

AL-MGHATTĀ VALLEY

**An Open Space for Double Absence:
A Story of Stranded and Forsaken
Migrants at the Margins of the State**

Tunisian Forum for Social and Economic Rights

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An Open Space for Double Absence: A Story of Stranded and Forsaken Migrants at the Margins of the State

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AL-MGHATTĀ VALLEY

AN OPEN SPACE FOR DOUBLE ABSENCE¹: A STORY OF STRANDED AND FORSAKEN MIGRANTS AT THE MARGINS OF THE STATE

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the valley and amidst the mountain slopes, beneath the shade of palm trees and rocky hills, and beside a polluted water pond, here and there, under the scorching sun, one can only witness the unfolding of a human tragedy. Those who visited al-Mghaṭṭā valley between July 5th and July 21st, 2023, would soon realise that the valley bears witness to wounds and sufferings. Visitors could see infants and children destined for misery and injustice. Among the migrants stranded in al-Mghaṭṭā valley, one could observe frightened and vulnerable women. The valley is a watercourse and a breeding ground for insects. After making sense of the harrowing sights, visitors would conclude that the migrants were trapped in desperate and

¹ The concept of double absence, borrowed from sociologist Abdelmalek Sayad's work, is discussed in his book "La Double Absence: Des illusions de l'émigré aux souffrances de l'immigré" (Paris: Seuil, 1999). In the context of the sociology of immigration, Sayad's notion of double absence describes a unique condition experienced by migrants. They are simultaneously absent in their country of origin and perceived as outsiders in the host country. This duality of absence contributes to the immigrant's social condition, wherein notions of alterity and otherness continue to influence their experiences. Consequently, immigrants find themselves in a state where they are neither fully present nor fully recognised in either their country of origin or the host country.

dire circumstances. Their attempts to cross the dividing line have been met with borders that crush dreams, dehumanize individuals, and stand as a symbol of dominance and injustice.

And if we borrow the words of Paul Vigné d'Oceton, we might say in this context: "Oh, those confined in [al-Mghattā valley], leave your hopes outside the door." Among the people of the same skin, the skin of Africans, the land borders are no longer freedom. The place is caught between two hells: the Tunisian security forces and the Algerian gendarmerie. In the context of the siege and awaiting assistance, one reality was clear: the violation of human dignity. I saw that the migrants were trapped, stranded, and excluded, sitting in the "waiting room of history."

Despite the dire circumstances, tears were not seen in the faces of migrants. Instead, it is as if they were addressing each other with the words of the Turkish poet Nâzım Hikmet: "Life's Good, Brother²." Within al-Mghattā valley, the voices of some of them resounded, chanting: "free the borders, free the borders." The migrants stranded in the valley are not herds, rabble, or animals, they are people struggling against oppression, yearning for freedom and equality.

In this context, this paper attempts to address some of the questions related to the formation of space (where

² The title of Nâzım Hikmet's autobiographical novel originally published in Turkish (*Yaşamak Güzel Şey Be Kardeşim*) in 1964.

the migrants were placed by the Tunisian authorities), the characteristics of migrants, the reasons for migration, their stories of suffering and exclusion, and other inquiries that I and the fieldwork assistants endeavoured to answer. Nevertheless, I also adjusted the analytical compass towards the path leading to freedom, the path of knowledge and activism against discriminatory borders that only yielded painful and tragic human stories.

THE STUDY'S SOCIAL, POLITICAL, AND SECURITY CONTEXT

After 2011, several studies demonstrated that Sub-Saharan migrants face various forms of racism in Tunisia. Thus, this issue is not a new phenomenon. While Libya has been labelled by some as the declared hell for migrants, Tunisia represents the hidden hell.

Since the end of 2022, voices of racism have grown louder in Tunisia. Many media outlets have hosted activists from the Tunisian National Party that espouse theories of "ajsiya" (Arabic acronym for the Sub-Saharan African migrant) and "settlement." These voices consider migration as a security issue, and the Tunisian Nationalist Party has been successful in mobilising hundreds, even thousands, of individuals with a phobia of migrants and specifically sub-Saharan migrants in Tunisia.

The Tunisian Nationalist Party paved the way for the growing voices of racism until the straw that broke the

camel's back came in the form of the presidential statement issued on February 21, 2023. The statement considered migration as a threat to Tunisia's demographic composition and deemed it a challenge to national sovereignty and the Tunisian state. Consequently, the political authority relied on a securitised approach to migration³. Since then, the pressure intensified as security forces targeted various traders, craftsmen, and property owners, imposing restrictions on their employment of migrants in an irregular manner and prohibiting them from renting apartments and houses to them (it is worth noting here that over 50% of Tunisia's gross national income comes from the informal economy). Also, the presence of irregular migrants in public transportation became prohibited.

The political elite played on the collective sentiments of Tunisians, and many citizens embraced the notion that migrants pose a threat to their safety and identity. Migrants were portrayed as causing economic, health, social, cultural, and religious crises. Consequently, the voices of racism grew louder, and this paved the way for tragic outbreaks of violence in the city of Sfax, known as one of the migration hubs. These events culminated in the loss of lives, both among the migrants and a Tunisian young man on July 3, 2023, in Sfax. Since then, cities have been emptied of migrants, and subsequent measures have been implemented

³ See the Tunisian Forum for Social and Economic Rights' annual migration report 2021-2022.

to deport them to the periphery: on the borders and in the desert.

In these tragic contexts, akin to many other citizens, I participated in humanitarian campaigns and aided the migrants stranded at the Tunisian-Algerian border. At the same time, I thought of writing a historical account to document what was happening—and a political analysis about the hardships and struggles experienced by migrants. However, during the writing process, I encountered obstacles. Gathering testimonies, taking pictures, filling out forms, and conducting field interviews proved challenging due to security measures that often restrict access to documenting firsthand testimonies and events on the ground. Nonetheless, through some sociological and anthropological fieldwork methods, I managed to gather useful and informative data. My aim is to describe the conditions, circumstances, and tragedies in al-Mghaṭṭā valley. It is important to note that writing history as it happens is not an easy task, and therefore, this paper remains open to debates and discussion. While I strived to ensure that all the data used for description and analysis is based on fieldwork and objectivity, I was also mindful of the fact that researchers are encouraged to offer critique and add their analytical contributions following the process of data collection.

METHODS OF THE STUDY

I did not strictly adhere to all the scientific norms and sociological traditions during the research process, these mainly involve formulating the research question, developing the central problematic, and proposing hypotheses with epistemological rigor. This paper is descriptive in nature. It is an attempt to document history as it happens and an attempt to present a political perspective on the incident of placing migrants in a valley at the margins of the state. Nevertheless, I did not neglect the fundamental techniques of collecting, analysing, and interpreting the gathered data.

QUANTITATIVE DATA: SNOWBALL SAMPLING

When I decided to conduct a fieldwork, I had limited knowledge of the number of migrants, their origins, ages, as well as their social, economic, and educational backgrounds. I was also unaware of their destinations and the reasons for migration. Consequently, I formulated questions aimed at understanding their characteristics, experiences, perception of authorities and organisations—and international agencies, their routes of passage, health conditions, destinations, reasons for migration, and other inquiries. The questions were designed to collect information from the field research. From the outset, I employed the snowball method, which is a technique used when researchers face difficulties in identifying members of the community to be

studied. The snowball data collecting method begins with a small sample and expands through suggestions provided by those already interviewed, with the possibility of identifying or proposing additional individuals for questionnaire completion.

