

Migrations: the world is flowing

2 - Stories of the “Border Burners” (Harraga)



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The Great escape: Young men emigrate... So do women and children!

This folder complements the question of irregular migration and focuses, this time, on how it affects the Egyptians, Algerians, Tunisians and Moroccans.

In an attempt to capture the causes of this phenomenon that we are calling – without any exaggeration - “the great escape”, the eight articles address the harsh social disparities between the rural world and the cities and between the different regions within countries. They are disparities caused by the random “parasitic” development, the sabotaging of agriculture and ecology with highly polluting extractive industries, the absence of public services outside of certain urban circles and the overall weakness and significant decline in basic services in the last decades... It shows the impact of those “disparities”: the congestion of an unemployed, despaired youth at the cities’ peripheries, treated like a human surplus while its problems are regarded with disdain and contempt (“Al Hokra”).

It leads to one of the motives of emigration which can be explained by the hegemony of the concept of “individual success”, associated with the fact of an ability to “make money” (without asking where it comes from), and the transformation of values that followed within these communities.

This folder embodies, through the example of the “border burners” (The “Harraga”, who burn the border through irregular migration and burn their personal documentation to impede repatriation), the limits of what the “informal economy” can provide and its incapacity to absorb the workforce, including those with higher education degrees. The phenomenon is growing among young women and unaccompanied minors who are, like the others and maybe even more, vulnerable to all kinds of oppressions and exploitations. Finally, the folder focuses on the policies put in place by the authorities to tackle the issue, their plans and their actual results.



EGYPT



Houmam Al-Sayed - Syria

Egypt: The Women and the Sea

Mona Allam

Writer and journalist from Egypt

The Egyptian woman is not only part of the question of irregular migration for being a migrant herself. Another facet that concerns her and seems more widespread is the fact that she is often a mother or a wife of an immigrant.

Nourhan Jamal Fathi (20 years old, Al Bohayra), Nashwa Mohamad Khamis El Ghouli (17 years old, Al Bohayra), Ghada Fathi Abdul Hamid Mansour (24 years old, Al Sharkiya), Atiyat Ahmed Sayyed Ahmed (23 years old, Al Sharkiya), Amira Ashraf Abdo Abdul Alim (17 years old, Al Fayoum)... are names that appeared on the list of the victims of the Rasheed shipwreck, on September 21st, 2016.

Of course, this list does not provide us with further information on the women. We don't know their social statuses, motives, or if they embarked on the boat by themselves or with their families. Though, a glance at the ages of the rest of the victims can give us some indications. Among those names, there is a certain number of infants and children, which means that at least some of these women embarked with their kids (and husbands?). This supposition is confirmed by the stories published by the newspapers about some of the survivors, such as Metwali Mohamad Ahmad, a 29-year-old man who lost all of his family that consists of his young wife and their 2-and-a-half-year-old son, in the sea.

This journey that had turned into a tragedy was nothing special with regard to the participation of women in the irregular migration of Egyptians, whether they depart from Egypt or start off the Libyan coast - which has become a central station for immigration after security was tightened on the Egyptian coast.

Last June, the Libyan navy stated that the coast guards have rescued 16 irregular migrants and recovered 3 corpses of infants, while more than a hundred persons were declared missing. According to the testimonies of one of the survivors, between 120 and 125 persons of Arab and African nationalities were on the boat and, among the missing ones, was an Egyptian infant. This indicates that entire Egyptian families, including women of course, still embark on the sea to reach Europe. It also gives a new confirmation that the phenomenon of irregular migration in Egypt is not, as usually perceived, exclusively masculine.

The change in numbers and percentage

The responsible of the International Organization for Migration program in Egypt, Laurent De Boeck, an official from the International Organization for Migration program in Egypt, says that determining the exact number

of irregular migrants and the percentage of women among them is very difficult, due to the nature of this type of movements that occur outside the formal channels. Thus, there are no official statistics on irregular migration in Egypt. As for the estimates of the Organization and according to the information it possesses on the number of Egyptian irregular migrants to Europe and the percentage of women among them, they are as follows:

In the year 2016

The number of irregular migrants reached 4230

58% of them were unaccompanied minors

2% were adult women

37% were adult men

The remaining percentage were accompanied minors

In the year 2017

The number of migrants reached 988

7.3% were unaccompanied minors

1.7% were adult women

This year, a drop of 76% in the number of migrants was registered compared to 2016, the number of unaccompanied minors has also drastically decreased, perhaps because migrants had to head to Libya in order to cross, which has made the whole process more difficult.

In the first quarter of 2018

The overall number of migrants reached 94

Between January and May of 2018, 85 Egyptians were intercepted while crossing irregular borders to Greece, Cyprus and Spain.

As Mr. De Boeck has stated and as the numbers show – there is an overall depletion in the movement of Egyptians departing from the Egyptian coast, to the point that all reports indicate that it became equal to nil while the movements of Egyptians were restricted to Libya and the Western coast of the Southern Mediterranean Sea.

This is most likely due to the measures taken by the Egyptian government

to combat irregular migration from the Northern Egyptian coast as this represents a top priority for the government. At the international level, the IOM has noticed a feminization of migration over the past decade, a phenomenon that has affected Egypt as well, although to a lesser extent. Mr. De Boeck confirmed that, through the direct assistance provided by the Organization, it was noted that both genders constitute an almost equal number of irregular migrants worldwide, and that the roles of women in society keep on changing which necessarily affects the patterns of migration: “according to statistics based on the migrants who request direct assistance from the Organization, we estimate that 52% of irregular migrants are women, more than 75% of whom are single mothers traveling with their children.” De Boeck stresses that women face greater dangers when deciding to immigrate irregularly because of their dual vulnerability, both as migrants and as women. He adds that poverty, gender inequalities and the lack of stable employment opportunities are integral and intertwined reasons that make these women vulnerable to risks, most notably to trafficking, either for sexual exploitation or forced labor where migrant women are subject to exploitation in the workplace, especially in the industrial or domestic work sectors.

The many facets of the relation of Egyptian women with immigration

However, the Egyptian woman is not only part of the question of irregular migration for being a migrant herself. Another facet that concerns her and seems more widespread is the fact that she is often a mother or a wife of an immigrant.

According to previous statements made by international officials who are well-acquainted with Egypt, and according to the reports of international organizations working in the field, 60% of the migrants from Egypt are children and minors, many of whom are the breadwinners for their families. Some of them decide to migrate independently while others take their families along. This can be explained by the desire to benefit from the rights and privileges granted by the European legislation to asylum-seeking children. The ages of quite a few victims of the Rasheed shipwreck fluctuates between 12 and 17 years old.

The village of Al-Jazirah Al-Khadra in the center of Metoubas of the governorate of Kafr El-Sheikh in Northern Egypt is one of the villages

where the rate of irregular migration has increased. It is separated from the village of “Rashid” (in the governorate of El Beheira) by the Rosetta Branch of the Nile which can be crossed in minutes on a medium-sized wooden boat. On both sides, bigger fishing boats are moored. The other end of the village is bounded by the Mediterranean Sea. In the vicinity of the village, there are other villages such as the Borg Rashid village (in the governorate of El Beheira) and the Borg Megheizel village (in the governorate of Kafr El-Sheikh) and other villages where the phenomenon of irregular immigration is widespread.

While wandering in the dusty, uneven roads of the town, you will find men and women sitting on the threshold of houses, groups of children playing, throwing stones on the many palm trees to make red or yellow dates fall on the ground. Not far, men and women are busy weaning baskets of palm leaves, their livelihood craft. You will also see canals of shallow still water full of dirt, a great number of coffee shops and stacked pipelines lately brought to connect the sewage network to the town which has for long suffered from problems in this domain. In general, the town, like any other Egyptian town, suffers from informal construction, lack of hygiene, a poor quality of services or the total absence of services altogether, be it in terms of infrastructure, medical services or other elements necessary for a decent life.

The principal activity of the town is fishing, but the situation of the town’s fishermen has deteriorated since the Fish Farming Project was started in the Ghalyoun pond in Kafr El Sheikh Governorate, in 2017. The governorate, crossed by the Nile river, bordered by the Mediterranean Sea and having also the Lake Burullus, is known for its abundant fish production, but the Fish Farming Project had set a zone in the sea to which access is forbidden to fishermen thus curtailing the available water where the fishermen could catch their livelihood product. Their losses were further multiplied with the increase in fuel prices and the recession accelerated. On the other hand, this project which was launched with huge publicity campaigns does not benefit the villagers who are not being offered any job opportunities and, as always, its accumulated gains are not feeding the ordinary people.

In addition to fishing, there is the craft of weaning “cages” and baskets from palm trees. Agricultural activities have also been harmed by the

water shortage which resulted in inconsistent irrigation for years. The amount of cultivated land corroded and the harvest became almost exclusively confined to palm trees and their produce of dates. Because of the widespread unemployment and the lack of stable job opportunities, the young people turn to seasonal work harvesting dates, though the harvest season lasts no longer than a month each year. Even university graduates - who are a small percentage of the villagers - find themselves working in harvesting with wages between 50 and a 100 Egyptian Pounds per day. A very small percentage of the villagers work in the mud-brick construction sites.

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Nobody in the village has forgotten the stories of the children and young people who were the victims of the Rasheed shipwreck. One victim was Hilal, the tuk-tuk driver who belonged to a fairly wealthy family. Another was Karim who was working in the seasonal date harvest and had tried to immigrate twice before embarking on his last journey, pushed by his father whose family was in a deplorable economic situation. Mohammed Sharaf was another victim; he was administrating the "Metoubas" page on Facebook and had lots of dreams for his village such as building a religious or educational institute for the villagers... Mohammed had always been against irregular migration but for some reason, at some point, he decided to go through with it. His father, who was working abroad, came back to the village after the accident and since then, he has been working on executing some of the projects as an homage to his departed son. His mother, on the other hand, still cries over the loss of her only son, while despising the uncle who had helped him flee from the house on the day of the travel without her knowing or agreeing. And there are others...

Poverty and lack of a better perspective have pushed a few to encourage

their sons to embark on the sea, hoping for them to reach a better place like others before them whose pictures they see on Facebook in the clean streets of Europe, appearing wealthier and dignified. This provokes a feeling of admiration and a strong desire to replicated the experience.

Agricultural activities have also been harmed by the water shortage which resulted in inconsistent irrigation for years. The amount of cultivated land corroded and the harvest became almost exclusively confined to palm trees and their produce of dates.

The privileges of childhood!

Most of the immigrants leave during childhood (between 11 and 18) before having finished their primary education. The intention is to benefit from the advantages that European countries offer minors, such as the right of asylum, an opportunity to attend an apprenticeship and then, maybe, to get a job in a workshop.

They first go to Italy and then to France, England or Belgium... The parents bet on the young immigrants ability to lift their families out of poverty and to “rise to the surface of world”, as they say. The immigrant who usually works in Europe in extremely difficult conditions - in a construction site, as a plunger in a restaurant or a coffee shop, or, as he used to do in his village, as a blacksmith – is seen by his family as a goose that lays golden eggs. He takes care of his sisters before their marriage and buys their luxurious furniture which can cost up to tens of thousands of Egyptian Pounds, and sends money in hard currency.

Thus, the parents, who usually suffer from extreme poverty and illiteracy and work as fishermen or in weaning, encourage their children to leave. Even the mothers do so, especially since, thanks to the internet, it has become possible to talk with their immigrant children daily with sound and image.

But it is not a matter that concerns only the extremely poor families. Some average households or even others with (relatively) good economic conditions send their children to improve their status. They want their sons to find jobs with incomes that are higher than anything they could get in

their own country, if they ever did find one. For instance, a prosperous agricultural engineer from the village has sent his son on an irregular immigration journey five years ago. In some families there is more than one migrant.

Often the mothers, either by themselves or with the help of their children or sisters, are the ones who manage the money sent by the immigrant son. They usually buy a piece of land and build a house for the son to get married and move into when he comes back. The son would not return before turning thirty so that he doesn't have to perform obligatory military service. When the "good catch" comes back, he picks the girl who's good enough for him, most likely a middle school or high school student. The girl of this vulnerable age will be thrilled about the prospect of a fiancé who can buy her clothes and luxurious electronic devices before going back to Europe to prepare the official papers so she can join him.

It is often the mothers who manage the money sent by the immigrant son. They buy a piece of land and build him a house to married in when he comes back. The son would not return before turning thirty so that he avoids obligatory military service.

The amount of money required to migrate is gathered during a celebration night in the village. The one who is about to migrate invites the families of the village to collect cash presents ("No'ta") from them. The "No'ta" nights are a well-known custom in the village. Those who want to marry a daughter, pay back a debt, start a project, undergo a surgery or send a son (or daughter) on a migration boat resort to the custom to collect the needed amount of money which can reach 20 or 30 thousand Egyptian Pounds and sometimes more. Sometimes the money can also be gathered by selling livestock or by borrowing from relatives or close friends.

An example: Umm Hassan

In the narrow uneven roads of the town, the modest homes neighbor the modern multi-story luxurious houses. There are also walled-off estates where construction has not yet started. Most of those lands belong to families of irregular migrants whose economic situation has improved due to the migration of one of their members. Those families have become

owners of property after having suffered from poverty and difficult living conditions. However, the home of Umm Hassan remained the same despite the fact that her son, Hassan, had migrated to Italy 5 years ago.

The old rickety house is now as empty as the heart of its owner, Umm Hassan, who has moved to her parents' place. Everybody talks about "Aida", this forty-something year old lady who has "never saw a good day in her life" and who was windowed too early. Her husband, a fisherman, got into an accident that affected his mental capacities. A few years later, he passed away, leaving his wife alone with 3 young children: two boys and a girl, Hassan being the middle one. She used to live off a small grocery store attached to her house. For the simple illiterate woman who probably never stepped a foot outside her village, the sea was a way to guarantee a better life for her children. She couldn't think of a solution other than sending her son away just like the other widows did. She collected money for him when he was twenty-five years old and he migrated. But, once he finished studying in the school he was sent to there, he got arrested and jailed after some street clashes in which he himself had no part, according to the circulating versions of the story.

In solitary confinement, Hassan was complaining from harassments and attacks inside the prison. He was then transported to the hospital in a critical condition. The prison management claimed that it was a suicide attempt, although he only had a month left to serve his sentence. Hassan died in July in unclear circumstances. His remains were repatriated to be buried in the village and the name "Hassan Ramadan Mukhaymar Sharaf" was added to the long list of Egyptians who left and were forgotten except in the hearts of their bereaved families.

"I made him leave because our situation was difficult and his father died... I lost him... I asked him to leave against my own will". Umm Hassan didn't build a new house and the family got dispersed so the old house was abandoned.

Testimonies

These are the testimonies of women who have not yet taken to the sea and are either still waiting in Egypt or have crossed into Libya. They speak about their pain, dreams and hesitations, and report about sexual assaults and other exploitations they are subjected to on the way.

Women had their share of reports and researches on their irregular migration to Europe. It is true that they represent a small percentage amongst the thousands of immigrants who embark on the sea, but they are the weakest link, the most vulnerable travelers and those who suffer exploitation most. They might be fleeing regions of wars and conflicts, economic migrants, accompanying their husbands, their families, leaving alone, with their children or victims of human trafficking networks.

This is an attempt to shed light on the suffering of women in the context of irregular migration, through true stories told by those who have lived the experience or those whose situation is pushing them to consider it. It also a representation of some of the researches that addressed those women' situations during a journey full of dangers and abuses.

“Ahlam” in the sea

“Ahlam” (*) is a 25-year-old Sudanese woman who currently lives with her 30-year-old husband in Sweden. They reached Sweden after an irregular journey through Egypt which cost her 7 thousand Dollars. Ahlam was then 7-months pregnant. She told me her story over an internet chat: “I traveled with my husband in July 2015. We were around 200 persons on the boat from different nationalities: Sundanese, Eritreans, Somalians, Egyptians and Syrians, women, men and children. There were not so many women, we were maybe 15 or 20 and none of them were Egyptians. Some were with their husbands like myself, but I remember that one woman was alone with her child, as she was divorced. There were no more than 5 children. I had entered in Egypt by plane in a regular way.

My husband entered by land through smuggling. We reunited in Cairo in a district where smugglers – who are Sundanese and Egyptians – rent flats to the smuggled migrants until the set date of their trip. The time of stay in these flats usually fluctuates between a week and a month. It was one of the most difficult time as we lived in anxiety and stress, always fearing a possible raid”.

Ahlam didn't know exactly where she was, all she knew was that they were in Egypt. The smugglers – as she says – very carefully avoided mentioning the name of the neighborhood or their real names. She didn't even know where she had embarked on the sea from, although she mentioned later that she realized they had actually left from Alexandria.

