

Interrupted sea

**THE ILLEGAL AND VIOLENT PRACTICES OF THE
TUNISIAN NATIONAL GUARD IN THE CENTRAL
MEDITERRANEAN**

June 2024



Collection of testimonies (2021-2023)

**A report by Watch the Med Alarm Phone,
in collaboration with Tunisian civil
society actors**



Contributors

Founded in 2014, **Alarm Phone** (AP) is a transnational network fighting against the European border regime. Comprising over 300 activists from some 15 countries, mainly in Europe and North Africa, its main aim is to offer assistance to migrants in distress at sea. The network maintains a 24-hour hotline, which has supported more than 8,000 boats in distress since 2014 while attempting to cross the Mediterranean or the Atlantic route.

<https://alarmphone.org/en/>

Numerous actors from Tunisian civil society contributed to this report. In the current context of criminalization and repeated attacks on people on the move and solidarity organizations in Tunisia, **it was deemed preferable, for their safety, to ensure their anonymity.**

This **new wave of criminalization** began after the National Security Council of May 6, 2024, in which Tunisian President Kais Saied targeted civil society organizations, calling them “traitors”, “[foreign] agents” and “rabid trumpeters motivated by foreign salaries”, adding that criticism of the state apparatus was an act of treason. The meeting took place after the interior ministers of Algeria, Libya, Tunisia and Italy met on the 2nd of May 2024 in Rome.

At the time of publication of this report, almost a month after the arrest and detention of Saadia Mosbah (president of Mnepty, a Tunisian anti-racist organization in solidarity with refugees and migrants), **dozens of human rights defenders have suffered the same fate.**

These attacks by Kais Saied's regime on Tunisian civil society, reported in the international media, **have done nothing to prevent the European Union and its member states from continuing their migration deals with the Tunisian state.**

While the names of the main contributors of this report have been omitted, **the authors reaffirm their commitment to transnational solidarity and, despite repression, continue to organize on both sides of the Mediterranean.**



The publication of this report stands like a promise - the promise that, regardless of any attempts at intimidation, solidarity will continue to express itself relentlessly and that we will always denounce racist and murderous migration policies, and to defend freedom of movement for all.



Executive summary

Based on testimonies gathered by various actors from Tunisian and transnational civil society, this report documents the interception practices of the Tunisian National Guard in the central Mediterranean. The data collected is based on 14 in-depth interviews conducted between 2021 and 2023 with people on the move who survived attacks at sea. Ultimately, the report highlights violent and illegal practices, ranging from non-assistance, to maneuvers intentionally aimed at capsizing boats in distress, causing shipwrecks and costing the lives of many people on the move.

The murderous practices/ violent attacks perpetrated by Tunisian border authorities, which has been documented for several years by Tunisian and transnational civil society, is taking place against a backdrop of increasing border outsourcing policies by the European Union and its member states. Faced with an increase in traffic on the Tunisian maritime route from 2021 onwards, and in the hope of limiting the number of crossings, the EU has considerably increased its support for Tunisian security forces, setting up a “refoulement by proxy” regime, following the example of its cooperation with Libyan militias.

Note: the term “coast guard” is often used in the report and the testimonies reproduced. It can refer to both the National Maritime Guard (under the direction of the Ministry of the Interior and theoretically operational within the strict confines of Tunisian territorial waters) and the Tunisian Navy (under the direction of the Ministry of Defense, in charge of coordinating rescue operations and able to operate in international waters). However, from the description of the boats by witnesses and the videos shared, we can conclude that in most of the attacks, it is the National Maritime Guard that is involved. ¹

¹ <https://alarmphone.org/fr/2022/12/19/politiques-meurtrieres-en-mediterranee/>

Index

1. Introduction and background

2. Methodology

3. Testimonies

4. Conclusion



Migrant boats in the Sfax region. Anonymous picture.

1. Introduction and background

Alarm Phone presents a detailed report on the abuses perpetrated by the Tunisian National Guard against people on the move² as part of the so-called “fight against irregular migration”, supported by the EU and its member states. These outsourcing policies, aimed at preventing all arrivals on European shores, consist of **strengthening the interception capacities of the Tunisian National Guard to set up a regime of non-assistance at sea and “push back by proxy”³**.

Push-back by proxy⁴ refers to the practice whereby the European Union and its member states outsource their border controls by subcontracting interceptions to a neighboring country (in this case, Tunisia). The aim is to stop and push back people on the move (Tunisian or foreign) before they reach European shores, thus enabling European states to offload their reception and asylum obligations while attempting to invisibilize the human rights violations this entails.

Although European support for Tunisia, in the areas of “migration management” and border control, has intensified in recent years, it is not new and dates back several decades to the era of President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali⁵. For over 20 years, Italy, followed by other EU member states, has been funding and equipping the Tunisian authorities to monitor Europe's coasts.

The aim of this report is precisely to make these brutal practices and rights violations visible while placing them in the context of European policies of border outsourcing in Tunisia. The testimonies collected for this research show that **the policies drawn up in Brussels with the complicity of the Tunisian authorities are the cause of many shipwrecks in the central Mediterranean and that the practices that result from them kill**.

More and more people on the “Tunisian route”

