

The Government of Irregular Migration in Sfax

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The Government of Irregular Migration in Sfax Abstract

This article examines power dynamics between city and central State relations in Tunisia, focusing on the government of migration in Sfax, a southern city. The study describes the emergence of Sfax as a migratory hub and its migratory ecosystem. It argues that the absence of a central strategy has reshaped both local and central powers, shifting from community empowerment to risk management, resulting in a “patchwork” approach of ad hoc measures. The role of local actors is analyzed, both considering the “government of the living” and the “government of the dead”, with particular attention to the creation of “numeric anonymous identities” for deceased migrants, driven by neoliberal practices and rising shipwreck deaths. Between 2022 and 2023, economic austerity, food shortages, and climate change deepened reliance on cheap migrant labor in fishing and farming, making smuggling a necessary survival strategy in Sfax.



Le gouvernement des migrations irrégulières à Sfax Résumé

Cet article examine les dynamiques de pouvoir entre les villes et les relations avec l'État central en Tunisie, en se concentrant sur le gouvernement des migrations à Sfax. Il décrit l'émergence de cette ville du sud en tant que centre migratoire, et son écosystème migratoire. Il soutient que l'absence de stratégie centrale a remodelé les pouvoirs locaux et centraux, passant de l'autonomisation des communautés à la gestion des risques, ce qui a donné lieu à un ensemble non coordonné de mesures *ad hoc*. Le rôle des acteurs locaux est analysé, tant du point de vue du « gouvernement des vivants » que du « gouvernement des morts », avec une attention particulière accordée à la création d'« identités numériques anonymes » pour les migrants décédés, motivée par les pratiques néolibérales et l'augmentation du nombre de naufrages. Entre 2022 et 2023, l'austérité économique, les pénuries alimentaires et le changement climatique ont renforcé la dépendance à l'égard de la main-d'œuvre migrante bon marché dans les secteurs de la pêche et de l'agriculture, faisant de la contrebande une stratégie de survie nécessaire à Sfax.



Keywords

Agriculture; government of irregular migration; local actors; Sfax, smuggling economy; political ambivalence; Tunisia.



Mots-clés

Acteurs locaux ; agriculture ; ambivalence politique ; économie de la contrebande ; gouvernement de la migration irrégulière ; Sfax ; Tunisie.

INTRODUCTION

This article delves into “city-central” State power relations in Tunisia, in particular through the lens of the government of migration in the city of Sfax, in the South of the country. Migration is considered here as a “*fait social total*”¹. This means that every element, every aspect, every sphere, and every representation of the economic, social, political, cultural, and religious order are all related to migration. It is for this reason that migrations perform in my view an extraordinary *reflective function*, revealing the deepest contradictions of a society, its political organization, and its relationships with other societies.

Following this, my focus is on the local government of both the living and the dead in Sfax. I argue that the government of migration in this city has contributed to a tacit reshaping of local and central State powers, characterized by a reduction in community empowerment initiatives and an increase in risk and emergency management measures in the aftermath of shipwrecks, giving rise to a new form of implicit State interventionism. Therefore, in this article, I use the terms “city” and “local” to denote an extension of the central State, and not an independent entity. This conceptualization of the city includes the local society in Sfax, comprising above all the political structures of the municipality, but also local civil society organizations, and citizen engagement, all operating within the urban space of the city. In Sfax, this interconnected network of political, social, and civic elements illustrates how the city operates as a direct extension of both the presence and absence of the State, assuming responsibilities not under direct delegation, but in the circumstances of implicit actions. In this sense, the urban government of migrant in Sfax involves not just “government beyond the State” or a weakening of local power, but a “government with[/within] the State”², reflecting the complex organization and negotiation of public-private, national-local, and state-society relationships.

In this scenario, during the two-year period 2022-2023, local, central and foreign actors have contributed to the social and political configuration that facilitates the irregular movement of people. This happens within a cascade framework: this situation unfolds within a broader context where President Saied has refused to make a deal with the IMF, rejecting any reform of the subsidy regime or privatization of state-owned enterprises, while aiming to re-establish a state-centered economy without the support of International Financial Institutions (IFIs). However, running out of financial resources, he has been forced to adopt austerity measures, leading to shortages, a freeze on public employment, inflation, and extremely low growth. The result has been the impoverishment of the population and the worsening of economic conditions for both Tunisians and migrants in Tunisia, exacerbated by xenophobia and racism. Such impoverishment compelled many individuals to migrate or engage in the business of smuggling. In this context, the city of Sfax offers a fruitful case study for the understanding of both the political ambivalence towards the fight against irregular migration and the implication of the Tunisian neoliberal economic model for the local government of migrant populations.

Thus, the primary questions guiding my exploration are: what are the power dynamics underlying the government of migration observed in the period 2022-2023 within the city of Sfax? And how are these forms of government articulated in the relationship between the city and the central State? In tandem with these overarching questions, a secondary inquiry emerges: how does illegal immigration become a part of the survival and coping strategies of both Tunisian and foreign social groups, and how does this immigration influence and transform the political economy of Sfax?

A crucial factor that facilitated my research was my involvement in the Uni.Coo project and my three-month fieldwork in Sfax, sponsored by the University of Turin’s Department of Culture, Politics and Society, in collaboration with the Italian NGO ANOLF (Associazione Nazionale Oltre le Frontiere), which was implementing there a project, namely Mentor2. This project, funded by the International Center for Migration

¹ Sayad, 2002, IX.

² McCann, 2016, 312-326.

and Development through the EU's Migration Partnership Facility, focused on circular mobility in the Mediterranean. The Uni.Coo project consisted in a scholarship for carrying out research activities related to the NGO's project Mentor2, which I utilized to analyze three key topics: the phenomenon of irregular migration related to Sfax's role as a departure hub; the phenomenon of regular migration through the Mentor2 project; and, finally, local governance dynamics and forms of repression. Given this, my research activities and topics were independent from the activity of the NGO, which I utilized only as a point of support in Sfax.

The importance of the topics explored in the article is further highlighted by the growing cooperation between the European Union (EU) – particularly Italy – and Tunisia in addressing irregular departures from Tunisian shores. Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's official visits to Tunisia, including meetings with Tunisian Prime Minister Najla Bouden Ramdan and President Saied, demonstrate this collaboration. Another factor to be taken into consideration is the scarcity of academic research on local government of migration practices, in line with the "methodological nationalism"³ which often characterizes migration studies. Existing analyses tend to focus on the national level, neglecting the valuable insights that local perspectives can provide and their implication with national dynamics of power. Following the path traced by the "local turn"⁴, my analysis aims to use "the local" as a gateway to multilevel relations across various government settings (local, national, supranational).

Before delving into the main body of this article, it is imperative to reflect on the terminology used and to outline the discursive approach underpinning this work. Examining power dynamics necessitates acknowledging the interplay between power and discourse. Foucault's analysis⁵ of discourse and power has been instrumental in revealing how dominant discourses shape social reality, marginalizing others. This "colonization" of reality influences how it is perceived and acted upon.

Building on Escobar's insights on development, viewing migration as a discourse helps focus the analysis on domination and its repercussions⁶. The portrayal of migrants from "under-developed" Global South regions often adopts Western standards, viewing them through a paternalistic lens. Migrants are typically characterized by darkness, powerlessness, poverty, ignorance, and lack of civil manners or historical agency. This homogenization serves more as a display of power over the Third World than as an accurate depiction. Therefore, it is urgent to "anthropologize the West"⁷ in migration discussions, highlighting taken-for-granted domains like epistemology and economics.

As Escobar has shown, the development apparatus – in my arguments, western neoliberal development as applied to Tunisia – constructs regimes of representation for peasants, women, and environments. Similarly, migrants have entered the development discourse over the past two decades. Within an economic framework, only those contributing to their home countries' development are considered eligible, legal, and worthy of recognition. The majority, however, are seen as an undifferentiated, troublesome mass. Migrants gain visibility in this economy only by being "developmentalized"⁸.