“We moved from Cairo to Alexandria in private vehicles, and there were also flats prepared for our stay but over a shorter period... We were then transported at night in trucks designed for the transport of goods. We all sat there, men and women, and were covered by a sheet to hide us... It was difficult to sit in this position but we had crossed the distance in 10 minutes only and we got out in a place next to the sea... We then had to cross a long distance walking on the sand... we walked for around 40 minutes, it was exhausting and arduous because there were hills in the sand but, at this point, you cannot go back or else you get caught by the police. When we arrived to the shore, we had to go into water and swim a little distance to get to the rubber compound which transported us to the bigger boat. I was very tired and was not able to swim but some Sudanese young men helped me and raised me up”.

Ahlam says that the days she had spent in the sea were the worst and most difficult experience she had ever lived. She spent 12 days on a big boat and a day and a night on a smaller one before a rescue ship arrived to transport them to Sicily in Italy, after which their journey in Europe begun.

“The experience was extremely bad, I was seasick and had to lie down all the time to avoid throwing up. Everybody on the boat was seasick.

Sometimes the waves were getting very high and hitting the boat in a scary manner. It was windy and it rained. Everybody was under huge pressure and our only choice was to cry, not only the women or the children but also the men. The small boat was overcrowded; it was not made to fit 200 persons. I could not extend my legs even though my body needed rest as I was pregnant. Us women were sitting in the back of the boat where the ventilation was bad. I was not able to go to the front of the boat to breathe. I grew phobic of the sea, whenever I saw water I felt like vomiting. On top of all this, there was the malnutrition, the lack of appetite and dehydration... We learned that a Syrian lady had died on another boat trip. By the end of the journey, the engine of the small boat failed and we became at risk of flipping or drowning. Everybody kept crying and we surrendered to death until we saw the rescue boat... Many suffer from traumatic disorders following the horrific experience. I suffered from arthritis in the hips and back pain. Since I have arrived here, I am getting treatment for what has been diagnosed as sciatica. I had no

health problems before... I now live on pain killers without finding the right medication. The doctors tell me that my problem is more psychological than it is physical, so I have requested to see a psychologist. I try to forget about what happened but it is difficult to forget.”

It was the second time that Ahlam and her husband tried to immigrate irregularly. On their first attempt, the Egyptian security forces caught them and arrested them for two weeks before repatriating them to Sudan. They took their chances again after a short while. Despite the fact that they were treated well, Ahlam says that period was difficult for her. She felt like she was being punished for wanting to travel and live in a better place.

She had an internal conflict between what the law stipulates and what an individual wants and the opportunities that present themselves. She says that she was prepared to try again a third and fourth time if necessary.

On immigrating while being pregnant, she says: “We did not plan on travelling to give birth in a European country for our kid to get a nationality. When my husband proposed to me the idea of travelling, I was indeed pregnant in my fifth month but it was difficult to postpone as there is a season for those journeys that usually happen during the summer. Also, the idea of travelling with a child inside my belly was easier for me than the idea of living this experience while carrying a newborn who could possibly drown in the sea.”

Ahlam did not know all the details of the journey she was about to embark on. “It was my husband’s idea. He told me about it and I accepted. I did not imagine that it was this dangerous or this bad. My husband told me that the journey in the sea would last for a day or two... He himself did not know the truth, and the smugglers don’t tell you the whole truth. There are some things you only discover when you enter Europe. I did not even know anything about the process of asylum seeking in Europe.

I thought we were travelling to work, just as if we were going to another Arab country for example. But my husband wanted to seek asylum from the beginning.”

Ahlam says that the cause for their immigration is economic, to improve their financial state. Even though they come from western Sudan, they

lived in other regions. She is from Khartoum and her husband is from Gedaref. They have nothing to do with the Darfur conflicts and her husband has no problem whatsoever with the authorities, but what supported their application for asylum in Sweden was a personal problem that concerns her husband, which Ahlam prefers not to disclose... Ahlam's husband had immigrated irregularly before to Israel. He had worked there for 3 years before coming back to Sudan. It is a common phenomenon among the Sudanese young men, especially those coming from western Sudan.

Ahlam has a postgraduate degree while her husband didn't finish his university education. In Sweden, she worked for a while in children rehabilitation while her husband currently works in a furniture shop. "I am thinking of going back to Sudan as soon as I get the citizenship. I regret coming here, I should have stayed in Sudan and let my husband come here by himself to work. Our economic situation in Sudan was good, and I think it was much better than our life here. The reality is very different than what we imagine about life in Europe. Here, you can earn money – even if it takes time – and the services are great in comparison with Sudan but, at the same time, you lose important things. There is a feeling of isolation and the fact that you are shunned for belonging to a different culture. You can also be mistreated for wearing a hijab or having your own traditions.

The working hours consume most of your time and you have no social life... It is difficult to find halal food and there's the fear that your children might internalize values you don't agree with through school... I am trying to convince my husband of what I am thinking... I have lived here for 3 years now and I've learned a lot, as they say "you learn a lot by being estranged". I was not aware of things enough when I agreed on coming. We might earn a lot of money here but we will lose our children and years of our lives. We are the victims of Europe. It was not worth going through all these dangers".

Malath

Malath is a 33-year-old Syrian woman. She chose to start telling her story from her asylum stop in Turkey where she has lived for a year and a half. "During this time, I felt safe after the destruction caused by the war in Syria. But security alone is not enough, I was not financially stable as it was difficult to find a job in Istanbul because I don't know the language. I

could not stay in Turkey where I had no future nor foundations I could rely on to start anew... I felt like leaf in the blowing wind. This is when I thought about leaving for Europe which presents many advantages for refugees. Before, I was a fierce opponent to the idea of irregular migration, but I came to a point where I didn't feel alive in the first place, so I no longer feared for my life. It was then that the idea started to become appealing to me."

On one night of 2016, Malath and some of her friends departed from Izmir in the direction of Greece on a small rubber compound transporting, in exchange for 1000 dollars each, around 40 persons of Syrian nationality. In two hours, they had reached the shores of Chios island, according to a GPS. There, a rescue boat of the Red Cross came to them. "On this trip I saw a lot of women by themselves or with their children but without the father. From what I understood of them, most of the times, their husbands are already in Europe and the reunification papers take a long time so most of the women prefer to travel by sea with their children to avoid the wait and escape the war. But what I found surprising was that some women were going through this experience alone while their husbands were sitting in Turkey or Egypt waiting for the reunification papers!"

Malath left from Greece to a European country. For her, life in Europe is better despite the problems related to language and integration. As for the future, it remains uncertain, as war refugees are deported after the end of the war in their home country.

"Hayat" and her friends: before the difficult decision

Hayat, Salwa, Afaf and Fatima are 4 Sudanese women aged between 26 and 39 years old. They all belong to tribes from Western Sudan but were living in Khartoum or in Omdurman. Now, they all live in Egypt without their families because they are either divorced, or their husbands went back to Sudan. They, or their children, suffer from health issues that require physical or psychological treatments. Three of them have said they were ready to migrate irregularly to Europe to find a better life as they have lost all hope in migrating regularly through the United Nations. Salwa is the only one who said that she was not ready to take the risk or to break the law. Salwa is 39 years old, divorced, and lives with a relative. She was the last one of the 4 to arrive to Egypt where she applied months ago to

register in the UNHCR. The three others are already registered and the times of their stay vary between two and four years. Salwa said that she would only immigrate through the UNHCR. She is hoping for a change of regime in Sudan so that she could go back and live a safe life in her country without being prosecuted.

Afaf, 33 years old, is raising two daughters, one of whom has special needs. She speaks about a friend of hers who went from Egypt to Libya and, from there, migrated irregularly to Europe with her brother and children. Those stories circulate in their circles, encouraging them to take the leap.

“Hayat” immediately strikes the eye with her tall gracious beauty, strength, and kindness. She was wearing a headscarf that seemed like it had been tied in a hurry. She talked with a heavy accent about her harsh situation which caused her indignation but hadn’t taken away her ability to smile and be kind to others. Two years ago, Hayat came to Egypt with her husband and children but, after a year, her husband, who wasn’t able to find a job, had to go back to Sudan. He was not able to go back to Omdurman where they used to live because he belonged to a Sudanese opposition movement, so he went to a village in Darfur to work as a farmer. Hayat refused to come along because of the poor living conditions in the village, the absence of basic services and the very low income that farmers make when selling their goods, especially given the recent rise in taxes.... “They have forbidden God’s mercy to fall on us,” says Salwa, describing in her own words what the Sudanese government has done to the farmers and the agricultural sector... Add to that, of course, the ramifications of the security disturbances.

Fearing possible sexual aggressions and as a precautionary measure, some women and girls from Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia passing through Khartoum, Sudan had injected themselves with contraceptives or brought with them emergency contraceptives on the journey.

In the absence of her husband, Hayat bears alone the responsibility of her four children aged between 1 and a half and 11 years old. The woman, in her thirties, carrying her toddler in her arms, talks about the increasing financial burden and the difficulties she is facing while mingling in a

society she is not used to. She talks about harassment and surveillance by the neighbors which have pushed her to relocate more than once. She expresses her loss of the sense of safety. “Hayat”, who has a university degree, was a nurse in her country. Here, she is trying to make a living by selling Sudanese products which allow her to make a small marginal profit if any. She makes 5 to 10 Egyptian Pounds for every pack sold as part of a project sponsored by an association partnering with the UNHCR where refugee women work. “All day I stand on my feet to sell jars of hair conditioner,” and this allows her to increase her revenue by a few pounds which she can’t do without as the financial help presented by the UNHCR is not sufficient and the support it provides for the children’s education is partial. Hayat started thinking that whatever she is putting into the children’s education should instead be saved aside for the immigration trip. Hayat suffers from kidney problems and needs to undergo surgery but she hasn’t found any organization in Egypt that would be willing to provide for the costs. She tries to circumvent her pains by eating parsley and drinking rye, yet even this represents a burden on her budget.

“It is my only hope in this life.” This is how Hayat describes immigration to Europe, considering it the only assurance for a better future for her children and for the family’s reunification. “The chances of migrating through the UNHCR have become very weak,” so her only option is irregular migration.

In 2016, Hayat and her kids they were supposed to leave on the Rasheed boat. The cost of the journey for one person was 35 thousand Egyptian Pounds and it was free for kids under 8 years of age. The shipwreck made them have second thoughts about the project, but this “retreat” – at least for Hayat – didn’t last for long. The idea reemerged, more insistently than before, under the weight of her harsh conditions.

It is clear that Hayat is conflicted between two feelings: the fear of risking her children’s lives and the desire to provide them with a better life which makes it imperative to leave. The last time I have spoken to her, she firmly declared that she had decided to immigrate and that she would not back down “even though the price might be death”, as she only has one life to live and she had no future for this life unless she went away. And despite her husband’s opinion, who will probably ask her to be patient and not to risk their children’s lives, she reiterates that as soon as she “puts her hand on the money”, she will take her children and leave. Hayat tells

us that the cost of migration is around 6 thousand dollars for a family and 4 thousand for individuals. She says that she is counting on overdue payments from her former work in Sudan. Generally, some resort to selling their houses or belongings in Sudan or depend on the help of relatives who work abroad, for instance. Afaf spoke about a Sudanese refugee woman residing in Cairo with her 9 children who sold her kidney to gather the required amount.

Libya

Libya is considered to be a main crossing point for the migrants and refugees going to Europe, especially with the increased security imposed by Egypt. A study conducted by the UNICEF, published in February 2017, and entitled “A deadly journey for children: the migration route through the Mediterranean Sea” stated that, since September 2016, the number of migrants in Libya is estimated to be around 256, 11% of them are women, 9% are children and a big proportion of these are unaccompanied. Through interviews conducted with 122 migrants – 80 women, 40 children aged between 10 and 17 – coming from 12 countries from different regions of the Middle East, North and Sub-Saharan Africa, the study concluded that almost half of the interviewed women have suffered from sexual violence or sexual abuse during the journey. Sexual violence is common and even organized at the crossing points and checkpoints. It is often expected from women to provide sexual services or pay cash money to cross the Libyan border. To deal with possible sexual aggressions and as a precautionary measure, some women and girls from Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia who were passing by Khartoum, Sudan inject themselves with contraceptives and carry with them on the journey emergency contraceptives.

Some of the mothers have declared that they had been forced to leave some of their children in their countries of origin with relatives, friends or neighbors. It is estimated that women represent 20% of those arrested in the detention centers in Libya which are estimated to be around 34 centers at least. The interviewed women have talked about the harsh conditions in which they live in those centers: overcrowding, very high temperatures in the summer, frigid winter temperatures, malnutrition, sexual and verbal violence from the guards. Added to that, the lack of health care leaves the women unable to acquire feminine hygiene products or medicine. A girl who was detained in the Sabrata Center said, “one of the women was

pregnant in this place, she was about to have her baby. Once her baby was born, there was no hot water available, so she had to use salted water to take care of her newborn”.

Libya is also considered to be an essential transit point for the human trafficking networks. One of their activities is to smuggle women from Africa to Europe to work in forced prostitution. The International Organization on Migration (IOM) opened an investigation in November 2017 regarding the death of 26 Nigerian migrant women and girls whose bodies were lifted in the Mediterranean Sea from two boats coming from North Africa. At that time, the IOM assured that those bodies probably belonged to victims of human trafficking for purposes of sexual exploitation, and that it was not the first incident of this kind. The bureau of Mr. Laurent de Boeck, the head of the Organization’s program in Egypt, declared that, based on the data gathered between 2006 and 2016 by the Organization, the women constitute the biggest proportion of victims of trafficking for purposes of sexual exploitation. According to a report issued by the Organization in Nigeria, 98% of the women migrants who arrive to Europe from Nigeria are victims of trafficking.

() All the names appearing in these testimonies are pseudonyms.*



Johnny Semaan - Syria

Egypt: Calm Shores and Agitated Depths

Mona Sleem

Writer and journalist from Egypt

Despite the infamous story of the “Rasheed” shipwreck, it does not differ in any way from other scenarios of irregular migration in Egypt which all go through five stages...

“If God wills, He grants sustenance” was the name of the boat that sank in the sea near the Egyptian city of “Rasheed” in the middle of the year 2016. With it, around 200 Egyptians and Africans drowned among around 400 passengers, according to estimations. Two years have passed since, and the images of that shipwreck remain present in the Egyptians’ collective memory. The daughter who lost her mother and sister who were fleeing a father who couldn’t stand his wife’s illness and consistently used violence and beating. The father who screamed on television, protesting against the discourse of the President of the Republic when he addressed to the youth with these words: “You’re leaving us to go where, exactly? ... And for whom, then, are we doing all this work here?” The father replied: “I don’t regret giving my benediction to my son to leave and I don’t accept that you accuse him after his death of being a greedy person who has gambled his life away. You are the one responsible for my son and others like him throwing themselves at sea to look for a dignified life...” A small hospital’s silent walls keep the memory of the bodies piled on its floor; so many of them that not an inch of the floor hasn’t been in direct contact with death... The swollen blue bodies covered with ice and tears of their families.

The case was closed after 50 persons were charged for voluntary manslaughter and given sentences ranging from 3 to 25 years. Then, the debate shifted to Cairo where new legislations that aimed to limit the phenomenon of irregular migration were discussed.

The trauma of the shipwreck

After the shipwreck, the President said, “From that day on, not a single ship will depart from Egypt”. Many meetings were held between Egypt and FRONTEX (the European Border and Coast Guards Agency). Egypt didn’t agree on participating in the “alternative settlements” agreement that Libya had accepted and which resulted in the injection of European funds to limit the flowing of thousands of migrants, 80% of whom depart from the Libyan shores. Centers of accommodation and repatriation were built there.

To compensate that, Egypt requested security support and investments’ promotion to be able to both face the networks of international smugglers and present work opportunities as well. A new legislation, criminalizing

the operations of irregular migration was enacted with sentences of up to 25 years of imprisonment.

Those decisions and the trauma of the “Rasheed shipwreck” have resulted in a widespread recession of the operations of irregular migration departing from the Egyptian shores. But have they stopped? What is their proportion? Have the economic and social reasons that prompt those departures among the Egyptian population and others – as Egypt is a transit country for Eritreans, Sundaneses, Somalians and Syrians – disappeared? Or is it that the security and the legislation are still tight after the tragedy while some are waiting for the situation to relax after a while?