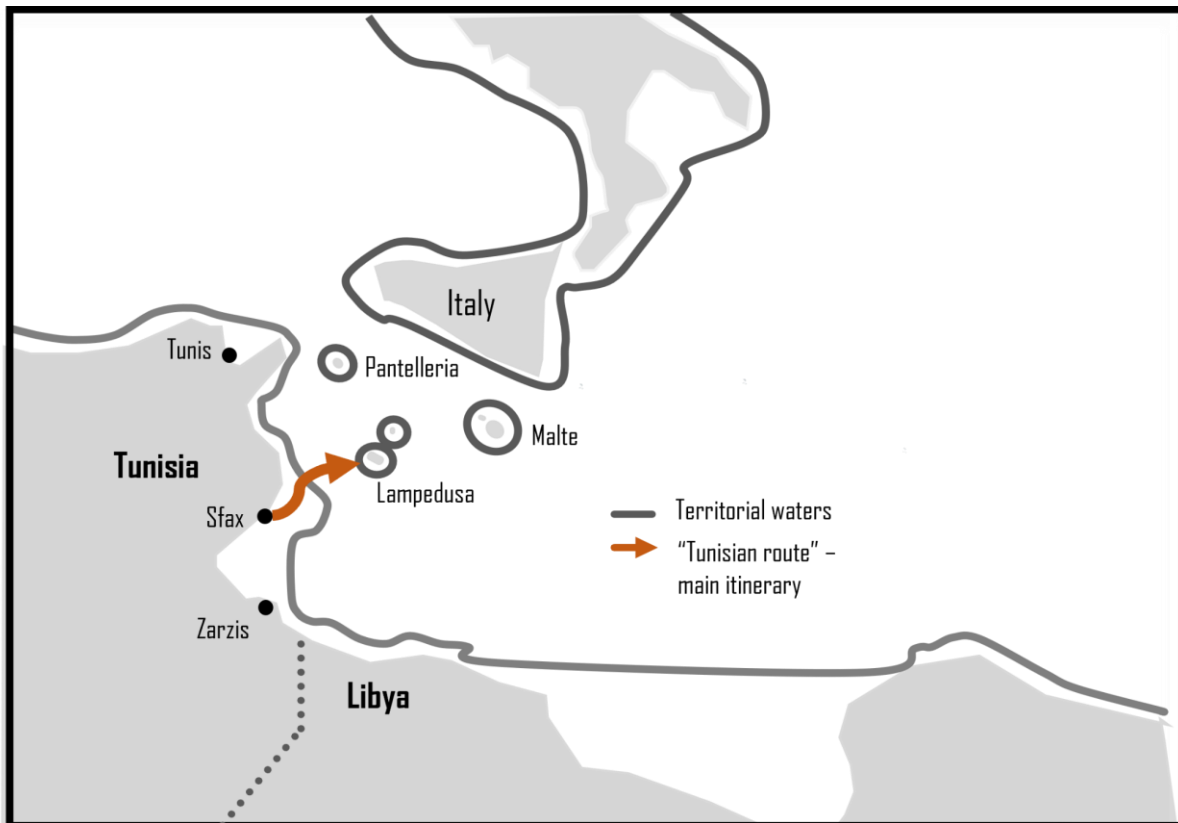
The strengthening of Tunisia's role as the European Union's “border guard” has accelerated in particular since the increase in traffic on the Tunisian sea route from 2020 onwards.

² By people on the move, we mean all people seeking to leave their country, whose migration has been illegalized and who are unable to travel safely and legally because of the apartheid mobility regime set up by Northern states against nationals of countries in the Global South.

³ <https://ftdes.net/refoulement-par-procuration-limpact-des-politiques-dexternalisation-des-frontieres-de-lue-sur-les-migrantes-victimes-de-traite-en-tunisie/>

⁴ <https://content.forensic-architecture.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/2018-05-07-FO-Mare-Clausum-Ex-EN.pdf>

⁵ https://migreurop.org/article2992.html?lang_article=fr



For a long time, Tunisian nationals were the main migrants heading to European shores from the Tunisian shores but in recent years an increasing number of third-country nationals as well departing from this route. The profiles of the latter vary: for some, Tunisia has been a transit country from the outset of their migration project, before crossing over to Europe, while others are fleeing worsening socio-economic conditions and rising xenophobia, after having been settled there for several years. According to figures published by the Tunisian Ministry of the Interior, the proportion of non-Tunisian nationals intercepted by the coast guard rose from 59% in 2022 to 78% in 2023⁶.

The obsession of European states: outsourcing interceptions at sea

Alerted by the increase in crossings from Tunisia, European states have considerably stepped up the outsourcing of their migration control. By 2023 outsourcing had become a genuine European obsession. On June 6, 2023, Italian Prime Minister Meloni visited President Kais Saïed *“to try to obtain a suspended loan from the IMF, to ensure the country’s financial stability and to prevent further migrant departures to Europe”*⁷.

A few days later, on June 11, 2023, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen travelled to Tunis with Meloni and Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte to meet President Saïed. The parties agreed to work together on a *“comprehensive partnership package”*⁸ that would

⁶ <https://kapitalis.com/tunisie/2023/12/21/tunisie-quel-role-jouera-la-migration-dans-les-elections-de-2024/>

⁷ <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/49460/italy-works-to-unblock-imf-funding--for-tunisia>

⁸ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_23_3202

cover various areas, including tighter controls on migration. These promises crystallized on **July 16, 2023**⁹, with **the signing of a memorandum of understanding between Tunisia and the European Union** for a “strategic and comprehensive partnership aimed at combating irregular migration and boosting economic ties between the Union and the North African country¹⁰”, with a sum of 150 million euros allocated to achieve this objective.

In the context of the outsourcing of migration controls to Tunisia, this “partnership”, in the field of maritime cooperation involves the supply of boats, mobile radars, cameras, vehicles, spare parts and engines for the Tunisian security forces to control mobility towards the European Union¹¹.

Following the Libyan model, this subcontracting aims to set up a “refoulements by proxy” regime in Tunisia, based on four pillars: **strengthening the capacities of the Tunisian National Guard (equipment and training), setting up a coastal surveillance system, creating a functional Maritime Rescue Coordination Center and declaring a Tunisian search and rescue zone**¹².

Progress has recently been made on these last two pillars with the approval of Decree no. 2024-181 of April 5, 2024, which provides for the creation of the “National Maritime Search and Rescue Coordination Center” responsible, among other things, for 24/7 operational watch, conducting maritime search and rescue operations and coordinating with maritime search and rescue coordination centers in other countries. Additionally, a “national coordination cell” will be tasked with submitting proposals for the development of a national maritime search and rescue plan, particularly with regard to the delimitation of the Tunisian zone of responsibility¹³.

In recent years, the number of interceptions at sea and pushbacks in Tunisia has increased considerably, according to FTDES figures¹⁴:

⁹ https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2023/07/17/migrants-economie-ursula-von-der-leyen-obtient-au-forceps-un-accord-de-partenariat-strategique-entre-la-tunisie-et-l-union-europeenne_6182251_3212.html