Acknowledging this, I recognize the risk of oversimplification in using terms like "migrant" and "sub-Saharan" throughout this article. These labels can reduce the complexity of individuals to a single defining characteristic. Additionally, focusing Eurocentrically on their immigration journey without considering their perspective as emigrants⁹ risks dehumanizing them, turning individuals into abstract figures or statistics, and ignoring the rich intricacies of their humanity. While I recognize the need for these categories in my research, it is crucial to highlight that my goal is to delve deeper into the complex experiences, hopes, and challenges faced by migrants.

³ Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002.

⁴ See Caponio *et al.*, 2018, 3; Zapata-Barrero *et al.*, 2017.

⁵ Among the many publications of the author, my main reference has been Foucault (1980).

⁶ Escobar, 1995, 6.

⁷ Rabinow, 1986, 241.

⁸ Escobar, 1995, 155.

⁹ Sayad, 2002, 385.

THE EMERGENCE OF SFAX AS A MIGRATION HUB

Before discussing the main arguments, it is important to differentiate smuggling from trafficking. Smuggling involves a migrant paying someone to facilitate illegal border crossing, ending the relationship once the destination is reached. It is a consensual transaction¹⁰. In contrast, trafficking involves coercion, deceit, or force, leading to exploitation, such as forced labor or prostitution. Trafficking is a crime against individuals, while smuggling is a crime against the State¹¹. Although these activities can overlap, this analysis focuses solely on smuggling.

Illegal emigration from Tunisia is not new. Initially, Tunisian fishing boats and smaller vessels crossed to Sicily and Lampedusa. This route became more structured in the late 1990s, facilitating the seasonal migration of workers from Maghreb countries to Sicily for jobs in fishing, agriculture, and greenhouses¹². Over the years, the flow shifted, increasing from Libya and decreasing from Tunisia. Recently, however, Tunisia has regained importance as a key transit country¹³.

In Tunisia there are mainly three routes for reaching Italy, which are still very active, namely the North East, Central East and South East¹⁴. The North East extends from Bizerte to Nabeul through the Gulf of Tunis and the region of El-Haouaria and Kelibia; the South goes from the boundary of the region of Sfax to the Libyan sea borders, including the important port of Gabes and the island of Jerba; and finally the Central East, also called “the Great Sahel”, which is the one I have worked on, includes major coastal cities such as Sfax, Sousse, Monastir, and Mahdia, but also a large number of villages of farmers and fishermen.

Based on the conducted interviews, it became evident that Tunisia is being increasingly considered as a favorable option for departures. This is primarily due to the notorious treatment of migrants in Libya, causing many individuals to use the country solely as a transit point, as well as its political instability¹⁵. Usually, migrants try to arrive at Tripoli and from there they try to reach the Tunisian cities of Tataouine, Gebes, Medenine, Sfax, Sousse, Mahdia and so on. Between 2022 and 2023, migrants coming from Libya were a minority compared to those arriving through airports or across the Algerian border.

On the other side, Algeria enforces stringent control over its coasts, prompting the Algerian police to redirect intercepted migrants towards Tunisia or into the desert, populated by criminal groups who often rob migrants in transit. Mohamed, a 21-year-old irregular migrant from Sierra Leone, related during our interview a similar experience, when some “mafia boys” robbed him, burnt his documents, and obliged him to indentured work for 8 months before being allowed to reach Tunisia¹⁶. This strategy, according to my interviewees, is widely accepted by the Algerian police and aims to obstruct departures from the Algerian coast while increasing migratory pressure at the Tunisian border¹⁷.

In general, in sub-Saharan Africa, given the length and complexity of the routes, the practice of migrating northwards in several stages seems widespread. In practice, the migrant, after a break of 2-3 months or more, can collect the money needed to pay for a subsequent stage of the journey, and identifies new intermediaries with whom to continue¹⁸. In the case of Mohamed, he told me that he moved with smugglers by car and that after leaving from Sierra Leone, he remained in Guinea for 2 months, then in Mali for 1 and in Algeria for 8. He has currently been in Tunisia for six months. His employer has promised to find a way to regularize him so that he can remain in Tunisia, but he is still saving money to get to Italy¹⁹.

¹⁰ Aziz *et al.*, 2015, 13.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Monzini *et al.*, 2004, 58.

¹³ King, 2023.

¹⁴ El Annabi, 2017, 167-168.

¹⁵ Interview 10.

¹⁶ Interview 9.

¹⁷ Interview 9, 10 and 11.

¹⁸ Monzini *et al.*, 2004, 60.

¹⁹ Interview 9.

These two routes from Libya and Algeria are usually the common path followed by many sub-Saharan migrants, except for those coming from a visa-free country. The sub-Saharan countries whose citizens have this right in Tunisia are Gabon, Ivory Coast, Mali, Nigeria, and Senegal²⁰. In Sfax, the Ivorian community is particularly significant, being one of the largest in the city²¹. The massive Ivorian migration also has very negative effects on women, who are enormously trafficked. In fact, during my research, I have repeatedly come across an export phenomenon known as “*bizi*”, a form of occasional and sometimes telematic prostitution²² (figure 1 and 2). Ads of this type can be found on the same online pages offering irregular travel to Italy, thus demonstrating how the people who usually organize the boats are also the same/in contact with the ones who traffic people, in this case women.



Figure 1 and 2. Examples of Bizi’s ads, found on the same Facebook page of ads for boat departures. Screenshots made by me on 08/05/23.

Wherever is the point of departure, irregular journeys are never undertaken by a migrant alone. Instead, the “candidate” to illegal immigration usually travels either in an autonomous group, or within a bigger network²³, as in the case of Mohammed. To successfully move from one country to another, a crucial figure comes into play: the passeur²⁴. The passeur is the person responsible for guiding and accompanying migrants along the paths that cross borders, or for driving vehicles and piloting boats to transport them. Usually, passeurs offering such services have been operating in the area for decades, often alongside the smuggling of goods. This role holds historical significance, being deeply ingrained in the region’s activities for many years²⁵. In the case of Sfax, actual smugglers were involved especially in the traffics of alcohol and spirits.

This initial overview of Tunisia provides a relevant introduction to the issue of irregular migration, which is not a new phenomenon for the country. However, what is a novelty is the emergence of Sfax as a migratory

²⁰ The complete list is available at the following address: <https://vistoturistico.eu/faqpag-4347-Tunisia-in-quant-paesi-con-passaporto-della-tunisia-possiamo-entrare-senza-richiedere-visto-> (accessed 01/10/2024).

²¹ Cassarini, 2022, 212.

²² Ciyow et Savoye, 2023.

²³ El Annabi, 2017, 169.

²⁴ Interview 9 and 10.

²⁵ Pastore *et al.*, 2006, 101.

hub. Such point of departure can offer insights to explore the government of irregular migration from a different perspective, shifting the analytical lens to the local level.

Sfax emerges as an ideal city for departures to Italy due to several factors. Firstly, its strategic location in the center of Tunisia makes it easily accessible for individuals arriving from Libya or attempting to enter from the Algerian desert. Moreover, the presence of the Kerkenna Islands archipelago in front of Sfax allows for departures from a point even closer to the island of Lampedusa, which is approximately 120 km (or 174 km from Sfax) away.

In terms of surveillance, the islands within the Kerkenna archipelago, especially in the far North where the port of Kraten is located, experience fewer checks. Although certain restrictions apply, such as prohibition of the use of public boat services between Sfax and Kerkenna islands for non-tourists or non-residents, departures from the archipelago persist. Another essential port of departures is Sidi Mansour, in the North of the city²⁶.