The Egyptian journey, from a hotspot to a cool one (2014 – 2018)

This journey started in 2014, not on the Egyptian shores but on their Italian counterparts where the FRONTEX employees were sitting in confusion. The European Union had decided to stop granting free-entry visas to the Eastern European countries and halt the land transit through these countries towards Western Europe. This made the Eastern Mediterranean route a main gate for the migrants. Therefore, the number of boats departing from Libya, Egypt and Tunisia towards Italy, Spain and Greece increased.

According to the statistics of the European Union, Egypt is ranked second after Eritrea in the number of minor migrants arriving to Italy.

The estimations of the European Union state that around 181 thousand migrants have crossed the Mediterranean Sea towards Europe in 2016. More than 80% of them have departed from the Libyan coasts while the others departed from Tunisia. The number of journeys departing from Egypt during the first 6 months of 2016 have reached a thousand and the number of Egyptian migrants officially registered in the European accommodation centers has increased from 344 persons in 2015 to 2875 in June 2016. Also, the number of migrants from all nationalities departing from the Egyptian shores has increased drastically in 2016 (by 104 per cent) while 70 per cent of these migrants were coming from African sub-Saharan countries.

Thus, the Egyptians have become among the first ten nationalities who cross towards Europe through this path. The minors (who are less than 18 years old) constitute 60 per cent of them. Naturally, they aim for the minors' rehabilitation centers on "the other side". According to the statistics of the European Union, Egypt is ranked second after Eritrea in the number of minor migrants arriving to Italy.

Therefore, it was not surprising that Fabrice Leggeri, the president of "Frontex" declared, only 3 months after the "Rasheed shipwreck" that "Egypt seems to have become a departure point for migrants; we can describe it as a hotspot".

Can "business" stop the migration flow?

The Egyptian authorities point out the intensification of projects of fish canning and salting in provinces that witness a great number of migrations, such as "Kafr el Sheikh". Official statistics reveal that 25 thousand job opportunities have been created. Many villages have also been improved due to the migration movement, like the "El Gezeera El Khadraa" which had previously lived under the poverty line and without any services until 2016, when its proximity to the "Rasheed" port turned it into a station for "storing" Africans who wanted to migrate.

After the "Rasheed" shipwreck, many villages have also been improved due to the migration movement, like the "El Gezeera El Khadraa" which had previously lived under the poverty line and without any services until 2016, when its proximity to the "Rasheed" port turned it into a station for "storing" Africans who wanted to migrate.

In contrast to those modest numbers, other shocking numbers issued by the UNHCR came in a report entitled "Human Trafficking and Migrants Smuggling": the investigation describes this kind of business as being "profitable", the overall sum earned by smugglers from Africa to Europe and from South and Central America to its North reaches 6.800 billion Dollars a year. Some of the smugglers earn more than 60 thousand Dollars a week while the migrant pays between a thousand and 10 thousand Dollars.

There is, on one hand, the dire humanitarian conditions which are worsening in countries where the social, economic and political environment is pushing the people to leave. On the other hand, there are unending legislations and procedures to mitigate the phenomenon of irregular migration. Then come the shocking numbers of the profits accumulated by this traffic. Mercy, greediness, dreams and nightmares are all mixed up in this world.

Nour Khalil, a researcher on the matters of irregular migration in Egypt said, “First, it is impossible to confirm the government’s statistics on irregular journeys between Egypt and Europe. We cannot know if they have completely stopped or to what extent they have regressed. Those numbers rely on those of the migrants who have been arrested - whether in Egypt before their departure or in Europe after their arrival. The decrease in the number of arrested ones does not necessarily mean that the number of journeys departing from Egypt to Europe have also declined.” He adds, “The Rasheed shipwreck led to anxiety among those wanting to leave irregularly. The government also promulgated the law 82 in the year 2016 on irregular migration and human trafficking. It also tightened security to try and stop it. The Upper Egypt and the Delta regions are still a centrifuge of people and migrants. Irregular migration journeys are ongoing, at a lower rate whose value we cannot define because of the absence of methods for doing so... Since 2013, many Syrians have been migrating irregularly from Egypt. They get into the country through the southern borders with Sudan after the Egyptian authorities decided not to allow their entry without a previously acquired visa.”

The aftermaths of the Rasheed tragedy

In an attempt to understand what is happening on the ground, we turned once again to “Rasheed”, a beautiful city surrounded by all kinds of secrets. A year after the shipwreck, fear is still overwhelming. A final judgment was issued against the accused ones amid complaints that “the poor people involved were condemned, while the more important people who were not from the Rasheed village were sentenced in absentia and shifted their activities to other cities.”

Many official representatives of the city were changed and the town of “Burg Rasheed” became a permanent focus of attention. We were trying to reach out for Hajj “M.A” who was released while his three sons remain

in prison on charges of having taken part in transporting the migrants in their small boat -named after their last name- to a bigger one that waited in the middle of the sea. As we were investigating, we met with a vendor who warned us, “Nobody will tell you anything and if you keep on asking questions, you’ll get arrested. The place is full of anonymous informants.” After knocking on Hajj “M.A.”’s door, we were sent off after being told, “We have nothing to declare, they have left and we paid the price while the ships are still departing. Along the entire shoreline, all the way to Libya, the most common thing is the small fishermen being paid by the “big shots” to transport migrants who want to leave.”

We went to the office of the lawyer “A.J” who defended the angry man who had shut the door in our faces. He tipped us on the judgement issued against the accused ones, which bore information on the irregular migration journeys from Egypt before the tragedy of the Rasheed shipwreck.

A road map... of the Sea

The story of the Rasheed ship is not exceptional in any positive nor negative way in comparison to other scenarios of irregular migration in Egypt, except for the fact that there was an insistence on overloading the boat with a huge number of people which led to it sinking very fast.

This dangerous and profitable traffic always goes through five stages. The departure point is, of course, planned: a local realtor, usually a “big shot” -whether he has an amassed fortune or is well connected- works by himself or within a team and has strong connections with international networks that profit from irregular migration.

The overall sum earned by smugglers from Africa to Europe and from South and Central America to its North reaches 6.800 billion Dollars a year.

This realtor contracts with a fishing boat owner over sailing towards Europe without getting caught by the border troops and without authorization. After that, he forms an army of collaborators across the provinces to assist him. Those go to the gathering points of Africans and Syrians and to a great number of Egyptian towns. The realtor agrees on a payment ranging between 40 and 60 thousand Egyptian pounds (4 thousand Dollars) with the migrant and, for two months or more, keeps contact with

the prospective migrants until the decisive moment comes when all the migrants are gathered and transported to the coastal cities.

The third stage starts with recruiting fishermen and youth from the coastal cities to camouflage the entry of buses carrying those who aspire to migrate and find places to accommodate them (usually in farms or poultry farms near the coast) for periods ranging between 10 days and two weeks. During the accommodation time, the big fishing boat - which will not be used for its usual fishing activities - manages to get into the territorial waters with its crew of fishermen and sailors on board. Then, the fourth stage starts with the small boats and vessels transporting the travelers at night to the bigger boat. Finally, the fifth and final stage begins: the journey of the transportation to Europe; the dream.

The case files... a retroactive reading

In the “Rasheed” boat, the dream turned into a nightmare. The case files uncovered the magnitude of the gains that pushed the journey’s operators to double the number of travelers.

The drowned boat was bought by its last owner only 3 months prior to the attempted departure for a million and 7 hundred Egyptian Pounds. The investigation uncovered that it was bought especially for this purpose. Its owner received from the big local middleman “Al Hout” (The Whale) approximately half a million Pounds while the middlemen attracting the travelers were getting from the latter 5% from the sum that each passenger they brought was paying. They tried to earn maximal profits, so they made the travelers under 18 who were going to the children centers in Italy pay 20 thousand Pounds. A forged “maritime merchant document” was given for 50 thousand Pounds to delude the migrants into believing that they had official papers to enter Europe. As for those who accommodated and stored the travelers on the shores, they received 400 Pounds for each person which equals approximately 160 thousand Pounds in ten-days-time.

Preliminary calculations reveal a net profit for the big local broker amounting to one million Pounds. The lawyer of a group of small defendants said that the role of his clients “was limited to the transport of the travelers in small boats and providing them with food. They didn’t know about the bad

intentions of loading the big boat with twice what it could carry and they had no intention of intentional murder as charged by the prosecution. Meanwhile, the accused high profile people who had engineered the whole operation ran away and from what was heard about them, have gone back to their activities in cities other than Rasheed.”

“The poor ones are the ones who were condemned, whereas the “big shots” were not from the town of Rasheed and they were sentenced in absentia and have shifted their activities to other cities.”

Such a discourse is not very different from what came out of the police investigation which described the fugitives as “seasoned in irregular migration”, whose “names are well-known”. This prompted many observers to point fingers of accusation to the competent bodies that already had information, meaning that these operations were, in fact, not a shocking surprise. Hiding all those migrants (not less than 300 persons for every trip) who are mostly Africans in a small town without the security forces discovering them, moving a fishing boat and coming back with it without problems despite its fake license and pretending that said boat was on a fishing trip for more than 14 hours... are all – logically - matters that raise suspicion.

A final comment on the incident that may be the “last one”

Researcher Nour Khalil says, “The sentences in the Rasheed case are heavy for the perpetrators and especially for the main defendants. But, there might be a mistake in the procedures that could allow an appeal in cassation and the commutation of the sentences in the subsequent litigations, or even their abrogation for some of the accused ones. The case was also devoid (both in the investigation and the sentences) of any determination of the responsibility of the state or its employees towards the incident, and especially concerning the delay in the rescue operations which caused the death of more victims. Who is responsible for this? And why aren’t they been punished? Doesn’t the state have enough equipment, ships and rescue boats?”

As for the future, Khalil mentioned that the latest measures taken by the government, such as the promulgation of a law to restrict irregular

migration (the Law 82, 20188) are good but very late. The law wasn't promulgated until after the Rasheed incident, so was the government waiting for 300 humans to die to take this step? As for the law itself, it lacks protective measures for the victims. Even if it lifts penal responsibility from the migrants, it doesn't place any policies to protect the survivors and the victims just as it doesn't state what would happen of the migrants who are fleeing from wars and conflict zones. For instance, the law stipulates that a special fund should be established to help the victims and protect the witnesses by decision and regulation of the Council of Ministers. Although the law was passed two years ago, nothing new has happened on this front.

Scenes from the stories of irregular migrations spanning over two years confirm the absence of concrete answers and the persistence of open-ended questions. The calm shores do not mean that the depths of the sea have settled in peace.



Semaan Khawam - Syria

Irregular migration of the farmers to Europe and the end of the Egyptian village

Ahmed Shihab El-Dine

Journalist, from Egypt

With the decline of agricultural revenues, Egyptian farmers have lost their lands. The incomes of formal and factory works are not sufficient to keep pace with the increasingly high living costs. The paradigm of the migrant is a seductive one for the villagers and has played a role in changing traditional standards and values.

Gamal Abdel Nasser, the first Egyptian president after the revolution of 1952, couldn't imagine that agriculturists, after the Agrarian Reform Act, would end up selling their lands, immigrating to Europe and putting themselves at risk of drowning in the sea. Some of them come back with what they have earned, build on their agricultural land and change the socio-economic structures of their villages. The Agrarian Reform Act assigned the limit of land-ownership to 200 acres (1) for each individual and distributed the rest of the land to the employed farmers (between 2 to 5 acres). Two million acres of land were also reclaimed for the High Dam project that aimed to enable Egypt to become food self-sufficient.

Bahia Abdul Salam (63 years old, retired) tells her childhood memories of the village of "Siger" in the Gharbia Governorate. The agricultural lands were owned by the big landlords and the agriculturists were working for them. When Abdul Nasser came, he distributed the equivalent of five acres to each wage-earning farmer against the will of the owners. The headmen of the villages, after the land redistribution, couldn't keep on living in the village so, some of them went to Cairo and Alexandria while others left Egypt altogether.

Decades after the experience of Abdul Nasser, illiteracy rates are still high and the rural areas suffer from underdevelopment. These reasons push villagers to move to big cities such as the capital Cairo, Alexandria or industrial cities... In the seventies of the last century, many agriculturists and artisans have immigrated to Iraq, Libya, the Gulf countries and Europe.

An old Immigration

In 1975, the number of Egyptians working outside the Arab region exceeded 370 thousand - out of the 655 thousand total migrants. During the year 1980, more than a million Egyptians were working outside of Egypt. In 1986, they were more than 2.25 million. Many workers outside Egypt sent money to their families with transfers reaching two billion dollars in 1979 which equals the total gains from the cotton export, the transit charges of the Suez Canal crossing and tourism combined.

The decrease in oil prices during the Iraq-Iran war led to stagnation in the job market in Iraq and the Gulf countries, and cost many Egyptians their jobs. This led to a slower workforce immigration to these countries in the

beginning of the nineties of the last century in favor of irregular migration to Europe.

The temptation to migrate remained an irresistible dream, especially for those who failed to get any education, as employment prospects in the Gulf countries worsened after the private sector started relying on cheap labor coming from Asian-Pacific states and after the collapse of the Iraqi economy due to the blockade that followed the Gulf war (1990-1991).

Internally, after the privatization of the public sector, the “open-door policy” and the peace agreement with Israel in 1979, the cost of living in the countryside got higher, the prices of housing increased because of speculation in lands and apartments by the “nouveaux-riches”, the inflation rates increased, the currency got devaluated in a county that relies on the importation of most of what it consumes, the natality rates increased in villages where families count on their children to sustain them through artisanal work, restauration or taxi driving and, in addition to all these, a general tendency developed in the villages to adopt the way of life of the cities. The big family – the siblings, their spouses, their children and parents - who used to live together under the same roof started to split into nuclear families constituted of the father, the mother and the children living independently.

Many workers outside Egypt sent money to their families with transfers reaching two billion dollars in 1979 which equals the total gains from the cotton export, the transit charges of the Suez Canal crossing and tourism.

The lifestyle evolved outside of the capacity of the Egyptian villagers. They were not qualified to work in the Gulf countries and the salaries of factories were barely sufficient to start a family and satisfy their basic needs. Thus, many of the poor ones decided to attempt irregular migration to Europe.

The European countries adopted, since the nineties of the last century, hardline policies concerning migration - especially after the Schengen Agreement in 1990 and the Maastricht treaty- with a set of conditions to deliver work permits, which prompted the development of irregular migration and the rise of smuggling networks. It is difficult to estimate the numbers but many Egyptians had managed to get to Europe.

Many of the irregular migration operations to Europe are managed by the relatives and friends of the candidates to migration. They often come from the same village and provide accommodation to those who arrive. According to the statistics of Ayman Zaher, a researcher specialized in immigration, around 95% of those who participated in a poll said that they relied on their families and friends to pose the hypothetical situation of the conditions to expect in the country of destination.

“Italian funds shaped our village”

Ali Fares (pseudonym, 52 years old) who left his town for Europe through irregular migration in the beginning of the 1990s after graduating with a degree in Commerce, remembers how his town changed culturally and morally because of irregular migration: “the agriculturalists who had owned lands went back to renting because of the rising prices, so they went back to being workers on somebody else’s land.” He continues, “irregular migration in the town of Al Batanun – Manufia Governorate – started with five people in the eighties of the twentieth century. The starting point was the grape harvest season in Europe as the Egyptian University granted its students the opportunity to travel to Europe for three months”. Some of Ali’s friends in the University went and never came back.

He traveled in 1990. He didn’t manage to get a visa and the only irregular route back then was from Libya to Malta. Most of the migrants then were arriving to Europe safely and only a small percentage died along the way or were being manipulated and returning hopeless. Egyptians were receiving residence permits (from 1983 to 1990). Ali left via Austria in a regular manner then entered Italy irregularly. There, a relative who had lived and worked in Italy for 10 years received him. Less than a year after he arrived to Italy, Ali was able to buy a land and build many apartments in his town in Egypt.

Ali comments on the work of Egyptians abroad, “we are ready to work seriously outside our country, inside it is more difficult”. When he returned to his town, his friends were impressed with his Italian clothes and glasses and with the new car he had bought.

Ali was surprised by the respect of the Italian authorities towards the Egyptian migrants, even the irregular ones. There, he had access to

healthcare and understood what it meant to have his rights respected. He considered that he was living a comfortable life. After the return of many of his generation to the town, its social and moral features began to change. The university degrees lost their value and many families competed in marrying their daughters to those returning from Italy. They began to ask for thousands of Pounds worth of gold as dowry (and for equipping the apartment) which put the villagers who didn't leave the village in a difficult social and financial situation.

The social and moral features of the town started changing. The university degrees lost their value and many families competed in marrying their daughters to those returning from Italy. They began to ask for thousands of Pounds worth of gold as dowry (and for equipping the apartment) which put the villagers who didn't leave the village in a difficult social and financial situation.