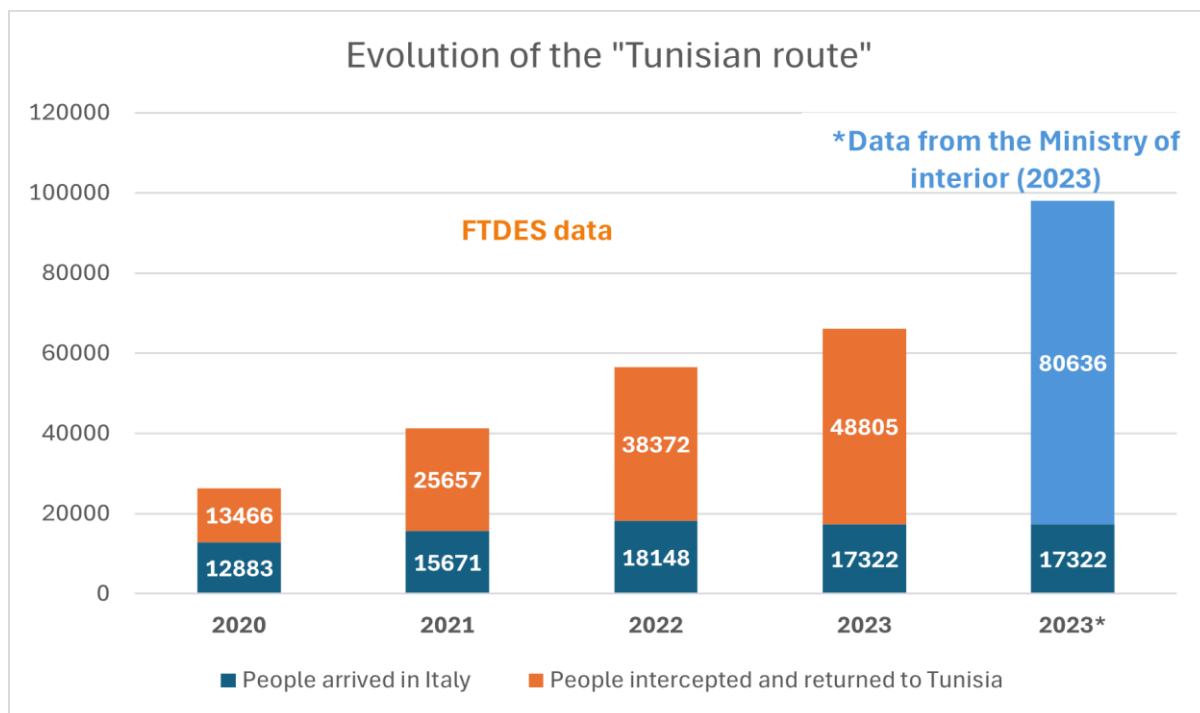
¹⁰ https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2023/07/16/la-tunisie-et-l-union-europeenne-signent-un-partenariat-sur-l-economie-et-la-politique-migratoire_6182243_3212.html

¹¹ <https://www.statewatch.org/media/3945/eu-com-von-der-leyen-letter-euco-25-6-23.pdf>

¹² <https://civilmrcr.eu/analysis/from-libya-to-tunisia-how-the-eu-is-extending-the-push-back-regime-by-proxy-in-the-central-mediterranean-civilmrcr/>

¹³ <https://legislation-securite.tn/latest-laws/decret-n-2024-181-du-5-avril-2024-portant-organisation-de-la-recherche-et-du-sauvetage-maritimes/>

¹⁴ https://ftdes.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/OST_FR-1.pdf



** For the year 2023, according to FTDES, the most reliable figures are those provided by the Tunisian Ministry of the Interior.*

It is difficult to measure exactly the European Union's responsibility, as the Tunisian authorities also follow their own political agenda. Yet, it is undeniable that the increase in pushbacks and interceptions at sea is closely linked to European support in strengthening the capacities of the Tunisian security apparatus and in particular the National Guard.

The brutalization of Tunisian coast guard practices

The rise in interceptions has also led to **an increase in cases of violence and human rights violations perpetrated against people on the move.**

These interceptions at sea, which Europe subcontracts to Tunisia, already produced dozens of victims, as in the two shipwrecks of 2011 and 2017, which according to survivors' testimonies were caused by dangerous maneuvers by the Tunisian coast guard¹⁵.

From 2022 onwards, the number of reported attacks by Tunisian coast guards on migrant boats soared. In December 2022, in a joint declaration¹⁶ signed by 56 actors, Tunisian and transnational civil society denounced the brutality of the Tunisian coast guards during interceptions in the Mediterranean: beatings, shootings, knife attacks, dangerous maneuvers, ransom demands... These acts of violence, which have continued to multiply ever since, target both Tunisians and foreigners attempting to flee Tunisia.

¹⁵ <https://www.babelmed.net/fr/article/73080-tunisie-coute-que-coute-ne-pas-les-laisser-traverser>

¹⁶ <https://asf.be/publication/politiques-meurtrieres-en-mediterranee/?lang=fr>

In September 2022, the case of “18/18” in Zarzis, which received media coverage thanks to the mobilization of relatives and the local population, once again highlighted the serious failings of the National Maritime Guard, even towards its own citizens. With no news of a boat leaving Zarzis with 17 Tunisian nationals on board, two days after their departure, the families alerted the Tunisian, Italian and Maltese authorities. Faced with the inaction of the Tunisian authorities, fishermen from the small town in southern Tunisia set out to find them. As the bodies were found and the shipwreck confirmed, the anger of the inhabitants of Zarzis was fanned by the negligence of the local authorities, who buried the bodies without first collecting DNA¹⁷.

As the testimonies collected as part of this research show, this brutalization of the Tunisian National Guard's practices at sea has continued ever since, taking various forms:

- More and more cases of non-assistance or delayed rescue operations
- Use of violence to force people aboard boats to turn off their engines (gunshots, blows with sticks, use of various projectiles, knives, etc.).
- Removal of engines from boats in distress
- Dangerous maneuvers leading to the sinking of boats
- Deportation to the desert following interception at sea

Pushbacks to a country that can in no way be considered safe

The subcontracting of interceptions to Tunisia not only concerns civil society organizations due to the violent conditions in which they are carried out, but also because they result in **thousands of people being sent back every year to a country that is absolutely unsafe in terms of human rights, and which is currently experiencing a deep political and economic crisis.**

Tunisia, long heralded as the successful model of the 2011 revolutions and the region's most successful democratic transition project, is far from being a safe country of origin or asylum¹⁸. Beyond the obvious economic difficulties, Tunisia is facing deeper issues that often take the form of serious human rights violations¹⁹. Already covered by a police state and total impunity, President Saïed launched his authoritarian and populist political project on

¹⁷ https://alarmphone.org/en/2023/01/18/contesting-borders-in-a-racist-environment/?post_type_release_type=post

¹⁸ The EU, in Directive 2013/32/eu of June 26, 2013, distinguishes between "Safe Country of Origin" (country for which - on the basis of the legal situation, law enforcement and the political situation - it can be proven that there is generally and consistently no persecution, torture, inhuman or degrading treatment or risk of violence in situations of internal or international armed conflict) and "Safe Third Country" or country of first asylum. (a third country which treats an applicant for international protection in accordance with the principles of life and liberty, non-refoulement, freedom from torture and inhuman, degrading or cruel treatment or punishment, and where it is possible to apply for refugee status and receive protection in accordance with the 1951 Geneva Convention and the 1967 New York Protocol).

¹⁹ <https://ftdes.net/la-tunisie-entre-la-classification-de-pays-sur-et-la-realite-dun-pays-a-la-derive/>

July 25, 2021, definitively closing the chapter of democratic transition. The freezing and subsequent dissolution of Parliament, the demolition of constitutional bodies, his granting of full powers by decree, and the ratification of a constitution drafted unilaterally by himself, are accompanied by fierce repression of political opponents, arbitrary arrests, repeated attacks on civil society and threats to freedom of expression and fundamental rights²⁰.