The fishing routes and activities associated with fishing and boat building have played a crucial role in facilitating irregular migration. Fishermen facing economic hardships have historically sold their boats or provided their services to accompany migrants to Italy²⁷. Nowadays it is more difficult to see fishing boats, both because they have become traceable (from the boat registry it is indeed possible to trace the owner) and because they are more easily recognized by the coast guard, are more expensive and take longer to build. As a result, an irregular boat-building industry specializing in a specific type of metallic, reddish-colored boats has flourished in the Sfaxian area (figure 3 and 4).



Figure 3 and 4. Photos of typical Sfaxian metal boats used for irregular migration, moored in the port of Kraten in the northern island of the Kerkenna archipelago (© G. Mazzocchi, 27/05/2023).

These boats are relatively inexpensive, quick to build (often completed overnight), and unique to the region. Based on the collected interview data, it was observed that it is primarily sub-Saharanans who use these types

²⁶ Fieldwork observation, May 2023.

²⁷ Interview 16.

of boats. These boats are known to be unstable and dangerous, but they are also more affordable. On the other hand, irregular Tunisian migrants tend to opt for safer boats made of wood and Styrofoam. Sub-Saharan usually travel in larger groups of 30 to 40 individuals, while Tunisians travel in smaller groups of around 20. Interview 16 specifically mentioned that Tunisians often depart from the Mahdia Governorate, whereas sub-Saharan depart from the Sfax Governorate. The Mahdia Governorate is relatively more controlled by authorities, making it easier for sub-Saharan migrants to be intercepted.

Typically, these boats are equipped with engines for the journey and are operated by one of the irregular migrants themselves. However, it is not uncommon for traffickers, once they reach the open sea, to deprive the boats of their engines, which can then be reused for other journeys. The risk of shipwreck is very high as the boats are sometimes not even supplied with enough fuel to reach the Italian coast. Their smugglers rely on the fact that the Italian authorities will tow into port on Lampedusa all the vessels they find drifting out at sea²⁸.

Departures usually take place in the early morning, coinciding with the first exit of the day by fishermen, or during the night. These times are particularly favorable, as coast guard radars still register boats, but are unable to distinguish between irregular migrant boats and those of fishermen, especially during shift changes. During the Ramadan period, departures are specifically arranged during Iftar, which is the time when Muslims can consume food and water after sunset. This time of day sees a decrease in coastal controls.

In cases where the Coast Guard intercepts boats, migrants are stopped and brought back to shore. Tunisians are usually arrested, while third country nationals lacking identification or documents are typically released onto the territory once again²⁹.

Departures from this region primarily aim to reach Lampedusa, but also Pantelleria and Egadi islands, with the crossing taking approximately between 10 and 24 hours under favorable weather conditions³⁰. Departures occur throughout the year, with a peak during the spring and summer months. The only determining factor for a successful trip is the condition of the sea. However, during peak times with a high number of departure requests, weather considerations are often disregarded.

The growth of the smuggling business has significantly reduced the cost of travel. While a trip could cost around 6,000 Tunisian dinars (approximately 1760 euros)³¹ per person a decade ago, the current cost ranges between 1,200 and 1,700 Tunisian dinars (350 to 500 euros)³², with important differences in price between Tunisians – who have access to safer and less crowded embarkations³³ and thus pay more – and third-country nationals. Furthermore, Sfax offers ample employment opportunities for unskilled labor, particularly in the agricultural and construction sectors, where low wages are prevalent. Working in the city becomes essential for migrants to accumulate funds to finance their journey from Tunisia to Italy³⁴. In addition, migrants from sub-Saharan Africa have given rise to a veritable market. Since they are forbidden to trade inside, outside the walls of the Medina, many migrants, especially women and children, set up rather busy squatter markets with products from their countries of origin³⁵. This moreover testifies that in addition to the smuggling of people, there is a considerable exchange of irregular materials, objects, and food³⁶.

Additionally, the use of social media platforms represents in Sfax a primary tool for promoting and organizing irregular travel. TikTok and Facebook offer easily accessible opportunities for irregular migration from Sfax³⁷. By searching for hashtags like “*harga*” (Arabic for irregular migration) and “*free booz*” (referring

²⁸ Monzini *et al.*, 2004, 61.

²⁹ Interview 16, 18 and 20.

³⁰ Pastore *et al.*, 2006, 108-109.

³¹ Interview 10.

³² Interview 9, 10, 16 and 20.

³³ Interview 16.

³⁴ Interview 9.

³⁵ Interview 20.

³⁶ Interview 11.

³⁷ Interview 16.

to “free boats”), TikTok users can find accounts that provide detailed information about the day and price of the trip (figure 5, 6 and 7). Similar information can also be found in relevant Facebook groups, such as “Africa Market Sfax”, from which I took the screenshot reported below. The announcements come across as formal, with guarantees for safety and even a request to “pranksters” and “time wasters” (*plaisantins* in French) to refrain (figure 8, 9 and 10). Furthermore, these platforms tend to portray irregular travel as a virtuous endeavor, emphasizing its righteousness and framing it as aligning with God’s will: “*boza fr[ee] c’est ne pas moi, c’est dieu*”³⁸.

GOVERNING THE LIVING: THE ROLE OF LOCAL ACTORS IN THE SFAXIAN MIGRATORY ECOSYSTEM

Over time, Sfax has developed a complex migratory ecosystem³⁹ comprising various entities, including political authorities, third-country nationals, civil society organizations, Sfaxian citizens, smugglers, the police, and the Guard Coast.

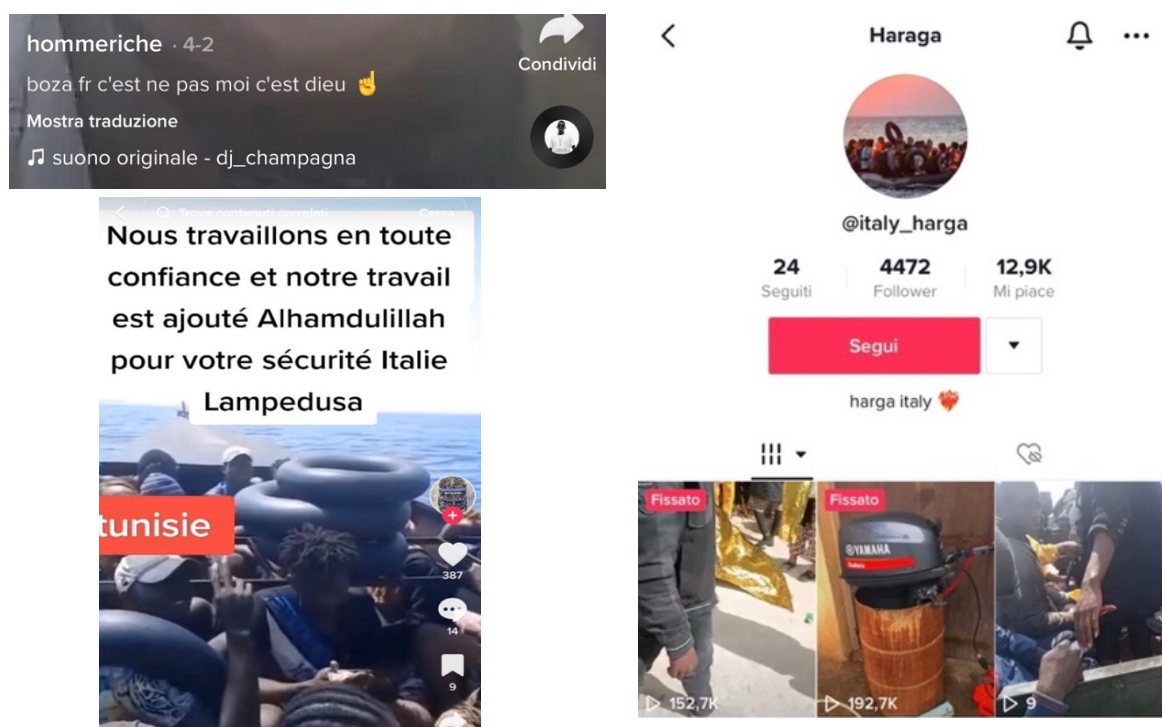


Figure 5, 6 and 7. Examples on the use of TikTok to organize irregular Mediterranean crossings from Sfax. Screenshots taken by me on 08/05/2023.

