight **severe structural and ethical shortcomings**: instead of representing a safe refuge, they often serve as the **"humanitarian" facade of violent and colonial policies**. Although formally tasked with protecting the rights of people on the move, these organizations offer protection that turns out to be purely formal, unable to guarantee safety and dignity. In many cases, their presence ends up legitimizing systems of repression and migration control, **masking with a language of solidarity a direct or indirect involvement in practices of exclusion and abandonment**.



Ph. Silvia di Meo, garbage bin with UNHCR "logo," Tunisia.

In **Tunisia**, the **absence of asylum legislation** has left migrant and refugee people completely dependent on the operations of UNHCR and IOM, which were supposed to act as guarantors of rights and access to basic services. However, these organizations have proven largely inadequate, limiting themselves to symbolic interventions that do not address the roots of systemic violence. **The (few) people who manage to register with UNHCR, despite being formally recognized as refugees or asylum seekers, have been left without access to safety, education, work, and healthcare.**

In many cases, registration with UNHCR has been a bureaucratic step lacking any substance, leaving people exposed to arrests, evictions, deportations, and rapes. IOM, for its part, has promoted programs of "voluntary assisted return," which, under humanitarian rhetoric, hide a role in supporting the European migration control system. These "voluntary" programs are set in a context where migrant people are left in unsustainable living conditions, transforming "return" into a forced alternative to extreme precariousness. In Libya, these programs have often overlapped with practices of arbitrary detention, torture, and exploitation, fueling a cycle of violence and migration without offering safe solutions. In this context, the testimonies of Josephus, an active member of Refugees in Tunisia, and David, a prominent figure in the Refugees in Libya movement, will shed light on the inefficiencies of these organizations, their protest actions, and transnational solidarity. They will tell us about the birth of the two distinct movements, Refugees in Libya and Refugees in Tunisia, their struggle and denunciation actions, as well as the mutual support initiatives that have arisen from them.

RESISTING THE SYSTEM: THE POWER OF SOLIDARITY AND SELF-ORGANIZATION IN THE REFUGEES IN LIBYA AND REFUGEES IN TUNISIA MOVEMENTS

The **Refugees in Libya**⁷ and **Refugees in Tunisia**⁸ movements are extraordinary examples of **collective resistance and self-organization** in contexts of extreme marginalization. Born out of the need to face violence, institutional abandonment, and precarious living conditions, these movements have structured themselves both as **grassroots protest movements and as digital platforms to denounce and document internationally the violence they have suffered**, demanding effective measures for their protection and accountability from institutions and governments.



Ph. Logo di Refugees in Libya e
Refugees in Tunisia

7. See the Refugees in Libya website at the following link: refugeesinlibya.org and the Twitter page.
8. See the Twitter page of Refugees in Tunisia at the following link: x.com/refugeestunisia.

The words of David, evacuated from Libya in 2022 and a representative of Refugees in Libya, can be enlightening in this sense:

“Looking back at the foundation of Refugees in Libya, it’s something people had wanted to do for a very long time. [...] We weren’t the first to protest, there had been many protests at the Khoms detention center by Eritrean, Somali, and Sudanese refugees. There were several protests in Zintan, for example, around 2018-19. And even at the beginning of 2020, there were many protests in front of the UNHCR office in Sarraj and Gurji. [...] It was 2021, when the neighborhood where I lived, called Agra Garage, home to tens of thousands of refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers, was attacked by militias. It wasn’t a very suitable place to live, there were makeshift buildings where people could manage and survive. You could say the situation now in Sfax is similar, but in Libya, it was different because there were several buildings, not camps, and we were mixed with Libyans.

On October 1st, 2021, the Libyan government, with militias affiliated with various entities like the Ministry of Interior, came with heavy weapons and terrorized the whole neighborhood, carrying out indiscriminate raids, arresting women, children, and men. That day, over 5,000 cases of arbitrary detention were reported in one of the infamous detention centers called Mabani. So, from that moment, we understood that we had no one else to turn to. People like me, who survived that raid, went to the UNHCR office in Tripoli.



Ph. Refugees in Libya

“The main idea of going there was that we had no one else to protect us. Our documents, our ID cards, our safety, you know, depended, supposedly, on what UNHCR could do, could say, could even report to the international community. When we gathered there, I was among the first to knock on the door to say we are here, we need this and that. They let us in, we had the meeting, and then they told us they were sorry, they couldn’t do anything for us. They didn’t expect the raid and had a very limited mandate to operate in Libya. So, they couldn’t provide anything. When we understood this, of course, young people like me, who were already used to this back-and-forth game with humanitarian agencies, would have wanted to leave. I wanted something for myself. But outside the building, there were many women and children who needed immediate shelter, immediate medical attention, and so on.”



That's when we understood that it was really necessary, at that moment, to come together to build our community and start a protest that would represent not only the victims of the attack in Gargaresh but also all the refugees in Libya who wanted to express their concerns but never had the opportunity for a real, reliable platform. Because usually, journalists travel to Libya, take information, the UN, the IOM, they were there, they see all the suffering, they talk about it, but how? I don't know. But what we understood was that it wasn't in our favor, it wasn't in our language. Not a language we speak, like French, but the language of someone who suffers. So, at that moment, we managed to unite from 11 different nationalities and we started the protest. But before starting the protest, we had to create an infrastructure that would keep us united. This infrastructure meant that we had to find bilingual people, we had to find community mobilizers, we had to find people who could solve our internal conflicts because we were like a traumatized community. People from different nationalities couldn't speak the same language. We had to find places to sleep, which was almost impossible because we were literally on the streets of Tripoli.



Ph. Refugees in Libya (The protest sit-in in Tripoli lasted 120 days).

On one side, there were the local community shops. On the other side, there was the UNHCR, and in the middle, there was the highway where vehicles passed. We had to create a different political body, we had to create a watch committee to monitor militia attacks and act with the ability to say, no, we don't want you to come take our women. We had to find, of course, among more than 4,000 people, a representative from each community to come together to put on the table the needs and requests we wanted to address to UNHCR, the Libyan state, and the international community in general, including European governments, who we already knew were cooperating with Libyan authorities for our imprisonment. The protest lasted more than three months, and every day was a real challenge, every day we had to get much smarter in trying to speak to the outside world. And one of our goals was to imagine building a bridge over the Mediterranean where we could speak with the European people and make sure that, if they didn't support us, at least they would give us some kind of radical solidarity. We also wanted people to protest on our behalf here in Europe, in front of the UNHCR, in front of the Italian government, in front of the German embassy. And so it happened. We sat down with Libyan authorities, we negotiated the release of our brothers and sisters. We were gaining momentum, we were gaining popularity, we were having power that the militias and the Libyan government would have never imagined a refugee or migrant could have to be able to sit and negotiate with them at the same table. For them, I think it was a huge embarrassment and they had to create, you know, a weapon of revenge to avenge our struggle. For this reason, on January 10th, 2022⁹, the protest movement was finally removed by force. People were beaten, many tents were destroyed and burned, and then more than 700 people, mostly women and children, were captured and deported to the Ainzara detention center, where they were incarcerated for several months. However, those of us who survived, continued to create survival mechanisms. In the meantime, I managed to get to Europe in June 2022, and we continued to amplify our voices, first and foremost to defend our comrades who had been sent to Ainzara and, you know, detained without any judicial process or review. We kept pressuring, and some of them were released from time to time, but the last group was released after almost two years.”