Irregular migration started to increase in the town with the beginning of the new century. Then, Ali decided to resettle in his town. He was "appointed" to a governmental post and his salary didn't exceed 1500 Pounds, an insufficient amount to cover the education fees of his two children, not to mention other life necessities. Without the money he had made in Italy, he would have found it problematic to resettle with his family.

The villagers started respecting the migrants more than governmental employees or agriculturists. The financial situation of many families evolved, they became land and property owners and some of them ran for the people's assembly because of their migration. This created a category of uneducated rich people who lacked certain moral values.

In this context, the phenomenon of customary courts disappeared. Many problems used to be solved with the intervention of the "notables" who were respected in the village and whose judgment was heard. Now, there is the law of the strongest, caused by "irregular migration to Italy" according to Ali, "The poor people used to be respected, the rich ones were polite and used to employ the poorer ones. Now, the poor people have lost their value for money, to the point where fathers started throwing their sons in the sea to bring them money from Italy or France."

A child's journey... from baker to migrant

Mohamad Ali, from Mit Mousa village in the Manufia Governorate, tells his story of irregular migration. He was 14 years old in 2011 when he left. He travelled to Alexandria and found himself with 150 persons. He paid the smugglers a thousand dollars. 85 persons embarked on the boat, among them 10 were elders and 40 were minors, 2 of them from his own village. He spent 48 hours on the boat without water or food. One of the migrants died on the boat and his body was thrown into the sea.

When Mohamad arrived to Italy, the authorities took him into custody then let him live with a family for a few days. They allowed him to choose between being adopted by the family or going to a school to learn Italian. He chose the learning. He was not able to work in craftsmanship or restauration because of his young age so he waited until he became 17 years old. Since then, he has been working in carpentry and has moved from Italy to France where his older brother (29 years old), who followed the same irregular migration route as him, lives.

Mohamed says he regrets travelling to Italy at such a young age. His father was the one who encouraged him as opposed to his mother. He wishes he had continued to live his childhood as a baker in his town. He now lives in France and can travel to any European country. But, he is unable to go to his own country because of the military service law. If he goes back to Egypt, he will have to turn himself in to the authorities for military recruitment. This prompts him to stay in France until he is over 30 which is the legal age limit for the military service in Egypt. He considers that this painful experience has taken his childhood away.

A surge in migration after the January Revolution

The tragedy of the Rasheed shipwreck with its 200 victims in 2016 highlighted the phenomenon of the migration of unaccompanied minors. According to the statistics of the International Migration Organization (IOM), in the first eight months of 2016, the percentage of unaccompanied minors rose above 60%. By the Italian law, those cannot be repatriated. Irregular migration boomed after the Revolution of 2011 and the numbers kept on increasing in 2013, 2014 and 2015. This encouraged the relatives of irregular migrants to migrate. According to the IOM statistics of 2018,

Egypt is ranked tenth among the countries of irregular migration to Italy.

The studies have shown that this increase is a growing tendency since the revolution of 2011. In the first five months of 2016, Egyptian irregular migrants who arrived to Italy have reached the number of 1815 persons and among them 1147 are unaccompanied children. Egypt has therefore taken the first place in the irregular migration of unaccompanied children.

The IOM presents aid to the irregular migrants who wish to return to Egypt. Since 2012, it has assisted in the rehabilitation of 1269 Egyptians being voluntarily repatriated from Germany, Greece and Holland.

The Egyptian authorities claim that they have managed to entirely stop irregular migration but the motives for migration remain standing and are, even, expanding. If the authorities really wish to eradicate the phenomenon, they should at least provide social and livelihood guarantees and healthcare insurance to compensate the high living cost and the salaries depreciation.

Only a few Egyptians who migrate irregularly to Italy go back to their countries. The Egyptian authorities claim that they have managed to entirely stop irregular migration but the motives for migration remain standing and are, even, expanding. If the authorities really wish to eradicate the phenomenon, they should at least provide social and livelihood guarantees and healthcare insurance to compensate the high living cost and the salaries depreciation. So, even if Egypt actually manages through security tightening to stop migration towards Europe, it would only provoke a social upheaval... which would bring the situation back to the low-security state of 2011. If this happens, it would become very difficult to control irregular migration.

1) A kilometer square = 247 Acres



Tunisia



Tunisia: The Rites of Passage and the Stories of the Repatriated Migrants

Fouad Ghorbali

Tunisian sociologist and researcher

Stories of “border burners” going from Tunisia to Italy, as told by them: the desire to leave, the journey by sea, the accommodation centers and the repatriation. A narration of their personal and psychological adventure which uncovers social, economic and political dimensions.

The obsession of leaving the country for Europe seems to be “the sacred dream” of a Tunisian youth possessed by despair and fear for the future. Most of the young ones don’t see any hope in staying in a country which has become the equivalent of “a big prison” governed by old people and controlled by the corruption mafias that have recovered from “the 14th of January Revolution”, during which some of those same young people had chanted “Employment is a right, you gang of thieves” and “the people want to topple the regime”.

Frustration or protest?

Eight years after the uprising, the powerful gangs are even more prolific. The regime didn’t fall and the young dreams of change have faded. So, the daily discussions between young people in the coffee shops, the bars and on social media, are centered around “Al hijja” which means, in Tunisian dialect, “leaving to go anywhere”. The expression in Tunisian dialect doesn’t only mean “leaving”, it also expresses a symbolic rupture with a reality that is described as being “unbearable”.

In that sense, the choice of migration resembles more a protest or resistance move in which the migrant engages in playing a symbolic game with death. The “border burners” are adventurers who may reach the brink of death. Yet, even if they’re saved, they always decide to keep trying to achieve their dreams of arriving to Europe, getting a job that allows them to live a decent life, marrying a European woman to get a residence permit, getting a car and sending the remaining money to their families.

Simple dreams... The young people fleeing the hell of the “southern shores of the Mediterranean” do not dream of becoming rich. They just want to be “like the others”, integrated and treated with respect. The point is to prove their existence, something they were unable to do in their own country. When talking to those who are thinking about immigrating irregularly, or with those who have tried and failed for one reason or another, we find that the main feeling they express is that “life here is difficult”, that they are “despised” and that no one cares about them.

Police brutality confines them to the districts where they usually live -urban popular neighborhoods or villages in the countryside abandoned by the

state -, where unemployment, poverty, the absence of basic infrastructure and widespread violence are accompanied by a set of traditional moral values that control and monitor private desires and conduct. Many of those who seek to immigrate irregularly or those who have tried and failed have constituted a perception of themselves and of their country which does not conform to the traditional frameworks, starting with how they relate to their families and down to their experiences with the education system which expelled most of them out to the streets without any competencies.

The choice of migration resembles a protest or resistance move that relies on playing a symbolic game with death. The “border burners” are adventurers who may reach the brink of death. Yet, even if they’re saved, they always decide to keep trying to achieve their dreams, which are rather simple.

Studies show that over 120 thousand Tunisians stop their education each year and that more than half of them are in a “waiting situation”, without work, without qualifications and not actively looking for employment. The education system has lost its legitimacy in the beginning of the nineties with the rise of unemployment among “holders of higher education degrees”, the marked decline of public schooling and the rise of private education, under the weight and duress of the market economy, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund which have transformed the State into a mere security guard, administering the people’s misery while protecting the rich from the “violence of the poor”.

On the rites of passage to Lampedusa

Yet what is important is not the causal relations nor the objective structural factors that drive many young Tunisians to leave their lives and do something so extreme. It is rather the personal experiences, the voices of the actors themselves and the justifications they provide to explain what triggers their involvement in irregular migration.

To understand “border burning” as a social movement, it is essential to listen to the “border burners” as active actors capable of justifying the action of burning the borders and of constructing a subjective narrative of it that represents their motivations; making their stories of forced displacements not just “stories to be told”, but also meaningful and significant “rites of

passage”. They tell the stories of their attempts to escape a miserable reality by risking their lives for the sake of the dreams they think they are going to achieve. They recount their failures while insisting to try again.

Those personal narratives of border burning are, of course, difficult to apprehend without situating them inside a social, economic and political context.

The story of crossing to the Italian shores starts with catching the hidden thread that links the “dreamers of Europe” to the organized networks of irregular migration. The “thread”, in the language of the border burners, means the “intermediate” who will do the coordination to bring those who want to immigrate to a defined place at the defined moment. The cost for border burning is between 1000 and 2000 dollars for each individual.

This price is non-negotiable as the demand is high. Most of the time, the intermediates have the necessary experience in this line of work.

They know how to hide from the security forces as they actually have a good networking relationship with the agents with whom they exchange “friendly” services to divert surveillance. Some of the security agents might even directly supervise the border burning operations. In that sense, irregular migration is part of an informal economy which makes big profits. The state deals with it as such, forbidding it sometimes and allowing it to happen other times, depending on the circumstances.

Police brutality confines these young people to the districts where they live -urban popular neighborhoods or villages in the countryside abandoned by the state -, where unemployment, poverty, the absence of basic infrastructure and widespread violence are accompanied by a set of traditional moral values that control and monitor private desires and conduct.

There is therefore an alternative story about the authorities, irregular migration and corruption. But, what embarrasses the official authorities most is not the fact that there are huge numbers of young people immigrating irregularly, nor the big number of victims drowning in the sea, nor even the scandals erupting around security cover-ups... The embarrassment comes from the European Union which keeps on

reminding the Tunisian state that it should do a better job in guarding its territorial waters and commit to its role as a policeman. Needless to say, the European counterpart has many persuasive methods to put Tunisia under pressure.

Border burners in the “waiting rooms”

Border burners also have their waiting rooms. Of course, they don't resemble the ones in airports where there are coffee shops, bars, glasses of cold beer and travelers going around the world. In the border burners' waiting rooms, things are very different. There is only one destination, the Italian island of Lampedusa, and the date and time of departure are in the hands of the journey's organizers and the boat's captain. The boat is often overcrowded as the more passengers it carries, the more financial gain there will be for the organizers. The waiting time varies but it never lasts more than 5 days, and the wait itself is a decisive moment for the irregular migrants in their journey. The waiting phase is called “Taqween” (nesting), and the place is called “Quona” (the hen house), where those who have decided to leave irregularly are gathered in a place chosen by the organizers. Often, this place is close to the departure point (most journeys depart from the shores of the cities of Sfax, Zarzis or Kelibia). The groups awaiting immigration are under the organizers' authority whose orders must be obeyed. The members of a group come from different parts of the country but the border burners don't travel alone. They immigrate in small groups tied by kinship relations or friendship. The need for solidarity is important especially that sometimes clashes might occur within the group, during the waiting period or while sailing over the sea.

Hicham, who comes from the city of Al-Rudayyif in the governorate of Gafsa in the south of Tunisia, speaks about his experience of the “waiting room” on the shores of the city of Sfax, “I thought we would be in a normal apartment. I didn't expect a luxurious place but that there would be the bare minimum, like toilets for example. We were put in a poultry farm and we sat on asphalt. I was lucky because I was one of the firsts to arrive so I found myself a mattress. As for the food, we would pay two dollars each for a sandwich of tuna with a little bit of harissa (hot chili paste). Whenever we protested, they would tell us that this is what's available. Sometimes, clashes erupt among the group members so the neighbors notice our presence and we therefore have to relocate. In this case, we move at

night, on foot, and each person on his own must carefully pass through the olive trees. The “hen house” is heaven in comparison to other places. Once, we found ourselves in a mosque under construction, without a roof. We were extremely cold especially at night, but we had to stay like that for four days... After that, they told us that we were going to embark.

It was 11 at night... They put us – more than 300 persons – in a truck (Hicham pauses as he tries to remember). On the way to the departure point we heard nothing but the words “open the door” and “close the door”... Next to me was a kid screaming “I am going to faint”... I told him, “you have to be patient, we will get there... You decided to risk your life and this is only one percent of what is awaiting you. There was a shortage of oxygen to the point I felt that each minute passed like an hour. We were not searched by any security patrol despite the fact that the place where we waited was only a few meters away from a police station.”

The boat is moving: Conflicting feelings

The hell of waiting was over and the journey on the sea began. This is why going through the experience of the wait is essential. It is one of the many rites of passage and a crossing line between what was and what will be. Failure can happen during the “nesting” period. The migration operation can be aborted by security or by collusion between the organizers and the security forces who share the profits afterwards.

The possibility of circumventing the operation is always present and everything is to be expected. The only guarantee is to reach the shores of Lampedusa. Thus, getting on the boat and sailing marks the passing of the “waiting test”. When embarking on the boat, the feelings are conflicted between hope and fear... The boat carries more than 150 persons. If it is in a good state, the border burners feel reassured, because the eventuality of drowning is therefore reduced. However, the migrants remain anxious about any unexpected circumstances as they are not in control of anything that happens along the way.

In those moments, the border burners leave their identities, their history, their personal pain, their country and its miseries behind them. Some of them read verses of the Quran when embarking. On the boat, we can hear screams whenever the waves get very high. At other times, the boat is enveloped in silence.

The ability of the boat's captain to deal with surprises at sea is decisive. Most of those who sail the irregular migration's boats are former sailors who worked as fishermen. Their involvement in the transportation of irregular migrants is a consequence of the crisis affecting the minor sailors who are not supported by the state and who have to compete, at the same time, with the owners of bigger boats. The professionalism of the sailor is reassuring for the border burners, but the idea of death never leaves their minds nevertheless. They do not wear a life jacket because they have assimilated that death is part of the venture of irregular migration, and that, in the event of the boat overturning, death is an inevitable outcome anyway.

Right before the boat departs, the migrants usually call their relatives, one of their siblings, their mother or their father. They don't call to say goodbye but to give them notice that they are on their way to Lampedusa. Irregular migration is a way to save oneself as an individual but it is also a family investment. Many families finance their sons and encourage them to leave.

The education system has lost its legitimacy in the beginning of the nineties with the rise of unemployment among "holders of higher education degrees", the marked decline of public schooling and the rise of private education under the weight and duress of the market economy, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund which have transformed the State into a mere security manager, protecting the rich from the "violence of the poor".

This phenomenon has many explanations. The most prevalent one is that the family is no longer a safe network that protects individuals. It has become vulnerable. When trying to talk about the boat's departure, Hicham has trouble describing the moment consistently, "before the boat departed I called my brother. I didn't feel like talking to anyone else. I called him to say we were going to depart. I thought it was one in the morning but it was actually ten at night and no one had gone to sleep yet... If I had known the real time I wouldn't have called... I had conflicted feelings... I was happy because I was about to leave and scared that security guards might stop us – even though I was almost sure this wouldn't happen... I was also scared of dying... But the prevalent feeling

was one of happiness... The idea that you are now leaving the country to achieve your dreams... We had moments of fear when the engine of the boat died in the middle of the sea... One person in the group had a relative working with the security. He called him and we managed to get a G.P.S. signal. The Tunisian coast guards called us and told us that the Italian coast guards were coming to rescue us... We stayed for four hours with the Italian coast guards... They were asking us about the number of the cellphone which was thrown at sea. They wanted to make sure that we were the ones who called... After that, they took us to Lampedusa. We arrived safely.”

Anwar, an irregular migrant who was recently repatriated from Lampedusa to Tunisia, also described his feeling at the moment of departure, “I was overwhelmed with happiness as we were getting further away from the Tunisian shores... We were scared of security but the possibility of death didn’t even cross my mind.”

Lampedusa: We arrived safely, but...

Arriving means that the journey was successful despite the moments of fear and doubt. The border burners don’t only think about the dreams they have risked their lives for, but also about arriving safely, which is the first step closer to achieving their dreams. The biggest concern of the border burners is the risk of being repatriated to Tunisia and expelled from the “paradise of the north of the Mediterranean” to the “hell of its South”. Migrants are usually welcomed by volunteers from Italian and European associations fighting to change the migration policies adopted by the European Union. They provide the newcomers with water, juice and covers.

The migrants don’t find themselves strolling in the streets of Rome or Palermo after that. They are placed in accommodation centers after some bureaucratic procedures of a security nature, with questions on their nationalities and identification documents. Their fingerprints are taken and some medical procedures are applied. Some of the border burners adopt the strategy of changing their names and hiding their nationalities.

They do not have identity cards with them, only their smartphones. Others decide to tell their real names. Each one acts according to their previous

experiences, the degree of coercion applied during the investigation and their predetermined agreements with the group they came with.

What embarrasses the official authorities most is not the fact that there are huge numbers of young people immigrating irregularly, nor the big number of victims drowning in the sea, nor even the scandals erupting around security cover-ups... The real embarrassment comes from the European Union which keeps on reminding the Tunisian State that it should do a better job guarding its territorial waters and commit to its role as a policeman.