For what concerns political authorities, following the dissolution of municipal councils in March 2023⁴⁰, Sfax faced heightened challenges⁴¹, necessitating internal reorganization. In the absence of a designated authority for the government of flows, the city has delegated responsibility to two key figures: the General Secretary (whose role mirrors that of the mayor) and the Director of Financial Affairs, concurrently serving as the focal point for the Mentor2 project and director of decentralized cooperation. In addition, the Governorate of Sfax has been without a Governor since his dismissal by Saied in January 2023, weakening the city and the entire region on the security side⁴².

³⁸ Figure 8.

³⁹ Meddeb and Louati, 2024, 10-11.

⁴⁰ Bouhlel, 2022.

⁴¹ Mzalouat *et al.*, 2023.

⁴² Meddeb and Louati, 2024.



Figure 8, 9 and 10. Examples on the use of Facebook to organize irregular Mediterranean crossings from Sfax. From the Facebook group “Africa Market Sfax”. Screenshots taken by me on 08/05/2023.

While the recent situation has worsened integration of migrants in the city, Sfax has in the past represented a significant space for the bottom-up incorporation and integration of migrants. An issue such as diversity – contentious at the national level – has been handled more pragmatically at the local level⁴³, reframing diversity in a different way. In the city, the policy domain of integration has remained relatively “decentralized”, allowing for alternative policy frames at the city-level. The national approach, guided by neoliberal principles, has placed the responsibility for integration exclusively on the individual immigrant. In contrast, Sfax has adopted a more practical approach, involving immigrant actors in policy formulation and problem-solving⁴⁴. The presence of a large community of regular, black-skinned students from sub-Saharan Africa, who come to study at private universities⁴⁵, spurred the emergence of local civil society actors like Afrique Intelligence, Sfax International, and JCI Sfax, which have been promoting cultural and sports activities for integration and inclusion, organizing sport events, cooking sessions and panels of discussion. With the rising migratory pressures, their roles have evolved significantly. Afrique Intelligence, in particular, has expanded its activities. Initially focused on supporting sports initiatives, the organization has now become a key player in the orientation and support of irregular migrants.

The Municipality has also supported integration initiatives by (shyly) considering promoting language courses, the education of migrants’ children, and, above all, sports activities. During my time in Sfax, the Municipality was considering establishing an office to offer information and services to migrants who decide to remain in Tunisia as well⁴⁶. Despite these efforts, it is challenging to evaluate Sfaxian authorities’ initiatives. Being mainly a transit city for migrants, the Municipality has historically shirked responsibility for this part of the population, avoiding the development of policy responses and strategies for migrant settlement⁴⁷.

⁴³ Bak Jørgensen, 2012, 245.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 248.

⁴⁵ Interview 7, 16 and 19.

⁴⁶ Interview 19.

⁴⁷ Marconi, 2018, 358.

Simultaneously the city has experienced securitization and criminalization of migration. Violence against sub-Saharan migrants, both regular and irregular, have deteriorated, especially following the worsening of the country's financial crisis. With the diminishing popularity of Saïed, black migrants become a scapegoat for the country's problems. Such tendency has downplayed the inherent violence of their government, and bureaucratic control exerted has dehumanized migrants⁴⁸, reducing them to numbers invading Tunisia and which need to be displaced. In this way, the overall approach of national authorities – made of policies, discourses and practices – towards immigration have legitimated episodes of extreme violence in Sfax.

In February, the xenophobic rhetoric from the President ignited a disturbing hunt for migrants⁴⁹ in the city. In July, then, the assassination of a Tunisian man during a confrontation with sub-Saharan migrants triggered severe unrest and disorders⁵⁰. According to Inkyfada⁵¹, Agence France Presse (AFP)⁵², and as personally confirmed by the president of Afrique Intelligence⁵³, hundreds of African migrants expelled from Sfax were transported to desert regions in southern Tunisia, near the borders with Libya (in Ras Jedir) and Algeria. Large groups were coerced onto buses under false promises from the police of better relocation conditions⁵⁴. Many died at the borders, left in the desert without any means of support⁵⁵. Furthermore, the dissemination of xenophobic sentiment has pushed many employers to dismiss irregular migrant workers⁵⁶. Not able to pay rents, migrants ended up being exploited, with a sharp increase in criminal activities and violence.

In this sense, in Sfax tendencies of cooperation and challenge with respect to national policies⁵⁷ coexist to varying degrees, but without a clear, cohesive strategy. Rather, the case of Sfax shows that the interaction between national and local structures creates a unique framework where different political rationalities and problem-solving approaches are enacted⁵⁸, contributing to context-specific outcomes. Authorities indeed have failed to develop a comprehensive approach to managing the presence and movement of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa. This lack of a unified strategy has led the city to adapt on a case-by-case basis, influenced by numerous factors. The result is a form of “patchwork” made up of ad hoc measures rather than a well-defined plan.

As part of the “patchwork” tendency, the Municipality has then implemented two regulations: individuals lacking a familial connection to or native status on the Kerkenna Islands are barred from traveling to the islands, while sub-Saharans and tourists are prohibited from accessing the primary port of Sfax. In both instances, enforcement falls under the jurisdiction of the police, tasked with monitoring access and scrutinizing documentation⁵⁹.

Apart from these initiatives, the Municipality has generally adopted a conciliatory approach towards sub-Saharan migrants to prevent escalation of conflicts among Tunisians and third-country nationals. For instance, public land outside the Medina, typically off-limits, has been informally allocated to migrants for activities⁶⁰ such as selling products or offering hair braiding services (figure 11, 12 and 13).

⁴⁸ Caponio and Borkert, 2010, 12.

⁴⁹ Santopadre, 2023.

⁵⁰ ANSA, 2023a.

⁵¹ Mzalouat *et al.*, 2023.

⁵² Turkia, 2023.

⁵³ Information provided to me by Omar Bongo, president of Afrique Intelligence, during a phone call on 11/07/23.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ “Discours anti-Noirs du président Saïed : un nouveau vol de 290 Ivoiriens a quitté la Tunisie”, InfoMigrants, 24 March 2023. URL: <https://www.infomigrants.net/fr/post/47730/discours-antinoirs-du-president-saied-un-nouveau-vol-de-290-ivoiriens-a-quitte-la-tunisie> (accessed 01/10/2024).

⁵⁶ Meddeb and Louati, 2024, 9.

⁵⁷ Kemp, 2018, 329.

⁵⁸ Bak Jørgensen, 2012, 248.

⁵⁹ Interviews 3-18-19. In my particular situation, I managed to circumvent these restrictions with the assistance of Mentor2 participants. In the first scenario, I accompanied a local islander, facilitating my access to the Kerkenna Islands. Similarly, in the second instance, by assuming a Tunisian identity and allowing the project participants to engage with the authorities on my behalf, my documents were not subjected to scrutiny, enabling my entry into the main port of Sfax.

⁶⁰ Direct observation on the field and interview 19.

Additionally, the migratory ecosystem encompasses many private actors. As an example, the humanitarian and vaccination assistance that was given to migrants present in the city during the Covid-19 pandemic increased the role of private entities. Indeed, local authorities needed to turn to international and national private organizations⁶¹, such as JCI or the Red Crescent⁶², for obtaining medical materials and food to offer a basic assistance to some migrants rather than relying on State assistance⁶³.



Figure 11. Photo of the irregular market set up by sub-Saharan migrants outside the medina (© G. Mazzocchi, 03/05/2023).



Figure 12. Photo of the irregular market set up by sub-Saharan migrants outside the medina (© G. Mazzocchi, 24/04/2023).