QUALITATIVE DATA

I did not rely on a pre-prepared interview guide or a specific technique such as semi-structured interviews. Due to the security conditions in the al-Mghaṭṭā, I relied on gathering testimonies from detained migrants in the valley through informal conversations and direct observation during the distribution of aid and completion of questionnaires. I also collected some data from citizens who visited the area and aided the migrants.

THE NUMBER AND NATIONALITIES OF THE DETAINED MIGRANTS IN AL-MGHATTĀ VALLEY

The migrants detained in al-Mghaṭṭā valley are from the following countries: Nigeria, Guinea, Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, Sudan, Sierra Leone, Cameroon, Burkina Faso, Conakry Guinea, and Gambia. The approximate number of migrants in al-Mghaṭṭā is around 160, including approximately 13 or 14 women and 9 or 10 children.

PART 1:

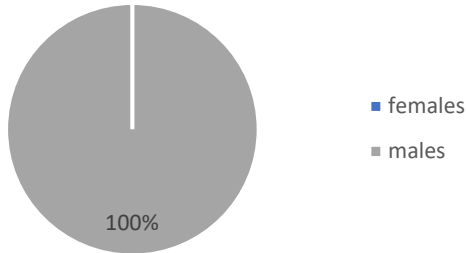
INTRODUCING THE SAMPLE INTERVIEWED IN AL-MGHATTĀ VALLEY

THE GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE

Out of a total of 160 migrants in al-Mghaṭṭā, 53 questionnaires were distributed and filled out, what represents 33.12% of the total detained migrant group.

1- Gender

Graph 1: Distribution of the sample by gender



Why are all the sample members males?

On Wednesday, July 12, 2023, at approximately 9:30 AM, we (the author and the fieldwork assistants) started distributing aid and filling out questionnaires quickly in anticipation of security decisions. Since entering al-Mghaṭṭā valley, I encountered Sudanese migrants, all of whom were males. Thus, the first questionnaires were completed with 26 Sudanese migrants. While moving to other locations where migrants gather in al-Mghaṭṭā valley, we found only males present at that moment, coming to collect the aid. In the valley, where migrants are living with feelings of fear, it seems that women, especially mothers, tend to avoid crowded areas and stay far away from gatherings or queues

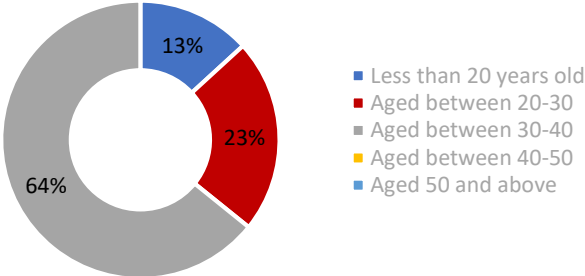
organised during aid distribution. Mostly, men take on the task of receiving the aid, perhaps because women either stay with their children, ensuring they are protected from the heat of the sun, or due to growing feelings of fear.

Additionally, it becomes apparent to anyone visiting this space that there is a clear quantitative disparity between genders. Out of a total of 160 migrants, we find only about 13 or 14 women and 9 or 10 children. After reaching a count of 53 questionnaires that were filled out, the security forces halted the process of questionnaire completion. Thus, there was no longer any chance to approach female migrants. However, later, I managed to listen to the testimonies of two women in a quick and brief manner.

2- Distribution of the sample according to the age groups

al-Mghattā valley as a space of detention was predominantly occupied by young individuals. However, this does not mean that there are no minors or children present.

Graph 2: Distribution of the sample according to the age groups



3- Distribution of the sample according to marital status

Considering that the majority of the sample consists of young individuals and considering the economic, social, and political crises faced by many African countries, it is logical for the majority of the sample to be unmarried.

Table 1: Marital status of the surveyed sample.

Divorced	Married	Single
1,9%	15,1%	83%

Further, I aimed to ascertain whether their presence in al-Mghattā valley and their migration was of a familial or individual nature. Below are the results of the quantitative research:

Table 2: Migrants confined with their families or individually in al-Mghattā.

Migrants alone in al-Mghattā	94,3%
Migrants with their families	5,7%
The total:100%	

4- Distribution of the sample according to the educational level

Table 3: Sample distribution according to educational level.

Higher education	Secondary education	Primary education	No educational qualifications
15,1%	45,3%	37,7%	1,9%

The table above indicates that the educational levels of the migrants are diverse, with the majority of them being literate. This contradicts the idea promoted by most anti-immigrant currents, claiming that the majority of African

migrants are uneducated. On the contrary, through the observations and informal interviews, it was clear that the migrants are proficient in reading and writing, and they are also aware of the issue of mobility rights and freedom, including legal and human rights issues.

5- Sample distribution according to nationalities

Table 4: The research sample is distributed according to the following nationalities:

Nationality	The number of individuals in the sample	The total
Sudanese (Sudan)	26	53
Sierra Leonean (Sierra Leone)	4	
Ivorian (Côte d'Ivoire)	1	
Nigerian (Nigeria)	1	
Burkinabe (Burkina Faso)	9	
Malian (Mali)	3	
Gambian (Gambia)	4	
Guinean (Guinea Conakry)	5	

6- Social characteristics of the sample

Table5: Occupations in country of origin.

Occupation	Percentage
Unemployed	37,8%
Daily labourer	35,8%
Artisan	13,2%
Student	7,5%
Merchant	3,8%
Football player	1%
The total :	

The percentages above reveal that most migrants detained in al-Mghaṭṭā belong to precarious and poor social groups. Here, we observe some intersections with Tunisian irregular migrants. It seems that unemployed individuals or those engaged in precarious and informal work, whether Tunisians or other African nationalities, are more likely to embark on irregular migration journeys. Thus, social, and economic factors continue to be driving forces behind migratory flows.

7- In al-Mghaṭṭā valley: regular or irregular migrants?

According to the surveyed sample, none of the migrants pursued higher education or vocational training in Tunisia. Only 9.6% of them had expired documents, and there is no individual who possesses a refugee document, except for a single person with whom I conducted an interview. Therefore, it can be concluded that the space of al-Mghaṭṭā valley is occupied by irregular migrants.

PART 2:

**TIME OF ARRIVAL, CROSSING
METHODS, PUSHING FACTORS
AND MIGRANTS' DESTINATION**

YEARS OF ARRIVAL, TRANSIT ROUTES, AND RECEPTION PROCESS

1- Time of arrival to Tunisia

Table 6: Years of entry to Tunisia according to the surveyed sample.

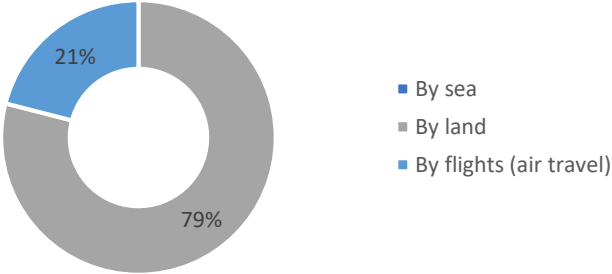
The year	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
The number of arrivals to Tunisian territory according to the surveyed sample	1	5	2	4	41
The total	53				

Through the year of entry into Tunisian territory, we learned that most migrants arrived in Tunisia in 2023. This is primarily because the quantitative field research process began with Sudanese nationals, numbering approximately 26 migrants who arrived in Tunisia in late June or early July 2023. Additionally, migration networks play crucial roles in attracting migrants. These networks, especially transcontinental networks, have their own philosophies, well-organised structures, and expertise in analysing political, climatic, and security conditions. At times, they use routes through the Balkan countries, other times through Libya, and sometimes through Morocco-Melilla. Occasionally, Tunisia serves as a transit point, leading to England and eventually France. Furthermore, rainfall, particularly during winter, decreased in Tunisia in recent years, thereby encouraging migration through the sea. Libya has become a living hell, and visa restrictions have been imposed through

Serbia, while accessing the Spanish enclave of Melilla via Morocco has become challenging due to heightened security measures. It is also noteworthy that Algeria has emerged as a source of migration crisis towards Tunisia, a point I shall discuss later. However, the question remains: how do migrants enter Tunisian territory, and what are the crossing methods and countries involved in the process?