Following President Kais Saïed's speech on February 21, 2023²¹, Tunisia has become a particularly hostile land for migrants. In his speech, Saïed criticized the “hordes of illegal immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa” responsible for “violence, crime and unacceptable acts”, and an unprecedented wave of racism swept through Tunisia, targeting black populations, whether they are migrants or long-established residents: people harassed in the street, stones thrown, racist insults, burglaries, rapes... In most cases, the Tunisian police and authorities offered no protection and were reportedly involved in the violence.

During this period, many foreigners were evicted from their homes and made redundant, leaving them homeless and destitute²². Regardless of their administrative status, many were arbitrarily arrested and detained (including people with refugee or asylum status, in a total violation of the Geneva Convention on Refugees, to which Tunisia is a signatory). As a result, many have been forced to flee Tunisia, either by returning to their country of origin whenever possible or by fleeing by sea, risking their lives²³. Hundreds of people have also been deported²⁴ to their countries of origin under what have been presented by the authorities as **so-called “voluntary” return programs.**

But above all, since the beginning of 2023, **expulsions to the Libyan or Algerian desert, already practiced in the past by the Tunisian authorities on a lesser scale, have become systematic²⁵.** These deportations concern people arbitrarily arrested in the street or their homes, as well as those intercepted at sea by the National Guard²⁶. These large-scale deportations, widely documented²⁷ and regularly denounced by civil society, have resulted in ill-treatment, torture, disappearances and, in several cases, deaths²⁸.

²⁰ <https://asf.be/600-jours-apres-l'article-80-de-letat-d'exception-a-l'instauration-de-l'autocratie/?lang=fr>

²¹

<https://www.facebook.com/100064458289062/posts/pfbid02go3Kd6NEprspXKU7JoDPuGsnPzBhUmZcR25bcHyRc8GAe8VdDPTmoSSuv186Gissl/?sfnsn=mo&mibextid=6aamW6>

²² <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=27935>

²³ https://alarmphone.org/en/2023/07/31/continuous-landings-increasing-violence-and-deaths-at-sea/?post_type_release_type=post

²⁴ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/03/tunisia-presidents-racist-speech-incites-a-wave-of-violence-against-black-africans/>

²⁵ <https://alarmphone.org/en/2023/07/17/tunisia-is-not-safe-mass-deportations-into-the-desert-continue-while-new-eu-migration-deal-is-agreed/>

²⁶ https://alarmphone.org/en/2024/02/18/2023-a-long-summer-of-migration-in-the-central-mediterranean-sea/?post_type_release_type=post

²⁷ <https://omct-tunisie.org/2023/12/18/les-routes-de-la-torture/>

²⁸ <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=28291>

Today, these practices continue²⁹. As highlighted in a recent statement signed by numerous civil society organizations, “more than a year after the communiqué issued by the Presidency of the Tunisian Republic at the end of the National Security Council meeting, which linked the presence of migrant people ‘to a plot to change the demographic composition of Tunisia’, systematic violations and racist and xenophobic campaigns targeting sub-Saharan migrants in Tunisia continue, and to this day remain unpunished.” (April 2024)³⁰.

This does not prevent the European Union from pursuing its outsourcing policies in Tunisia, even though they have largely contributed to the rise in violence, racism and xenophobia in the country^{31,32}, and while they are making the Tunisian route increasingly dangerous.

An increasingly dangerous route

After more than 30 years of the European Union's high-security policies, **we know that trying to close a migratory route is not only ineffective, but also deadly**. Indeed, reinforcing borders only makes the mobility of people on the move more precarious, pushing them to take more dangerous routes, in more perilous conditions. Various analyses attribute the increase in traffic on the Tunisian route, among others, to the heightened security of the maritime route from Libya, or that from Morocco, following the intensification of the EU's subcontracting of maritime controls with these two countries.

The Tunisian route has become increasingly dangerous as Tunisian authorities have tightened maritime controls on behalf of Europe. In recent years, metal boats have appeared alongside traditional wooden craft. These metal boats, which can easily capsize due to their design³³, have also seen their quality deteriorate as the Tunisian National Guard has criminalized the workshops making them, forcing builders to hastily assemble them in a clandestine manner. The EU-backed crackdown on smugglers did not make these perilous boats disappear. It just made them more dangerous, resulting in numerous shipwrecks just a few hundred meters off the Tunisian coast.

Violent coast guard practices have also made the crossing more dangerous, with many shipwrecks caused by coast guard maneuvers, as the testimonies in this report show. For their part, to avoid interception at all costs, which can sometimes prove fatal, **people on the**

²⁹ <https://civilmrcc.eu/political-developments/effects-of-externalisation-in-tunisia/>

³⁰ <https://alarmphone.org/fr/2024/04/09/un-an-apres-le-debut-de-la-crise-les-violations-des-droits-des-migrant-e-s-en-tunisie-se-poursuivent/>

³¹ <https://www.lacimade.org/traitements-inhumains-tunisie/>

³² <https://civilmrcc.eu/political-developments/escalation-of-racism-in-tunisia-civilmrcc/>

³³ <https://civilmrcc.eu/analysis/new-developments-along-the-tunisian-route-civilmrcc/>

move are forced to travel in increasingly precarious conditions, for example by taking to the sea in harsh weather conditions and/or on poor-quality, barely finished boats.



Photo: iron boat on Tunisian beaches.

In fact, as the situation in Tunisia deteriorates, people on the move (Tunisians and non-Tunisians) are prepared to take ever greater risks to flee the country. All these factors explain why the Tunisian route has become so dangerous. In 2023, some 3,105³⁴ people (children, men and women) drowned or went missing along the Mediterranean routes, according to the IOM³⁵ (a minimum figure, that does not take into account all the invisible shipwrecks that could not be documented).

Costly in terms of suffering and human lives, the European Union's migration policies, implemented with the complicity of the Tunisian state, have not succeeded in stopping the crossings. A case in point is the period in September 2023 that has been dubbed the "little summer of migration", in reference to the summer of 2015, during which over a million people on the move arrived in Europe. In the week of September 11 to 17, 2023, more than 11,560 people, mainly departing from the Sfax region in Tunisia, arrived on the island of

³⁴ <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/fr/donnees>

³⁵ <https://civilmrcc.eu/tunisia-is-neither-a-safe-country-nor-a-place-of-safety-for-thos-rescued-at-sea/>
Twitter post by Flavio di Giacomo, spokesman for the International Organization for Migration in the Mediterranean: <https://twitter.com/fladig/status/1693940733139468518?t=DJpLe9aA-jjqx8XXT9AisA&s=19>

Lampedusa³⁶, barely two months after the signing of the memorandum of understanding between Tunisia and the European Union. This proves that, **despite the brutalization of the border regime, people on the move are courageously continuing to fight for their right to freedom of movement.**



Sfax cemetery where the bodies of migrants found at sea are buried, April 2023

Humanitarian rhetoric to mask security objectives

*"Migration along the central Mediterranean route. Managing migration flows, saving lives"*³⁷: this is the title of a policy document put forward by the European Commission in January 2017 proposing the subcontracting of migration control to the North African coast guard to protect its coasts. In response to the "tragedies" in the Mediterranean, which in 2016 cost the lives of over 4,500 people, it proposed, among other things, to train the so-called Libyan coast guards or to strengthen the Frontex Agency's aerial surveillance, the first steps in implementing its strategy of push backs by proxy in the central Mediterranean.