9. Al Jazeera. (2022, 10 gennaio). Libya security forces violently break up migrant protest. Al Jazeera.



UNFAIR CAMPAIGN, Geneva 2022

The **Refugees in Libya** movement represented a **courageous response to the brutality and abandonment suffered by refugees and migrants in Libya**, where the reception system and local authorities failed to guarantee protection and fundamental rights. In the so-called protected channels, people encountered long bureaucratic practices, endless lines at UNHCR offices, and a constant deferral of decisions on the possibility of escaping the Libyan hell. The "asylum seeker" UNHCR document remained in the pockets of thousands of people for years without offering any real protection or rights:

no protection from violence, nor from the frequent kidnappings in the streets of Libyan towns, no housing, nor food aid. Mohammad, a Sudanese asylum seeker, recalls in dozens of phone calls made between 2021 and 2022 how he could not receive food from UNHCR offices after days of waiting, requests, and promises, despite having three young children aged 5, 7, and 9 with him. He, too, joined the protests, hoping to leave Libya, but never succeeded. **The "UNHCR document"**, the preferential channel for the dream of freedom from violence reserved for the "most vulnerable" cases, was received with paradoxical discretion after repeated interviews with the commission for international protection (conducted online with a single member of the commission and a mediator) and following years of negotiations with various governments around the world by UNHCR. But what distinguishes Ali, severely traumatized from torture in the Zawya prisons, from Neria, with two children suffering from chronic diseases? What distinguishes Mohammad, repeatedly tortured in Libyan prisons, from Alhassane, just 15 years old, repeatedly raped in Garbarage, Tripoli?

David Yambio's testimony, one of the founders of Refugees in Libya, reveals the difficulties and injustices refugees have been subjected to, but also their **determination and resistance in trying to build a platform that could finally give a voice to those who had been ignored and persecuted.** The protests in Libya, which began as early as 2018, represented attempts at resistance against systematic abuses and arbitrary arrests by militias and police forces. However, it was only in **2021**, after a massive raid on the refugee community in the Agra Garage neighborhood, **that the protest movement formally consolidated,** driven by the realization that international agencies like UNHCR would be unable to help them. In addition to organizing collectively to form a heterogeneous movement of people united by the same condition of violence, the movement continues to skillfully denounce and give voice to the mobilizations and demands of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in different border zones, where, despite changing power dynamics and actors, the pattern of violence and abuse remains unchanged.

The experience of Refugees in Libya was crucial in **inspiring the Refugees in Tunisia movement.** While in Libya the struggle emerged as a response to the brutality of militias and the complicity of local institutions, in Tunisia, refugees faced a similar situation of abandonment and violence, but also growing hostility from the local population, especially after President Kais Saied's speech in February 2023. **In both situations, refugees realized that the only way to confront atrocities and discrimination was through unity and self-organization.**



Ph. Sfax olive grove of instruction camp

David speaks in this regard:

"With this, we had already created a great network, but what you need to know is that we were already in contact with people in Zarzis (Tunisia), the refugees who were there. This was in early 2022, when we were still protesting. In December 2022, we launched the Unfair Campaign. The Unfair Campaign was a campaign that looked at the broader context of UNHCR, not only in Libya but also in Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Niger, Egypt, and Jordan. Because the existence of UNHCR in these countries has been like a containment machine where people have to wait for more than a decade to be recognized as refugees. But during the waiting process, none of them have the right to education, work, or live a normal life as human beings. So, it was through this process that we also looked at Tunisia to say that UNHCR in Tunisia ignored people's protests. They tried to silence them. They deliberately tried not to report to the international community that people here are in an emergency state and, therefore, the evacuation process must begin. [...] Refugees in Tunisia were inspired by us, and after their evacuation from UNHCR shelters, they occupied the UNHCR building in Zarzis, and we were giving them, you know, advice on where we failed and where they could succeed. So, even though they were eventually evicted from the UNHCR building, we were able to give them many voices and different agencies. Some of them fled to Tunis, and there again, they started another protest in front of IOM in the following months and years. And so, they formed, and we had to give them our own umbrella because when it rains, and you have an umbrella, you must shelter the person next to you. And the person next to us was the refugees in Tunisia. So, with this, people in Morocco, Algeria, Niger, Ethiopia, Sudan, began to see us not only as an inspiration but as a kind of platform where their voices could multiply and be heard. So, the reason we decided to support, in particular, the situation in Tunisia, you can see that the people who are now in Tunisia are also people who traveled from Libya to Tunisia because they failed, they were trafficked, detained, tortured, and even enslaved in Libya.

So, when migration routes began to open more towards the Tunisian route, many people who were in Libya started migrating to Tunisia. [...] From that moment on, we tried to build an underground motivation for people not to give up, for people to find their autonomy, to have their own voice. And this is exactly what we did, which is, for me, a practice of radical solidarity. We give them not only the platform to provide their voice but also resources. These resources are our experience, our skills, and the money we managed to raise to change what is happening in the community."



Ph. Luca Ramello, Riccardo Biggi, Valentina Lomaglio, early protests in Tunis, 2022.

In Tunisia, the **Refugees in Tunisia movement took shape in 2023 during the sit-in in Tunis**, using tools such as social media to denounce the brutality of evictions, the inhumane conditions in informal camps, and the complicity of international organizations in perpetuating a system of control and repression. But **the movement has its origins in the early protests that took place in Zarzis, in southern Tunisia, starting in 2022.**

FROM ZARZIS TO LAC 1: THE TRANSFORMATION OF MIGRANTS', REFUGEES', AND ASYLUM SEEKERS', PROTESTS IN TUNISIA

Timeline of the 2022 Migrant Protests in Zarzis and Tunis

9 february 2022

Migrant protest begins in front of UNHCR offices in Zarzis, Tunisia

19 may 2022

Mohammed Faraj Momin, a migrant protestor, is hit by a car outside of the UNHCR offices. He dies of his injuries on 25 May 2022.

Early february 2022

Migrant are forced by the UNHCR to leave their apartments

15 april 2022

Migrant protests move to Tunis after a violent police eviction in Zarzis.

18 june 2022

A violent eviction of the UNHCR camp is carried out by Tunisian police.

The **protests by migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in front of the IOM and UNHCR offices in Tunisia, which began in 2022 in Zarzis and continued through 2024**, represent one of the most emblematic episodes of the hardships faced by refugees and asylum seekers in the country and their daily struggles.

These events have been marked by increasing **tensions, forced evictions, and ongoing violence over the past three years**, reflecting a context of growing **repression against migrants and the abandonment by institutions and international organizations**¹⁰.