Over time, this framework of intervention has generated a cascade of responsibilities, leading to a fragmented and complicated government of migration issues. Local authorities are burdened with tasks like the management of public spaces in relation to the sub-Saharan communities present in the city. The Coast Guard

⁶¹ Interview 20.

⁶² Interview 13.

⁶³ Hibou, 1999a.

also plays a crucial role, intercepting and blocking migrant boats based on directives from the central government, which seeks alternately to increase or to relieve migratory pressure towards Europe in order to exert pressure on EU countries⁶⁴. Organizations like Afrique Intelligence add another layer to this complex web by assisting migrants, further complicating the distribution of responsibilities. In the wake of divisive presidential speeches⁶⁵, individual citizens are also drawn into the fray, tasked with restoring order and security. This diffusion of duties across various entities⁶⁶ has eventually deresponsibilized public authorities and created a state of perpetual uncertainty⁶⁷.



Figure 13. This photo shows a woman from the Ivory Coast presenting me with some of her products, including miracle balls for breast and hip growth. In fact, typical products from the countries of origin are sold in these markets (© G. Mazzocchi, 12/05/2023).

Another important local actor to be considered is the pre-existing presence of well-organized criminal networks in the region. In the past, these networks were involved in the lucrative alcohol trade, which, although not prohibited in Tunisia, was considered *haram* and challenging to find in Sfax, especially spirits⁶⁸. Such networks are essential for the organization of irregular trips: sub-Saharan migrants, well-connected through social networks and word-of-mouth, are often aware that Sfax is the city to reach even before embarking on their journey. Some migrants already have contacts in Sfax that help them secure employment, as exemplified by the case of Mohamed, who had already secured a job in one of the bars in Sfax's medina before reaching the city⁶⁹. Through individuals involved in this business, migrants are provided not only with job opportunities, but also with abusive accommodation (typically cramped apartments). Additionally, this network facilitates the transportation of migrants to their departure points using large trucks and other means of transportation⁷⁰.

⁶⁴ Meddeb and Louati, 2024, 17-18.

⁶⁵ Haski, 2023.

⁶⁶ Hibou, 2023, 11.

⁶⁷ Hibou, 1999a, 30.

⁶⁸ Interview 10.

⁶⁹ Interview 9.

⁷⁰ Interview 16.

GOVERNING THE DEAD: THE ROLE OF LOCAL ACTORS IN THE SFAXIAN MIGRATORY ECOSYSTEM

The government of the dead at the Tunisian borders is a critical concern for the Tunisian State, in a logic of control over bodies⁷¹ and numbers. In this context, identification papers play a significant role in the agency of migrants. Indeed, as reported in some interviews, documents found on deceased bodies are often deemed unreliable by the police, as migrants frequently use false documents or those belonging to others⁷². The lack of identification documents obliges the police to release migrants back into the territory if they are found on a boat and, in this way, migrant can theoretically try to cross the Mediterranean illimited times. As most undocumented bodies were not such at first, the practice of “depaperialization” and anonymization is intentionally practiced by many migrants⁷³ for this purpose.

In this anonymization practice, the autopsy and identification process in Sfax further contributes to the creation of a “numeric anonymous identity”, a new identity devoid of personhood⁷⁴, characterized by neoliberal rationalities of bodily control. Neoliberal bureaucratization in Sfax governs the dead more than the living, operating through numbers, rules, procedures, codes, and categorizations – formalities rooted in market and business logic. These formalities permeate daily life, State functions, and even the biology of death, manifesting politics, power, domination, and conflicts⁷⁵.

Throughout my fieldwork, I tried to understand how the Sfaxian Municipality manages the shipwrecks, which bring on the coasts of the Governorate many dead bodies, often unrecognizable. Unlike smaller Municipalities in the Governorate, which often leave the bodies on the coast, the Municipality of Sfax takes on the responsibility of handling almost the entire Governorate’s situation, except for the Kerkenna archipelago⁷⁶. The municipality recovers bodies within a large area of 40km in the North and 40km in the South⁷⁷, arranging then for their transportation to the morgue and subsequent burial in the cemetery⁷⁸. The person responsible for public hygiene has now taken on the practical role of retrieving corpses. Previously focused primarily on rabies control by eliminating stray dogs and cats, this individual is now also tasked with transporting the dead from the coasts to the morgues. This person drives the municipal “*estafette*”⁷⁹, an open van where bodies are thrown on top of each other, with no separation between driver and rear.

To address this dramatic situation, the Municipality has sought assistance from the international community, specifically requesting support from various organizations, agencies, NGOs, and funds, increasing also the role of private entities in the government of the dead. On May 3rd, 2023, the Municipality informed me that it has submitted requests to entities such as IOM, ICMPD, *Tunis Terre d’Asile*, and HUNCHR. These requests included the need for a refrigerated van for transporting corpses, 500 body bags, 500 special clothes for the body recovery workers, 500 filter masks, 200 gloves, 500 protective goggles, funds for the construction of a cemetery for the burial of bodies recovered at sea, and the possibility of using other morgues for corpse identification⁸⁰. These demands have still not been met to this day.

Once the bodies are found, the Municipality obtains a written authorization from the police and moves the bodies from the coast to the Habib Bourguiba hospital for autopsy and identification. This part is essential to understand how a “numeric anonymous identity” is created for the bodies found after shipwrecks.

A full systematic forensic autopsy is carried out by doctors on all bodies to confirm the cause of death (usually mechanical asphyxia due to submersion) and to rule out any other cause, in particular that of the intervention

⁷¹ Diallo, 2018, 162.

⁷² Interview 19 and 20.

⁷³ Diallo, 2018, 148-149.

⁷⁴ Agamben, 2009, 91.

⁷⁵ Hibou, 2013, 9-10.

⁷⁶ Interview 18.

⁷⁷ Interview 21.

⁷⁸ Interview 20.

⁷⁹ Interview 21.

⁸⁰ Interview 20.

of a third party. The autopsy also reveals any internal element that could help with identification⁸¹. Each body is assigned a code/number at the mortuary, which allows for tracking of two key pieces of information: DNA and the tomb number. This information is recorded both at the hospital and in an online register maintained by the Municipality. The aim is to facilitate the identification of bodies by families searching for their relatives⁸².

	2021	2022	2023
January	0	0	15
February	0	0	24
March	15	0	46
April	18	68	205
May	24	130	190 (until 24th May)
June	32	27	/
July	44	63	/
August	73	5	/
September	0	22	/
October	25	0	/
November	7	0	/
December	4	20	/
Total	266	355	468

Table 1. Data on the dead bodies collected by the Municipality from January 2021 to May 2023⁸³.

The situation has become increasingly challenging in the recent year, as the morgue in Sfax, which normally has a capacity of 35 corpses⁸⁴, has faced severe pressure and space constraints due to the increasing number of bodies collected at sea⁸⁵. Individual burials of migrants take place at the cemetery, facilitated either through the *Service d' Intervention Rapide et Permanente* or the *Service de Cimetière*. The Municipality incurs a significant cost of approximately 250/300 Tunisian Dinars for each burial, which is covered by its own funds. However, some Municipalities, including Gremda, Mahres, El Ain, Thyna, Saqiyat Ad D'Air, Sakiyet Ezzit, and Chihia, have agreed to provide spaces for the burial of migrant bodies, sharing the burden with Sfax⁸⁶.

According to the data officially provided to me by the General Secretariat of the Municipality of Sfax⁸⁷, there has been a concerning increase of dead bodies found in the Governorate, and consequently, we may hypothesize, an increase of departures. The data were provided to me only up to the 24/05/23.

The data show a notable upward trend in the total number of recorded dead bodies of migrants over the three-year period. The total count has increased from 266 in 2021 to 468 in 2023, indicating a significant rise in such incidents. These numbers appear to be even more worrying if we consider that the first 5 months of 2023 widely outnumbered both those of 2021 and 2022.