"Reinforcing controls to save lives at sea" is the European Union's clumsy and awkward attempt to disguise its security objectives behind humanitarian rhetoric. To justify the reinforcement of border controls along the Tunisian route and its massive support for the repressive Tunisian authorities, the European Union adopted the same strategy, shedding crocodile tears over the fate of people who have died or disappeared at sea, and stressing the need to reinforce "rescue" resources. In July 2023, the European Commission presented the signing of a memorandum of understanding between the EU and Tunisia as a means of

³⁶ <https://www.maldusa.org/l/lampedusas-hotspot-system-from-failure-to-nonexistence/>

³⁷ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/FR/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52017JC0004>

“strengthening cooperation to combat and reduce irregular migratory flows and save human lives”³⁸.

The Tunisian National Guard adopts the same mixture of humanitarian and security registers, using the terms “rescue” and “interception” interchangeably. Interviewed in August 2023 by Agence France Press, National Guard Commander Mouhamed Borhen Chamtouri explained that for the Tunisian coast guard “the very first priority is to save human lives”³⁹.

At a time when reports of dangerous and deadly practices by the Tunisian National Guard are multiplying, this “rescue” rhetoric is hardly credible. Nevertheless, the communication efforts of the European Union and the Tunisian authorities have succeeded in promoting the idea that these operations serve to protect the lives of migrants. **It is precisely this erroneous and hypocritical discourse that this report seeks to deconstruct, by giving a voice to the first people concerned** – people on the move themselves, the first people affected by European outsourcing policies.

³⁸ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/pt/ip_23_3887

³⁹ <https://www.voafrique.com/a/sauver-des-vies-la-priorit%C3%A9-des-garde-c%C3%B4tes-en-tunisie/7221217.html>

2. Methodology

This report gathers testimonies from 14 people who survived human rights violations at sea and violent practices perpetrated by the Tunisian authorities. These testimonies were collected by various activists and civil society organizations between 2021 and 2023.

The witnesses interviewed for this research are people who either called the Alarm Phone hotline or approached Tunisian civil society actors.

Various precautions were taken to gather the views of people on the move:

- Where conditions allowed it, interviews were recorded.
- Where possible, several witnesses were interviewed about the same incident to cross-check information.
- Testimonies were anonymized to guarantee the protection of individuals, in a context of reprisals and increasing criminalization of victims who dare to break the silence.
- The consent of those interviewed was rigorously obtained.

The testimonies reproduced in this report aim to convey as faithfully as possible the words of the various people interviewed. For the sake of brevity, some passages have been removed when they do not illustrate the purpose of the report, or when they provide information that would have made it too easy to identify the person giving the testimony. The safety of witnesses, some of whom are still in Tunisia, remains a priority.

If the testimonies only cover the period 2021–2023, it's mainly because the hardening of criminalization during the year 2023, has made interviews much riskier both for the people on the move themselves, victims of these practices, and for the people collecting their words. Many of those intercepted are directly pushed to the borders by the Tunisian National Guard, which has considerably limited the possibility of continuing this work of collecting testimonies.

This report aims to illustrate, through testimonies, practices that are tending to become systematized in the central Mediterranean, and to denounce the actors who implement them, either the Tunisian authorities or European states. However, it considers the diversity of the actors involved and the complexity of the situations along the Tunisian route.

Indeed, many individuals within the Tunisian National Guard continue to courageously save lives rather than endanger them, refusing any recourse to violence. Some rescue operations can cost lives, despite the professionalism of the coast guards and the efforts made. **By showing the systematization of violence and rights violations committed against people on the move, this report aims to highlight institutional rather than individual responsibilities.**

Moreover, while the testimonies reproduced below have been selected amongst others, **this collection in no way claims to cover exhaustively the various acts of violence committed along the Tunisian route.** As reported by the people on the move themselves, the media and human rights organizations, this violence is daily, massive and often invisible. Many have not survived to bear witness. This is the observation made by Alarm Phone, which notes an increase in the number of boats reported after leaving Tunisia, disappearing without a trace, raising fears of an increase in the number of invisible shipwrecks.



Metal boats in the Sfax region. Anonymous picture

3. Testimonies

Name (fictive)	Date	Violence / violation perpetrated by the Tunisian coast guard	Deaths or disappearances
Ali & Maria	July 10th, 2021	Dangerous maneuvers causing the boat to capsize	31 people survived, 29 are missing, 15 bodies found
Katie	May 18th, 2022	Dangerous maneuvers	/
Georges	August 29th, 2022	Physical violence, shooting and dangerous maneuvers	/
Abdulaye	January 1st, 2023	Physical violence, threats with firearms	/
Salimata & Bakary	March 9th, 2023	Withdrawal of engines, forced removal from the coast, dangerous maneuvers	7 people missing in a shipwreck near the port
Issouf & Omar	March 21st, 2023	Bottle-throwing, physical violence, dangerous maneuvers causing the boat to capsize	At least 6 people missing
Fatoumata	March 23rd, 2023	Physical violence, dangerous maneuvers causing the boat to capsize	At least 15 people missing
Lami	April 1st, 2023	Motor removal, non-assistance	/
Sékou		Physical violence, dangerous maneuvers causing the boat to capsize	At least 10 people missing
Mohamed & Bouba	April 11th, 2023	Dangerous maneuvers Physical violence, dangerous maneuvers causing the boat to capsize, non-assistance	At least 10 people died and dozens missing
Carla	April 22nd, 2023	Proliferation of threats	/
Nabil		Dangerous pursuit and use of tear gas	/
Mamadou	April 23th, 2023	Non-assistance in distress	25 people died
Abdou	August 2nd, 2023	Physical violence, dangerous maneuvers.	At least 5 people died

July 10, 2021, Ali and Maria – A maneuver caused the boat to capsize. 31 survivors, 29 missing, 15 bodies recovered

Ali's testimony

"It was 5:00 a.m. on July 10, 2021. We were in a boat with 65 people. A few hours after leaving Sfax, we were very close to international waters (30 minutes according to the GPS position). The Tunisian coast guard approached our boat and asked us to stop. We decided to obey, and the captain stopped the engine. **But the Tunisian coast guard made a very quick U-turn and deliberately rammed our boat. Our boat capsized. Everyone fell into the water.** Some of us had life jackets, but not all. Many couldn't swim and drowned. Another coast guard boat arrived and took the survivors on board. **There were only 31 of us left. All the children died.** They also took 7 bodies onto their boats. [...] When we arrived in the port of Sfax, the coast guards fled.

