

TUNISIAN DIARY

In the coming months, borderline-europe will publish a Tunisian diary by our volunteer Ludovica Gualandi, who is on site and describes her impressions on various migration issues.

June 3, 2023 – 3 –

The migrants' protests in Tunisia

I find myself at 6 Rue Lac du Bourget, in front of the headquarters of IOM¹ (the International Organization of Immigration), in Tunis. About 250 people live on this street, camping in makeshift tents for at least the last two months. On this street, which is in one of the most wealthy and luxurious corners of the capital, young men, women, and children are beseeching international organizations the OIM and UNHCR² for evacuation from Tunisia and resettlement in European countries given the dismal living conditions experienced by migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees in Tunisia.

In the words of one of the people here: 'Because of problems here and in our countries of origin, we cannot go back to our homes; we just want to be released from this country to one that is safe. They describe us as criminal terrorists, they say we've destroyed private property, but in reality, we are simple, peaceful refugees.'



Hands of some people in front of the IOM headquarters in Tunis who participated in the collective writing of a banner denouncing and protesting European migration policies and racist violence in Tunisia. - Photo Luca Ramello

Tunisia has never been a safe country for migrants of sub-Saharan origin, who are continuously exposed to exploitation and marginalization in a country where even today there is no law on asylum, an effective reception system, or a guarantee of the most basic social, economic, and political rights. The already extremely precarious situation for migrants from various Central and Sub-Saharan African countries has worsened as a result of racist and xenophobic rhetoric from President Kais Saied. Many of those in front of the IOM have, in fact, found themselves abruptly without a home or a job and exposed on a daily basis to physical and verbal violence by Tunisian citizens.

The peaceful demonstration began months ago in front of the two neighboring headquarters of the IOM and UNHCR. The demands of those protesting, albeit with some variances, underscored the needs they had for care, protection, and security. People in front of the UNHCR asked for immediate evacuation from Tunisia for resettlement in a safe country. Protesters in front of the IOM were and

¹ <https://tunisia.iom.int/fr>

² <https://www.unhcr.org/countries/tunisia>

are still asking not just for resettlement from Tunisia, but also repatriation to their countries of origin should they face no possibility of evacuation to a safe country, along with the precariousness and violence on Tunisian territory.

On the day of April 11, 2023, after demonstrators were denied access to UNHCR premises for electricity outlets and running water, violent actions taken by Tunisian authorities resulted in the dismantling of the demonstration³ and the living grounds that had taken shape in front of UNHCR headquarters.

Wesla, a Sudanese woman, described the events this way:

“The task force began the attack by firing tear gas, throwing stones at us, there were pregnant women among us, children, teenagers, and elderly. They attacked us with smoke bombs, I was running and my daughter fell, her leg was broken, now it's worse, it's still not healed. We heard it was the UNHCR who told the police to clear out the demonstration, then they began to arrest us. They took more than 150 people.”



Banner from the IOM in front of the Quirinale, Rome

That day many people were arrested without explanation. Some of them were released a few hours later, for others the stay in prison lasted as much as twenty days⁴. The dismantling of the demonstration at UNHCR led to different groups of people converging in front of the IOM headquarters, where many, too many, continue to live today.

The prospects for change in this situation are unlikely; they can try make their voices heard and speak out on the dire conditions that they find themselves in from this symbolic place, in front of the headquarters of the very organization that should protect migrants and refugees, sullied by its lack of care or action for them.

Yet above all we should take a closer look at our own European governments, which continue to officially regard Tunisia a safe country in spite of its marked shift towards racist and xenophobic rhetoric in the first months of 2023. No European country seems willing to not only put in a provision for quotas in the resettling of migrants and refugees stranded in Tunisia, but most importantly to return to the discussion of security and military management of migration from countries of origin on the African continent. To the contrary, the first months of 2023 have been characterized by a

³ See the “Info Migrants” article: <https://www.infomigrants.net/fr/post/48143/a-tunis-violent-demantelement-dun-camp-de-migrants-devant-le-hcr>

⁴ See migration-control.info: <https://migration-control.info/si-on-reste-on-meurt/>

reinforcement of the controls against unregulated border crossings on the Mediterranean⁵, with a significant increase in interception activities at sea by the Tunisian National Guard⁶.

European governments, above all Italy's, have insisted on the need to stop boats of illegal migrants coming from the Tunisian coast and to dismantle human traffic networks. Tunisian authorities have been congratulated on several occasions for their great number of interceptions in the strait of Sicily⁷.