2- How to enter Tunisia and transit countries

Graph3: Ways of entering Tunisia according to the surveyed sample.



The results of the fieldwork showed that the majority of migrants in al-Mghattā valley come by land, as the percentage of those entering Tunisian soil by air represents only 20.8% of the sample. As for those who arrived by land, their rate reached 79%, or an average of 42 immigrants who entered Tunisia by land. In this context, we tried to search for the crossings and the countries they pass through to reach Tunisia.

Boxout 1: Countries and entry points to reach Tunisia according to the surveyed sample.

1- Migrants from Sudan: They start their journey from Sudan - Chad - Niger - Algeria - Tunisia. According to the surveyed sample, there are 26 Sudanese migrants. According to their accounts, their journey lasts approximately three months.

2- Migrants from Gambia: Their journey begins in Gambia - Senegal - Mauritania - Algeria - Tunisia. According to the sample, there are four Gambian migrants.

3- Migrants from Sierra Leone: Guinea - Mali - Niger - Algeria, then Tunisia. According to the research sample, there is one Sierra Leonean migrant who arrived in Tunisia via land.

4- Migrants from Ivory Coast: They migrate from their home country, passing through Burkina Faso, then Algeria, and finally reaching Tunisia. According to the research sample, there is one migrant from Ivory Coast.

5- Migrants from Burkina Faso: They migrate from their country, then Mali, followed by Algeria, and finally Tunisia. According to the research results, there are five Burkinabe migrants.

6- Migrants from Mali: Three Malian migrants arrived in Tunisia via land, following the route Mali - Algeria - Tunisia.

7- Migrants from Guinea: They depart from Guinea - Mali - Algeria - Tunisia. According to the research sample, there are only two Guinean migrants.

As for those arriving by air, they either have direct flights from their home countries to one of the Tunisian airports, or they have a transit in another country and change planes, such as Burkina Faso - Ivory Coast - Tunisia or Sierra Leone - Guinea - Tunisia.

3- The process of reception upon arrival to Tunisia

When entering Tunisian territory, whether by land or air, the authorities receive migrants, so how do migrants evaluate the reception process?

Table 6: Migrants' assessment of their reception process.

How do you evaluate the reception process in Tunisia?	
Very good	3,8%
Good	58,5%
Not good	34%
It was good when I arrived, but now it is not good	3,8%

Migrants who arrive in Tunisia, especially those who arrive through irregular means, have a poor reception process. However, in al-Mghaṭṭā, Sudanese migrants specifically affirm that their reception was good. In comparison to the Algerian authorities and gendarmerie, the treatment by Tunisian authorities during the reception process is perceived to be better.

THE REASONS FOR MIGRATION AND MIGRANTS' DESTINATION UPON ARRIVAL

I clarified above that the social characteristics of the individuals in the surveyed sample point to their belonging to fragile and marginalised groups, and these social groups are the most inclined to embark on migration, whether they are Tunisians or other African nationalities. Does this mean that Tunisians and migrants from other African nationalities

are driven by the same factors, whether they are repelling or encouraging, to migrate?

Table 7: Reasons for migration according to the surveyed sample.

Reasons for migration	Percentage (%)
Wars	52%
Economic and social conditions	28,2%
Political upheavals	11,3%
Climate	3,8%
Health reasons	1%
Access to freedom	1%
The total 100%	

Before analysing the above information, it is worth noting that the migration policies of the European Union fuel the influx of irregular migration waves. The study's results indicated that 11.3% of the surveyed sample applied for visas to European countries and were rejected, while 88% of those who did not apply are like most Tunisians who have lost hope and consider obtaining a visa to be almost impossible, especially for precarious and poor social groups.

According to the surveyed sample, war occupies the forefront of the factors driving migration. However, economic, and social conditions, as well as political unrest, also act as pushing factors for migration, whether through regular or irregular means. African nations continue to suffer from challenging social conditions, which is why "the struggle for freedom in Africa is essentially a struggle for

liberation from hunger, disease, and poverty,"⁴ as stated by Julius Nyerere, the former President of Tanzania.

1- Migration: a response to circumstances, not a choice

"We arrived here as refugees because of the war in Sudan. It took us about three months to reach Tunisia. During that journey, we lost six individuals who died from hunger and thirst. We could not give them a proper burial, and their bodies remained abandoned in the Algerian desert. We did not come here voluntarily; we were forced to flee."⁵

This is how one Sudanese person spoke in al-Mghattā, talking about the deep wound that has afflicted his country. He speaks with sadness and pain, eagerly awaiting a moment of stability to return to his homeland.

These migratory flows are considered acts of necessity. People are forced to flee from bombardment, war, and oppression. However, in Tunisia, migrants found themselves trapped in valleys, surrounded by mountains. This siege comes at a time when international agencies and organisations, especially those concerned with refugee issues such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), have withdrawn.

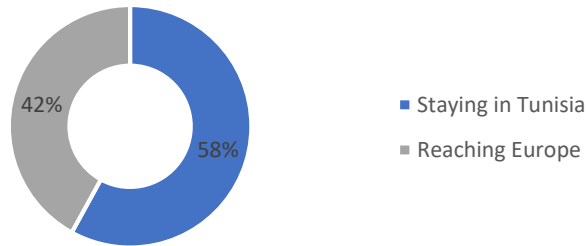
⁴ See Georg Sorensen's *al-Dimuqratiyah wal-tahawul al-dimuqrati. al-sirwarat wal-ma'mul fi 'aalam mutagayyir*. Translated by Afaf al-Batainah. Beirut, al-Markaz al-'Arabi lil-abhath wa dirasat al-siyasat, 2015, p. 29.

⁵ A conversation with Sudanese migrant in the valley. July 9, 2023, in the morning.

2- Migrants' destination before the Sfax incidents

After passing through forests and the desert, and after travelling thousands of kilometres, do migrants want to stay in Tunisia, or do they dream of reaching the northern shores of the Mediterranean?

Graph 4: Reasons for entry to Tunisia according to the respondents.



Among the 53 answers, 26 Sudanese immigrants stated that they want to stay in Tunisia, looking for a safe place until the political turmoil in Sudan ends. One of the Sudanese immigrants explains:

"We ask the organisations or the Tunisian government to put us in a safe place.... We came because of the war. There must be organisations that will host us until the war in Sudan ends."⁶

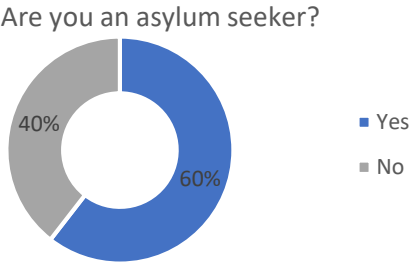
Political instability and coups are among the expulsion factors that make people search for a safe place. In the past

⁶ A conversation with Sudanese migrant in the valley. July 9, 2023, in the morning.

year, Burkina Faso witnessed a coup in which soldiers seized power and overthrew President Roch Kaboré. Similarly, in December 2022, Gambia experienced a failed coup attempt, as Gambian armed forces tried to overthrow President Adama Barrow's government. In Guinea, a coup took place on September 5, 2021, resulting in the arrest of President Alpha Conde after a gunfire incident in Conakry. Subsequently, on the same day, Guinean politician and military figure Mamady Doumbouya seized power, dissolved the government, suspended the constitution, and closed the Guinean borders.