⁸¹ Ben Amar *et al.*, 2022, 883.

⁸² Interview 21.

⁸³ Data requested to the General Secretary of Sfax and provided directly to me on May 25th, 2023, through an internal document of the Municipality.

⁸⁴ Interview 20.

⁸⁵ ANSA, 2023b.

⁸⁶ Interview 21.

⁸⁷ Interview 18.

THE POLITICAL AMBIVALENCE TOWARDS THE FIGHT AGAINST CLANDESTINITY: THE REGULATION OF THE EMIGRATION ECONOMY IN SFAX

The tension between stringent and tender border control, as well the ineffectiveness of government practices at the local level, emphasize an important aspect concerning the fight against irregular migration in Sfax: its political ambivalence. Indeed, activities of repression and criminalization of migration movements acts linearly with a laissez-faire approach, both in the economy and in the securitization activities of the State.

Many analyses view human smuggling as indicative of State failure⁸⁸. Yet, as Hamza Meddeb emphasizes⁸⁹, this perspective overlooks the intricate intersections among various actors and their often-complementary operational logics. Clandestine activities do not operate in isolation from State control and influence. Instead, they reveal the State's localized dynamics. The ambivalence in the fight against smuggling activities is indeed part of an implicit tendency pursued by the central government, with the aim of balancing conflicting demands. Sfax in this sense not only provides a real-world perspective on smuggling⁹⁰ and insight into grassroots State control, but also represents a fruitful case study for the understanding of this local political ambivalence.

Smuggling activities in Sfax are pervasive, visible in streets, markets, crammed houses, ports, social media, construction sites, mortuaries, and cemeteries. This unchallenged smuggling economy is tolerated by political authorities, reflecting pre-revolutionary power dynamics⁹¹. In 2009, Meddeb commented on the Ben Ali regime, stating that *“le régime tunisien a privilégié le statu quo politique au détriment de la performance économique et de la justice sociale”*⁹². This observation remains relevant even under Saïed's regime. Despite a revolution, the fundamental power dynamics in Tunisia's economy remain intact⁹³.

Local authorities in Sfax exhibit a tolerant attitude towards irregular migration⁹⁴, regardless of repressive legislation like the 2004 law⁹⁵, which imposed harsher penalties for irregular entries and exits. This law created a climate of suspicion and fear towards migrants and their supporters⁹⁶. Still, the reality diverges from formal condemnation. As declared by the Director of Financial Affairs of the Municipality of Sfax: *“Nous, mais aussi la police, sommes plus que patients et tolérants à leur égard”*⁹⁷. Judges, too, have displayed leniency toward migrants⁹⁸, reflecting a state-level preference for tolerance over strict enforcement.

The gap between stringent legal norms and their practical enforcement by judicial and police authorities reflects the challenge faced by the State in balancing conflicting demands: securing funds from external actors on the one hand while maintaining internal stability and obedience on the other, without disrupting the informal economy that sustains certain segments of society⁹⁹. Historically, this dilemma has been managed through deceptive policies, creating the illusion of tireless control and securitization efforts¹⁰⁰. Actions such as partially controlling departures from the Sfaxian coast, arresting a few local smugglers¹⁰¹, and repelling sub-Saharan migrants contribute to a narrative portraying Tunisia as Europe's border guardian¹⁰², thus

⁸⁸ See for example Badie, 2004.

⁸⁹ Meddeb, 2012, 374.

⁹⁰ Dobler, 2022, 20.

⁹¹ Hibou, 2006.

⁹² Elbaz, 2009, 831.

⁹³ Hibou *et al.*, 2011, 53.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁹⁵ Law no. 2004-6 of 3 February 2004, *Journal Officiel de la République tunisienne*, n° 11, 6 February 2004, URL: <https://legislation-securite.tn/fr/law/45000> (accessed 01/10/2024).

⁹⁶ Natter, 2022, 1556.

⁹⁷ Interview 19.

⁹⁸ Meddeb, 2012, 383-387.

⁹⁹ Elbaz, 2009, 830-831.

¹⁰⁰ Meddeb, 2012, 392-393.

¹⁰¹ “Tunisia: arrest of a major smuggler in Sfax”, *Africanews*, 2023, URL: <https://www.africanews.com/2023/05/26/tunisia-arrest-of-a-major-smuggler-in-sfax/> (accessed 01/10/2024).

¹⁰² Ben Jémia, 2007, 37.

securing essential backing from the EU and shaping geopolitical perceptions. For this reason, Sfax has an essential role in the construction of the international image of Tunisia.

Yet this narrative contrasts with the local reality of undocumented migrants, the ease of finding travel details on platforms such as TikTok and Facebook, and the availability of work and housing for sub-Saharan migrants. In this sense, smuggling in Sfax is deeply intertwined with Tunisia's political economy and its relationship with Western actors, illustrating how neoliberalism and security converge in the Global South's integration into the global neoliberal economy¹⁰³. In essence, smuggling in Sfax transcends local significance, shaping Tunisia's political and economic landscape within the broader geopolitical context of the Global South's interaction with the global neoliberal economy.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF SMUGGLING ACTIVITIES AND THE ROLE OF AGRICULTURE

The ambivalence in the fight against irregular migration has both origins and consequences within the Tunisian informal economy, especially in Sfax. As a significant socio-political factor, the Tunisian informal economy employed about 43.9% of the population in 2022¹⁰⁴, and continues to grow¹⁰⁵, reflecting strong political acceptance¹⁰⁶. While most studies focus on land borders with Libya or Algeria, where the political economy of the tribal conscience transpires in local politics¹⁰⁷, Sfax also acts as a crucial maritime boundary, serving as a major departure point for migrants. This sea border complicates the relationship between frontier economy, obedience, neoliberal development, and international and city-center relations. Various actors, including smugglers, the Municipality, the central government, and EU representatives, contribute to the indirect government of migrants, each with divergent views on sovereignty, leading to a delicate balance of power¹⁰⁸.

Before getting to the nitty-gritty of the Sfaxian situation, it seems pertinent to first provide a national overview. A national framework is indeed important for understanding the economic dynamics in Sfax, which, in turn, offer concrete examples that illustrate the economic reasons behind the ambivalence in the fight against irregular migration. With this analysis, my aim is to challenge Western securocratic narratives¹⁰⁹ that link informal economies to terrorism and organized crime.

Some scholars argue that instability and lack of development in Tunisia have allowed terrorist groups to recruit disillusioned young men into illegal markets, posing security threats to the EU¹¹⁰. However, following the suggestion of Matteo Capasso¹¹¹, I consider human smuggling and State capture – which I understand in the sense explained by Hibou¹¹² as privatization of the State – as intertwined phenomena, both arising from the deteriorating economic performance of Tunisia and the country's subordinate integration into the global neoliberal economy¹¹³.

Neoliberal development has historically benefited Tunisia's ruling elites and their international allies, disadvantaging the lower-income population¹¹⁴. This dynamic traces back to the liberalization and privatization efforts of former President Ben Ali, the “*bon élève*”¹¹⁵, in the 1980s, as well as the pressure exercised by the EU and other international financial institutions over the years. The Barcelona Process and the 1995 Association Agreement (AA) marked steps toward economic privatization and liberalization,

¹⁰³ Capasso, 2021a, 464.

¹⁰⁴ Nadir *et al.*, 2023.

¹⁰⁵ Ben Hassen *et al.*, 2022, 2.

¹⁰⁶ Hibou *et al.*, 2011, 44.

¹⁰⁷ Meddeb, 2015, 66.

¹⁰⁸ Hibou, 2023, 14-15.

¹⁰⁹ See for example Bechis, 2023.

¹¹⁰ See for example Ben Yahia et Ras, 2019; Scheele, 2012; Baird, 2016.

¹¹¹ Capasso, 2021a, 442.