The accommodation center in Lampedusa is yet another waiting room. The migrants are allowed to leave the center but remain under the surveillance of the Italian security forces which make sure they return to the center. They go out to buy some of their basic needs or to call their relatives. Their phones stay with them. But, most of the times, when they leave the center, their objective is to find a way to escape from the small island. Hicham told us about his attempt to steal a small boat with a few friends in order to escape. They had failed because the fuel in the boat was not sufficient.

The border burners hate the food they are offered in the center. They only eat the potatoes, the cake, some rice and the apple. From time to time, they are allowed to have a cigarette and eat some dessert, but the dessert they are offered contains sedatives that relax their bodies and diminish their sexual desires. The centers are hence not only places of accommodation for irregular migrants, but also a way to control and dominate their bodies. The border burners despise the Tunisian translators working with the Italian authorities during the investigations. They see them as apathetic traitors who ignore the conditions that pushed them to leave their country in the first place.

It is up to the Italian authorities to allow the migrants to leave Lampedusa. Otherwise, the only way out is to escape. The most feared outcome in this case is to be repatriated to Tunisia. To the border burners, repatriation is as bad as a death sentence.

Repatriation: Hoping for a plane crash

Border burners in Europe get acquainted with European friends, relatives and women through Facebook. They rely on them to help them start anew in Europe. The migrants who don't have these kinds of networks will do everything to create one. Those who escape repatriation work in precarious simple labor. Some others take "risks", which means that they do unlawful things like drug dealing. Getting to Lampedusa doesn't necessarily mean the success of the migration, as the Italian authorities might eventually decide on repatriation, with the approval of the Tunisian authorities.

Nobody knows the exact number of Tunisians being repatriated from Italy because the Tunisian authorities hide this information. The "Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights" says there are thousands. There is no "civil society" to welcome them back home as there is only a few associations in Tunisia working on migration.

The repatriated ones arrive to Enfidha's airport in the south of the capital, where the travelers are much fewer than those in the Carthage International Airport, which is the main airport of the country. Enfidha's airport is used for commercial flights or very special journeys such as the repatriation of irregular migrants or of those who have been accused of terrorism in Europe. The repatriated migrants are received away from the journalists' eyes as the security forces manage everything.

The repatriated ones tell us the story of the security reception in Enfidha's airport. They say it is generally not rough, and all that is asked of them is cooperation, which means no lying. They are asked about their religious practices in order to detect any terrorist affiliations among them. The other questions revolve around the departure point of the border burners, who facilitated their travel, how they had gathered the required amount of money, what kind of car had transported them from the waiting point to the boat, and so on. The security forces deal with the migrants as a source of information. Some of the agents openly confess their sympathy for the repatriated ones, expressing their desire to burn the borders as well, as many security agents come from the same social class as the repatriated ones. The situation, as they describe it, is that "everybody is fed up with living in the country".

The most painful phase of the repatriation experience is its beginning, in Italy. The Italian authorities decide to repatriate big groups of irregular migrants to the countries they came from. The repatriation process is subjected to bureaucracy and security procedures that the repatriated find very tough. The chosen groups are not warned about the time of repatriation and the operation happens by surprise. The security agents arrive to the accommodation center suddenly with a list of names of the people to be repatriated. They get searched thoroughly in a way that humiliates their human dignity. The migrants realize at that moment that they are going to be repatriated. The stories they have heard from those who made the journey before help them to interpret the comportment of the Italian security agents. They are then transported in buses to meet the Tunisian consul in the city of Milano. He is the representative of the Tunisian State responsible for confirming that those being repatriated are indeed Tunisians. The migrants say that the consul treats them with a harshness that resembles that of the authorities in Italy. One of the migrants told us that he felt that the Tunisian consul was an agent of the Italian authorities! Ahmad said, "I am from the city of Zarzis, our dialect can be confused with the Libyan one. I told him I was not Tunisian and that I was sentenced for two-years of imprisonment in Libya. His answer was very cold, he told me: "You had better leave now, or else the sentence will become two years and a half in Tunisia." Ahmad thinks that the consul could have accepted his argument and saved him from repatriation... After the interrogation, the repatriated migrants sign some papers written in Italian. They can't read those papers and nobody is there to provide a translation for them. Afterwards, they are taken to the airport. Each repatriated migrant is accompanied by a security agent in civilian attire. Some have attempted to escape from the airport but they are always caught by the police.

From time to time, the irregular migrants are allowed to have a cigarette and eat some dessert, but the dessert they are offered contains sedatives that relax their bodies and diminish their sexual desires. The centers are hence not only places of accommodation for irregular migrants, but also a way to control and dominate their bodies.

In the airplane, a feeling of pain prevails, and everyone feels like a failure. They have lost their own money and the money of their families who were counting on them when they financed the "costs of the border burning".

Everybody wishes for the plane to crash or explode in the skies. Ahmad, who was sent to an accommodation center in the city of Catania before repatriation, says, “in the accommodation center in Catania, there is no hope of escaping. It is designed like a military casern, surrounded by the army and the policemen. There are buses waiting outside. Before getting to Catania, I met with the Tunisian consul in Milano. I asked him whether the ones that were spared from repatriation were better people than us. I begged him to please allow us to stay. His answer was cold. He said that no one was going to stay here and that we would all be repatriated. He was asking why we had left, how and from which place. You feel that he is an agent. A person from his own country comes to him telling him that he had lived through misery and hunger and that only God knows how he managed to get here (he pauses), I just told him, “May God guide you to do the right thing”. Then I signed some papers without knowing what they were about and I left. I stayed in Catania for 15 days. On the day of repatriation, the agents came. They were so huge that you don’t even consider resisting them. They searched us scrupulously. They asked me to remove my pants and I refused, which they accepted, actually. Then, they took the phones and shoelaces and any other laces we had. When we got to the airport in Palermo, they removed the handcuffs and we were accompanied by security agents in civilian clothes. In the plane, each of us sat in their place and no one was allowed to stand. When we arrived, they only brought us to the plane’s gate and left. When I was in the plane, I felt like there was no more hope, I was suffocating. You think about the moment you left the country. You think of your mother and father. Everybody in that plane was praying to God for it to crash”.

Repatriation is a cruel experience that brings an unbearable feeling of personal failure. In the first days after repatriation, the migrants who went through it hunker down. After that, they go back to working precariously to continue living. Some of them start a family and stop thinking about border burning.. Others try again or at least think about giving it another try. The experience becomes a shaping factor of their identities. They now have a “story” to tell, after having lived without any particular personal stories. Some of them take pride in the experience while many become more psychologically fragile, especially given the economic context in which they live. For the migrants we interviewed, the country hasn’t changed. Many have expressed their hatred of the local news which they consider to be against them as it often describes them as being citizens

who don't love their country, criminals or lazy people who don't even seek employment.

Irregular migration: Reshaping the borders

Irregular migration is not only a phenomenon related to economic and political factors; it is also a social experience lived individually. It belongs to a world where uncertainty and inequalities are increasing. But when it comes to the relation between Europe and the south of the Mediterranean, irregular migration can also be understood as an operation related to the reconstruction of borders, where the existence of borders doesn't prevent the flow of migrants.

Irregular migrants have an impact on borders, just like the borders impact them. In that sense, German sociologist Ulrich Beck considers these migrants to be “border artists”. They tamper with the classical and official borderlines between countries and disrupt their contradictory legal systems. For irregular migrants, the borders have to be used and diverted but, most importantly, they have to be crossed. This is precisely where the political relation between Europe and the south of the Mediterranean – and precisely Tunisia – lies. Ongoing negotiations with the authorities under the pressure of European “conditions” aim at decreasing the numbers of migrants and pushing towards upholding the classical border demarcations. But whatever decisions might result from those negotiations, they are unlikely to put a halt to the “seasons of migration to the North”.

The testimonies are parts of semi-structured interviews conducted during a field research of “the Tunisian Forum for Political and Economic Rights” on irregular migrants being repatriated from Italy. We would like to thank them for allowing us to use parts of those testimonies in this article.



Semaan Khawam - Syria

“Carthage” expels its children into the sea

Mohamed Rami Abdelmoula

Journalist from Tunisia

Studies confirm that more than half of the Tunisian youth wants to emigrate! Lower-middle class segments of the population are the ones most willing to “burn the borders”, followed by the poor and destitute groups. The importance of the economic dimension doesn’t mean that it is the only motivation for border burning as it can also be influenced by cultural and psychological factors.

In September 2018, the Tunisian State received Matteo Salvini, the Italian Minister of the Interior, a neo-nationalist rightist known for his racist anti-migration positions. Salvini met with his Tunisian counterpart and they held a press conference at the Ministry. In the background, there was a mural depicting the army of Carthaginian commander Hannibal crossing the Alps in the direction of Rome. This “coded message” pleased many Tunisians and made them feel proud, although, the glorious past doesn’t resemble the humiliating present. The grandchildren of Hannibal still dream of reaching Rome, not as conquerors but as irregular migrants arriving on obsolete boats instead of horses and elephants. Carthage has started to drop its children into the sea. They are the “border burners” who left all their beloved ones in the southern land and headed North, to Europe. There are songs talking about the torments and dreams of those leaving their country and going into the unknown. Hundreds of “Mezwed” (a Tunisian popular music genre), angry Rap and sad Rai songs talk about the despair of the youth from their country’s condition and their embarking on the treacherous sea to say goodbye to the contempt they experience.

They talk about the sadness of their mothers and the terror of the boat. Border Burning has become an essential thematic in the popular cultural production, not only in Tunisia but in all the Maghreb. The song of the Algerian singer Rida Taliani “Oh boat, oh my beloved one, take me out of this misery” has become a national anthem for the Maghreb youth.

The phenomenon of “border burning” or irregular migration doesn’t only concern the youth, it is a public affair that affects the Tunisian family and a security / political dilemma affecting the “national security” of the country and its international relations. No week passes by without media reports about the security forces aborting a “border burning” attempt or about the arrival of Tunisian migrants to the Italian shores. Every few months, there is a tragic shipwreck incident that results in dozens of dead and missing ones. The media treatment of the issue is often superficial and full of stereotypes about the “border burners”. Most of the times, expressions such as “illegal migration” or “clandestine crossing of the border” are used with all the negative connotations they bear.

Who are those “border burners”? What pushes them to risk their lives in a sea where tens of thousands of immigrants have drowned before them in the last three decades? How does society perceive them and how does the state treat them?

General information

“Border burning” is the legitimate child of the Schengen Agreement which organized the crossing of the internal and external European borders. With the implementation of this agreement in March 1995, it has become mandatory for Tunisian citizens to fill an application to obtain a visa for entering the signatory European countries. The visa that is only granted after the fulfillment of a bunch of conditions which are becoming increasingly difficult over the years. This drove many Tunisians to ignore those conditions and take their chances with other means. Those who can marry a European tourist or the daughter of a migrant who has acquired a European nationality, but most of the others resort to irregular migration. Economic migration is a “life necessity” for the Tunisian youth, so Europe’s policy of “shut-doors” did not impede their immigration which only became costlier on both material and human levels. This also opened new doors for the organized crime groups on both sides of the Mediterranean Sea to make more money.

The history of irregular immigration in Tunisia can be divided into three main stages. The first one goes from the mid-90s to 2003. This was before Tunisia enacted a law criminalizing the phenomenon of irregular immigration and before it engaged enthusiastically in the European strategies established to address it. During this period, almost 30 thousand Tunisians had made it to the Italian shores. The second stage goes from 2004 to the end of 2010, this period was marked by considerable strict policies by the Ben Ali regime. The security and punitive solution succeeded in decreasing the number of “border burners” to a few hundred every year but it didn’t manage to address the deep causes of the phenomenon. As for the third stage, it started with the Tunisian revolution on January 2011 and is still continuing until today. In 2011, the Tunisian security forces became deeply confused and an unprecedented increase in the number of “border burners” was recorded as the Italian authorities stated that more than 25 thousand Tunisians had arrived to their shores. Then, the numbers started to decrease over the years with the return of political and security stability in the country. In 2016, they increased again after the deterioration of the economic conditions in Tunisia. The yearly average became of 4000 to 5000 irregular migrants. Almost 38 thousand Tunisian irregular migrants arrived to Italy in the period between 2011 and 2017 to whom almost 2000 must be added for the first four months of 2018. This means that in two

decades, more than 80 thousand Tunisian irregular migrants have arrived to Italy. If we take into account the thousands who got arrested before departure -or during the journey - and the hundreds who were lost at sea, we would conclude that more than one hundred thousand Tunisians have resorted to irregular migration.

It is true that Tunisia has become a transit country for foreign border burners – and especially those of sub-Saharan nationalities - but Tunisians are still the majority among those migrants, with a proportion of 80%.

There are songs talking about the torments and dreams of those leaving their country and going into the unknown. Hundreds of “Mezwed” (a Tunisian popular music genre), angry Rap and sad Rai songs talk about the despair of the youth from their country’s condition and their embarking on the treacherous sea to say goodbye to the contempt they face, about the sadness of their mothers and the terror of the boat. Border Burning has become an essential thematic of the popular cultural production, not only in Tunisia but in all the Maghreb. The song of the Algerian singer Rida Taliani “Oh boat, oh my beloved one, take me out of this misery” has become a national anthem for the Maghreb youth.

The sailing means used are mainly fishing boats, ships, speedboats and, to a lesser extent, cargo boats, yachts and rubber boats. The irregular migration journeys depart from various Tunisian shores but smugglers have prefer to deploy their journeys from certain governorates: Sfax, Monastir, Al Mahdia, Bizerte, Nabul and Medenine. Based on the statistics of the Ministry of Interior on the aborted operations in each region, we can conclude the following: The department of Sfax arrives in first place (37% of the operations in 2016 and 42% in 2017) maybe because of the vastness of its shores (the longest in Tunisia), the presence of a number of small ports and fishing towns and also because Sfax is a big city where it is easier to hide and wait without getting noticed by security forces or any “informant”. Zarzis (in the Medenine governorate), Chebba (in the governorate of Al Mahdia), Bekalta (in Monastir), Cape Zebib (in Medenine) and Kelibia (in the governorate of Nabul) are also considered to be active stations for the border burners.

Who are the Tunisian “border burners”?

The age group essentially concerned in migration is the youth aged between 18 and 35 years old. The overwhelming majority is unmarried men. Family migrations are almost non-existent. The presence of women in the boats of irregular migration is feeble and does not exceed 2 to 3 per cent but it has been increasing and this growth is expected to become perceptible in the upcoming years.

The border burners come from all the regions of the country but some areas are more involved than the others in this activity: the outskirts of big cities and their popular neighborhoods (the Tunis district, the department of Sfax and the coastal departments) and, to a lesser extent, the poorest inland cities and especially those of the Midwest and Southwest. Lower-middle class segments of the population are the most willing to “burn the borders”, followed by the poor and destitute ones.

Border burning is, above all, an economic migration. It is an extension to the Tunisian traditions of migration entrenched since the late sixties of the last century. The reasons that push the Tunisian youth to burn the borders today are almost the same as those that pushed generations of Tunisians to immigrate before them. What has changed is the Visa requirement imposed by Europe with its set of impossible conditions.

Economic migration is a “life necessity” for the Tunisian youth, so Europe’s policy of “shut-doors” did not impede their immigration which only became costlier on both material and human levels. This also opened new doors for the organized crime groups on both sides of the Mediterranean Sea to make more money.

Europe – and especially the colonial countries in it – carries a large share of responsibility for what is now happening on its southern borders. There is no unjust prejudice in this statement: decades of colonization of the countries of the Maghreb, of plundering their resources and of supporting the corrupt local elites after independence have made those countries unwelcoming to their own populations, especially the young groups. In addition, the promotion of the immigration of the Maghreb youth by Europe after the second World War (as a needed labor force for rebuilding

and operating factories) has set significant mobility rules between the two shores of the Mediterranean Sea and social dynamics that are hard to ignore or to simply suppress with a political / security decision. Talking about the European responsibility doesn't mean exempting the "locals" from theirs. The "national" regimes which have wasted natural wealth and enormous human potential are "native partners in the crime".

The main reasons are thus economic: poverty, unemployment, weakness in production and in potentialities for economic development, unbalanced development, the congestion of the poor population in the outskirts of the big cities, the prevalence of corruption and clientelism, etc. But the objectives of the migration differ from a migrant to another and from an age group to another.