Out of a total of 53 respondents, we find 18 migrants of Gambian, Guinean, and Burkinabe origins. If we add to them 26 Sudanese, we find that approximately 83.01% of the sample consists of individuals from countries experiencing wars, conflicts, or coups. However, would the destination change after the events in Sfax? This is something I will address later. As for the search for a safe place, the study indicated the following percentages of individuals interested in obtaining asylum:

Graph 5: Asylum seekers according to the surveyed sample



In addition to seeking a safe place, many migrants arrive in Tunisia without the financial resources to cover the costs of their migration journey. Therefore, many of them consider Tunisia as a station to work and save money in preparation for the Mediterranean crossing.

PART 3:

**AL-MGHATTĀ VALLEY: A
DETENTION CENTRE AND A
SPACE OF DOUBLE ABSENCE**

AL-MGHATTĀ: GEOGRAPHICAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE CHARACTERISTICS

al-Mghattā is a small geographical area, known in Tunisian Arabic as *douar* and inhabited by five families. This area is located in the village of al-Farid in the sector of ain al-Karma, which is part of the Tamerza delegation in Tozeur governorate. Economically, the area is characterised by agriculture and livestock farming. Additionally, the extended border strip from al-Farid to ain al-Karma, Rmitha, Tamerza, and Midès is a mountainous border route between Tunisia and Algeria. Traders travel through these routes, whether through regular or irregular means, many of them engage in contraband trade, what is known locally as *el-kontra*. As for al-Mghattā valley, where the migrants were placed by the Tunisian authorities, it is a water valley that extends from Algeria towards the Tamerza dam.

Administratively, this area is part of the governorate of Tozeur. And the small village of al-Farid has historical, familial, and spatial ties to the inhabitants of Redeyef and more specifically to Ouled Sidi Abid (a tribe, or *arcb* as referred to locally).

WHEN THE VALLEY TURNS INTO AN OPEN DETENTION CENTRE: A DESCRIPTIVE READING OF THE SPACE AND CONDITIONS

1- The time of detaining migrants in al-Mghaṭṭā valley

Before determining the conditions of their arrival at this space, I wanted to know the locations of the migrants before bringing them to al-Mghaṭṭā valley.

Table 8: The Governorates where migrants were located before being placed in al-Mghaṭṭā.

Governorate	Percentage
Sfax	45,3 %
Gafsa	47,2 %
Sousse	5,7 %
Ben Arous	1,9 %
The total%100	

Most migrants held in al-Mghaṭṭā valley, especially those who spent months or even years in Tunisia, are primarily coming from the city of Sfax. As for the migrants who were in Gafsa governorate, field testimonies indicate that they are migrants who arrived in Tunisia within a few days or weeks before the Sfax incident in early July 2023. They entered through the Algerian border and were either placed by authorities or detained in the city of Gafsa.

It is not easy to specify an exact date about the beginning of the detention of migrants in al-Mghaṭṭā. On July 12, we asked the following question to the respondents:

for how many days have you been in al-Mghaṭṭā? Some said that they had been in the valley for 10 days, others said that they were there for a week, and some confirmed that they had been there for 5 days.

On July 3, 2023, a young man was killed in Sfax. A day or two after that, the process of emptying the city of migrants began. According to what is being circulated in cafes and social media platforms, July 5th or 6th was the first day of detaining migrants in al-Mghaṭṭā. However, what can be said and confirmed is that July 7, 2023, is the official date when al-Mghaṭṭā became one of the places where migrants were being detained.

2- Distances and difficulties of movement between al-Mghaṭṭā valley and adjacent areas

Regarding the distances separating al-Mghaṭṭā from the rest of the delegations and Algerian borders: it is about 20-25 km away from the delegation of Tamerza, about 18 km from the delegation of Redeyef, and about 20 km from Moulares. The valley is also about 12 km away from the Betita (Algerian border crossing).

Although the distances between al-Mghaṭṭā and some areas and delegations are short, access to the valley is not easy. Access roads are sometimes difficult to reach, and require powerful cars and constant attention, especially for those who do not know the place well or who visit it for the first time. To reach al-Mghaṭṭā, powerful motorcycles can

also be used, while driving carefully especially in the sand and within the heights.

The difficulty of accessing this place makes it impossible to turn al-Mghaṭṭā into a space for refugees or migrants, and this is confirmed by one of the activists of the Red Crescent who told me that:

"al-Mghaṭṭā cannot be a place for gathering migrants and refugees because it lacks the international, humanitarian, and human rights specifications and standards. For example, this area lacks water and electricity, and it is far from hospitals. Due to its difficult access routes, it would be impossible for ambulances to reach this location in case of emergencies.⁷ "

3- Migrants stranded in a semi-arid climate

The governorate of Tozeur records 30 mm of rainfall annually, and from the month of June to September the governorate records 00 mm. During summer, the maximum temperature in Tozeur reaches 41.71 degrees Celsius, and the minimum temperature is 28.08 degrees Celsius. The average annual summer temperature reaches 34 - 47 degrees Celsius. The days of sirocco wind (known locally as *sh'hili*) extend over a period of 34 days. And the humidity rates during the

⁷ A statement by one of the activists of the Red Crescent, Redeyef branch, on July 9, 2023, at 7:00 pm, during a coordination meeting to provide aid to migrants stranded in al-Mghaṭṭā. Meeting place: The headquarters of the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights, the Mining Basin Branch, Redeyef.

months of June, July, and August, reach the limits of 28.60%⁸.

On July 9, 2023, the number of migrants detained in al-Mghaṭṭā valley reached about 160. On the same day, the National Institute of Meteorology declared that temperatures exceeded 40 degrees in 21 meteorological stations in various regions of the country, 13 of which were above 45 degrees. Tozeur recorded the highest temperature, which reached 49 degrees, close to its 2018 record of 49.2 degrees.

In such hot and harsh climatic conditions, all the migrants remained without bathing or access to washing water, in addition to a noticeable shortage in the allocated quantities of cold drinking water (considering the increased demand for water during heatwaves). In the context of the semi-arid and harsh climate, a group of migrants originally from Gambia stated the following:

"We have been here (in al-Mghaṭṭā valley) for almost 10 days, and we are suffering from thirst and hunger. During this period, we have been drinking from a contaminated water pool... We want to return to our homeland."⁹

⁸ See: Gouvernorat de Tozeur en chiffres 2021. République Tunisienne ministère de l'économie et de la planification, Office de Développement du Sud (October 2022). <http://www.ods.nat.tn/en/index1.php?id=47>

⁹ A conversation with Gambian migrants in the valley. July 12, 2023, in the morning.

This testimony is not only specific to Gambian immigrants. It was clear to me that all migrants in al-Mghaṭṭā suffered from the heat, sunlight, and lack of water and food.