¹¹² Hibou, 1999a.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 460.

¹¹⁴ Capasso, 2021b, 444.

¹¹⁵ Hibou, 1999b, 2.

promoting the creation of a Euro-Mediterranean Economic Area. In particular, the measure contained in the Agreement went “well beyond the existing framework of cooperation by calling for a comprehensive harmonization of the regulatory framework”¹¹⁶. Employing the usual carrot-and-stick policy attitude¹¹⁷, the EU and the World Bank provided financial support for Tunisia’s adjustment and development¹¹⁸, assuming economic progress would reduce migratory pressure¹¹⁹.

Nonetheless, these structural reforms placed the burden of economic and social progress on Tunisian entrepreneurs, reinforcing a top-down governance model and worsened worker exploitation¹²⁰. The State, under Ben Ali, assumed a “pedagogical role”¹²¹ and maintained control over resource allocation and restructuring pace, despite portraying itself as a social provider and defender of national interests¹²². This approach increased State interference in the economy, reinforced a political economy of control, and augmented regional inequalities¹²³.

Béatrice Hibou’s analysis shows that State privatization involves more than transferring public services to private hands; it transforms State mechanisms to serve private interests. Economic liberalization and the increasing role of civil society and private actors, like NGOs and markets, intensified this shift in Tunisia¹²⁴.

After these years of economic integration with and opening toward the European area and especially after the 2011 revolution, Tunisia faced a worsening economic situation. Between 2022 and 2023, the reliance on austerity measures ignited social unrest amid already challenging economic and financial conditions¹²⁵. Meanwhile, the failure to secure a deal with the IMF¹²⁶ to address financial gaps and restore investor confidence has pushed the country to the brink of a financial crisis. Economic growth has stagnated, exacerbating long-term poor performance and rising inflation¹²⁷, which has increased social pressures. Nowadays, public finances are severely constrained by imbalances, accumulated arrears, and a growing burden of publicly guaranteed debt, limiting the government’s ability to maneuver. Without an IMF agreement, reliance on external funding has decreased, while increased domestic borrowing has crowded out the private sector, further deepening economic stagnation.

Tunisia is at a critical juncture, unable to ignore internal and external imbalances. Maintaining the status quo will inevitably lead to a financial crisis, while drastic adjustments could result in sociopolitical upheaval.

In this scenario, human smuggling has served as a strategy articulated from below to mitigate the impacts of impoverishment and aggressive inflation. As income-generating opportunities dwindled, more individuals turned to informal economies¹²⁸, including human smuggling, driven by necessity rather than ideology¹²⁹.

In this regard, the Sfaxian economic structure and labor markets offer a good example of the interconnections between human smuggling and the Tunisian political economy. Dominated by agriculture¹³⁰ (the governorate

¹¹⁶ Jbili and Enders, 1996, 19.

¹¹⁷ Rietig and Walter-Franke, 2023, 8.

¹¹⁸ The global cost of the first phase is evaluated at \$2.5 billion and is partly financed by the EU and the World Bank. On 22 March 1996, following the visit of James Wolfensohn, President of the World Bank, Tunisia was granted a loan of \$750 million. ECU 45 million were granted by the EU, in April 1997, in the context of the MANFORM program, aimed at promoting human resources and vocational training within private firms. One month later, two loans, which amounted to \$54 million, were granted by the European Investment Bank to support the structural reform program. See Jbili and Enders, 1996; Cassarino, 1999.

¹¹⁹ Cassarino, 1999, 63.

¹²⁰ Capasso, 2021b, 4.

¹²¹ Cassarino, 1999, 64.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 61 and 66.

¹²³ Bousnina, 2008, 7-9.

¹²⁴ Hibou, 1999a, 4.

¹²⁵ Diwan *et al.*, 2024, 23-24.

¹²⁶ “Tunisia’s President Kais Saied rejects IMF ‘diktats’”, *Africanews*, 6 April 2023, URL: <https://www.africanews.com/2023/04/07/tunisia-president-kais-saied-rejects-imf-diktats/> (accessed 01/10/2024).

¹²⁷ Mkehli, 2023.

¹²⁸ Elbaz, 2009, 831.

¹²⁹ Capasso, 2021a, 443.

¹³⁰ Hammami, 2022, 6-7.

is the primary agricultural producer of the country¹³¹), Sfax's economic structure benefits significantly from irregular migration. The local agricultural economy is based on the production of olives, almonds, and fish at lower costs¹³². Sectors such as agriculture, construction, and fishing attract many migrant workers¹³³, particularly young sub-Saharanans willing to accept any job. For instance, Mohamed had secured work in olive harvesting and later in a café in Sfax even before arriving in Tunisia. Here, he earned 22 dinars (approximately 6 euros) per day for 12-hour shifts¹³⁴. His experience highlights the deep connections between local actors and smuggling networks, with the State's *laissez-faire* approach reinforcing authoritarian power dynamics: in exchange of cheap labor, some fragments of the Tunisian society tacitly accept intrusive and controlling modes of power. However, the true cost of this agreement is the exploitation of the most vulnerable, including migrants.

The focus on exporting a limited range of agricultural products has recently exposed Tunisia, and specifically Sfax, to food dependence and shortages¹³⁵. During my time in Sfax, frequent shortages of rice, flour, and sugar were evident and were deteriorated by the reduction, through rationing, in expenditures on subsidies in 2023¹³⁶. Additionally, this export-driven strategy, which proved successful in the 1990s and early 2000s, has led to a trade balance deficit¹³⁷, causing an increase in international food and fuel prices¹³⁸.

The risks of opening the local agriculture to global competition without protecting (all) local production¹³⁹ were exacerbated by an exceptionally unfavorable agricultural season in 2023, due to climate change and water scarcity¹⁴⁰. While products with comparative advantages thrived, others like dairy, animal products, and cereals struggled, making the country increasingly reliant on imports¹⁴¹. The high cost of importing animal feed and other inputs was faced with the need of selling farmers' products at low prices on the local market, leading to significant distortions and substantial losses for farmers. This reliance has impoverished the peasantry and undermined food security¹⁴². Thus, the agricultural sector's challenges are compounded by issues related to the subsidy regime and price regulation. Indeed, subsidies, which mainly cover petroleum products, electricity, gas, and cereals, have a high cost and tend to be highly unfair, as they benefit high income segments of the population, while failing in improving poor life conditions¹⁴³.

Given this, it is not a surprise that the first smugglers in Sfax were fishermen¹⁴⁴ and small-scale farmers¹⁴⁵ facing severe economic difficulties. At the same time, it appears clear that hiring under-paid irregular migrants is convenient considering the current Tunisian economic situation.

CONCLUSION

As the article has shown, the case of Sfax illustrates the intricate dynamics between urban and State relations in the government of migration. While the local level plays a crucial role in governing migration (both the living and the death), the interplay between local and national strategies creates a complex framework for policy outcomes. In Sfax, local and national policies coexist, sometimes aligning and other times diverging. While the city has implemented integration initiatives, it has also experienced increased securitization. Local civil society organizations have promoted cultural and sports activities for integration, partially supported by

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² *Ibid.*, 8.

¹³³ Interviews 10, 16 and 19.

¹³⁴ Interview 9.

¹³⁵ World Food Programme, 2022, 3.

¹³⁶ El Oudi, 2023.

¹³⁷ Arafah and Meddeb, 2024, 1-3.

¹³⁸ Diwan *et al.*, 2024, 18.

¹³⁹ Capasso, 2021a, 462-463.

¹⁴⁰ Diwan *et al.*, 2024, 3.

¹⁴¹ Tröster *et al.*, 2018, 2.

¹⁴² See Ayeb and Bush, 2019.

¹⁴³ Diwan *et al.*, 2024, 14-15.

¹⁴⁴ Interviews 14, 15 and 16, but also Capasso, 2021a, 447-448.