Friends came to the port to help us unload the bodies. Other authorities came and took the bodies to the morgue. We were looking for the Tunisian coast guard to show them our pain and anger, but the port was empty. It was as if they had realized what they had done and decided to disappear. We received no assistance at the port. We met the Red Cross in Sfax, who told us that 8 other bodies had been found, but that we couldn't see them because of the COVID... We haven't received any psychological support, and many of us are going crazy. I'm currently with a woman who has lost her child. She's gone mad. We're not afraid of anything anymore. They can cause us problems, we don't care, we're ready to die. We've lost everything"

Maria's testimony

"I'm originally from Cameroon. I gave birth when I arrived in Tunisia. My son was one year and three months old when I decided to attempt the crossing with my son. It was July 10, 2021. We were in a small boat, I had the baby on my back for the crossing, I was tired: there were a lot of people in the boat, that's why I put my son like that. [...]. Two or three hours went by and we saw the national guard arrive with two people. [...]. **They told us we were going to die here.** We thought they wanted money, some of us tried to give some, but they didn't want money and repeated that we were going to die.

They pushed our boat and the water started coming in, people started shouting [...] the navy boat pulled away and **our boat capsized.** There were mothers with children, pregnant women. I fell into the water with my baby on my back. I wanted to swim but a man held on to me and pushed us underwater [...] I tried to fight, I swam towards the boat which caused us to sink. **I saw the man who made us sink and he did nothing, he just watched us die.** [...] Then another navy boat arrived, but not to rescue us. They stayed at a distance and asked us to swim towards them to get to safety. I swam with my baby, who had drunk a lot of water.

I couldn't give him mouth-to-mouth; I didn't want to leave his body in the water, I was afraid he'd be eaten by the fish. My arms hurt, I couldn't even hold the rope because of the pain in my arms, so I grabbed it and took my baby with me. When they caught me, I still had hope because I thought that with mouth-to-mouth resuscitation my baby could be saved. **But it was too late, my baby was dead [...]**.

The 9 children on the boat were all dead, they died in the sea [...]. I asked for my son's body but [the coast guard] wouldn't give it to me, saying it was the law, so now I don't know where my baby is. I don't know where they buried my baby. Two weeks after that, there was a shipwreck of 24 other people and only two of them survived, the same story. I've been having nightmares ever since."

May 18, 2022, Katie – Dangerous maneuvers

"Our boat left on the evening of May 12, 2022, at around 10:30 pm, at the border between Tunisia and Libya. We were in the middle of the sea, and the Tunisian telephone network was no longer working. There were 30 people on the boat, including 2 children and 10 women (from Gambia, Ghana, Cameroon, Guinea and Ivory Coast). The boat was wooden and blue (a fisherman's boat) [...].

Shortly after our departure, we saw Tunisian coast guards in the distance. When they reached our boat, they asked us to turn off the engine, which we did. There were 3 coast guards on the boat. [...] They told us they had to phone their superior for orders and asked us to wait. They made us wait in the water for three hours. They didn't give us anything to eat or drink, and only three of us had life jackets.

Around 7am, [...] **the coast guards started circling around our boat. This created waves, and we were afraid of falling over at any moment. Fortunately,** our driver found a good technique to avoid the waves by following the coast guard's trajectory. As we were shouting a lot and they couldn't manage to overturn us, they finally stopped and asked us to switch off the engine again. We asked them why they were trying to kill us. One of them replied that it was his orders and that he was sorry he had to do it. [...]

They continued to circle. We started filming and sending the videos to friends who alerted Alarm Phone. The person from Alarm Phone called us, and we told him that the coast guards were trying to kill us. [The coast guard] finally stopped their dangerous maneuvers and pointed us in the direction of the port of Zarzis in Tunisia. They watched from a distance as we headed towards the port but didn't follow us.

At the port, soldiers were waiting for us. They did everything they could to find out who had called Alarm Phone, but nobody said anything. **This went on for several hours, during which we stayed in the sun without food or water.** I'm really tired of this situation. The attack by

the Tunisian coast guard really affected me. I can't stop thinking about it and I have a lot of nightmares."

August 29, 2022, Georges – Knife attack, shooting and dangerous maneuver⁴⁰

"I'm 21, I'm from Ivory Coast and I arrived in Tunisia in January 2021 after working for a while in Algeria. [...] We left Mahdia on August 29 at 8pm with a wooden boat and a 90-horsepower engine. There were 38 of us (from Ivory Coast, Guinea and Cameroon), including a pregnant woman.

At around 11pm, the Tunisian National Guard spotted our boat and approached us. There were two of them (an old man and a young man) on a small blue, white and red boat with the number "112". They asked the captain to cut the engine. We refused, saying we didn't want to go back to Tunisia. So, **the coast guards backed off, speeded up and headed straight for our boat.** Fortunately, they didn't manage to capsize us. **Then they stuck their boat to ours and started beating the captain with a stick.** When they pointed a gun at the captain and threatened to shoot, one of my Ivorian brothers tried to intervene. **The coast guard threw a knife at him, hitting him in the head. He was bleeding badly. The coast guard fired into the air.**

Between 11pm and 1am the next morning, **the coast guards stayed close to us and did everything they could to sink us.** They kept hitting us and started filling our boat with water using a container cut in half. When they saw that this technique wouldn't work to sink our boat, they started driving towards us again, repeatedly. In vain. For two hours we fought with them. At around 1 a.m., **they tried to capsize our boat by leaning on the edge.** To defend ourselves, we threw our water bottles at them. Their engine was damaged, and we were able to escape.

Between 1 a.m. and 6 a.m., we continued our way. About 7km from international waters, our boat stopped as we ran out of fuel. We started to drift. We had no food or water. [...] The waves finally pushed us towards the Tunisian coast, and we alerted the coast guard. The Tunisian national guard came to pick us up on Wednesday at 5pm, almost two days after our departure.

This kind of attack happens all the time. I was with a friend on the boat who recognized the older of the two coast guards. He had already attacked his boat earlier in the month, resulting in a shipwreck. The problem is that migrants are afraid to speak out because they might get arrested."

⁴⁰ This testimony has already been published on the Alarm Phone website.
https://alarmphone.org/en/2023/01/18/contesting-borders-in-a-racist-environment/?post_type_release_type=post

January 1, 2023, Abdulaye – Physical violence, threat with firearm

"I've tried to cross the Mediterranean four times now. The [Tunisian authorities] don't want us in Tunisia, but they won't let us cross either. Often, the coast guards remove the engines and let people drift out to sea. Often, they make the boats capsize [...] **The second time I tried to cross, I was beaten up by the Tunisian coast guards in the middle of the sea, because I refused to get on their boat. My friend filmed the scene, but his phone was snatched from him to prevent him from publishing the video [...].**

A coast guard approached me because I was lying in the boat, and he wanted me to tie a rope he was stretching out to our boat. I said no, so he took a long wooden stick and started beating me. We were afraid they'd capsize us. **After wounding me in the shoulder, he pointed his gun at me and said he'd shoot if I didn't get on the boat.** [...] In the end, we all got on their boat, and they took us back to Tunisia [...].

