

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.

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Italian-Tunisian cooperation but not for all - Expulsion and deportation from Italy

In Tunis, the weather is already warm, the sun is shining on the capital's crowded streets and a hustle and bustle of people of all sorts occupies the streets packed with kiosks, street vendors



and smells of spices of all kinds. Sitting at the Orange bar in Tunis' la Fayette district, I wait for my dear friend Heni¹, a young Tunisian boy I met a few months ago who has not only become part of my life, but is also an excellent guide in understanding Tunisia's complex social and cultural dynamics. As I sip my Kawha (coffee), I see him appearing in the distance.

He sits down next to me, and we start chatting. I met Heni last May in Tunis. At that time, he worked for the social enterprise IPA², founded in 2019 with the priority objective of reducing so-called unauthorised migration and of proposing projects through European funding of economic and social reintegration for all those who, following their migration experience in a European country, return voluntarily or more frequently forced to Tunisia. Within IPA, Heni was in charge of tracing on Tunisian territory, both Tunisian and sub-Saharan individuals who, after performing *harga* (the name by which 'irregular' migrants are called in Tunisia that also stands for the act of burning documents before an irregular migration) towards Italy were violently expelled from Italian territory and sent back to Tunisia. In fact, it is important to emphasise that although at the international level there is a narrative of voluntary return or assisted voluntary return, most of the times that a Tunisian citizen returns to Tunisia after migrating to Italy, he or she does so in a forced manner. Other times, it is a deportation.

¹ The information contained in this article belongs, in part, to a fieldwork conducted between April and July 2022 in Tunisia by Ludovica Gualandi (author of this article) and Nicoletta Alessio called Grassi, two students of the MIM (Inter-Mediterranean Migration) Master's programme at Ca' Foscari University in Venice. The fieldwork focused on Italian-Tunisian cooperation on migration and the issue of forced deportations of Tunisian citizens from Italy to Tunisia. Heni was the first witness of these practices encountered by the two students.

² This 'social enterprise' was founded in 2019 by Kilian Kleinschmidt, a development and migration expert with 30 years of experience as a UN official in the field of migration. According to IPA Switzboard's official website, the main goal of this enterprise is to reduce the phenomenon of unauthorised migration on three levels: the reduction of unauthorised migration from Tunisia to Europe; the integration of returning migrants; and the development of perspectives of and with third-country nationals. The IPA is just one of several organisations in Tunisia that deal with the 'prevention of irregular migration', psychological and social assistance and economic reintegration of returnees in Tunisia. The birth and continuation of this reality's activities are due to the funding received from various international and European actors: the 'Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit' (GIZ) for counselling activities in the initial phase; the 'Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund' (AMIF) and the 'Bundesministerium für Inneres' (BMI) for funding the operation and implementation of small projects aimed at socio-economic reintegration in Tunisia. As of today, information on IPA's work is no longer available and the website has been closed, as its mission in Tunisia has ended. IPA has in fact moved to Ukraine.

This practice, that at the level of Italian and European cooperation is called “repatriation” or “readmission of unauthorised migrants on Italian territory”, in fact takes on the appearance of a real forced deportation in which violence and violation of human rights are the most established and widespread practices.

Heni plays this role in IPA because he, himself, has been a victim of these violent practices. But let us take a step back. It is necessary to explain within what political and cooperation framework these now systemic practices take place. Tunisian³ are to date one of the largest nationalities of migrants travelling via the Central Mediterranean route from the Tunisian coast in the hope of reaching the nearby Italian coast of Pantelleria or Lampedusa, with 18,465 new arrivals in 2022 alone⁴. Italian and European policies aimed at externalising the Union's external borders through enhanced cooperation with third countries of origin and transit of people on the move, such as Tunisia, perpetuate a securitarian and criminalising approach to people on the move, whose access to regular procedures and obtaining visas is now almost impossible. Forced to migrate by sea on increasingly precarious boats, Tunisian citizens are now almost automatically rejected as soon as they arrive on Italian territory.



In the practice of externalising European borders and in the management of migratory flows in the Mediterranean, Italy has played a key role by being the first European country to conclude a readmission agreement with Tunisia in 1998⁵ and having signed a series of other subsequent informal agreements.

Over the past decade, bilateral cooperation between Italy and Tunisia has been intensified, leading to important legislative developments that have speeded up the identification of Tunisian individuals in an irregular situation in Italy and shortened the period of stay and processing of their applications for international protection. As of 2019⁶, Italy considers Tunisia a safe country of origin and applies special procedures to its citizens' asylum applications directly at the border, tending to consider them inadmissible. Tunisia's supposed 'security' for its citizens, de facto, allows their expulsion without an assessment of the merits of the asylum applications submitted in Italy, permitting their immediate repatriation.

Unfortunately, my friend Heni fell victim to these violent practices. Heni decided to emigrate to Italy in 2019. After having tried several times to apply for a visa for study and work purposes and having seen his application denied, he decided to leave by sea on a journey that was not

³ Tunisian nationals arriving in Italy are, as of today, the fourth most common nationality, after Ivorians, Pakistanis, and Guineans

⁴ Official statistics provided by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), available at the following link: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/5205>

⁵ See: <https://sciabacaoruka.asgi.it/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Accordo-Italia-Tunisia-1998.pdf>

⁶ DECREE 4 October 2019 Identification of safe countries of origin, pursuant to Article 2-bis of Legislative Decree 28 January 2008, nr 25 <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2019/10/07/19A06239/sg>

only very expensive but also extremely dangerous. His decision to leave Tunisia stemmed from the lack of freedom of expression he experienced daily in Tunisia as an artist and political activist. The social and cultural repression afflicting certain categories of people prevented him from feeling fully free to express himself and build a future in Tunisia. After a long and painful journey that began on the Tunisian coast and ended in nearby Pantelleria, Heni was forced into a prolonged condition of irregularity that effectively prevented him not only from finding a job and accommodation, but above all locked him in a precarious condition, on the margins of a society in which racism and xenophobia are growing and all-encompassing feelings.

Intercepted by Italian police forces, Heni was interrogated, beaten, tied up and loaded with others onto a Charter flight, which left from southern Italy, heading towards Tunis. On the flight, he and his companions had their hands tied with plastic ties, and Heni was wrapped in scotch from head to toe. Once forcibly taken back to Tunisia, Heni was quickly unloaded at Tunis airport. No one took care of him, no one explained what was happening.

Today I meet Heni again, despite the multiple violence and suffering he has suffered on the



Tunisian and Italian side, he has a big smile on his lips. We talk a bit, he doesn't hide to me his desire to leave again. And all this makes me think a lot. Movement, imagining oneself in a place other than one's own country, is an anthropologically and naturally intrinsic characteristic of human beings. The presumption of wanting to control and manage this phenomenon, especially in the recent era, animated by the propagation of a European populism,

which criminalises people on the move from the African continent and beyond, has the nefarious effect of dividing humanity between those who possess without any merit the privilege of unrestricted freedom of movement and those who are denied this same privilege. Heni's vital need to leave Tunisia, risking his life once again to reach neighbouring Italy, highlights his plight in Tunisia, a country considered 'safe' by Italy and Europe, a country increasingly affected by an economic, political, and social crisis unable to guarantee its citizens a dignified and safe life.



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Photos by Ludovica Gualandi, impressions from Tunis