There is a difference between those who immigrate because unemployment has exhausted them or because their income is woefully insufficient and those who immigrate because they are looking for a way to make a fortune quickly. Even the socio-economic features of migrants keep on changing. The first generation was primarily composed of destitute young people with a low educational level, then the middle-class people became involved in the movement and even university graduates have become part of it.

The young people who want to immigrate can be divided into three age groups: 18-24 years old, 25-29 years old and 30-35 years old. Before the beginning of the revolution, the last two categories were the most present in the boats of irregular migration: young people who became fed up with heavy physical low-income labor, who couldn't find a work on par with their qualifications, or couldn't find work at all. They travel looking for stability with the objective of improving their situation and their families' financial status. The presence of people from the first age group, the youngest ones, was limited before the revolution, yet after it, they became the most present. This change in the order of the age groups can be explained by the fact that news about shipwreck incidents and drowning migrants have made some from the older age groups reluctant to take the step and fearful for their safety. The younger ones do not want to "waste time" like their elders did, so they don't even try to build a future in their country and instead resort to the fastest and "most successful" solution: immigration, even if it is irregular or dangerous. A number of teenage "border burners"

do not immigrate because of poverty but to go on an adventure and prove their courage and their capacity to overcome difficulties. In the previous years, pictures and videos of young boys on the border burning boats circulated as if they were on a cruise! Also, this age group is the most impressed by the pictures showing a technologically developed West, full of sensuality, and by the photos of migrants living a “good and easy life”.

So, the importance of the economic side doesn't mean it is the only factor. There are other influential cultural and psychological factors. Some also immigrate to run away from judicial decisions or to join a relative or a loved one.

How does the Tunisian society perceive irregular migration?

The word “society” is very loose and it would be more precise to talk about socio-economic classes. The leisure, upper and upper-middle classes look at it from a distance and with disdain. Their discourse on “border burners” relies on two essential points: First, on the criminalization of the phenomenon and the punishment of those “lazy” young people who don't want to work in their country and prefer to get involved with criminal gangs in Europe, then on the satisfaction of getting rid of thousands of “trash” potential criminal.

The question of “border burning” principally concerns the poor and lower-middle classes. When irregular migration appeared in Tunisia in the middle of the last decade of the twentieth century, most of the “border burners” didn't tell their family members – and especially their mothers – about their intention to cross the sea so that they don't dissuade them from fulfilling “their project”. They would wait until they arrive to the Italian shores and move to a city in Italy or elsewhere in Europe to call their parents and inform them of their arrival or, they would ask one of their friends to tell the family after the boat's departure. In that period, “border burning” was safer because of the small number of migrants and the good quality of the used boats. With the increasing demand on border burning, the tightening of the Tunisian and Italian states' security and the organized networks of smugglers, the journeys have become less safe. In the beginning, the Tunisian families used to refuse that their sons resort to this kind of dangerous and sometimes deadly “solution”. But this refusal started to disappear with time and with the intensification of the

unemployment crisis which affected even the university graduates in the beginning of the twenty first century. Many families, especially the poorest ones, started to understand the wishes of their sons to immigrate in an irregular manner. After the revolution and the dramatic increase of the number of border burners with the alarming worsening of the economic condition of the country, the understanding turned into encouragement in most cases.

Many families realized that there was no future for their children in Tunisia and it became normal for relatives to cooperate in gathering the needed amount for the young person to cross the Mediterranean Sea. This can be considered as a collective investment: the safe arrival of the “border burner” to Europe and his regularization there can completely change the financial and social situation of the family.

It is true that Tunisia has become a transit country for foreign border burners – and especially those of sub-Saharan nationalities - but Tunisians are still the majority among those migrants, with a proportion of 80%.

Of course, this is the best case scenario and there are less optimistic ones: the son could get arrested before arriving to Europe, the boat might sink, the son could die and sometimes the body could be lost at sea, or he could get caught in Europe and then repatriated. Each year, hundreds of “border burners” get arrested and many boats sink leaving families in despair. Probably the worst cases are the ones where the family doesn’t even have a body to bid farewell and is unable to get the victim’s remains back from Italy.

The question of immigration is very present in the life of Tunisians, especially the young ones who discuss it and exchange “stories” and dreams about it. The popular neighborhoods are full of middlemen who chase the dreamers. Thousands of young people look for a “border burning thread” (information and middlemen who could get them to the journey’s organizers). Usually, they quickly enough find someone to direct them towards the “path to salvation”. Most of the Tunisians have a story on border burning. They have either lived it themselves or heard stories of their relatives or friends who have. Some stories are “amusing” like the border burners who are defrauded and sail on a boat for hours

before being left on the shores of another Tunisian city. Some stories have happy endings. Others are truly tragic. The widespread occurrence of the phenomenon has made it present in the media, in dramatic performances and movies, in literature, popular songs and street arts such as graffiti.

The official approach to irregular migration

The official discourse in Tunisia criminalizes the phenomenon and considers it to be a dangerous practice that must be deterred. The state deals with irregular migration as if it was a phenomenon that didn't have any socio-economic causes so it avoids taking any responsibility in that matter. But that doesn't mean that the authorities are completely inimical to "border burning" and "border burners". On a practical level, irregular migration doesn't represent a big threat to the state's security and it has its "advantages". Most of the border burners are young people in the age of employment while the country has been witnessing an employment crisis for years. The thousands crossing the Mediterranean Sea every year ease the severity of the problem. Also, the lucky ones who get to Europe become migrants who send hard currency money to their families in Tunisia and participate in the alleviation of the poverty burden from thousands or even tens of thousands of their relatives. The border burners who manage to get residence permits join around a million Tunisians who live abroad and come back, every summer, to spend their vacation in their country, which creates substantial economic dynamism. That is without mentioning the migrants who leave as poor people and come back to invest and employ young unemployed Tunisians. To sum-up, migration, whether it is regular or irregular, is one of the safety valves of "social peace" and a drainage channel for the anger of the less fortunate classes. This equation is not new; it goes back to the sixties of the last century. Irregular migration also generates big money to the accomplices present in the various security apparatuses in charge of controlling it. This complicity is not speculative; logic implies that it can't be possible for tens of thousands of "border burning" boats to keep on departing from almost the same stations over two decades without facilitations from the security forces.

Then, what pushes the Tunisian state to adopt increasingly severe policies to combat irregular migration? The answer is obvious: the migration policies of the European Union that wants the countries of the South to take it upon themselves to solve a problem created by the countries of

the North. There are of course other reasons, such as the embarrassment created by the tragic shipwreck incidents and the anger they provoke, or the possible relations between the networks of smuggling and those of human trafficking or terrorism. But the European pressures / impositions remain the main reason behind the Tunisian state's adoption of oppressive laws and practices against those who want to immigrate, whether they are Tunisians or sub-Saharan in transit.

Europe carries a large share of responsibility for what is happening on its southern borders. Decades of colonization of the countries of the Maghreb, of plundering its resources and of supporting its corrupt local elites after independence have made those countries unwelcoming to their own populations and especially the youth. Talking about the European responsibility doesn't exempt the "locals" from theirs. The "national" regimes which have wasted natural wealth and enormous human potential are "native partners in the crime".

Pressures have started since the end of the nineties of the last century, a few years after the apparition of the phenomenon of irregular migration.

The regime of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, which had always tried to please the influential western countries so that they ignore its dictatorial practices, was very cooperative on the economic and security levels. In addition to signing the agreement of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and a partnership agreement with the European Union, Ben Ali presented himself as an ally of Europe in countering terrorism and addressing irregular migration. Because the phenomenon was new and somehow unique, there was no Tunisian law capable of firmly handling it. The Tunisian law regulating travels and border crossing goes back to 1975, when Europe was open to migrants without visas. Therefore, the European pressures on Tunisia to bridge this "legal loophole" started in 1998 which is the date of the signature of the first agreement between Tunisia and Italy enacting a cooperation between the two states to limit irregular migration and the acceptance of Tunisia to welcome back its citizens who arrive or reside irregularly in Italy. This agreement would later be fortified by three additional ones, the last of which was signed in April 2011.

Starting from the year 2002, Tunisia became actively involved in the

Mediterranean security system and played an essential role in the efforts of the “5+5 Dialogue” created to tackle irregular migration. A ministerial summit around migration in the Western Mediterranean was held in Tunis in October 2002, followed by a presidential summit on the same subject in October 2003. In 2004, Tunisia accelerated the move when its Parliament ratified the Law number 6 of the year 2004 (dated on February the 3rd, 2004) which revised the Law number 44 of the year 1975 (dated on May the 14th 1975) related to passports and travel documents. It was not about the latter but really about irregular migration although the words “migration” and “migrants” were not explicitly used and were replaced by “entering and leaving the Tunisian soil”. This law is, without exaggeration, among the most restrictive in the world in the matter of irregular migration.

It states, in the part from the chapter 38 to the chapter 53, custodial sentences and monetary fines (ranging between 3 to 20 years of prison and 8 to 100 thousand Tunisian Dinars) to all those involved in the different stages of irregular migration (helping, organizing, brokering, providing equipment, accommodating, etc.) and it does not even exempt those who support for free. It even punishes those who don't play the role of the whistle-blowers (chapter 45): “Shall be punished by imprisonment for a term of three months and a fine of five hundred Dinars each person who deliberately refrains, even if subjected to professional confidentiality, from immediately notifying the relevant authorities of information they received or actions they witnessed relating to the commission of offences described in this section”. It is true that most of the sentences target the “organizers” and the “smugglers” but it also closes the last door on those wanting to immigrate and who will most likely never get a visa to Europe. The Ben Ali regime managed to almost completely control the immigration flow and, in exchange, received political and financial gains from the Europeans.

Migration, whether regular or irregular, is one of the safety valves of the “social peace” and a drainage channel for the anger of the less fortunate classes. This equation is not new; it goes back to the sixties of the last century.

After the Tunisian revolution and the outbreak of the war in Libya, the deck was shuffled again triggering a new stage of the “border burning” phenomenon. The political mess and the security vacuum in both countries

were a golden opportunity for hundreds of thousands of sub-Saharanans to cross the Mediterranean Sea. This created a situation of panic on the Northern shores and pushed European officials to try and convince Tunisia to “assume its responsibility” and contribute to downsizing and reducing the speed of the migration flow. The concerned European states are principally Italy (a transit and residence country), France and Germany (residence countries). The Europeans wrap their demands in terms like “security cooperation”, “development assistance”, “logistical aids to develop the Tunisian security capabilities” and “combatting trafficking in persons”. They also promise to support the Tunisian economy, to encourage its youth and to facilitate obtaining a Schengen Visa for its citizens... These are promises that no one finds believable.

Irregular migration and how to control it are items on the agenda of every meeting between European and Tunisian officials, even when the initial object of the meeting has nothing to do with the matter. The weakness of the successive Tunisian governments and their seeking for foreign support at all costs allowed the Europeans to dare on imposing their conditions and proposing procedures and “solutions” for irregular migration that do not respect national sovereignty: opening offices in Tunisia to review the profiles of Africans seeking asylum in Europe, setting camps to receive the repatriated African irregular migrants, placing “hotspots” to capture the data of irregular migrants who get caught by the Tunisian security forces before departure, etc...

The “partnership” plans are concluded quickly between the countries of the Maghreb and Europe to facilitate the transportation of goods between the two shores. But when it comes to humans, only the “people of the North” can travel to the South at will.

It doesn't seem like the European pressures will soon ease, especially given that the influence of populist isolationist forces hostile to migration and foreigners is increasingly growing on the old continent. Neither can we be optimistic about the relative “resistance” of the Tunisian state as its margin of manoeuvre keeps on narrowing down: The Tunisian economy, in crisis, is more or less at the mercy of “donors”, international financial institutions and foreign investors. What Europe doesn't obtain by coercion, it can get by threats and extortion: blacklisting Tunisia, stopping the loans'

approvals and the installment payments, suspending investment and tourism support, creating impediments to the export of Tunisian goods to Europe, triggering the files of Tunisian terrorists and jihadist networks...

The “Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade” negotiations which have started in 2016 between Tunisia and the European Union uncover the extent of the imbalance between the two “partners”: Tunisia didn’t request a visa exemption for all Tunisian citizens or the facilitation of their access to employment opportunities in Europe, it just asked from its European counterpart to exempt Tunisian businessmen from the visa requirement. Of course, the European counterpart didn’t meet this demand but promised to ease the visa requirements for those.

In conclusion

For almost a quarter of a century, the boats of the “border burners” have been departing from the country at night, sneaking into “the salvation land”.

The forms of border burning and its price have evolved just like the features of the border burners, smugglers and organizers have changed, but some things remain unchanged: the socio-economic conditions in Tunisia are becoming increasingly difficult, the European borders increasingly closed and the Tunisian law increasingly harsh. Many studies and opinion polls state that more than half of the Tunisian youth wants to immigrate and that between 30 and 40 per cent of those are willing to embark on the “death boats”. The “partnership” plans are concluded quickly between the countries of the Maghreb and Europe to facilitate the transportation of goods between the two shores. But when it comes to humans, only the “people of the North” can travel to the South at will. Just as in the case of informal economy, no security measures, criminalization, stigmatization or any of the aggressive “solutions” will be able to eradicate the “border burning” problem. If attention is not paid to the economic condition of the youth and if they are not given the hope to live in dignity in their own country with the right to discover the world, the “boat” will remain the “heartthrob of the millions” and their only means of transport to a better tomorrow...



Semaan Khawam - Syria

The Mediterranean Sea, a graveyard for humans and hopes

Nadhem Yousfi

Researcher, from Tunisia

To the North of the Mediterranean Sea, the States, obsessed with the fantasy of the “invasion”, are mobilizing to lock the border through FRONTEX (European Border and Coast Guard Agency), both on the national scale and within the European framework.

On the 3rd of June 2018, the archipelago of Kerkennah off the coast of the city of Sfax in Tunisia woke up to a tragedy: the sinking of a makeshift boat transporting around 180 irregular migrants. Once again, the Mediterranean Sea has swallowed humans. At dawn, a boat left the coast of Kerkennah in direction of the Italian island of Lampedusa but a violent storm overthrew it. The Tunisian coast guards managed to save 74 migrants, 5 of them from sub-Saharan countries and recovered 71 lifeless bodies, among them were 4 pregnant women. 40 migrants remained missing. Beyond the collective disaster, there are individual stories. On the radio, personal tragedies are broadcasted: the father of one of the missing migrants recounts the ordeal of his son who wanted to rejoin his mother and sister in Italy and was refused a Visa 11 times. A survivor explains how the boat, made to carry the weight of 70 persons left with 180 ones on board. Another one, after having described the horror of the shipwreck, says he is ready to try again. Unfortunately, this event was neither the first nor the last tragedy happening in the Mediterranean Sea which has become a graveyard for humans and hopes. Two shipwrecks have hit the headlines before: on the night of 7 to 8 September 2012, a boat which had left Sfax with more than a hundred persons onboard sank not far from the Lampedusa island. Only 56 persons managed to escape, two bodies were recovered. As for the others, there wasn't a trace, not even hull debris. On the 8th of October 2017, a collision between an irregular migration boat and a ship of the Tunisian National Navy off the Kerkennah archipelago resulted in the death of dozens and many went missing.

We use the term “irregular” to designate this form of departure towards Europe. The terms “clandestine” or “illegal”, widely used in the North and the South of the Mediterranean Sea are adjectives elaborated to criminalize the phenomenon and are charged with moralizing connotations.

An uncontrolled old practice

To understand the irregular migration of Tunisians, one must go back to the history of Tunisian migration to Europe. This phenomenon was historically uncontrolled. Despite the agreements and conventions acted between Tunisia and the European countries since the 1960s to channel and regulate the migratory flux, the Tunisians seeking to leave prefer to do so without going through the institutional arrangements established from both sides of the Mediterranean. Those Tunisians rely on their social

networks. The migrant often arrives without a visa, finds employment and is regularized afterwards. Testimonies gathered from Tunisians settled in the city of Nice in France since 1967, confirm this attitude: going through official recruitment agencies destined for work abroad takes too much time and requires to go through intermediaries and string-pulling to be selected for departure. At the same time, it is possible to get to France in a much shorter time frame through networks of family, friends and neighbors.

Once they arrive, it is easier to be regularized subsequently. According to the Tunisian official statistics, more than 70% of the departures towards Europe between 1967 and 1972 were spontaneous and uncontrolled by the Tunisian authorities (1).

We use the term “irregular” to designate this form of departure towards Europe. The terms “clandestine” or “illegal”, widely used in the North and the South of the Mediterranean Sea are adjectives elaborated to criminalize the phenomenon and are charged with moralizing connotations.