10. For a comprehensive overview of the different stages of protests by migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in Tunisia, refer to the numerous publications available on the Melting Pot website, which document and analyze the developments of the mobilizations in Tunisia. The information can be found at the following link: meltingpot.org.

The **first protests began on February 9, 2022, in front of the UNHCR office in Zarzis**, in the southern governorate of Medenine, on the border with Libya. Initially, refugees and asylum seekers **were protesting against evictions from apartments in the reception centers in Zarzis and Medenine**. Over the weeks, the demands evolved, with **calls for immediate evacuation and resettlement to safer third countries**. After **three weeks of sit-ins**, a meeting between a UNHCR representative and the protesters led to a promise of a solution. However, following an alleged incident of aggression, the office director decided to **close the office**¹¹.

Later, the **protesters moved toward Tunis to continue the sit-in**. This movement, which began in Zarzis, gained greater visibility and participation in Tunis, with **people from different parts of Tunisia joining the protest**. However, not everyone was able to travel from the south to bring the protest to the capital. **Many migrants and asylum seekers, particularly women, were unable to move due to logistical obstacles, intimidation by law enforcement, or work and family obligations**—such as in the case of Aba and other women who remained in the south.

"Our struggle continues from here just the same. It's not like we can be scared. We have children; we have to feed them. We have our families, our sisters—we cannot stop moving forward. Staying united is the only way not to lose ourselves."



Ph. Silvia di Meo, protests of women remaining in Zarzis, 2022

11. Melting Pot, "4 months on the streets: 214 refugees or asylum seekers demand relocation to a safe country," Melting Pot, 2022.2,

From **2022 to 2024**, the sit-in evolved in both form and content, with the demands of the people involved continuously changing. **The sit-in in front of the UNHCR and IOM offices at Lac 1 in Tunis** eventually became a meeting and living space for all those who had been left without protection, representing a focal point for the mobilization of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in Tunisia. **With its definitive eviction on the night of May 3-4, 2024**, the focus of attention, both media and international, shifted to the informal camps that had emerged in **the olive groves of Sfax, now the only place of life, gathering, and protest for the migrants who remained in the country.**

DOCUMENTING SYSTEMIC VIOLENCE: THE VOICE OF JOSEPHUS AND THE PROTEST IN TUNISIA

We met **Josephus**, a young man from Sierra Leone, in 2022 during the peaceful sit-in in front of the UNHCR and IOM offices in Tunis, in the Lac 1 neighborhood. Josephus was part of the first protest movement in Zarzis and has since become one of the many voices of **denunciation that have consistently documented, with strength and courage, the violence and repression faced by migrants through the Refugees in Tunisia page and his social media channels.** His personal story will help us, on one hand, **reconstruct the trajectory of this protest movement and the increasing difficulties it faced.** On the other hand, it will help us understand on what foundations and **through which actions and support the Refugees in Tunisia page was created.**



Ph. Luca Ramello, Riccardo Biggi, Valentina Lomaglio, first camp in front of UNHCR in Tunis, 2022.

Josephus begins:

"My name is Josephus, I come from Sierra Leone, and I arrived in Tunisia in 2019. I arrived in Zarzis, I didn't go directly to Tunis. I spent two and a half years in Zarzis before coming to Tunis. I passed through Libya, I think I spent a few weeks there, so I don't know it very well. Zarzis was the place where I learned construction work. For me, it was important to know how to lay bricks, and to learn a trade. It wasn't easy, but at that time it wasn't like it is now, because there was work. We worked for 30 dinars. Normally, we worked four or five times. With that, you could support yourself, pay the bills. You found an apartment, maybe with four, five, six, seven, or eight people, and we would pool our money little by little to pay. When I first arrived in Zarzis, I think after two weeks, I found out that IOM and UNHCR were there. So, I tried to contact them because I knew the reason I had left my home country, Sierra Leone. I was trying to see if I could get asylum, you know? They gave me an appointment after a few days. I think they also told me it would take three months. They gave me the number of a guy. I called the guy. He asked me to go to a place called Rue Ben Garden in Zarzis. There, UNHCR has an office for some refugees and a small office. So, I went there, and the man asked me my nationality, where I was from, and what was happening. I started explaining, and he told me to wait. Then he told me he would call me back and that we would meet in the same place. And from then on, for more than six months, he never called back. I kept calling, and he kept telling me to wait, wait, wait, wait. And in the end, I got tired. It was 2021. The protests began in Zarzis. I was part of it, but I didn't speak up and denounce as much as I do now. I then moved to Tunis with the arrival of my wife, and the movement also moved there. When we arrived in Tunis, I went to IOM and UNHCR. There is a place in Tunis where they told us to go. I went there with my son, and they gave us another appointment. I think it was a three-month appointment. They told me to wait another three months. I tried, but I never saw them give me that kind of paper or access."

Josephus' testimony highlights the **inefficiency and abandonment by UNHCR and IOM** in providing essential support to migrants and refugees. Despite repeated attempts to access protection, documents, and assistance, Josephus faced **slow bureaucracy, unmet promises, and long waiting periods that produced no concrete results.** This institutional attitude pushed many people in extremely vulnerable conditions to protest in order to draw attention to issues that were systematically ignored.

Josephus continues:

“I found work in Aït Addam, in the Bizerte area, and fortunately, I was able to find a job on a farm outside Tunis. So, I had to move with my wife and child because there was a place to sleep there. I always worked in construction; they paid me three and a half dinars per meter. Then I had problems with the man I was working for. At first, in the first two months, he paid me. But in the third month, he didn't pay me, and in the fourth month, he didn't pay me either. He kept telling me to wait, that he would pay me the following month. I got tired too.

I didn't want to have problems with him because I know how things are here, so I took my family and went back to Tunis, and we went to live in the Ariana area. Then, in Ariana, we managed to stay with other people in the same apartment to save money. I managed to find a job on a construction site. Unfortunately, you know, on February 21, 2023, I was working, and then something terrible happened after the presidential speech; it exploded everything. At work, I got a phone call from a friend who told me they were attacking black people in the area. Many people were running away, and many were injured, some lost their lives.”

A crucial moment occurred on **February 21, 2023**, when Tunisian **President Kais Saied delivered a racist and xenophobic speech, legitimizing and institutionalizing the latent violence against sub-Saharan migrant communities**. Accusing them of being a demographic and social threat, his words triggered a **spiral of immediate and systematic violence**. Armed attacks, rapes, arbitrary arrests, raids, and roundups became common practice, while evictions and layoffs indiscriminately affected anyone belonging to these communities. Josephus was one of many direct victims of this violence: while he was away from home, his residence was vandalized, and upon his return, he found that his wife and child were no longer there. Desperate, he went to the IOM office seeking help, finding refuge in the informal camp that had formed there. **Fearing further attacks, many people left with nothing decided to join the sit-in in front of the IOM and UNHCR offices in Tunis**. These places, despite being targets of violent evictions, were considered safer than the city streets, which had now become the stage for widespread persecution.