¹⁴⁵ Amayed, 2020.

the Municipality. However, Sfax has also faced criminalization and violence against migrants, exacerbated by xenophobic rhetoric and recent violent incidents.

The plural nature of local policies' adaptation and their contradictory dynamics¹⁴⁶ in Sfax has not weakened local actors but has mainly altered their intervention methods. This has resulted in a reduction of community empowerment initiatives, namely activities promoted by the civil society organizations quoted above, and in an increase in emergency and risk-management measures, namely the necessity to focus resources on the emergencies created by shipwrecks.

However, in Sfax such government has so far demonstrated to be ruinous and incomplete¹⁴⁷. The logic inherent to this practice and the local ambiguity created by implicit delegation contribute to this failure. For example, the Sfaxian Coast Guard, bound by rules and procedures, identifies migrant boats and disembarks irregular migrants. While arresting Tunisians, it releases third-country nationals back into the territory¹⁴⁸. This flawed approach perpetuates a cycle of labor exploitation – migrants need to work again to pay their journey – and double financial gains for smugglers – migrants end up paying twice for the same trip, overall reinforcing the smuggling economy. Meanwhile, law enforcement officers exploit the lack of accountability, resorting to physical violence¹⁴⁹ and arbitrarily confiscating migrants' possessions¹⁵⁰. Moreover, bureaucratic categorization overlaps with racism, as black-skinned residents in Sfax assumed to be irregular migrants experience discrimination¹⁵¹.

In this framework, implicit delegation¹⁵² has played a pivotal role, creating both more space of maneuver – for integration and inclusion –, while simultaneously contributing to increased violence – as the space of maneuver also creates space for the silent acceptance of illegality and for what concerns police deportation activities and confiscation of migrants' belongings. Implicit delegation – which in turn is part of the process of State privatization¹⁵³ – has been reached by a tacit agreement and a meeting of wills without formal processes enacted by the local State and central State, which operate in the same intervention logic. The migratory ecosystem present in Sfax has in different ways fostered several initiatives without active promotion from the central State, which instead encouraged the local level of government, both public and private, to assume responsibility.

Additionally, the fight against irregular migration in Sfax highlights the ambivalence of the practices at local-level government. The tension between stringent national policies and more lenient local approaches reflects a broader strategy to balance conflicting demands. While repressive measures coexist in life¹⁵⁴ with a *laissez-faire* attitude towards the economy and security, this duality reveals the State's localized dynamics and its strategic response to both internal and external pressures.

Smuggling activities in Sfax, pervasive and visible across various aspects of daily life, are integrated into the local economy and tolerated by authorities, further emphasizing this ambivalence. As the analysis has shown, the business of clandestinity is driven by necessity rather than ideology, with the Sfaxian economy benefiting from cheap migrant labor in agriculture, construction, and fishing. Such attitudes towards informal economy reflect the broader neoliberal development model adopted by Tunisia in the past, driven by Western agendas, Tunisian reliance on financial aid, and the economic and agriculture crisis which has impoverished the Tunisian society, leading to increased smuggling as a means of survival.

¹⁴⁶ Kemp, 2023, 442-445.

¹⁴⁷ Hibou, 2023, 12.

¹⁴⁸ Interview 16, 18 and 20.

¹⁴⁹ Camilli, 2023.

¹⁵⁰ Interview 9 and 10.

¹⁵¹ Interview 10 and phone call on 11/07/23. Omar reported to me that after the February speech of the President and the assassination occurred in July, he experienced many episodes of hate and discrimination in the streets and in some administrative offices in Sfax.

¹⁵² Hibou, 1999a, 13-14.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁵⁴ Hibou and Hulsey, 2006, 188.

Forms of State control are also integral to the government of the dead. The practice of “depaperialization”, where migrants intentionally discard identification documents, reinforces the cycle of anonymization and bureaucratic management of the dead, creating a “numeric anonymous identity” devoid of personhood. This process underscores a neoliberal rationality where the dead are governed through strict formalities and categorizations rooted in market logic.

The rising number of dead bodies, from 266 in 2021 to 468 in 2023, illustrates the increasing peril faced by migrants attempting to cross the Mediterranean. This trend indicates not only an increase in departures but also a failure of broader securitarian migration policies. The handling of migrant deaths in Sfax exemplifies the intersection of local government, international pressures, and the harsh realities of the Tunisian economic crisis, painting a grim picture of the human cost involved in the actual government of global migration.

APPENDIX - METHODOLOGY

The article is built on a qualitative methodology. This methodology was chosen due to the scarcity of material on migration governance in the city of Sfax, necessitating an initial qualitative study to understand this relatively unknown phenomenon before quantitative research can be pursued. Additionally, my research questions focused on qualitative aspects, and limited resources prevented large-scale statistical assessments. Safety concerns also influenced this choice, as my position as a young, white, female researcher made it challenging to safely approach sub-Saharan migrants willing to speak openly. My main activities included semi-structured interviews in French. These interviews aimed to understand the socio-economic backgrounds of Mentor2 project participants, sub-Saharan migration experiences and local government dynamics. The semi-structured format allowed flexibility and engagement, enabling me to adjust questions based on each interviewee’s context. I found this method to be the most effective in eliciting information that might not have been readily apparent through observation alone.

The phenomena of irregular migration and human smuggling are poorly understood and difficult to research¹⁵⁵. The primary sources of related information are thus ex-post accounts from irregular migrants and insights from local actors such as journalists, municipal officials, and NGOs. While these sources provide valuable information, they are often biased toward traumatic journeys and local perceptions.

Additionally, I conducted transect walks with Mentor2 participants, starting from the Affair Center where I had a small office. These walks explored key areas in Sfax’s social and economic fabric, highlighting significant locations such as the ports of Sidi Mansour and Sfax, Kerkenna Islands, and the “Casino” beach area with its industrial complexes. I also visited the irregular market outside the medina, frequented by sub-Saharan migrants. Extensive photo documentation accompanied my activities. Finally, I carried out academic review and policy analysis.

Interview table			
	<i>Role</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>2nd interview</i>
Interview 1 + transect walk	Participant 1 F – Social Innovation Researcher	24/04/23	1.1, 08/01/24
Interview 2 + transect walk	Participant 2 M – Refrigeration Technician	26/04/23	Refused to respond
Interview 3 + transect walk	Participant 3 F – Biologist	28/04/23	3.1, 27/11/23
Interview 4 + transect walk	Participant 4 M – Engineer	28/04/23	4.1, 04/01/24
Interview 5 + transect walk	Participant 5 M – Engineer	28/04/23	5.1, 11/01/24

¹⁵⁵ Black, 2003, 34-35.

Interview 6	Participant 6 M – Engineer	04/05/23	6.1, 11/01/24
Interview 7	Participant 7 F – Optician	08/05/23	Has not responded
Interview 8	Project manager of Mentor2 at ANOLF in Sfax	10/05/23	
Interview 9	Irregular migrant from Sierra Leone	08/05/23	
Interview 10	Regular migrant and president of Afrique Intelligence	29/04/23	20/05/23, interview 10.1.
Interview 11	Irregular migrant from Ivory Coast	12/05/23	
Interview 12 + transect walks	Former president of JCI Sfax	08/05/23	18/05/23
Interview 13	Member of Sfaxian Red Crescent	29/04/23	
Interview 14	Owner of a carpet shop in the Medina	09/05/23	
Interview 15	Owner of a restaurant in the Medina	17/05/23	
Interview 16	Local journalist and fisherman	03/05/23	
Interview 17	Manager of ANETI in Sfax	24/05/23	
Interview 18	General Secretary	23/05/23	
Interview 19	Director of Financial Affairs and Decentralized Cooperation	19/05/23	
Interview 20	Head of External Relations	19/05/23	24/05/23
Interview 21	Manager responsible for logistical activities related to the recovery and burial of bodies following shipwrecks at sea.	24/05/23	

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