The situation has changed with the end of labor migrations to Europe in the middle of the 1970s. A posteriori regularizations have become difficult.

Irregular migration from the Tunisian coasts to Italy, commonly referred to as “harga” (border burning) started in the beginning of the 1990s, when the Schengen Agreements imposed Entry Visas on Tunisians. The economic difficulties of Tunisia, unemployment and the inequalities between regions have created conditions conducive to irregular migration (2). The apparition of the actual form of irregular migration - leading to tragedies which are often deadly - results from the European legislation, the border closure on the workforce and the setting of a “Mediterranean wall” at a time when the world is opening up to capital, goods and ideas. Consequently, the tightening up of the requirements to obtain a Visa and the strict border control have put the lives of thousands of young people in danger. The European laws, under the effect of the Schengen legal arsenal were, for a few years, dissuading. In parallel, the Tunisian laws criminalized irregular departures. They now provide for a sentence of several years of imprisonment for those who attempt to cross the border in an “illegal” manner and much stiffer sentences - which can reach 20-year confinement and heavy fines- for organizers and smugglers.

The challenge

Therefore, the monitoring is doubled: it happens both in the South and the North of the Mediterranean Sea. The foreign investments advertised with great fanfare after the agreements with the European Union were signed had been long awaited. However, those investments are yet to happen and those that had already been made have provoked “reorganizations” that led to more unemployment. So, despite the tools used for deterrence, in Tunisia and in Europe, the factors inciting Tunisians to immigrate are still proliferating. Caught between poverty, unemployment and helplessness, the youth of the South, including Tunisians, no longer see the end of the tunnel. If we add to that equation the image and the quality of life in the West, perpetuated by the media and by the migrants coming back for holidays, the young Tunisians find themselves in a situation where the scope of their choices is reduced. To meet their objectives, the youth of the countries of the South are ready to sacrifice their own lives. The purpose of irregular migration is no longer just to find employment but it has become an act of “bravery” for which bands get organized and the State, synonymous of failure, corruption and anarchy, is defied.

Despite the tools used for deterrence, in Tunisia and in Europe, the factors inciting Tunisians to immigrate are proliferating. Caught between poverty, unemployment and helplessness, the youth of the South, including Tunisians, no longer see the end of the tunnel.

According to the research of the Tunisian Institute for Strategic Studies, irregular trips are organized by criminal networks that profit from the distress of those seeking to leave. Those networks earn around 400 billion dollars. The study underlines the apparition of international mafia groups, Italians, Albanians and others. The candidate who desires to immigrate must spend between 3000 and 8000 Dinars (between 1000 and 3000 Euros). To cross the sea, migrants are stacked in fishing boats, wooden ships or inflatable boats. Those who want to migrate irregularly come from the underprivileged Tunisian inlands and the deprived neighborhoods of the big coastal cities (3).

In 2008, for the first time, Tunisian migrants comprised the highest percentage of those arriving to Lampedusa, with 6762 irregular migrants.

In 2007, their number reached 1100, making them in fourth place behind the Eritreans, the Moroccans and the Palestinians. In 2009 and 2010, the number of landings on the Italian coasts declined as much as 10000 migrants a year because of the tightening of the Italian migration policy. In the aftermath of the Tunisian Revolution, a migration spike was recorded due to many factors among which the loosened security, the chaotic situation of the country, the anxiety experienced by a youth facing an uncertain future, the absence of control over the migratory flux and the capacity of the irregular migration “market” to mobilize young people who aspire to leave in a context characterized by the weakness of the State. In the second semester of 2011, irregular migration diminished: the number of Tunisian landings have gone from 20258 arrivals to 4300. One of the main reasons of this decrease is the reactivation of coastal and port controls by the competent authorities. It is true that Tunisia is a country of immigration but it is also a transit country for a significant number of sub-Saharanans who pass through it on their way to the Northern shores of the Mediterranean Sea (4).

The foreign investments advertised with great fanfare after the agreements with the European Union were signed had been long awaited. However, those investments are yet to happen and those that had already been made have provoked “reorganizations” that led to more unemployment!

In Tunisia, the official authorities are well-aware that irregular migrants are victims of a structural economic crisis whose consequences can only be overcome through a stabilization of the political situation of the country and an economic growth, but they still consider irregular migration as being an illegal practice. The law passed on the 3rd of February 2004 repressing the illegal crossing of borders is very strict and against the human rights, yet it hasn't been modified. On the ground, while waiting for the improvement of the economic situation and the signing of agreements favoring legal immigration, a tight security grip on irregular migration is considered to be a priority by the government. To that end, the Tunisian Ministry of Interior strengthens its surveillance capacities with European funds and logistic aid. In the Tunisian public opinion, the tragedies linked to irregular migration give rise to anger, compassion and recollection.

But, after a few days, the moralizing discourse incriminating the migrant

resurfaces in the media and in the comments of politicians. It is a discourse which is paradoxically similar to the security-oriented European approach of the phenomenon.

Conclusion

To the North of the Mediterranean Sea, the States, obsessed with the fantasy of the “invasion”, are mobilizing to lock the border through FRONTEX (European Border and Coast Guard Agency), both on the national scale and within the European framework. In the recent years, the external borders of Europe have witnessed an unprecedented increase in the number of migrants and refugees wishing to get to the European Union. The countries with an external border are solely responsible for border control. FRONTEX can provide the countries confronted with a strong migratory pressure with additional technical assistance. The agency then coordinates the deployment of additional technical equipment (such as planes and ships) and of specially trained personnel. FRONTEX coordinates maritime operations (in Greece, Italy and Spain for example) but also operations on the external land borders (in Bulgaria, Romania, Poland and Slovakia). It is also present in many international airports all over Europe (5).

All of the devices, to the North and to the South of the Mediterranean Sea, are not able to stop the flux of irregular migration. Each day brings its share of boats landing on the Italian coasts and those arrested in the sea by the Tunisian authorities or by the Italian coast guards. Addressing this phenomenon requires a new approach that breaks with “security” and takes into account the dignity and freedom of migrants since emigration is a natural and legitimate movement. Opportunities for growth of development for people in their countries should be created while, at the same time, the European policies of borders fortification should be resisted.

In the South, the moralizing discourses against irregular migrants are discourses that rely on the same arguments made by the Europeans. We play the role of the cop vicariously guarding the European borders. The security-based approach to the migratory flux in Europe is both hypocritical and anachronistic as, in fact, in the coming years, the European countries will need thousands or even millions of persons coming from the Maghreb and Africa to respond to the challenges of the ageing of their populations.

The European economy will have to recruit workforce for needs that will become increasingly incessant.

1) Nadhem Yousfi « *Des Tunisiens dans les Alpes-Maritimes : une histoire locale et nationale de la migration transméditerranéenne (1956-1984)* », Paris, l'Harmattan-IRMC, 2013.

2) Riadh Ben Khalifa « *L'émigration irrégulière en Tunisie après le 14 janvier 2011, le problème des disparus : pouvoirs publics et société civile* » in *Hommes et Migrations* 2013 /3 (n°1303)

3) Rihab Boukhayatia « *Tout savoir sur l'immigration clandestine en Tunisie: Les profils des migrants, les causes, la mafia. à travers cette étude de l'ITES* », HuffPost Tunisie, 8 novembre 2017

4) Center of Arab Women for Training and Research CAWTAR « *Jeunes et émigration en Tunisie*, 2017

5) <https://frontex.europa.eu>





Semaan Khawam - Syria

Burning the borders so you don't burn your life: Irregular migration in Algeria.

Salim Chena

Researcher from Algeria, author of the book "The migration flows in contemporary Algeria" (Karthala, 2016)

To the North of the Mediterranean Sea, the States, obsessed with the fantasy of the "invasion", are mobilizing to lock the border through FRONTEX (European Border and Coast Guard Agency), both on the national scale and within the European framework.

In the last years, the Algerian press has not been mentioning “border burning” much, after having capitalized on it at the end of the first decade of the 21st century. This change in attitude has more to do with a trivialization of the phenomenon than its disappearance. Irregular migration, from the Algerian shores of the Mediterranean Sea, has become a structural practice in a society where the majority of the population has a “desire to leave” (1).

After the stabilization of the pattern of migration, or even after the period of receding numbers in the first half of the 2010s, the number of border burning attempts increased again during the year 2017. 5000 persons were arrested trying to embark, compared to around 1500 in 2015, according to the numbers of the Ministry of National Defense (2). These departures head to Spain. Between the 26th of October and the 3rd of November, around 600 Algerians had reached the Iberian coast (3) - and Italy which has witnessed a rebound in irregular maritime arrivals of Algerians in the middle of the 2000s (with around 1500 arrivals each year).

Algeria is traditionally a county of emigration transformed by transitions in the migrants’ movements into a country that receives immigrants from the sub-Saharan region and the unstable areas of the Middle-East.

In 2017, the United National High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) says that the European coasts have witnessed the arrival of more than 8500 irregular Algerians. Though, these numbers should be put in perspective in comparison with the amount of the migrants coming from the sub-Saharan region, the Middle East or Central Asia, or even with the Moroccan migrations.

Algeria is traditionally a county of emigration transformed by transitions in the migrants’ movements into a country that receives immigrants from the sub-Saharan region and the unstable areas of the Middle-East. The Algerian emigration that began during World War I and increased during the “Roaring Twenties” (1920 – 1930) became massive in the period after World War II, when there was a need for workers to rebuild, and also later with the application of the right of family reunification in 1974 in France (4). An Algerian community abroad (5) was thus created, described by Algerian sociologist Abdelmalek Sayyad (6) as the “third generation” of

Algerian emigration. Obtaining study or stay visas to the Schengen area became increasingly difficult with the progression of irregular migration in the 90s and 2000s, as the conditions of entry and residence in Europe grew tighter.

In recent years, the Algerian press has not been mentioning “border burning” much, after having capitalized on it at the end of the first decade of the 21st century. This change in attitude has more to do with a trivialization of the phenomenon than with its disappearance. Irregular migration, from the Algerian shores of the Mediterranean Sea, has become a structural practice in a society where the majority of the population has a desire to leave.

A “fourth generation” (7) came into existence during the “dark decade” of the 90s in Algeria, but it principally concerned the intellectual elite (professors, researchers, doctors, journalists, artists ...) who were mostly French-speaking seculars running away from the rise of fundamentalism and political violence and seeking asylum. Today, asylum seekers are still many but they usually use their applications for asylum as a strategic step (8) which allows them to protect themselves from deportation during the allocation period (asylum being rarely obtained by Algerians).

Border Burning concerns all social categories but it remains dominated by young men (sometimes teenagers), from lower classes and without stable employment. But, we have also seen young graduates, middle class relatively well-off people, individuals in their sixties or seventies, handicapped people, pregnant women and mothers with their infants go.

Sometimes, Algerians try to pretend being Middle Easterners fleeing the wars ravaging the region. In front of the “Europe Fortress” which tends to entrench itself, irregular exile is the remaining option for the Algerian “border burners”. According to the director of the French Police for Air, Borders and Foreigners (PAFE), around 10000 Algerians are arrested every year for illegal residency, especially after having exceeded the duration of their visa permits to stay clandestinely in France. The visa is sometimes fraudulently obtained against several thousand euros paid to subcontractors at the French Consulates (“real fake” visas).

The “Wilayats” (Provinces) of the West (Tlemcen, Oran, Mostaganem) and of the East (Skikda, Annaba, El Tarf) are the main departure points in the direction of the regions of Almeria and Murcia in Spain and the island of Sardinia in Italy. Another longer route that appeared in the year 2010, goes from the region of Dellys towards the Spanish island of Mallorca. Border burning, the departure from the Algerian coasts in direction of the European shores through a direct maritime route, appeared between 2005 and 2006. Irregular migration in the 90s and the early 2000s used to follow traditional routes, passing through Morocco, to a lesser extent through Libya and, in very rare cases, through Syria, Turkey and Greece.

At this time, the most used technique was to hide inside a cargo ship, with or without complicity. This is why many young Algerians would scrutinize the port looking for information.

Border Burning concerns all social categories but it remains dominated by young men (sometimes teenagers), from lower classes and without stable employment. But, we have also seen young graduates, middle class relatively well-off people, individuals in their sixties or seventies, handicapped people, pregnant women and mothers with their infants go.

The used techniques change a lot depending on the type of the network that arranges it. Many departures are made in an rudimentary way, through “spontaneous” networks (9), but there are also “professional” networks that can recruit candidates from the entire national territory as well as “transnational” networks which can recruit across borders; the latter doesn’t seem to be really implemented in Algeria even though a few Algerians are detained in neighboring countries of the Maghreb for having tried to reach Europe through Morocco or Libya.

The organized networks, with a high division of labor, more concerned with making profits than with the success of the journeys, have developed in parallel to the rooting of the border burning practice, but those require a higher financial investment – between 80000 and 150000 dinars. The work breaks down between “a driver” in charge of the material and food, “a lodger” who gathers candidates before departure, and “smugglers” at the head of the organization who manage the whole network, sometimes with the complicity of members of the security forces.

Though, even if this type of organizations still exists despite their successive dismantling, the traditional networks represent an important part of the border burning operations. Far from the social and political images presented by the dominant security-oriented discourses, those networks are constituted by, first and foremost, the coastal residents who practice (or have practiced) maritime professions and know a lot about navigation and its risks (10). They represent groups of solidarity, defined by kinship ties or places of habitation, bringing together a few persons who put their resources in common to equip themselves (boat, engine, GPS) and to form, at the end, a crew of a dozen persons who won't spend more than 30000 to 50000 dinars – they might even leave for free if there is an available place or if the person leaving is known and respected by the rest of the group or if he is in a very precarious situation. It is also, for the youngest ones, a kind of rite of passage, of defiance against a backdrop of social impasse (11). This reconversion of those who know how to navigate can also be explained by the decline of the profitability of small-scale fishing activities, because of sea pollution or the concurrence of trawlers and their competitiveness (12).

Two elements differentiate those networks: the organized ones gather people who don't know each other and rely on outside actors. They aim for profitability: this is how we can find twenty or thirty persons on an embarkation. In the traditional networks, crossing remains a main objective, the solidarity of the group is based on them knowing each other: in short, the migrants, rarely more than ten on a boat (generally 5), master entirely the migration process thanks to the socialization of their means. Finally, the surveillance and the action of the security forces feed the migrants' self-sustained dynamic of perfecting the means of migration with increasingly more powerful yet lighter boats, but this also forces the migrants to take more risks when the traditional routes are too closely monitored.

The authorities have reacted by creating the offence of “clandestine emigration” punished by a sentence of 2 to 6 months of prison and a 20000 to 60000 dinars fine. The candidates to exile are rarely condemned to stiff jail terms, except in some cases of recidivism; though the networks of smugglers are sometimes sentenced with many years of imprisonment. To dissuade the border burners, the Algerian authorities have sometimes relied on religious institutions such as the High Islamic Council that issued

many fatwas assimilating irregular migration with suicide.

For those who manage to cross, it is usually the European coast guards who intercept them in the territorial waters. They evaluate their physical states and place them in confinement centers. Then, they are often released with an obligation to leave the territory or are held until their expulsion when the legal and administrative procedures can be done quickly.

For anyone who cares to listen, the discourse of the border burners is undoubtedly political. Unemployment or, to be more precise, the absence of a stable and legal economic activity, the lack of housing, the poor infrastructures, the corruption, the contempt they receive from the elites, the high costs of living, the ineffectiveness of public policies... have set a context in which it is better to “be eaten by the fishes than by worms” ...

The term “hogra” (contempt) expresses the feeling of the border burners about their position in their country. They refuse to turn to institutions they are opposed to in order to resolve their daily problems (13). Factors of emancipation from the frameworks of the traditional society (escaping a forced marriage, accepting an unwanted outside marriage pregnancy...) and of individual autonomy inside the family structure (to provide for oneself or to the family...) also explain the search for a form of freedom allowing self-realization. In the absence of an independent political field and with a “miserable life” at the margins of society, Farida Sweih explains “border burning” as an “exit” allowing to circumvent alternatives to a political commitment doomed to failure, the passive acceptance of deplorable conditions or even the entry into loyalty channels or clientelism. Thus, border burning imposes itself as a form of passive contestation or an active expression of discontent and displeasure (14).

Irregular migration therefore constitutes an important challenge for the Algerian regime, inside the country where the families of border burners lost at sea have been mobilizing for years and outside the country where it portrays an image very different than the one that the official communication wishes to promote. Though, migrations, whether they are trans-Saharan or trans-Mediterranean, also constitute a major component of the Euro-Mediterranean geopolitics. Even though Algeria originally refused to play the role of the “policeman of Europe”, the reversed trends

in its legislations between 2008 and 2009 and the persistence of trans-Saharan migrations make this role an important bargaining tool for the country's external relations.

