

Tunisia Shows How Europe's Approach to Migration Is Untenable

by [Sarah Yerkes \(/experts/sarah-yerkes\)](/experts/sarah-yerkes), [Sabina Henneberg \(/experts/sabina-henneberg\)](/experts/sabina-henneberg)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Sarah Yerkes \(/experts/sarah-yerkes\)](/experts/sarah-yerkes)

Sarah Yerkes is a senior fellow in the Middle East Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.



[Sabina Henneberg \(/experts/sabina-henneberg\)](/experts/sabina-henneberg)

Sabina Henneberg is a 2023-24 Soref Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Junior Research Program.



Articles & Testimony

To stem the growing threat of instability, European governments must develop a strategy to humanely address the migration crisis, both by reexamining their own policies and by pressing Tunisia to create a path for regularization of incoming sub-Saharan Africans.

The global situation for migrants in 2025 is precarious at best. In Western destination countries, anti-migrant and xenophobic governments are gaining strength. In transit countries, particularly the southern Mediterranean, governments are doing Europe's bidding and either deporting or mistreating migrants seeking to make their way to Europe. The result is an untenable—and ineffective—model of migration management. Perhaps nowhere is this more obvious than in Tunisia, currently the main launch point for third-country migrants transiting the continent as well as citizens attempting to flee growing repression at home.

Migrants leaving Tunisia for Europe, traveling what is known as the Central Mediterranean Route, fall into three categories: non-Tunisians (primarily sub-Saharan Africans) transiting or trying to transit Tunisia; Tunisians leaving through regular channels; and Tunisians leaving through irregular channels. Most global attention is devoted to the first category.

According to Tunisian official statistics, the number of irregular migrants reaching Europe from Tunisia [fell](https://english.news.cn/20250123/2dbab68ba5c4420b96b1dc7b06617fb5/c.html) (<https://english.news.cn/20250123/2dbab68ba5c4420b96b1dc7b06617fb5/c.html>) dramatically in 2024 to 19,245—down from 97,667 in 2023. According to [Frontex](https://www.frontex.europa.eu/what-we-) (<https://www.frontex.europa.eu/what-we->

[do/monitoring-and-risk-analysis/migratory-map/](#)), the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, 7,679—or roughly 40 percent—of 2024 arrivals were Tunisians. But this decline in arrivals does not mean the problem has been solved. In addition to the nearly 20,000 who made it to Europe, another **80,000** (<https://english.news.cn/20250123/2dbab68ba5c4420b96b1dc7b06617fb5/c.html>) irregular migrants were intercepted in the waters between Tunisia and Italy (an **increase** (<https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/03/tunisia-transformation-into-a-transit-hub-illegal-migration-and-policy-dilemmas?lang=en¢er=middle-east>) from around 70,000 in 2023 and 31,000 in 2022) and hundreds more drowned. The International Organization for Migration has called the Central Mediterranean Route the “**deadliest known migration route in the world**” (<https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean>).”

Many migrants remain in Tunisia indefinitely. According to the UNHCR, (<https://reporting.unhcr.org/tunisia-operational-update-10246>) at the end of 2024 there were 15,514 registered refugees and asylum seekers in Tunisia (a country of not quite 12 million). The Tunisian government also **reported** (<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/7-250-irregular-migrants-voluntarily-returned-from-tunisia-to-their-countries-in-2024/3459883>) that 7,250 sub-Saharan African irregular migrants were voluntarily returned to their home countries in 2024.

In the past, European and Maghreb states have cooperated around legal migration. Bilateral agreements such as the **1968 Franco-Algerian Agreement** (<https://www.tf1info.fr/politique/immigration-que-prevoit-l-accord-de-1968-liant-la-france-et-l-algerie-que-ancien-premier-ministre-edouard-philippe-remet-en-cause-2259465.html>) and the 2008 **Friendship Agreement** (<https://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/31/world/europe/31iht-italy.4.15774385.html>) between Italy and Libya implicitly recognized the responsibility of European colonization for the Maghreb’s relatively poor levels of development. Europe’s labor shortages have also prompted quota schemes and **deals** (<https://www.reuters.com/world/italy-signs-deal-take-migrant-workers-tunisia-2023-10-20/>) to increase visas for Tunisian workers in Italy. From the perspective of Maghreb governments, such policies help alleviate pressures created by unemployment and lack of opportunity while also generating remittances.

But increasing numbers of irregular migrants, or those who do not meet legal requirements for crossing borders, in recent years have changed European states’ posture. “Frontline” European states such as Italy are especially keen to limit such movement and **have led the charge** (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/italy-albania-eu-migration/>) in what many have termed Europe’s strategy of “externalizing” migration management—essentially paying southern states to clamp down on border security.

New governments hostile to migration may soon take over in both Germany and France. On Feb. 23, Germany will hold a **snap federal election** (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/germany-elections-politics-big-ideas/>) after the governing coalition **fell** (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/germany-politics-scholz-coalition/>). The far-right Alternative for Germany is **on the rise** (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/germany-elections-politics-afd/>) and, if successful, could **push Germany** (<https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/62548/with-farright-support-german-parliament-passes-motion-to-restrict-migration--what-does-it-mean#:~:text=It%20calls%20for%20permanent%20border,made%20available%20to%20all%20of>) towards a more xenophobic, anti-migrant posture. And in France, Marine Le Pen’s far-right, explicitly anti-immigration National Rally party made **historic gains** (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/france-far-right-macron/>) in snap elections in June 2024. While not in power for now, it is more influential than ever before.