4- Seeking shade and escaping insects: migrants under palm trees and mountain rocks

Hot weather, thirst, and hunger, yet the migrants do not have any roof to shelter them from the heat of the sun, nor mattresses to sleep on. They are scattered here and there along the valley looking for shade under palm trees and mountain rocks.

Since one enters the gathering place of immigrants in the valley, one will find the Sudanese sitting or sleeping under the stones of the mountains surrounded by the valley and beneath it a pond of polluted water.



Figure 1: Sudanese migrants in al-Mghaṭṭā valley

Source: A photo taken by a young man from Redeyef while providing humanitarian aid.

Few meters from the location shown above, where palm trees are visible, the visitor can see the other migrants, both males and females, from different nationalities and age groups. They are all scattered along the valley and under the palm trees, searching for shelter to protect them from the heat.

Figure 2: Migrants sitting under palm trees in al-Mghaṭṭā valley.



Source: Taken during fieldwork.

During the day, migrants search for shade to escape the scorching sun. Further, their nights become unbearable due to the presence of insects. Many migrants have reported encountering poisonous insects, especially during night-time.

On July 12, 2023, at about ten o'clock in the morning, one of the migrants goes to Walid¹⁰ and asks him to come

¹⁰ Walid is a pseudonym; it refers to one of the fieldwork assistants.

to a place in the valley to show him something, and while arriving at the specified place, the migrant points with his hand and addresses Walid:

"Look there, it's a snake. We killed it just before you came."

Walid later confirms:

"I saw the snake killed, they probably killed it few hours before we came to the valley...it is between 40 and 50 centimetres."

Regarding the danger of the place due to poisonous insects, one of the Sudanese migrants, with a face filled with sadness and fear, says, "This place (al-Mghaṭṭā valley) is full of poisonous insects."

Based on the aforementioned statements and observations, it becomes evident that this place cannot be a space for humans to live in, but rather a space where punishment can be inflicted on them.

5- Unliveable space: can al-Mghaṭṭā valley be a gathering station for migrants?

al-Mghaṭṭā valley is a place without shade. It lacks water, electricity, internet, and means of communication. It is filled with insects, it is far from hospitals, and essential life facilities. Can this place be a gathering station for migrants? I included this question in the survey, and the answers are indicated in the table below.

Table 9: Migrants' assessment of al-Mghaṭṭā valley.

How do you evaluate this place you are in? (al-Mghaṭṭā valley)	
Unsuitable place to live in	96,1 %
Suitable place to live in	3,9 %

In general, al-Mghaṭṭā cannot be a space in which a person lives, it is only a place for the torture and punishment of migrants. In this racist context, these tragic and painful images bring back to our memory stories of colonial abuses that were characterised by racism, injustice, and regional discrimination.

6- Territorial differentiation evoking colonial spatial divisions

The Tunisian state created a territorial and racial differentiation between Tunisian citizens living in houses and neighbourhoods and citizens of other African nationalities who were placed in the peripheries: in the mountains, deserts, and forests. As al-Mghaṭṭā is not far from the mining villages, especially the cities of Redeyef and Moulares, it reminds us of the geometric divisions during the colonial period, with European neighbourhoods at the centre of the mining villages, these are built with the European style, "villas with red tile roofs, and residential areas for Tunisian workers consisting of dilapidated huts

emitting the smell of onions and urine... a breeding ground for poisonous insects... a geometric hell."¹¹

The decision of placing migrants on the borders, in the desert, and within the mountains and valleys, isolating them from cities, neighbourhoods, and essential facilities, reflects a racist political tendency which reminds us of Franz Fanon's words:

The colonist's sector is a sector built to last, all stone and steel. It's a sector of lights and paved roads, where the trash cans constantly overflow with strange and wonderful garbage, undreamed-of leftovers. The colonist's feet can never be glimpsed, except perhaps in the sea, but then you can never get close enough...the colonized's sector...is a disreputable place inhabited by disreputable people. You are born anywhere, anyhow. You die anywhere, from anything. It's a world with no space, people are piled on top of the other, the shacks squeezed tightly together. The colonized's sector is a famished sector, hungry for bread, meat, shoes, coal, and light. The colonized's sector is a sector that crouches and covers, a sector on its knees, a sector that is prostrate¹².

7- Health conditions and medical aid in al-Mghattā valley

Margaret Chan, the director of the World Health Organisation (2007- 2017), stressed the importance of the right to health to every person. The world, according to her,

¹¹ Jaouzdi, (Abdelmajid), *Ḥafrīyāt fī Jarā'im al-Isti'mār al-Firansī bi-Manājim Gaṣṣab*, Taqḍīm: Muḥammad al-Khālīdī, Dār Ṣḥar li-N-Nashr, Tūnis, 2020, pp. 42, 43.

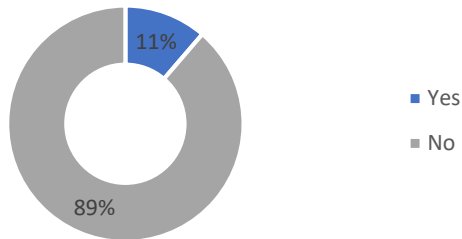
¹² Fanon (Frantz), *The Wretched of the Earth*. Grove Press, New York (2004). Pp 4-5.

needs guardians of health. Was the Tunisian state a faithful guardian to the health of migrants?

The World Health Organisation emphasises that regardless of their migration status, all migrants and refugees have the right to health, and countries should provide health services that meet their needs¹³. In this context, I addressed the question in the survey asking migrants whether they have received any medical aid in Tunisia.

Graph 6: The extent to which migrants received medical aid in Tunisia according to the surveyed sample.

Did you receive any medical aid in Tunisia?



These figures confirm the Tunisian state's non-interference in medical aid operations for migrants, regardless of their regular or irregular status. This contradicts the principles of the World Health Organisation and the basic human rights.

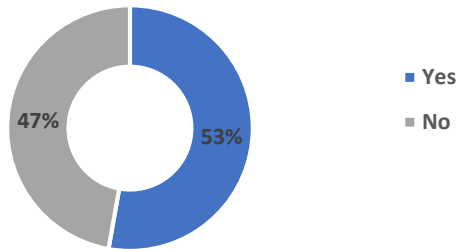
After escaping the hell of Sfax and enduring a migratory journey that lasted about 3 months from Sudan,

¹³<https://www.who.int/ar/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/refugee-and-migrant-health#>.

passing through Chad, Niger, Algeria, and Tunisia, along with the suffering of other migrants who travelled from Gambia, Senegal, Mauritania, Algeria, and Tunisia, and various other groups who journeyed from Sierra Leone, Guinea, Mali, Niger, Algeria, and finally Tunisia, and other difficult and rugged routes, it is natural that many of them would suffer from pain and wounds in their bodies.

Graph 7: The percentages of injured/experiencing body pain individuals in al-Mghattā valley.

Are you injured or experiencing any pain in your body?



Along the valley, a Guinean woman sits beneath the palm trees, accompanied by her four-year-old son, and speaks out against the situation, expressing her concerns:

"In this place, my son suffers from illnesses; here, we endure suffering and pain, facing dire circumstances."¹⁴

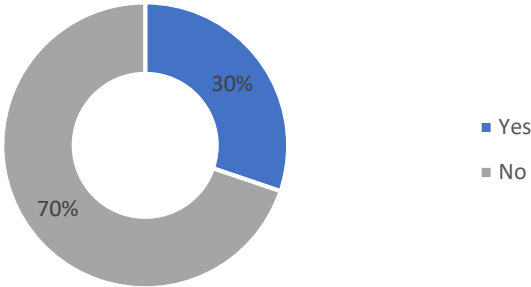
In such disastrous health conditions, the Red Crescent in Redeyef intervened and provided basic medical assistance to the trapped migrants in the valley. The aid included basic

¹⁴ An interview conducted by Ramzi (pseudonym of fieldworker). July 12, 2023, in the morning.

first aid and bandaging legs wounds. However, the Red Crescent in Redeyef lacks sufficient financial and human resources to offer advanced and professional medical assistance, especially considering that al-Mghaṭṭā valley is a challenging location for ambulance access and lacks electricity, making it difficult for certain medical equipment to function without power. Hence, I sought to ascertain whether the migrants received on-site medical services or not.