1) Kamel Rarbo, «Le désir de partir», *Confluences Méditerranée*, n°14, Printemps 1995, pp. 21-26.

2) Charlotte Bozonnet, Zahra Chenaoui, « L'émigration algérienne repart à la hausse », *lemonde.fr*, 6 décembre 2017.

3) Sonia Lyes, « Arrivées massives de harragas : l'Espagne hausse le ton face à l'Algérie », *TSA*, 20 novembre 2017.

4) Farida Souiah, « L'émigration algérienne », *Questions internationales*, n°81, septembre-octobre, 2016, pp. 52-55.

5) *With around a million and a half person in France and hundreds of thousands present in various countries such as Spain, Canada, USA or Germany*

6) Abdelmalek Sayad, « Les trois 'âges' de l'émigration algérienne en France », *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, vol. 15, 1977, pp. 59-79.

7) Myriam Hachimi Alaoui, *Les Chemins de l'exil. Les Algériens exilés en France et au Canada depuis les années 1990*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2007.

8) *In Greece, some pretend to be Syrian but it rarely works out for them; in Germany or France the subterfuge is more quickly exposed and even though the seekers are almost systematically rejected, they stay numerous: they were more than 2500 to seek asylum in France in 2017.*

9) *For a typology of migratory networks in the Maghreb, c.f. Mehdi Mabrouk, « Émigration clandestine en Tunisie: organisations et filières », Naqd, n°26-27, 2009, pp. 101-126.*

10) *Among the interviewed border burners, none of them ignores the potential risks (damages that lead them to wander at sea and exhaust their provisions, shipwreck followed by drowning, arrests...) nor the difficulties of an immigrant's life in Europe.*

11) Nouredine Khaled, « Adolescents harragas : risquer sa vie comme seule possibilité de réalisation de soi », *Adolescence*, Tome 31, n°3, 2013, pp. 699-709.

12) Salim Chenna, « Sidi Salem et el harga », *Hommes & migrations*, n°1300, 2012, pp. 52-61.

13) *Public youth employment or business starting aid agencies are sometimes sought for grants under the pretext of engaging in fishing activities but the acquired money is usually reinvested in projects of clandestine departures.*

14) Farida Souiah, « Les harraga algériens », *Migrations société*, n°143, 2012, pp. 105-120.



Morocco



Houmam Al-Sayed - Syria

Moroccan Minors: Children Too, Leave Their Country

Said Oulfakir

Writer and Journalist, from Morocco

Minors who immigrate alone come from different cities and regions of the country even from what is known as the “good Morocco” such as Casablanca, Tangiers or the capital Rabat. The answer to the question “why” is always: “in my country, I am despised and living in misery”.

In Morocco, not only the grown-ups are enticed to migrate, the younger ones as well have the desire to reach the opposite shores. Their numbers increase each year. They throw themselves into the sea, driven by a childish enthusiasm and a craving for adventures. They then wait at the nearest gate to either cross over or, in the best cases, stay in accommodation centers, some of which respect their humanity while others can't manage to absorb their massive numbers. The youth end up just hanging out, awaiting the unknown.

“Oh boat...”

“Oh boat, oh my love, take me out of misery. In my country, I am despised, I am so tired and fed up.”

An entire generation of Moroccans has chanted the lyrics of the song “Oh Boat” (by the Algerian Rai singer Rida Taliani) since the beginning of the new millennium. The song has incepted the idea of the boat as a way out of misery in the collective consciousness of children. Its strong symbolism has been shaped into a mental image, as the children become accustomed to drawing a small canoe and building paper boats that represent it.

Every day, the echo of the song spreads in the popular neighborhood that starts in a “Ras Darb” (1) (where the young people hang). The lyrics express their pain; the rhythm makes their body move to dancing while the cheap hash cigarettes take them in their tripping imagination to the “promised paradise”. The children of the neighborhood watch the scene, aware of the joblessness of those young people (who are mostly university graduates) and their wild desire to “burn the border” (*Harrig (2)). Indeed, it may seem shocking at first, and the question is raised, “how is it possible that a Bachelor degree or a Master’s degree does not allow a young man in his twenties or in his thirties to make a dignified livelihood?”

Stories of that kind repeat themselves and boys grow up convinced that neither studying nor staying in Morocco is of any use”. Hence, they decide to take the shortcut and leave while they are young. Of course, that is not their sole motive for migrating; each minor has his own story and reasons, as the following testimonies narrate.

Testimonies and stories

- Adam: “The country is not important, as long as it is in Europe.”

Adam (3) puts his hands in the pockets of his black jumpsuit while his eyes stare at his rickety shoes. Adam (16 years old) walks slowly as he wanders in the narrow streets of Al Haddad neighborhood in the district of Bani Makad in the city of Tangiers. Each week, for two years, Adam has been risking his life to cross irregularly the straits of Gibraltar, he dreams of leaving his hometown to go to Spain: “There is nothing for me to lose in my country. There, I will be hosted in an accommodation center for minors like myself, then I’ll receive residence papers and after that I will work to send my mother money.”

For him, the country does not matter as long as it is in Europe. He doesn’t have a dream or a plan in Europe and his only ambition is to help his mother who works in a textile factory and is only paid 1.20 Euros an hour. “Hell is waiting for him”, Adam tries to ignore these words and hold on to the dream of migrating to the “European paradise”. The pictures that his friends share on social media encourage him to leave. “They are happy, they wear the prettiest clothes, and they really live a beautiful life... I think they live in Sweden”. With these words, Adam express his admiration for his friends’ lifestyle, reduced into stereotypes that reinforce the parading image that immigrants like to show to their country’s people.

- Ismael: “I am migrating with my mother’s consent.”

Originating from Tangiers, Ismael (4) dropped out of school at the age of 12 to try and cross the gate of the city of Ceuta, occupied by Spain, with the consent of his mother. The boy wants to follow the footsteps of his neighbor who had obtained residence permit after touching down the “promised land” in Madrid. His ambition is to become a mechanic and buy a car and an apartment.

Every day, dozens of teenagers try to climb the fences of the harbor. They test their luck by hooking their bodies under the big boats going to the Spanish Algeciras island which is 40 minutes away.

- Marwan: “I’m immigrating at any cost.”

He sat by himself, staring at the horizon expanding over the Mar Chica

lake (bordering the Mediterranean Sea) in the city of Nador. This is where 13-year-old Marwan has been settled temporarily for over 6 months. Originally from Fes, Marwan (5) speaks about his attempts to reach the European shore: “I have tried to cross to the city of Melilla many times.

The first time, I climbed the fences; the second time I hid under a bus transporting passengers; other times, I tried to climb on boats’ ropes... But in the end, all my attempts have failed.” Marwan didn’t give up yet. “May you arrive safely, my son,” this is how Marwan’s mother concludes her conversations with her son. Her warm voice over the telephone destabilizes him. His mother’s blessing, in addition to the situation that afflicts him, the pictures that he sees and the stereotypes that have taken root in his imagination about the benefits he would obtain if he migrates, all charge his small body with an energy directed towards migration at any cost, even if he has to pay for it with his own life.

In Nador... Not far from Melilla

At a distance of 14 kilometers from the city of Melilla, occupied by Spain, is the Moroccan city of Nador. It has become a resting place for those eager to “burn the border” to the opposite shore. There are many nationalities there. Some are sub-Saharan, others have come from countries devastated by wars, and many are Syrians awaiting their turn, after having become present in all Moroccan cities – such as Rabat, Casablanca, Tangiers and Agadir.

Among the Moroccans ready to migrate, the minors too, temporarily settle in the city of Nador. They live together in shared apartments, often reassembling according to the city or region they come from. Since the law forbids minors from renting, the lease is usually signed by an adult person.

“They are not homeless, they have families. They are school dropouts who want to migrate,” says Omar Al Naji (6), a lawyer and the director of the Nador office for the Moroccan Human Rights Association. He continues, “reaching the other shore happens through two ways: either by infiltrating the Beni Anssar Port, hiding inside boats, to arrive directly to Europe, or by going to Melilla where there is an accommodation center which can incorporate up to 400 persons. When the number of people exceeds this

amount, they are forced to live in the streets. Their presence in Melilla allows them to reach Spain through ways which can be dangerous, such as hiding in the boats (...) As minors, they subject to international conventions for children's rights which guarantee them education, family protection and health care which are rights largely unsecured by the Moroccan authorities. So, the minors just pass time hanging around, while a few civil society organizations or benefactors provide them with essential needs such as food and accommodation. Unfortunately, governmental institutions are absent which means the state has resigned from its duties toward them," Al Naji concludes.

Where did they come from?

Wandering in the Abi Nasser port, we ask a random group of children hanging around us where they came from. It appears that they have come from different cities and regions, even from the so-called "the good Morocco", such as Casablanca, Tangiers or the capital Rabat. Their answer is always, "I am despised in my own country and I am living in misery."

Unemployment, crime, theft and, most importantly, the idea of migration are all social phenomena incubated inside the marginal areas of Fes, Tangiers (which is among the places where most minors who populate the 18th district of Paris come from, for example) (7) and other metropolitan cities of Morocco, especially in the marginal neighborhoods that are morphologically distorted behind the urban centers. Like a virus, the dream of migration spreads and infects the children there before the grown-ups.

Marwan lives with his father, a day laborer who works in construction or as a hawker in popular markets. His mother works in the informal market, selling bread on street corners. The eldest of his siblings, Marwan has dropped out from school because the family couldn't afford to pay for his education anymore and his parents decided that earning money by any means was the solution to save the four other children of the family.

Moroccan minor migrants in Paris: What the numbers say (8)

- The families of 40% of the minor migrants in Paris come from villages or areas around urban agglomerations suffering from extreme poverty.

- 40% migrated after family issues such as divorce or other problems like domestic violence.
- 10% are homeless (street children)
- 10% belong to middle class families

Immigration as a means to resolve crises

Minors mostly leave their homes because of family disintegration, conflicts, drug addictions, school drop-out and other problems related to social vulnerability, like unemployment, limited incomes and lack of basic services...

Some families convince their younger boys of the necessity to leave as a means of resolving the crises in which they find themselves plunged.

“What’s the problem if I burn the borders once, twice or thrice? At least I will be like my friend, Samer, who can now help his mother and family with the income...” This is how Marwan persists in trying to get to Europe, whatever the cost may be.

What actually happened to others in their journey to Europe is not unknown to Marwan and his friends. In France for example, most of the unaccompanied minors live in the streets and resort to things like stealing and pickpocketing, fall victim to addictions to alcohol and drugs or into prostitution. They sometimes get sexually harassed and are also chased by the authorities. This “phenomenon” has become a hot topic for the media in the last few months. Marwan and others waiting at the border gates probably think that the “successes” of their friends – their showing-off, their clothes and accessories – are a consequence of their work or the aid they receive. What they fail to realize is that these acquisitions are actually the consequence of them becoming part of networks of prostitution or drug dealing.

Moroccan minors: Increasing Numbers

There are no detailed statistics on the overall number of unaccompanied Moroccan minor migrants present in the European continent.

The association “Save the Children” has reported that the proportion of

this category reaches 65% of the overall number of minor migrants, and they are estimated to be over 4000 children; a number that has tripled since 2016. They are rescued by child protection organizations and put in accommodation centers in Andalusia, in the two occupied cities of Ceuta and Melilla, in Catalonia, in Madrid and, to a lesser extent, in the Bask region and in Valencia.

In Sweden, this phenomenon has surfaced since 2013 in various cities such as Stockholm and Malmo. The number of Moroccan minors there was estimated to be around 800 children in 2017. These children mostly refuse to stay in accommodation centers and instead wait for their situation to be regularized as asylum seekers or to otherwise live with a relative or a Moroccan family.

Look for the mother

The mother is by herself a thematic and a common denominator in the question of immigration. She has often been celebrated by Rai singers in the prime days of “border burning” in the nineties and the early 2000s. She impersonates the “home country” and embodies human values such as “sacrifice”.

For Marwan, sacrifice is non-negotiable. He is not doing it to save his siblings or his father but for his mother who is tuckered out by long hours of sitting in the cold streets to earn a few miserable dinars. The son says he can no longer tolerate the humiliating scene that he witnessed one morning (which probably reoccurs from time to time) when an authority official threw his mother’s merchandise on the ground while insulting her.

It is not the “bragging” of friends that pushes Marwan towards Europe; the feeling of “humiliation” alone has motivated him and made him disappointed with his home country. “Border Burning” is not only a dangerous trip on board a rubber boat, it is also a new form of expressing discontent. Moroccan people are no longer demanding their human rights in what has been called “the regional movements” of Morocco, but they are now seeking an “exit from the country”. The idea of giving up the Moroccan nationality has even become a threat used to pressurize the authorities into hearing their demands.

Marwan tries to forget everything about his country by listening to a Rai song. He imagines the emotional state of the estranged singer who describes the painful separation from his mother. It is a separation that might be permanent. Who knows? The waves of the sea can bring about the end of his story, or it can carry him to the shores of safety.

An attempt to mitigate

After the phenomenon of Moroccan minor migrants surfaced, it was necessary to look for solutions or to try and mitigate this scene. Accommodation centers are among the solutions that were found. The children are welcomed there in Spain, France and Germany. The role of those centers is to protect them and guarantee that basic needs are provided to them.

However, those centers themselves also witness violations of the children's rights, especially when they become overcrowded. The human rights associations consider those to be equivalent to detention centers or minors' prisons. Sometimes, they don't even have a room or a bed to sleep in, which, by itself, triggers them to escape. As a result, many of the children end up on the streets.

European countries prefer to throw the ball in Morocco's court by giving the country financial support to build local accommodation centers. But the local human rights associations refuse this solution. In the city of Nador, for instance, the Moroccan Human Rights Association (9) has demanded from the local authorities to cancel the project of building an accommodation center for minors in partnership with Spain. They argue that the State should rather work on providing this category of the population with decent living conditions, such as education, health care and family protection.

Adoption is another solution. The Spanish government is crafting a convention with Andalusia to allow Spanish families there to adopt Moroccan minors under 12 years of age, who reside in the accommodation centers of the city. The Spanish Minister of social welfare has stated that there are between 60 and 65 families in Ceuta who would like to adopt some of the Moroccan minors who are hanging around in the city's streets.

This might not be enough to shelter everyone as the number of minors below the age of 12 in the accommodation centers is estimated to be around 100 or 150. For them, the popular Moroccan expression “Tar in my country is better than honey in other people’s countries” has been transformed into “Honey in other people’s countries is far better than tar in my own.”

1) A word meaning “street corner” that the young people from popular neighborhoods use to refer to a corner in the street where they meet to hang out, talk and sometimes smoke cigarettes and hash.

2) “Harrig” (border burner, someone who immigrates irregularly) is a word widely used by the Moroccan youth.

3) A testimony from the French newspaper “Le Monde” inside a report entitled “From Tangiers to Paris, on the footsteps of the lost children of Morocco”

4) A testimony from France-Press Agency (AFP) which has been published in many newspapers and on various platform, such as “L’Express” French magazine.

5) An exclusive testimony for Assafir Al-Arabi. The name has been changed.

6) Exclusive interview given to Assafir Al-Arabi.

7) According to a study conducted by the Spanish “Border Burners” association, under the supervision of María Antúnez , Álvarez Nora Driss , Cotilla Rosa ,García Rodríguez Sara Olcina Vilaplana and entitled “:De niños en peligro a niños peligrosos: una visión sobre la situación actual de los menores extranjeros no acompañados en Melilla, Mellila, 2016”

8) Statistics issued by the Association “Masarat” as part of a study titled: “Recherche-action sur la situation des mineurs non accompagnés marocains”, Avril 2018, page 45.

9) According to what Mr. Omar Al Naji, the president of the association, has revealed to us in an exclusive interview for Assafir Al-Arabi.

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Migrations: the world is flowing

2- “Border Burning” escaping misery, negligence and contempt

It is “the great escape”! The eight texts attempt to capture the causes that push the youth of Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco – including the women and children – to “burn the borders” and their personal documentation to impede repatriation. We found similar causes: harsh social disparities between the rural world and the cities and between the different regions within countries.

Those disparities are the result of a random “parasitic” development, the sabotaging of agriculture and ecology with highly polluting extractive industries, the absence of public services outside of certain urban circles and the overall weakness and significant decline in basic services in the last decades... The congestion of an unemployed, despaired youth at the cities’ peripheries, treated like a human surplus while its problems are regarded with disdain and contempt (“Al Hokra”).