Timeline of the 2023 Migrant Protests in Tunis



The **protests in Tunis, between February and June 2023**, represented an essential part of **Tunisia's migration management within the context of externalizing borders**. In response to the increasing precariousness, people primarily from Sudan and West Africa (including Sierra Leone and Nigeria) set up a second protest camp in front of the organization¹². **In March and April 2023, the protesters, including Josephus, organized peaceful demonstrations, interacting with the media, posting videos through the "Refugees in Tunisia" Twitter account, and attracting international attention¹³**. However, on **April 10, this camp was violently evicted by Tunisian authorities¹⁴**: in the middle of the night, tear gas and batons were used against the protesters, including women and children. Dozens of people were injured, while hundreds were arrested. Witnesses reported mistreatment during and after the arrests, with detainees held in precarious conditions and denied access to legal representation.

Josephus recounts:

"After Saied's speech, for me, it was safer to stay at IOM. I stayed there until the eviction. We were protesting, and some of us were at the front line denouncing what was happening. Then came a moment when things went crazy. [...] We continued living under the protection of UNHCR, hoping they would protect us. [...] At first, we asked for an evacuation, but they said it was not possible. Then they asked what we wanted, and so we wrote that we needed shelter and that the card should be effective."



Ph. Luca Ramello, Riccardo Biggi, Valentina Lomaglio, protest sit-in in Tunis 2022.

12. Bathke, B. (2023, July 28). Hundreds of migrants fly home from Tunisia fearing more attacks. InfoMigrants.

13. Mounier, J. (2023, March 4). Sub-saharan migrants in Tunisia living in a 'climate of fear' after surge in racist attacks. France24

14. AlarmPhone. (2023, April 26). If we stay here, we are going to die. AlarmPhone.

The card was supposed to protect us, not justify crimes. But at least with that card, we wouldn't be exposed to any kind of threat. We should be able to go to the police and report a problem, like an employer who doesn't pay us. The police should intervene. Our children should be able to go to school. My son has been here for three years and has never attended school. It's absurd. We should have access to proper medical care. All of this was in a petition we submitted to the UNHCR officials, who promised us they would respond within three days. Three days passed without any response. We continued protesting, and after a week, they told us they could not meet our demands, they didn't have the capacity for independent action. One morning, the police started shooting tear gas because there was a confrontation with us. There were some brothers with us, there were cars, and the police were shooting tear gas. Some of them were captured; the police were mistreating them, beating them, and women and children were suffocating from the tear gas. We all moved to IOM. At that point, some police officers came to IOM and told us we had an hour to leave. . .

Some of us started gathering to go to the American Embassy because it was the only one nearby, and it was a place where we could leave and make our voices heard. They arrested many people, and I even had videos. I published them. We were suffocating; I don't even know how we managed to get out of that chaos that day because they fired so much tear gas. The air was unbreathable; even for me, it wasn't easy. So I took a road that leads from the IOM to the other side of the street, toward the UNHCR. When I got there, I found a large number of police officers lined up. At that point, the tension was high. As I was crossing the street, I suddenly saw a car stop in front of me. I realized they wanted to take me, so I started running. They chased me. Then I saw a motorcycle blocking my way and another car. They caught me and asked for my phone. I don't know why they are so cruel or so blind. I don't understand. We all need to live. Just because I seek refuge in your country doesn't mean you have to treat me this way.

If it happened to you, you wouldn't like it. It doesn't make sense, no. We have to watch our backs. They started beating me, used electric shocks on me, sprayed pepper spray in my eyes, and took my phone. Among all of us, they said they would take only three to prison: me, Ali, and Joseph. The three of us—because we are the ones who usually film and expose what Tunisians, especially the police, are doing.

Josephus became a direct target of repression due to his activism. The authorities identified him as a threat because, together with others, he documented and denounced the violence they were subjected to through social media. This highlights a crucial dynamic: the absence of media, activists, and journalists able to operate freely, combined with the criminalization of solidarity, forced migrant people to become **witnesses of their own stories, playing a central role in denouncing injustices.** Their guilt was not only in protesting, but in having the courage to publicly denounce the brutality of the Tunisian authorities and the indifference of international institutions.

This criminalization is not just a strategy of control, but a deliberate attempt to silence any form of resistance and alternative narratives. Josephus' experience is not an exception, but part of a larger system that combines institutional repression and structural abandonment. However, it also testifies to the extraordinary resilience of migrant people, who, despite everything, continue to **mobilize, self-document, and fight for their rights.** In a context where **solidarity is persecuted and the media are silenced or violently instrumentalize reality, people like Josephus are at the forefront of a courageous resistance that challenges dominant narratives and demands visibility and justice.**
Josephus:

"I spent a month in prison. When we came out of prison, many of us had suffered oppression. The police were beating our colleagues, citizens were attacking us, and we called the police with no response. Once, a group of young Tunisians was about to attack us. We defended ourselves because we knew they would hurt the women and children. I spent a month in prison.

Even journalists were afraid; they didn't come, and no support arrived, meaning no food, which they usually bring, or materials, you know, the organizations did nothing, and for me, it was already clear that the organizations saw me as being too loud, too talkative for their liking, so it's crazy. [...] I thought: well, maybe I should move, try to go live in Sfax. I arrived in Sfax, I think it was July 2023."

Despite the brutal repression, some protesters managed to recover both physically and emotionally, solidifying the group remaining in the informal camp outside the IOM headquarters. Protests continued, albeit on a smaller scale, until **May 3, 2024, when Tunisian security forces forcibly evicted the camp in Tunis.** The operation, conducted at dawn with the use of tear gas and tasers, led to **the arrest of hundreds of people and the deportation of about 400 migrants to the Libyan border,** in clear violation of international human rights standards. Meanwhile, **media attention gradually shifted to Sfax, which became the epicenter of Mediterranean crossings in the summer of 2023 and the indiscriminate violence against people with black skin.**



Ph. Giovanni Culmone, An informal camp of asylum seekers and migrants awaiting voluntary repatriation in front of the International Organization for Migration in Tunis

BODIES THAT OCCUPY, VOICES THAT DENOUNCE: STRATEGIES OF SURVIVAL AND STRUGGLE

The stories we have heard thus far have allowed us to understand the foundations upon which the two different protest movements took shape, in the Libyan and Tunisian contexts, the difficulties encountered, as well as the achievements and specific objectives that continue to fuel the protests and online denunciations. In both cases, **the occupations of symbolic spaces—such as the UNHCR and IOM headquarters—became epicenters of the struggle.** Not only were they **places of protest**, but also **temporary refuges** for those forced to live on the streets or under constant threat. The decision to occupy these premises highlights a **direct critique of the role of international organizations**, often perceived as the only interlocutors capable of offering protection, but incapable of addressing the real needs of people.

These movements do not limit themselves to protesting with their bodies, occupying public spaces, and breaking the invisibility imposed on their struggles; they also build resilient communities **through internal mechanisms of governance and representation.** In Libya, the linguistic and cultural diversity of the participants necessitated the creation of a structure capable of mediating internal conflicts, organizing resources, and negotiating with authorities. Similarly, in Tunisia, migrant people **used protest to strengthen the sense of collective belonging and to make their demands visible on a global scale.** Radical solidarity emerged as a guiding principle: it is not just about sharing resources, but about a deep connection based on the common experience of injustice.