It was January 2nd. We had left the day before and were intercepted after 24 hours at sea. **On January 5 I had to go to hospital because I was in so much pain, and there I learned that my shoulder had been displaced.** The X-rays show it very clearly.

[...] People sometimes say that there are a lot of shipwrecks at sea because of bad weather. But that's not true. **Most of the time, shipwrecks are caused by the national guard [...].** Sometimes boats capsize because of overloading. But most of the time it's the Tunisians."

March 9, 2023, Salimata and Bakary – Removal of engines, forced to move away from the coast, dangerous maneuver

"Our boat left the Sfax region on March 8. We were 41 people from sub-Saharan countries. With us were 8 other boats with a similar number of people. About 24 hours after our departure, the coast guard arrived with two boats. They asked us to stop, which we did. **The coast guards then removed our engine and left.** We weren't very far from the coast, between Sfax and Kerkennah, so we could see land. **We saw them making waves around the migrant boats to destabilize them, and then they started going back and forth to move the boats away from the coast. Then the coast guards came for our boat. They tied it to theirs with a rope and took us out to sea, without an engine, into the deep sea.**

We were on the water from 10pm to 3pm the next day. The coast guards came back from time to time to keep an eye on us. The people on the boats tried to row with their hands, legs and shoes to get closer to the shore. Fortunately, the sea was calm... At around 3 p.m., fishermen finally picked us up (along with 5 other boats) and took us back to the port of Sfax. One boat refused to be towed by the fishermen towards the coast, but unfortunately **their boat capsized and 7 people disappeared.** Once we arrived at the port, there was no one, neither coast guard nor police, and we were able to return home".

March 21, 2023, Issouf and Oumar - Bottle-throwing, physical violence, dangerous maneuvers causing the boat to capsize. At least 6 people killed

"After President Kais Saied's racist speech on February 21, we lost our jobs and our house and had to leave [...]. We left on a metal boat with almost 50 people on board. 2 or 3 other boats left at the same time as ours [...]. After 4 hours of sailing, we were almost out of the Tunisian zone. At 8 o'clock, the coast guards found us and arrested us, with a large boat and 5 agents. They told us to stop the engine. They hit the engine to force us to stop [...]. **The national guard threw bottles of water at us, they hit us shouting "stop the engines", but our captain wouldn't listen. So, they started zigzagging and making waves around us to knock us over, until they finally hit our boat, which flipped over [...].**

People fell into the water. I had an inner tube, but at the time I lost it. There was a woman next to me, I could see the babies in the water and the woman was screaming. Even though the National Guard started pulling people out of the water right away, many people lost their lives. I saw 6 dead, but I heard that **more than 12 people lost their lives**. The National Guard left all the bodies in the water. I don't know if they went back afterwards to look for them [...]."

March 23, 2023, Fatoumata - Physical violence, dangerous maneuvers causing the boat to capsize. At least 15 persons dead

"I'm originally from Guinea Conakry. I left my country with my 5 children, because I didn't want my daughters to be circumcised I've been in Tunisia for two years now. On March 23, we had the opportunity to attempt the crossing. We left on a metal boat at 4am, with 37 people [...]. We came across the Tunisian coast guard. They told us to stop. **They took out a long stick with a piece of metal at the end and hit the captain on the head**. But he didn't stop the engine.

So, **they did everything they could to break our boat. They rammed into our boat, and we overturned**. They watched us drown before taking us on their boat. They threw a rope to save us. But it was too late. My little brother is dead and his two babies.... As we insisted, they finally agreed to recover the bodies of the two babies [...] One was still alive but ended up dying on board, because they didn't know how to get the water out of his body. **In all, 15 people died in this shipwreck.**"

April 1, 2023, Lami - Engine removal, non-assistance

"We left at midnight on April 1, north of Sfax, heading for Lampedusa. At 1:30 am, as we approached the Kerkennah islands, the Tunisian coast guards saw us and tried to chase us [...]. When they tried to approach us, the captain turned off the engine. **The coast guards boarded the boat and stole the engine**. Then they went off in another direction to get other engines. **We were on the water for over 3 hours without an engine before another National Guard boat came to pick us up.**"

April 1, 2023, Sékou – Physical violence, dangerous maneuver causing the boat to capsize. At least 10 people missing

"Our boat left the Sfax region on 1st April at around 5am with an iron boat. There were 45 of us on the boat. When the national guard arrived near our boat, **they had iron sticks and beat us up, asking us to stop [...]. Then they put water in our boat by making waves. We were bailing out, but they kept adding water. Our boat ended up sinking and everyone started screaming. We were all in the water.** Some of the little ones didn't have life jackets. We grabbed each other in a "triangle" to try to float, and we gave each other courage. But there were people who were too tired to fight, saying to let them die. In the end, the coast guards took us on board their boat [...]. **At least 10 people are dead or missing."**

April 11, 2023, Mamadou and Bouba – Dangerous maneuvers causing the boat to capsize, non-assistance. At least 10 people died. Dozens missing

"We left for Mahdia at around 19:00 in a wooden boat carrying 120 people, including 13 children. With us were people from Ivory Coast, Ghana, Togo and Tunisia [...]. We had arrived not far from Kerkennah Island when the Tunisian coast guard came up behind us and started chasing us. **They chased us for at least 20 minutes. They made waves around us and blocked our path. It was because of these maneuvers that we sank at around 10pm. People were in the water. Instead of rescuing us, they sailed away....** Maybe they were going to make another interception, we don't know. **We kept calling "help, help, help", but they kept their distance.**

It was only after an hour that they came back to us, with two other boats. They rescued us. But some people died. One woman lost her 8-month-old baby. She managed to get him out of the water, but on the boat, the coast guards did nothing, and the child passed away [...]. **Many people died in the water**⁴¹. The coast guard took us ashore. They let us go with our clothes wet, and gave us no assistance."

April 22, 2023, Carla – Proliferation of threats

"Our boat left on the night of April 22 to 23. We had already sailed for 4 hours when the National Guard stopped us. They tied their boat to our boat and asked us to get on their boat. We begged them to let us go but they refused, and **threatened to sink our boat if we didn't get on with them. They had a stick and threatened to beat us.** As there were also babies with us, we agreed."