Graph 8: The extent to which migrants received medical aid in al-Mghaṭṭā valley.

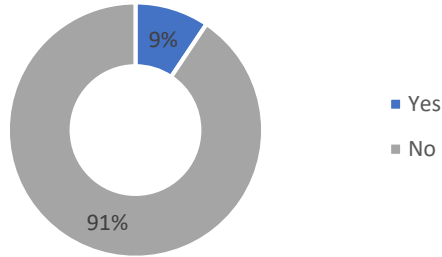
Did you receive medical aid in al-Mghaṭṭā?



It is worth noting that 30.2% of those who confirmed receiving medical aid in al-Mghaṭṭā only received basic medical aid provided by the Red Crescent in Redeyef. Some other migrants were transferred to Tamerza Hospital without undergoing medical examinations to confirm the absence of infectious or chronic diseases. Therefore, I also addressed a question regarding chronic diseases, and the responses were as follows:

Graph 9: percentage of chronic diseases amongst the surveyed sample

Do you suffer from any chronic disease?



Considering the average age of the surveyed sample, and after covering long distances on foot, I did not observe many cases of fainting due to chronic diseases such as diabetes in al-Mghaṭṭā. Therefore, the responses regarding the prevalence of chronic diseases among the migrants appear to be reasonable, but it remains the responsibility of the medical specialists to comment on the health conditions of the migrants.

The group of migrants might have spent months and days without access to bathing, toilets, and medical services or examinations. Consequently, it can be said that the Tunisian state did not respect the fundamental rights of migrants, specifically the right to access healthcare and medical aid. If the Tunisian state has indeed withdrawn, then this raises questions about the involvement of international and UN organisations.

FORSAKEN MIGRANTS AND ABSENT INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

Along al-Mghaṭṭā valley I met with a migrant who had wounds on his feet, sitting under the palm trees:

"I am married, but I have no information about my wife or my son. I am requesting intervention from the International Organization for Migration and the African Union."¹⁵

Just a few meters away from the injured migrant's location, all the migrants from Gambia complained about their deteriorating health conditions. They emphasised that their situation was becoming more complex, and they demanded the intervention of the International Organization for Migration and the African Union. So, what was the response of international organisations and agencies?

The International Organization for Migration works to help ensure a humane and orderly management of migration, to strengthen international cooperation on migration issues, to help search for practical solutions to migration problems, and to provide humanitarian assistance to migrants in need, including refugees and internally displaced persons. The organisation's constitution also recognise the relationship between migration, economic, social, and cultural development—and people's right to movement. But in the al-Mghaṭṭā valley, none of that

¹⁵ A conversation with a migrant in the valley. July 9, 2023, in the morning.

happened. We did not witness the arrival of any humanitarian aid, and the organisation did not demand the freedom of movement of the people stranded in al-Mghaṭṭā valley.

In addition to the International Organization for Migration, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), established in Tunisia since 1963, works to protect refugees, ensure that asylum-seekers can apply for and obtain protection, support refugee access to health and education services, and ensure that vulnerable refugees and asylum-seekers are able to meet their basic needs. In al-Mghaṭṭā, there are groups who wish to obtain asylum and many indeed have asylum documents. This was confirmed by a French-speaking refugee who did not want his identity to be revealed:

"I am married, I have been living in Tunisia for 5 years, and I have an asylum document and a passport (the author saw these documents). I am stuck here complaining about the oppression of the political authority and the lack of intervention by international organisations.¹⁶"

Saying that international organisations and agencies did not play a role in this crisis are statements that are made by everyone and are not exclusive to the respondent above. Most of the migrants stuck in the al-Mghaṭṭā confirmed that

¹⁶ A conversation with a French-speaking migrant in the valley. July 9, 2023, in the morning.

they did not receive any assistance or guidance from international organisations.

Graph 10: The extent to which migrants received aid and guidance from international organisations.

Did you receive aids or guidance from international organisations?



In a dire and deteriorating situation, during a time of oppression against migrants, their rejection, and their expulsion to remote areas without water, food, or medical care, in contexts where voices of racism have escalated, how do the migrants trapped in al-Mghattā view these organisations?

Graph 11: How do the respondents assess the interactions of international organisations with them?

How do you evaluate the interaction of the international organisations with you?



The provided data and testimonies mentioned earlier reaffirm the escalating sense of disappointment experienced by the migrants. They express dissatisfaction with the minimal involvement of international organisations and agencies addressing migration matters in this pressing humanitarian crisis, which coincides with a notable rise in racist sentiments in Tunisia towards sub-Saharan Africans.

Concerning the absence of international actors, there are conflicting statements and justifications. There are parties asserting that the migrants did not contact them, and this is in fact unjustified considering that the geography in which the migrants are detained lacks communication networks, and the organisations are supposed to take initiatives. Another narrative confirms that the Tunisian authorities prevented the presence or entry of these organisations into the border spaces, apart from the Red Crescent.

CLASSIFICATORY BORDERS

Since the 1990s, that is, the fall of the Soviet camp, the expansion of neoliberalism, and the formation of the Shanghai space, immigration has become a privilege, not a right. Talks about the dominance of the technologically advanced North over the economically and socially different countries of the South has become a routine conversation. As a result of the adoption of discriminatory borders, many Tunisian, Maghrebi, and African beaches have turned into a theatre for tragic stories, and even within the people of the

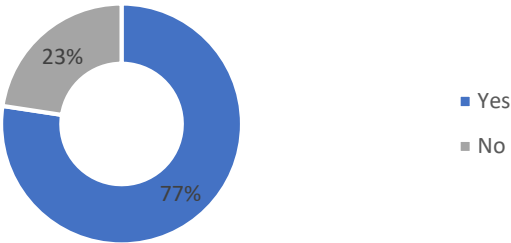
same skin, that is, the skin of Africans, dealing with borders has become discriminatory, racist, and inhumane.

1- Caught between the Tunisian security forces and the Algerian gendarmerie.

We posed the following question to the surveyed sample, excluding immigrants arriving via flights: How do irregular migrants enter Tunisian territory? The answers revealed that they enter Tunisia either through irregular migration networks or by being forcibly pushed into Tunisian territory by the Algerian authorities.

Graph 12: Algerian authorities forcibly pushing migrants into Tunisian territory

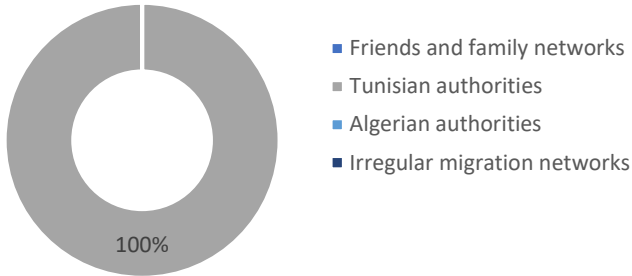
Did the Algerian authorities push you to enter into the Tunisian territory?