Through **digital platforms and global communication channels, movements have amplified their voices, creating transnational support networks that connect local struggles to international ones.** A crucial element is the use of digital platforms to document violence and abuse. In the face of the criminalization of solidarity and media censorship, migrants themselves have become witnesses and narrators of their own stories. They have publicly denounced the conditions in detention centers, forced deportations, and the indifference of institutions. **This self-documentation not only challenges the monopoly of official organizations over the narrative, but also returns power to those often relegated to the role of silent victims.**

This excursus has allowed us to reconstruct the **genealogy of the current and dramatic condition experienced by over 30,000 Black migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers trapped in the olive groves of Sfax, Tunisia.** Placing in **historical and critical perspective** the genesis of these informal camps and the daily violence faced by those who live there is essential to understanding how **colonialism.**



Ph. deportation in the desert between Tunisia Libya

racism, border externalization, and abandonment by international organizations intertwine in a system of violence and structural dehumanization. This system did not arise by chance, but is the product of policies that layer and perpetuate oppressions on the backs of migrant people, relegating them to the margins of society. At the same time, it is crucial to balance this bleak picture by recounting the protest movements and international solidarity that have crossed borders in recent years. **These movements represent courageous and powerful responses against the annihilation and oblivion imposed by the racist policies governing migration**

Refugees in Libya, Refugees in Tunisia, and all the subjectivities resisting systemic violence bring to light **networks of care and radical solidarity as vital antidotes to dehumanization and death.**

The shift of attention from Tunis to Sfax after the violent eviction of the camp in Tunis reflects a further worsening of conditions. Many migrants, expelled from urban centers due to the deterioration of social and political conditions triggered by Saied's February 21, 2023 speech,

were forced to seek refuge in the countryside and olive groves around Sfax, creating makeshift camps lacking essential services. These places, symbols of systemic abandonment, are now the stage for daily resistance. In the following paragraphs, we will explore the relentless struggles taking place among the olive trees of Sfax and the acts of solidarity and love that oppose the imposed silence and violence.

SFAX, THE NEW BORDER OF EXCLUSION: DEPORTATIONS, VIOLENCE, AND SURVIVAL

It was March 2023, the first time we went to Sfax. About a month had passed since President Saied's racist speech, in which he revived the conspiracy theory of ethnic replacement by Sub-Saharan communities in Tunisia, which completely altered the fragile social and political balances in the country. At that time, the city was still largely inhabited by a multitude of foreign communities occupying urban and public spaces with their bodies and activities. I still remember the first time I went to the center of Sfax, to Bab Jebli, the central market square. I was struck by how Sudanese, Gambian, Nigerian, and Ivorian people had "taken over" this square and the attached market, with their spice sales, small makeshift stalls with fabrics and African braids.

There was already an atmosphere of high tension. The repercussions of Saied's speech were already being felt. Many people we met told us how, overnight, they had been fired, evicted, and forced to live on the streets of the city center without any form of protection. At that time, the northern outskirts of Sfax were only crossed by migrants who wanted to leave Tunisia. They would quickly pass through the coastal areas before being put on a boat heading towards Europe. The **towns of Jbeniana and Al Amra**, which today symbolize the **Sub-Saharan presence in Tunisia**, small peripheral towns marked by a large number of these makeshift camps extending into the olive groves, were still just **transit points back then**. We can certainly trace, in the incendiary racist rhetoric of the President and the violence that followed, accompanied by the **strengthening of migration cooperation between the EU and Tunisia formally signed with the memorandum of understanding in July 2023**, the genesis of what are now makeshift camps stretching along the coasts in the olive groves north of Sfax.

David speaks on this matter:

“Before July 2023, you could already see people walking the streets trying to get to the olive grove areas. These olive groves, before they became camps, were used as hiding places for crossing the Mediterranean. It was already a refuge before the violence erupted. Now that people have really been pushed to the margins of society and were fighting to make a living, they had to move there for obvious reasons. The olive groves provide shelter, shade, and so on, but they also offer quick access to the Mediterranean. And I think it was around June or July 2023 that the situation in Sfax was no longer livable for people, and they began to move there.”



Ph. Refugees In Tunisia, people on the street in Bab Jebli, Sfax.

Josephus continues:

“June, July 2023 was the moment when Sfax became too chaotic for black people, for people living in Sfax, I’m not talking about the olive grove area. What happened in Sfax is what pushed people to live in the olive grove area, because there was no house for us, they attacked us in our homes, the police arrested us, abandoned us in the desert, left us in an abandoned place. There were rapes against black people, many people were killed, many were left in the desert, the police just gathered some people, left them somewhere to go there and die of hunger. At that moment, I was in Sfax, it wasn’t really easy for me. I had just gotten out of one problem and found myself in another problem again in this damned country. That’s what led me to choose to live in the olive grove area. We were exposed to racist thugs who would molest us or kill us, so we had no choice, we were forced to flee. Gradually, we started moving into the olive groves, we slept there, there were no tents, nothing, we just slept under the trees. At that time it was summer, an infernal heat. We had nowhere else to go, we thought this place was the only one where other people were living.”



Ph. Refugees in Tunisia, families camped on the streets of Sfax following evictions and violence.



Ph. Giovanni Culmone, people living in the streets, Tunisia.

The transformation of **Sfax** from a thriving **economic hub** to a **symbol of humanitarian crisis** reflects the deep contradictions in the relationship between Tunisia and migration. Initially, **the presence of Sub-Saharan migrants had contributed to the region's economic dynamism**, providing essential labor in sectors such as construction, agriculture, and hospitality. However, with the worsening economic crisis and the growing migrant population, the balance began to crack.

Strategically located on the **Gulf of Gabès, just 130 km from Lampedusa**, Sfax became a crucial departure point for migration routes toward Europe. While its economy had initially benefited from the migrant presence, economic difficulties, aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the discriminatory rhetoric promoted by the government fueled social tensions and a growing climate of hostility. President Saïed, seeking support in a context of economic decline and political instability, adopted a populist and xenophobic narrative, accusing migrants of posing a threat to the country's cultural and social identity. **This rhetoric echoed in the repressive policies implemented in Sfax, culminating in a series of systematic acts of violence, raids, and roundups. Starting in July 2023, the Tunisian authorities intensified operations against Sub-Saharan migrants in the city.** Numerous raids were carried out in urban areas, including popular neighborhoods and gathering spots like the historic Bab Jebli market square, where people would gather in search of work or support. The **forced eviction of Bab Jebli marked one of the most emblematic moments of the repression**, with hundreds of people being forced to leave their shelters and scatter. At the same time, the roundups on the streets and in workplaces increased the sense of insecurity and precariousness, as the police intensified checks and arbitrary arrests.