The European approach has come under increasing strain. As the data show, irregular migrants have responded by taking on increasing risk or **shifting to other routes** (<https://www.frontex.europa.eu/what-we-do/monitoring-and-risk-analysis/migratory-routes/migratory-routes/>). Meanwhile the Tunisian government must balance

prevention of departures to Europe with other objectives. Tunisian authorities tend to tolerate smuggling across the Algerian and Libyan borders—**estimated (https://ecfr.eu/publication/road-to-nowhere-why-europes-border-externalisation-is-a-dead-end/#_ftnref3)** at 5,000 people in 2023 alone—because it helps the economies in border communities and can contribute to intelligence gathering against threats such as terrorism. Many West African migrants—for whom Tunisian governments previously removed visa requirements in an effort to improve relations with other countries on the continent—also arrive in Tunisia on commercial flights.

Yet Tunisia lacks a legal framework—let alone a broader strategy—for dealing with these entrants. President Kais Saied’s politicization of migration and rhetoric has stoked racist attitudes, contributing to **discrimination (<https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/sub-saharan-migrant-workers-in-tunisia-are-victim-of-economic-exploitation-study-finds/>)** against sub-Saharanans effectively trapped inside Tunisia. Europe’s strengthening of Tunisian border security to prevent them from leaving—both by funding border guards and increasing patrols itself—only **exacerbates these conflicts (<https://ecfr.eu/publication/maghreb-migrations-how-north-africa-and-europe-can-work-together-on-sub-saharan-migration/>)**.

The challenge thus falls on local authorities in communities where migrants settle. Yet, newly elected and codified local councils lack adequate power and resources to develop their communities, suggesting they are unlikely to prioritize integration or tolerance of foreigners. Meanwhile security forces in governorates such as the city of Sfax—a hub for smuggling and departures for Europe—while seeking to crack down on irregular departures, are often left without clear central directives. The situation is rife for human rights violations, including **allegations (<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/tunisian-state-directly-implicated-sale-migrants-libya-report-finds>)** of Tunisian authorities’ involvement in human trafficking, as well as **collusion (<https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/03/tunisias-transformation-into-a-transit-hub-illegal-migration-and-policy-dilemmas?lang=en>)** between border security forces and smugglers.

Simultaneously, the European Union is under increased scrutiny over its alleged contributions to migrant abuse. The European Commission is **revising (<https://ecre.org/eu-external-partners-commission-planning-overhaul-of-funding-to-tunisia-following-abuse-revelations-%E2%80%95-commission-signs-e-3-billion-agreement-with-jordan-%E2%80%95-tunisian-mps-scrutinising-dr/>)** its funding agreements with Tunisia after **the Guardian revealed (<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2025/jan/24/eu-human-rights-tunisia-migrant-security-forces-migration>)** that EU-funded Tunisian security forces engaged in “widespread sexual violence” against hundreds of migrants in Tunisia. And several members of the European Parliament continue to **object (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/mar/13/european-commission-accused-of-bankrolling-dictators-by-meps-after-tunisia-deal>)** to any deals with Tunisia, arguing that by striking deals with the authoritarian Saied, who in his first term has largely failed to address his country’s dire economic conditions while ramping up repression, European governments are only enabling human rights abuses on top of an economic catastrophe that will lead to an even greater surge in migration.

Meanwhile, Saied appears to be increasingly trying to leverage his advantages over Europe in this arena. He has **said (<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/tunisia-will-not-be-europes-border-guard-president-says-2023-06-10/>)** that Tunisia will not be Europe’s border guard, and has acted on that rhetoric through forcible, inhumane clearings of tent camps in Tunis—even while ultimately **accepting (<https://www.eunews.it/en/2024/03/04/eu-150-million-to-support-economic-reforms-in-tunisia/>)** European funds for Tunisian border security. Perhaps taking its cues from Washington, the Tunisian parliament is now debating a **law (<https://www.newarab.com/news/tunisia-parliament-seeks-legalise-deportation-migrants>)** that would facilitate the return of most irregular migrants to their home countries. Tunisian human rights organizations have criticized the draft law, **arguing (<https://www.newarab.com/news/tunis-migrants-ouardia-forced-sign->**

repartition-papers) that migrants are often forced to sign repatriation papers against their will after enduring abuse at migrant centers.

Bashar al-Assad's fall in Syria could also affect the situation. As of December 2024, Germany **hosted** (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/germany-election-syria-refugees/>) more than **850,000** (<https://www.unrefugees.org/news/syria-refugee-crisis-explained/>) Syrian refugees, and Syrians make up the largest group (roughly 20 percent) of irregular migrants at Europe's borders. While it will **take time** (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/syria-assad-hts-refugees/>) for the post-Assad government to create the conditions of stability that make Syria an attractive place to which to return, a transition in Syria could affect patterns of movement for both Syrian refugee communities already in Europe and new groups of Syrians who may choose to migrate to Europe via Tunisia.

Facing growing internal and external condemnation of its current approach, Europe must develop a strategy to humanely address the migration crisis in a way that respects human rights. This should include reexamining its own efforts to absorb migrants while supporting Tunisia in creating a path for regularization of sub-Saharan Africans. European countries can also redirect funds spent on border security toward supporting international organizations in the processing of refugees and asylum-seekers in Tunisia (the UK recently announced **new efforts** (<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-partnership-with-tunisia-to-target-root-causes-of-irregular-migration>) along these lines); working with Tunisian local authorities on long-term development programs (as Italy has **begun to do** (https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/Conclusioni_230723.pdf)); and supporting NGOs promoting tolerance and anti-racism. Such a path would benefit both Europe and Tunisia by creating conditions for long-term economic growth and preventing further instability.

Sarah Yerkes is a senior fellow in the Middle East Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

*Sabina Henneberg is a Soref Fellow at The Washington Institute. This article was originally published **on the World Politics Review website** (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/europe-tunisia-migrants/>).* ❖

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