The results show that 77.4% of the respondents were pushed by the Algerian authorities towards Tunisia. After spending a period in Tunisian cities, the Tunisian authorities placed the migrants near the Tunisian-Algerian border.

Graph 13: Actors behind the migrants' placement at al-Mghaṭṭā valley according to the surveyed sample

Who placed you here?



All the respondents confirm that the Tunisian authorities are responsible for their placement in the valley. This act is a form of injustice and racism. In such context, the Tunisian state can be described as a state of contempt. A state that did not respect the dignity of individuals.

Between being pushed at the borders and crossing them, migrants find themselves caught between the Tunisian security forces and the Algerian military. A Gambian migrant talked to us about his experience on one of the days between 8 and 11 July 2023:

"We attempted to enter Algerian territory, but the Algerian authorities fired shots in the air."¹⁷

¹⁷ Walid's interview with a migrant in the valley. July 9, 2023, in the morning.

A Tunisian local asserted to us hearing shots in the air on one of those days, but the interlocutor was uncertain about the source of the sound and whether it was bullets shot in the air or tear gas canisters.

Some migrants attempted to escape from the al-Mghaṭṭā valley or protested to demand water. In response, the Tunisian security forces confronted them by firing tear gas¹⁸. In the al-Mghaṭṭā valley, one of the Gambian migrants revealed scars and burns on his back, indicative of the use of tear gas canisters¹⁹ by Tunisian security forces.



Figure 3: Tear gas canisters at al-Mghaṭṭā

Source: fieldwork.

¹⁸ In fact, we do not know specifically the reason for the Tunisian authorities' use of tear gas. There are two narratives that we came across. The first one suggests that the migrants wanted to escape from the valley, while the second narrative states that they protested due to the lack of water.

¹⁹ Fieldwork observation. July 12, 2023, in the morning.

The immigrants found themselves trapped between air bullets from the Algerian soldiers and tear gas canisters from Tunisian security forces. They are confined in a prison caught between two hells: the Algerian gendarmerie and the Tunisian security forces.

2- Free the borders

In al-Mghattā valley, an immigrant from Guinea-Conakry says:

"I am African, and Tunisia is an African country, and I have the right to live here."²⁰

While providing aid and conducting surveys, a young man who speaks French accompanies the fieldwork team. He holds a loaf of bread or a water bottle in his hand, and he repeatedly chants a line from the rap song of Soolking: "La Liberté la liberté..." (freedom, freedom). The migrant continued singing until one of the security officers forced him to stop²¹.

It was clear during the fieldwork that the migrants were longing for freedom. They are neither slaves nor herds. Borders, in this context, killed their dreams and put an end to their hopes. Classificatory borders are discriminatory. They kill dreams and make human bodies suffer. In al-

²⁰ Field observations. July 9, 2023, in the morning.

²¹ Field observations. July 12, 2023, in the morning.

Mghattā valley voices and chants of some Guinean migrants echoed:

"Libérer les frontières " (free the borders)²².

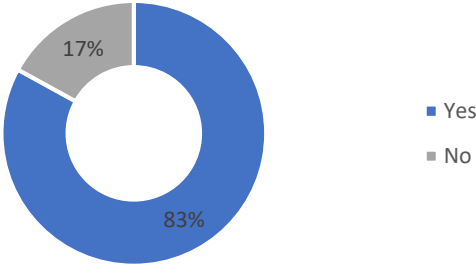
FEAR, RACISM, AND IMMIGRANT DESTINATIONS AFTER THE SFAX EVENTS

1- Migrants trapped in a circle of fear.

After enduring suffering, racist discrimination, humiliation, and displacement, will migrants be able to feel reassured, or are feelings of anxiety and fear prevailing?

Graph 14: Feelings of anxiety and fear among the respondents.

Do you feel worried/anxious and fearful in Tunisia?



Fear is the nucleus of anxiety, as stated by Jim Folk, a specialist in treating anxiety sufferers. Individuals are usually afraid of the possibility of something bad happening or of

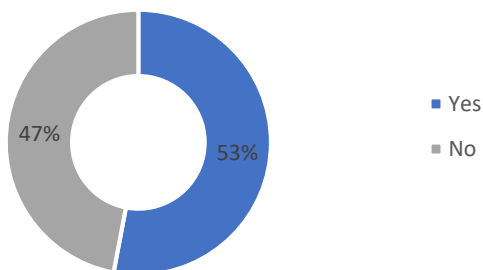
²² Field observations. July 12, 2023, in the morning.

the harm that might befall them in the future. And then individuals develop a feeling of insecurity as they do not know what lies ahead in the future. Fear intensifies little by little in front of the spectre of the unknown and the ambiguity of circumstances²³. Indeed, these migrants live in the shadow of an uncertain future, as they do not know where the authorities will take them and do not know any information about their fate. These fears come in circumstances where many migrants are exposed to the impact of racist acts.

2- Violence: development and sources

Graph 15: The development of racial harassment according to the surveyed sample.

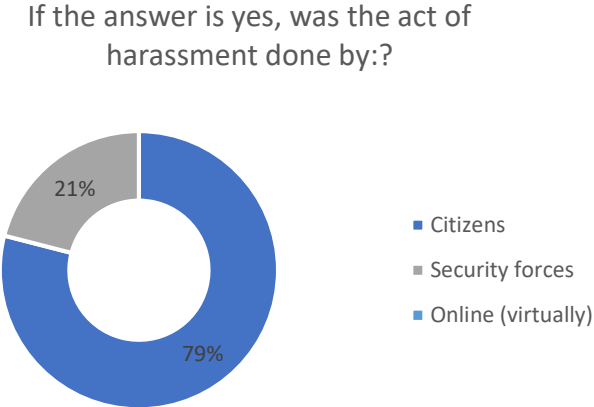
Have you experienced racist harassment in Tunisia?



²³ Lamloum (Olf), Abdelbaki (Mariem), *Shabāb fī al-hawāmish: al-Ṣiḥḥab al-naḥsīyah wa al-sulūkīyāt al-mahfūfah bi al-makbatīr fī al-kabāriyah wa al-Gaṣrīn al-shamālīyah wa Taṭāwīn al-shamālīyah*, International Alert, 2022, p. 37.

It should be noted that the incidence of racist harassment may vary in different case studies and among various migrant groups in Tunisia. The survey sample comprised 26 Sudanese immigrants, and all of them stated that they had not encountered any instances of racist harassment, as their arrival in Tunisia had been recent, spanning only a few days. Nevertheless, my inquiry aimed to identify the sources of racist harassment, which are depicted below:

Graph 16: Sources of violence according to the surveyed sample



After being confined in valleys, mountains, and borderlands, and after the growing acts of violence and racism, what is the destination of the migrants?

3- What is the destination of the migrants following the Sfax incidents?

Table 10: The destination of al-Mghattā valley migrants before and after the Sfax incidents.