Many people were literally pushed out of the city and forcibly moved to remote areas, particularly to desert regions near the borders with Libya and Algeria. The **deportations to the desert**, conducted in July, represented a severe violation of human rights, with **hundreds of people abandoned without water, food, or protection in a hostile environment**. These operations affected not only individuals in irregular situations but also people who were regularly registered with international organizations. The systematic violence, deportations, and abandonment made clear the failure of an approach that, instead of addressing migration dynamics in a humane and coordinated way, chose the path of repression and dehumanization.

This **spiral of abandonment and violence has turned Sfax into a symbol of exclusion and repressive migration policies**. While the authorities tried to expel migrants from the city and erase their presence, dynamics were perpetuated that deepened the disregard for human dignity. The crisis in Sfax is not just a local issue but reflects the broader failure of border externalization policies, which delegate the management of migration to transit countries like Tunisia, turning them into gray zones of violence and abuse.

SURVIVING IN THE OLIVE GROVES: SELF-ORGANIZATION AND VIOLENCE AT THE BORDERS OF EUROPE

The people trapped in the olive grove camps of Sfax find themselves in an extremely precarious living condition. Forced into these places by the impossibility of crossing the sea to Europe or living elsewhere, they are compelled to build a new daily life among the trees, in a context marked by constant external threats and internal conflicts.

David, thanks to the valuable contribution of the people living in the camps, was able to reconstruct their organization, the divisions in various kilometers, the number of people present, and other useful documentary information for a broader understanding of life unfolding among the trees. Here's what he says:

“There are countless kilometers. We have kilometer 19, 20, then kilometer 24 and 25, kilometer 30, 31, 33, 34 up to 39. There are countless kilometers where people are, and when we did the population assessment at the end of September, we discovered that there were about 30,000 people. 30,000 people live in these rural areas alone, I can say that today the number is more or less the same.”

The **olive grove area stretches for dozens of kilometers, identified by progressive numbering** (from kilometer 19 to 50), each inhabited by distinct groups. Each kilometer hosts several groups of people, who organize themselves to survive and maintain an internal balance. In September, an **estimate showed about 30,000 people spread across these rural zones**. This number appears to have remained unchanged, despite some continuing to leave the camps, often without success.

Josephus:

“Right now, all those kilometers are occupied from 19 to 50. From 19 to 50, each kilometer has two or three groups of people who split and manage themselves living in these conditions. We have no other choice. Some of us, with few resources or money, try to do business, buying from the Tunisians and selling in the olive grove area.”



Infomigrants, Sub-Saharan African migrants sitting near tents at a camp in Jebeniana, Sfax governorate, Tunisia | Photo: Mohamed Messara / EPA

In these camps, the communities have developed systems of self-management to face daily challenges. Kilometers like 30, initially inhabited mainly by people from English-speaking countries, have since integrated other nationalities, giving rise to a diversified community. Here, the residents have created a system to resolve internal conflicts and protect themselves from external aggressions, while knowing they are constantly exposed to violence.

Josephus continues:

“Kilometer 30 is a place where a large number of people from English-speaking countries had settled first, and now, even though there is a large number of French-speaking people and a few Sudanese, there are still a huge number of people from English-speaking countries. I was there, I was one of the people who helped create the system to decide where to go. We were put into a category as if we were animals, and that's why they chased us away, and now we live in a place where animals should live. But first, we need to understand each other, and also them. We created a system to solve problems between us Black people, even if there is an external problem with others. We try to call the police, but most of the time, they abandon us. But we try to solve it in a way that makes them feel that we are powerless or subject to their terms and conditions, which is good for us to be safe or to live in that place peacefully. That way, we managed to live there for a long period. Some of us, like me, my house was part of the houses attached, but it wasn't too much, like in the other kilometers. This is because of the kind of approach we used with them; when the police usually came there, we organized ourselves, the women, us, to kneel in front of them, simply begging them. And even if they started shooting tear gas, we would run back, no stones, no signs of violence. So, even they, when they saw this kind of reaction, sometimes they had pity on us.”

Despite the difficulties, the groups have developed a form of internal governance, with representatives managing security and the organization of daily life. Self-management has become a necessity to maintain a minimum of order and dignity in an otherwise inhumane context. However, the persistent threats, discrimination, and violence, both from Tunisian civilians and law enforcement, make this condition a trap with no way out.

IN THE HEART OF THE OLIVE GROVES: HIDDEN VIOLENCE AND THE STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL

According to a **study published by the Tunisian association FTDES¹⁵ on July 23, 2023, physical violence reportedly affected around 56.7% of the sample surveyed.** However, this figure cannot be considered reliable. **Daily accounts from Sfax tell a very different story, indicating systemic violence practically affecting 100% of Black people,** with frequent and repeated physical attacks. In **November and December 2024 alone, 10 instances of institutional violence were reported at kilometers 35, 36, and 19, involving bulldozers, police, and the use of tear gas.** These figures are partial, as media outlets, researchers, activists, and organizations like FTDES are unable to access these areas or document the events **due to intense repression and criminalization of civil society. Anyone attempting to provide assistance on-site or document the ongoing violence risks persecution and arrest.**



Camps in the olive groves Sfax, Tunisia

15. Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES). (2023). Preliminary results of a field study on the situation of migrants in Tunisia. Accessed on [access date], at <https://ftdes.net/resultats-preliminaires-dune-etude-de-terrain-sur-la-situation-des-migrants-en-tunisie/>.

The **absence of access to basic services** is undoubtedly the first element of this systematic dehumanization. **No drinking water, no electricity, no bathrooms: the olive groves become both a refuge and a prison.** The lack of adequate hygiene conditions turns the fertile ground into a **breeding ground for diseases such as scabies, tuberculosis, and chronic infections, which, without treatment, have devastating effects.**

Josephus:

“Every day, we deal with many injuries, childbirth cases for pregnant women, medical problems for children, and many infections in the olive grove area. We have suffered from the dust from summer to winter. Winter is very cold, and we are exposed to many flies and filth.”

Joy:

“We live exposed to violence, whether in the city or the olive groves—at El Amra, kilometer 30, kilometer 21... everywhere. All migrants in Sfax suffer. The cold and pain are constant because no one is well. Pregnant women die, children die... diseases that could be treated, but without access to hospitals, many lose their lives or their children.”

Access to food is another daily struggle. Here, basic necessities become luxury goods: bread and medicines are sold at inflated prices, far beyond the reach of those who have nothing left.

Joy:

“It’s dark; we have no homes, and we’re abandoned. Sometimes they chase us when we’re looking for food. The price of goods for us is double or triple. We survive by begging or pooling a few dinars among various people to buy food.”

The Tunisian government not only ignores this crisis but exacerbates it, restricting commerce and monitoring the distribution of medicine.

Joy continues:

“Now we’ve discovered that even pharmacies are reducing the amount of medicine they sell to us because the government is monitoring them. The challenges are endless. When they find out we’re receiving aid, the government tries to block it.”