⁴¹ According to a report by the Tunisian coastguard, "At least 10 migrants from sub-Saharan Africa drowned when a boat sank off the Tunisian coast".

https://www.ansa.it/ansamed/it/notizie/rubriche/nazioni/2023/04/12/almeno-10-migranti-annegano-al-largo-della-tunisia_ebef80cf-d1e1-4668-8aca-21a7951201ab.html

April 22, 2023, Nabil – Dangerous chase and use of tear gas

"I'm Tunisian and I took a boat to Europe on April 22, 2023. It was the third time I had attempted the crossing [...]. There were 17 of us on a wooden boat with a 90-horsepower engine. We left at around 4:00 am and at around 6:30 am, the police, with two boats, stopped us. [...] **They tried to sink us, but we managed to escape.** It took us about 15 minutes to get back to the Tunisian coast. **But when we got out of our boat, they chased us and sprayed us with tear gas.** So, we fled, two by two, in different directions.

April 23, 2023, Mamadou – Non-assistance despite shipwreck situation. 25 people lost their lives

"Our boat left the Mahdia region on the evening of April 23 around 9pm in a boat with about 37-38 people. At around 1 a.m., the waves started to get rough, and we were afraid to turn over. We were about 10 km from Kerkennah. [...] The water started to enter the boat. We cut the engine and **called the coast guard to ask them to come and save us. They told us they weren't working.** We called several times, they answered but refused to come [...]. **Around 2am, our boat sank. We were in the water. We kept calling for help, to no avail [...]. It was only around 8am that a Tunisian fisherman saw us and came to our rescue. But 25 people were already dead.** [...] I lost my friend in that shipwreck. I'm sure he's dead, but I don't know if his body has been recovered."

August 2, 2023, Abdou – Beating with an iron stick, a dangerous maneuver that caused the death of 5 people⁴²

"I come from Nigeria. I had to leave my country because I couldn't live there anymore and I had to find a better place to help my family. I arrived in Sfax 3 months ago where I found a difficult situation, with migrants suffering from violations. I tried to escape by crossing the sea, but I was intercepted and returned to Tunisia.

I left by boat on August 2, from Sfax. The boat was made of iron and was very scary. I was traveling with 31 people, including one girl. The people came from Nigeria, Sudan and Tunisia. We left around noon. There were a lot of boats around us. During the night, the Tunisian coast guard arrived. **They started beating us with a long iron stick. The captain and other passengers were injured. Then the coast guards tied a rope to our boat and forced us into their boat.**

When we were on the coast guard boat, we saw two other migrant boats being intercepted at the same time. In all, around 120 people were intercepted. It was very violent. **I saw the**

⁴² The testimony below has already been published by Alarm Phone (<https://alarmphone.org/fr/2023/08/05/quand-les-vies-ne-comptent-pas-temoignage-dune-personne-survivante/>). Several videos have circulated on social networks mentioning the attack described by the witness. See : <https://twitter.com/karbai/status/1687448093837385728?s=46&t=PxqAnHFEdWrlv5ro1yn0J>

Tunisian coast guard hit a boat with Tunisians, using a smaller speedboat. People fell into the water. We shouted for someone to help them. We threw them life jackets. **There were children, women, boys... there were so many people in the water. 3 boys died after being loaded onto the boat.** I tried to give them first aid, but I couldn't save them. One of the children was only 14. The mothers were screaming. Bodies were brought on board. In total, 5 Tunisian boys died.

In the meantime, the Tunisian coast guard called in other military vessels. At least 6 came, plus helicopters. **We started protesting because we didn't want to go back to Tunisia and because of what we had witnessed. The coast guard responded by shooting at us, and one of the survivors was pushed into the water.** He managed to swim back to the boat, but we were very scared.

We were stuck on the big boat for several hours. We were thirsty, hungry and tired. We hoped that a rescue ship would take us to Italy, but in the end, we landed in Sfax. **In the port, we received no help.** The coast guard noticed that some of us had taken photos and videos of what had happened, and we were forced to delete all the images. The Tunisians were sent to prison, while the others were allowed to leave freely.

I can't get rid of the images I saw that night. I see children drowning, their mothers screaming... I can't sleep. My priority now is to find a way out of this country as quickly as possible".

4. Conclusion

The practices described in the testimonies outline the **violent and deadly system of interception at sea**: non-assistance, engine seizure, physical violence, threats with firearms, the use of lethal weapons to force people on board boats to turn off their engines, and the use of dangerous maneuvers to overturn boats.

Implemented by the Tunisian authorities, this system is part of the border externalization policies that the European Union and its member states are constantly reinforcing in their attempt to lock down their borders. At a time when rights violations against people attempting to flee Tunisia have been intensifying and abundantly documented for several years now, European countries continue to fund, train and equip the Tunisian coast guard, thus consolidating **a regime of push-back by proxy to a country currently undergoing a serious political and economic crisis, and where the authorities target both their own citizens and citizens of other African countries with the aim of preventing them from leaving at all costs.**

While the Tunisian President, for his part, keeps repeating in long speeches tinged with sovereignism that “Tunisia will never agree to become the border guard on behalf of the European Union”, this subcontracting of border control has become an increasingly prevalent reality in Tunisia since he came to power. The adoption on April 5, 2024, of Decree no. 2024-181, which foresees the establishment of the “National Center for the Coordination of Maritime Search and Rescue Operations” and the delimitation of a zone under Tunisian responsibility, represents a further step in this direction and raises fears of **the legitimization and normalization of violence and violations of the law at sea.**

Although the number of interceptions carried out by the Tunisian coast guard has risen considerably in recent years, many people continue to take this route and reach European shores. This proves that repressive policies do not achieve their aim, but merely shift migratory routes and make the crossing more dangerous. **The “border spectacle⁴³”, in which state authorities stage violence designed to discourage mobility, does not succeed in discouraging the tens of thousands of people who courageously continue to exercise their freedom of movement.**

As the testimonies gathered in this report show, these voices, which in the main are invisibilized and suppressed, are fundamental to overcoming the image of “victims” often attached to people on the move. They affirm their tenacity in realizing their mobility, the courage they show in daring to testify and in fighting for their rights to be respected.

⁴³ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/border-spectacle-of-migrant-victimisation/>

Costly in terms of human lives, the ultra-secure migration policies implemented by the European Union on its borders, with the complicity of the Tunisian state, are also **largely responsible for the rapid rise in racism on both shores of the Mediterranean**. By associating migrants with criminals and perpetuating structural inequalities, these policies fuel hate speech and the rise of populism in both the global North and South. The silence of international organizations, such as the IOM and the UNHCR who supposedly exist to protect migrants and refugees, in the face of this rise in racist attacks and serious rights violations, is deafening.

Alongside Tunisian and transnational civil society, Alarm Phone will continue to document the violent practices of the Tunisian coast guard and all other authorities involved in interceptions and refoulements in the Mediterranean and violations of rights at sea. Together, we denounce this repressive regime of mobility control and the outsourcing policies that enable and encourage it.



Photo : Alarm Phone