After the Sfax incidents, what is your destination now?	
looking for a safe place until the war in Sudan ends	37,9 %
Staying in Tunisia	11,3 %
Reaching Europe	41,5 %
Returning to the country of origin	7,5 %
Getting medical treatment and going back to the country of origin	1,9 %

The study results revealed that before the events in Sfax approximately 58% of the migrants expressed a desire to stay in Tunisia. This could be attributed to fleeing from wars, political turmoil, or accumulating financial resources to cover the costs of their migration journey. After the incidents in early July 2023, the destination sought by the migrants did not change significantly. The majority continue to search for a safe place until stability is restored in their home countries. Another group, accounting for 41%, aims to reach the northern Mediterranean shores. Those willing to return have lower percentages, as they have fled poverty, hunger, desertification, and wars. Indeed, their words echo the sentiments of many Tunisian youth who also embark on irregular migration journeys. The migrants confined in the valley have sacrificed their dreams and aspirations in their country of origin. They have nothing to lose, either to live

with dignity or to die. It is crucial to be reminded that the dreams and aspirations of the migrants in al-Mghaṭṭā are not so different from those of Tunisians. Many African populations share similar tragedies, struggling against oppression and seeking freedom, equality, and social justice.

Despite the violations, harassment, and the success of the political authorities in instilling "migrantophobia" in Tunisia many ordinary citizens have stepped forward to aid the distressed migrants. Meanwhile, the international organisations have not played a significant role in the crisis facing the irregular migrants.

AT THE BORDERS, IN THE VALLEY, AND AMONG THE MOUNTAINS: ORDINARY CITIZENS' ACTS OF SOLIDARITY

1- The Margins of the state beyond the narrative of dissidence and disobedience

Many consider that the city in the history of Tunisia is the origin, the hub, the essence, and the crucial point of connection. Whilst the countryside and margins are the branches, the cacophony, and the "disobedient son"²⁴ of the centre. However, many historical and national struggle stations, such as the *miad* of Sbeitla in 1881, the endorsement

²⁴ Timoumi, (Hedi), *Khawāṭir hawl dawr al-aryāf fi al-harakah al-waṭaniyah at-tūnisīyah bayn 1881 wa 1956*, Majallat rawāfid, al-Ma'had al-'Alā li-tārīkh al-harakah al-waṭaniyah, Jāmi'at al-Ādāb wal-funūn wal-'Ulūm al-insāniyah bi-Tūnis, al-juz' al-awwal, al-'adad al-awwal, p. 11-12-16.

of armed resistance during the colonial period, and the popular uprisings at the time of the authoritarian state showed the presence of civic and patriotic values in the forgotten villages and countryside. The cities of the margins especially those known for their workers' union struggle in the mining basin participated always in solidarity events such as the collection of donations for the Palestinian cause or for the Choucha camp.

2- Solidarity at the margins of the state

Since July 7, 2023, when news of the presence of migrants stranded and detained in al-Mghattā, many individuals from Redeyef and Moulares, as well as some residents of the Algerian Dawāwdiyyah district²⁵, headed to the valley, bringing water and food with them. And since July 8, 2023, the Red Crescent (Redeyef branch), and the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights, (the mining basin branch), have intervened in this humanitarian aid.

On the following day (July 9, 2023), a local committee was formed in the city of Redeyef to aid the migrants²⁶. This committee consists of the Red Crescent (Redeyef branch) and the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES) (mining basin office), along with ordinary citizens

²⁵ Dawāwdiyyah is a small village in Algeria, situated approximately 1 to 2 kilometres away from the border separating Tunisia and Algeria."

²⁶ The committee was formed on the 9th of July 2023 at the headquarter of the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES)-the Mining Basin branch.

from the mining city of Redeyef. The committee called for the continuous provision of aid. Thus, the struggles experienced in Redeyef, especially in 2008, do not only signify rebellion and defiance, but also represent cultural and solidarity institutions that bring about profound changes in the lives of individuals. The 2008 revolt in Redeyef is a legacy still remembered by many and it indeed casts its shadows on future generations from the mining basin, this is what can be observed and understood from the individuals' rush to help and show solidarity with the irregular migrants.

In general, actors in Redeyef do not find it difficult to identify actions, whether they are protest or humanitarian. In one way or another, they learned lessons from previous solidarity movements and actions, as it becomes clear that they have an awareness that can be sociologically understood as a form of returning to previous actions of the same kind. The actors demonstrated knowledge in sharing different tasks and coordinating their actions. Observing the interactions between the organisers and participants clearly shows a shared awareness of performance²⁷. And all this points, again, to the history of resistance in the city of Redeyef where many learnt how to cooperate and work together within the context of collective action and protest movements (especially during the 2008 local revolt). In the

²⁷ Fillicule, (Olivier), "**Tombeau pour Charles Tilly. Répertoires, performances et stratégies d'action**", In Eric Agrikoliansky et al, *Penser les mouvements sociaux*, La Découverte, Paris, 2010, pp 77 – 99. P 82.

valley, they drew on their shared experiences to offer help and support the stranded migrants.

Citizens along with a network of activists and human rights advocates came together to offer humanitarian and solidarity lessons. All painted a vivid and beautiful image of the peripheral regions of Tunisia. These regions have for long been perceived solely through classical narratives which apply also to many Maghrebi rural regions, the narrative of tribal ties and absence of civic culture. What was observed in al-Mghaṭṭā valley, that is, the solidarity, aid, and support for migrants by the locals question such narratives. Nevertheless, what is unfortunate in this context is that the ongoing populist storm and the ideology of migrantophobia also reached the rural areas what made many citizens think that migrants are a threat.

CONCLUSION

In the final picture, we see migrants fleeing from war, turmoil, and political upheavals, escaping poverty, hunger, desertification, and injustice. However, the borders have shattered their dreams, hopes, and aspirations. In the picture, children, adolescents, women, and young people united by the same tragedy, yearning for the realisation of the same dream: the dream of freedom and equality.

In their migratory journey, after crossing forests and deserts, the migrants found themselves at the Tunisian-Algerian borders, in the middle of al-Mghaṭṭā valley,

surrounded by mountainous terrain and exposed to the scorching sun, in an environment teeming with insects. Thus, the dignity of these human beings was violated twice, starting in their countries of origin, and ending in their host country. They were dehumanized across nationalities, countries, and continents.

In their country of origin, they suffer from injustice, then their right to mobility is violated across continents. In Tunisia, they lived in an open space of what sociologist Abdelmalek Sayad calls double absence²⁸. Returning to their homeland means going back to a square of frustration, poverty, war, and deprivation, while staying in Tunisia means sitting atop a volcano.

It is evident that all these events confirm the shortcomings in Tunisia's path of modernisation. In an era of progress, advancement, technology, and human rights, no one could have imagined that one day we would witness marginalised individuals at the borders: within the valley and among the mountains. Yes, this is in Tunisia, which abolished slavery on January 23, 1846, crafted its constitutional monarchy in 1861, rejected tribalism and sultanic rule following its independence, and witnessed a popular revolution in 2011. Tunisia, with its progressive and democratic values that have been fought for and continue to be fought for across generations, now witnesses the humiliation of migrants. Their stories bear all the pains:

²⁸ See footnote 1.

stranded and forsaken migrants in al-Mghaṭṭā valley, as a space of double absence.

Populism, especially of the right-wing style, thrives on rejecting migrants and fuelling feelings of hatred and hostility. President Kais Saied follows "a manipulative strategy that addresses emotions instead of minds, presents a frightening picture of the situation and the possibilities of its development. He casts blame on a source of harm and evil while maintaining the ambiguity of this source: the populist does not clearly identify his opponent or enemies, does not mention their names, instead describes them with epithets such as treason, while always stressing his role as the protector of the homeland from conspiracies."²⁹

²⁹ Hermasi, (Abdelatif), *Tūnis al-thawrah wal-meḥnah: Muqārabah min Mandhur 'Ilm al-Ijtimā' al-siyāsī*, Manshūrāt Sotimedia, Tūnis, 2023, p, 268.



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