Hospitals in nearby areas fail to respond to emergency calls, and when patients are admitted, **exorbitant sums of money are demanded for access to treatment, effectively rendering **healthcare services inaccessible**.**

Josephus:

“I have explained to many people that the medical facilities here are terrible. People go to hospitals in Jbeniana or Sfax, but they don't pay attention to us; they don't take care of us. People die, even in emergencies, like a woman in labor. We call the emergency number, but they don't come. It was sheer luck for many of us that we managed to meet people with medical skills, such as doctors and nurses, who started helping.”

But if daily survival already seems impossible, the looming shadow of **violence** worsens everything. People are constant targets of **attacks by some local citizens: physical assaults, theft, and rape**. Women, in particular, face double vulnerability, becoming easy prey for abuse that goes unpunished. On top of this, **authorities** adds fuel to the fire with **night raids that destroy camps, burn tents, and arrest and deport people to the borders without any form of protection**. With every eviction, the little that people manage to build is wiped out, leaving them with nothing—exposed to the cold, the rain, and the absence of hope.

David:

"With this situation—the diseases, the contaminated water they're forced to drink daily, the dust in the olive groves, pregnant women who can't be transferred to hospitals—and now, with the rise of new militias, the citizen militias. I remember the name of a Tunisian MP, Abdallah Gamoudi, who supported the formation of these citizen militias. Now these militias operate as armed groups along the Mediterranean coast where the migrants are. These people are armed with machetes, rifles, and guns. They shoot without mercy. They capture people to steal their phones and money or to abuse women, subjecting them to rape and other atrocities. From the information I've received, most of the attacks still involve the Tunisian police arriving periodically. However, the citizen militias are a persistent presence and are growing stronger. I would say that now almost 60% of the violence is carried out by civilians—violence that takes people's lives. But who is behind these people? Why are they not prosecuted if they are ordinary individuals committing violence without any consequences or repercussions? This means that the state oversees these situations and chooses not to prosecute the criminals, legitimizing violence by allowing impunity."

Josephus:

"But we are still exposed to Tunisian boys who often come to attack us, damage our belongings, and leave. If we try to respond, the police come, burn the tents, arrest people, and abandon them. We have no alternatives."



Olive groves after the violence and the eviction

Joy explains how makeshift "homes" are built, only to be periodically destroyed by attacks or bad weather, leaving those who inhabit them even more exposed to the cold and violence:

"How do we survive? We make improvised tents, not with tarps, but with nylon. Tarps are thicker and better, but we can't get them. Plastic nylon is what we use to build. Then we line the inside with blankets, pieces of blankets. And we make the beds with sand. We raise them a bit, then lay mats, put cardboard on top, and sleep with blankets. If we're lucky enough to find pieces of foam randomly lying on the ground, we use those to sleep. So basically, that's how we survive in the camp."

The carefully constructed tents, pieced together with plastic bags and the few materials available, are periodically destroyed. After such attacks comes deep despair and a relentless search for new shelters. Some try to rebuild with whatever remains, while others move to different locations, again and again. **These episodes of brutal violence lead to the loss of food, materials, clothing, and hope.**

Those unable to even find plastic bags sleep under the trees, exposed to the cold and prone to illness. In a **cruel logic of profit**, every time shelters are destroyed, **Tunisians increase the prices of tents and essential goods, exploiting the desperation of those in need.** Some witnesses report that voluntary aid and the distribution of free goods are blocked unless they are sold, further perpetuating suffering for profit. Despite the daily violence and abuse inflicted by all segments of the population in the camps, Joy states:

"I stayed in Zarzis for about four or five months. Then the police evacuated everyone from the building. That's how I ended up in El Amra, in Sfax. I've stayed there ever since. And since then, finding housing in Zarzis has become extremely difficult. So, I didn't even bother trying to go back because I have nowhere to stay. You can't go into the city, leave the bushes where you have an improvised tent, and stay in abandoned buildings. I mean, in the cities, the police can come whenever they want and do whatever they want. You can't escape. But if you're in the camp, if the police come, at least you can find a way to run. I prefer staying in the camps rather than in Zarzis, where you live in an unfinished building. You might be in a building, and the owner might want to complete it.

Then you have to leave and start searching for another place. I don't even want to talk about the mafia. They could come at any moment, steal your things, or do whatever they want to people. So, I still prefer the camp, where we are together. If something happens, you shout, 'Thief! Thief! Thief!' and many people will come out to help you. In the city, there's nothing like that."

Added to this is the **absence of international organizations**, a void that weighs heavily on a population left to survive without a safety net. In this **climate of total hostility**, every day is a struggle to maintain dignity and life. Institutionalized violence, the lack of protections, and the indifference of the international community make these camps a tangible **symbol of humanity pushed to the margins.** And yet, even in this hell, people resist, organize themselves, and seek common solutions, demonstrating a strength that refuses to be annihilated. It is on this foundation that self-organized medical assistance activities have begun, created by the people living in the camps to respond to daily challenges, celebrating care, life, and a form of radical collective resistance.

The words of Doctor Ibrahim, David, Josephus, and Joy will help us understand how this service operates and what the main challenges are.

RESISTANCE IN CARE: THE STORY OF THE SFAX HOSPITAL AND ITS DAILY CHALLENGES

David Yambio, along with the Refugees in Libya movement and the solidarity of other actors within the international civil society, decided to provide emotional and logistical support for the efforts already present in the camp to build and sustain medical activities carried out with courage and dedication by the people trapped in the olive groves.

He shares his perspective on the creation of the hospital and the support provided:

"Faced with this growing need, we had no choice. We turned to MSF, but they couldn't help us. We contacted UNHCR and had several communications with the UN Special Envoy, such as Vincent Cochetel, but even they couldn't assist. The Red Crescent, the IRC (International Rescue Committee), and the Red Cross couldn't do anything either

In this situation, we turned to the international community to mobilize funds and build a hospital that now serves as a lifeline for countless communities and treats many illnesses. [...] The idea for the hospital emerged to change the situation because, until the end of January, the IOM periodically visited the camps to provide people with medicine. But then this was no longer possible. People could no longer move. Tunisian authorities undertook a nationwide crackdown on Tunisian civil society, beginning to persecute individuals who demonstrated solidarity or provided social or legal assistance to people.

This posed an enormous threat to the survival of those living primarily in these olive groves, who are still in Jbeniana, El Amra, and Sfax today. But in the background, there was already Doctor Ibrahim, along with a team that began offering medical services to treat and assist patients, deliver babies, and provide countless medical interventions. They told us they needed help—help that wouldn't come from the Tunisian government or from NGOs present in Tunisia. That's when we said: okay, we'll try to support you and expand your hospital. This hospital will now serve as a care point for people from the surrounding areas."

Numerous individuals dedicate their energy every day to supporting the medical team established within the olive fields. Several hospitals have now been set up, bringing together diverse individuals who contribute with their professional skills or out of a deep desire to help.