Field observations reveal the deadly effects of these border policies: because of the violence and marginalization faced by migrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers of sub-Saharan origin living in Tunisia, more and more people have been forced to undertake the perilous journey along the central Mediterranean route with hopes of reaching Europe⁸. Many people have been intercepted, often by violent and dangerous practices, at sea. Tunisian authorities' often aggressive maneuvers have caused the overturning of boats in which there were numbers of young people, women, and children, in some cases causing their deaths or loss to the seas⁹.



Bologna, Photo by Nicoletta Alessio detto Grassi

In front of the OIM, there are many with stories of such an experience: after months of protest before the two headquarters, in some cases having requested repatriation to their countries of origin and received no answer, for some the only option was to cross the Mediterranean. Many were detained in the attempt, forcefully returned to the Tunisian coast. Lacking any recourse, with no place else to stay, some have returned to the encampments in front of the IOM headquarters.

⁵ https://www.esteri.it/it/sala_stampa/archivionotizie/comunicati/2023/05/cooperazione-italia-tunisia-nel-contrasto-allazione-criminale-dei-trafficienti-di-essere-umani/

⁶ <https://ftdes.net/statistiques-migration-2023/>

⁷ <https://www.businessnews.com.tn/matteo-piantedosi-salve-les-efforts-tunisiens-en-matiere-de-lutte-contre-la-migration-irreguliere,520,129450,3>

⁸ Coastguards see a 300% increase in departures in this region of central-eastern Tunisia compared to 2022 - report: <https://www.infomigrants.net/fr/post/48794/tunisie--les-corps-de-14-migrants-retrouves-pres-de-sfax#:~:text=Les%20garde%2Dc%3%B4tes%20%20C3%A9voquent%20une,Tunisie%20par%20rapport%20%20C3%A0%202022.&text=Les%20autorit%C3%A9s%20tunisiennes%20ont%20%20C3%A9galemment,embarcations%20transportant%20782%20migrants%20subsahariens.>

⁹ In relation to the increase in departures, there is an increase in interceptions and shipwrecks, which caused the loss of at least 500 human lives between January and April 2023. These figures underestimate a certainly wider phenomenon that does not consider the dead and missing from shipwrecks: <https://ftdes.net/statistiques-migration-2023/>

My research companions and I spent a lot of time in front of OIM headquarters in the company of the many people currently inhabiting this street. We listened to their stories, ate with them and dreamed of a better world. Determined that their protest, too often silenced or ignored by institutions and governments, be brought forth, we proposed shortly after the April 11th eviction to make their voices heard at a large anti-racism demonstration to be held on April 28th in Italy¹⁰.



The banner in Arabic: "We women, children, and men want immediate evacuation from Tunisia."

The enthusiasm from many people in front of OIM who joined in our proposal resulted in the collective writing of a large banner on which the people put their demands and recriminations for European countries: Thanks to the coordination of many of those involved, allies and activists in Europe, the banner from the IOM in Tunisia arrived in Rome at the Quirinale (see photo above), paraded down the streets of the Italian capital as part of the anti-racism demonstration "Non Sulla Nostra Pelle": literally, "Not On Our Skin."¹¹

The plight of migrants and refugees in Tunisia was next brought to Bologna, where a conference was organized in the space "Home":

Finally the protest arrived in Berlin, where on May 26th, a month after the arrival of the banner in Italy, a citizen-led demonstration marched along the streets of the Berlin capital demanding the cessation of illegal border control policies, the return of rights to migrants, and the fight against all forms of racial discrimination.

¹⁰ <https://www.dinamopress.it/news/non-sulla-nostra-pelle-in-piazza-a-roma-contro-il-razzismo/>

¹¹ <https://www.facebook.com/NonSullaNostraPelle/>



Berlin demonstration, May 26, 2023, the banner from Tunisia. - Photo by Sofia Mele

Despite these efforts and the concerns vociferously raised by the many European citizens who have taken to the streets in support of migrants and refugees, and despite the symbolic power of the banner which made its way across European countries, breaking the impossibility of movement of people demanding evacuation in Tunisia, to date migrants and refugees in Tunisia have not seen any change of their situation take place.

They too, still at the headquarters of the IOM, have been demonstrating peacefully every day for a week, demanding that international organizations and European governments take charge of their requests for protection. Tragically, in Tunisia as in Europe, their voices and their cries continue to go unacknowledged by African and European governments and politicians.

Translation from the Italian by Olivia Taibi