Another key figure in the success of the medical activities is **Doctor Ibrahim**. For over a year, Ibrahim and his care team have stood as a beacon of hope amidst the staggering desolation documented in video

reports, photos, and stories shared across various communities. These accounts reflect abandonment and violence—constructed, deliberate, and supported by the policies of wealthy nations, including our own country. These policies have created a harmful distance that enables the slow killing of those attempting to cross borders: left without water, food, shelter, aid, or clothing, and stripped of the right to human dignity. However, in Sfax, migrants reclaim and demand their dignity through the power of their protests, tireless mutual care efforts, and their defiance of European policies that continue to trample on, harm, kill, and rob them.



Sfax olive groves — without shelter after violence and eviction

Doctor Ibrahim shares his experience:

“I arrived in Tunisia in January 2024. I am from Sierra Leone, and like many others, I wanted to reach Europe. The humanitarian situation was terrible, so I poured all my resources and energy into helping. I couldn’t close my eyes to what was happening; I couldn’t leave. I’m a doctor, and you can’t imagine the situation here in Sfax, in the olive fields. I am the founder of the Black Medical Team in Sfax, where we’ve been working as volunteers non-stop for over a year now, in the desert, among fields filled with thousands of migrants. Each of us is responsible for specific kilometers within the olive groves—for instance, the structure at kilometer 33 also covers kilometers 31, 32, and 34. We are migrants ourselves, trying to help fellow migrants like us. The reality of Sfax spans several kilometers, each with different groups. My hospital is located at kilometer 38. In these areas, thousands of people—men, women, and children—live in inhumane conditions. My phone rings constantly with requests for help of every kind, for various illnesses. There are many people with me who assist those who are suffering. We’ve dealt with infectious diseases, illnesses caused by a complete lack of basic needs (water, food, blankets, shelter, hygiene, or even minimal assistance), extreme heat

and cold, and injuries inflicted during police violence. Every penny we receive goes toward medicine and essential goods.”

The financial support required to keep medical activities running in the olive fields of Sfax has been the result of extraordinary collective effort. Thanks to **crowdfunding initiatives promoted by Refugees in Libya** and **solidarity donations from all over the world**, essential aid has been made possible. However, a **significant portion of the funds was raised through immense personal sacrifice**: many begged, did small occasional jobs, or, in some cases, gave up their daily ration of food to contribute the little they had to the well-being of the community.

Dr. Ibrahim continues:

“Here, the police often come to different kilometers to take everything away, leaving people without blankets. This means that, in this period, they are left out in the cold, without food. The most harrowing images we see are of women and children forced to beg because they cannot even manage to eat. I don’t know how to describe this humanitarian disaster.

Politically, I wouldn't even know what to say other than that we are immersed in a disastrous situation, and we deal with it every day. I am focused on that. Imagine women who have to give birth, people with disabilities (and there are many), malnourished children who die from the cold. Even just bringing them to a hospital is difficult because it can't be done without money, and often people are afraid of ending up in prison. This has happened—if you are sick and go to the hospital, you might be jailed. When people beg, they are often beaten by Tunisians, even very young boys. For example, there was a 12-year-old who was hit by a scooter and left without help. I treated him; he lives at kilometer 36. There have been cases of pneumonia where we've needed not just medicine but equipment to assess the situation, and here I only have a stethoscope. During police attacks (they have come several times with bulldozers), they used tear gas, which caused several cases of asphyxiation—some brothers died this way. Because of the cold, some tried to warm their tents with charcoal and ended up suffocating. I've also treated several cases of shipwreck survivors suffering from saltwater damage, dehydration, and shock.



Ph of the shipwreck in Tunisia

Saltwater causes significant damage to the skin, and survivors need rehydration and strength recovery. Some have severe chemical burns on their legs due to diesel floating in the water. When mixed with seawater, diesel burns the exposed skin. The most critical problem is always the lack of sufficient medicine for treatments, especially in serious and urgent situations where we truly don't know what to do. And in such a dangerous place, it's terrifying. We are abandoned—by both the Tunisian government and non-governmental organizations. Without the help of some donors, we would all already be dead in the desert.”

The **shipwrecks**, many of which go **unnoticed**, bring some survivors back to the fields of Sfax, full of physical and mental wounds, treated by the doctors and nurses on Ibrahim's team. One example is the shipwreck on November 16, 2024, off the Tunisian coast, where 23 out of 53 people survived. On November 24, another shipwreck resulted in the deaths of 34 people, with 24 survivors, also off the Tunisian coast:

“We immediately began providing the necessary treatments for the survivors. Even in this case, the supplies ran out quickly.”

News also spreads quickly in the fields about the continuous **push backs in the deserts near Ben Gardane, close to the Libyan border, or in Algeria, near Tamanrasset or Assamaka.** Migrants from the Sfax camps constantly try to support those in life-threatening situations. Many are people who were intercepted at sea or the southern border and sent back with no chance of survival. **These events are not recent phenomena but have expanded since 2015 following European externalization policies.** These involved “informal agreements” with countries like Niger, Libya, Tunisia, and even Sudan to turn transit countries into guards of Fortress Europe in exchange for large sums of money. **Those abandoned in the desert are erased by authorities** who pretend they never existed. Fortunately, networks of activists and communities continue to document their stories and, in some cases, save hundreds of people from certain death.



Sfax km 34 - scenes of life

Amidst the disasters and violence, **children continue to be born in the fields of Sfax, thanks to the care of the medical team.** These children desperately need milk, food, safety, protection, a home, and proper medical care. Alongside them are dozens of migrants with disabilities caused by their journeys or the torture endured along the way:

“Some severely disabled individuals cannot walk or rely on wheelchairs—here, in the desert! Take the case of a couple: she is in a wheelchair, and he has only one leg. You cannot imagine the despair. The police constantly damage us. Once, at kilometer 35, they attacked me, and I lost my blood pressure monitor. We live in miserable conditions. We can endure, but the women, children, and disabled people must be taken away from here as soon as possible. Every day, I thank my team for what they do, for their resilience and strength. And where are the big organizations? The IOM, UNHCR, MSF? Where are they? They’re just big names without substance. Sometimes, people from organizations come, count the number of people, and take data (date of birth, nationality, marital status). They tell us that the IOM and UNHCR can’t reach us—it’s just an excuse. There is no humanity here. They collect data and later ask around if anyone wants to be voluntarily repatriated, but it’s not voluntary repatriation. Many feel forced by inhumane and terrible conditions—it’s not fair.”

Every day, Ibrahim’s phone and those of his colleagues ring incessantly, with reports of new births, police beatings, roadside assaults by angry Tunisians, torrential rains, and cold that worsen the already terrible living conditions. There are machete wounds, internal conflicts within communities that are difficult to treat and disinfect, emergencies requiring hospital intervention, and the funds necessary to access care. The work is staggering and unimaginable, done with practically no resources. Yet, in Sfax, the resistance continues—the resistance of those who oppose injustice, who fight tirelessly and without hesitation: to act, to be present, to resist.

Joy, Ibrahim, Patricia, Fatima, and all those living in the chaos of Sfax show the world what courage means and what kind of world should be built—a world where the word “care” still holds meaning, a word entirely trampled and forgotten within our privileged communities.



CROWDFUNDING FOR HEALTHCARE ACTIVITIES IN SFAX

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