Beyond transit: Tunisia and the real stories of migration" or simply "Why Tunisia is not just a transit country"

By Ayoub Mejri

"Migration is out of control." "We must stop the flow."

From East to West, North to South — these are the mantras of our time. Whether in Tunisia or Italy, France or Morocco, migration has become a convenient target, blamed for everything from national identity, unemployment to national decline.

What's striking is how global and interchangeable the alarmist rhetoric has become. A quote might just as easily come from a Tunisian president denouncing Sub-Saharan migrants, a British minister targeting Pakistanis, a French official evoking North Africans, or an American politician railing against "illegal aliens." Scapegoating migrants is nothing new. It's a cynical political tactic as old as migration itself. In this article, we will try to take Tunisia as a lens to explore how this anxiety is manufactured, and what it obscures.

The truth is, migration is not chaos. It tends to follow predictable patterns, often closely linked to development. Globally, the share of international migrants has remained stable at around 3% of the population. What changes over time are the directions and destinations. As education, infrastructure, and living standards improve; migration also increases, at least initially. That's why, contrary to popular belief, development doesn't reduce migration. Researcher, Ronald Skeldon in his book on the issue concluded that "migration IS development". In this line, today many experts note that we are witnessing the "African migration era" (especially from Western-Africa).

Having the aspiration to migrate does not always mean having the ability to do so — especially when moving from a poorer to a wealthier country. Migration scholar Jørgen Carling conceptualises this tension through his "aspiration–ability" model: people may want to migrate, but their ability to do so is constrained. This (in)ability is shaped by restrictive visa regimes, social class, racial discrimination, and unequal access to financial or social resources. Carling precises that we live in an "age of involuntary immobility" — a condition that characterises much of the relationship between the so-called Global South and Global North.

Taken together, these dynamics shape how migration unfolds across the region. As development increases and opportunities remain uneven, people often find themselves moving within the continent. That's why nearly half of all African migrants today live in another African country. And for many, North African countries like Tunisia or Morocco become more accessible destinations than Europe: geographically closer, more affordable, and less restricted. These trends don't reflect failure. They reflect the evolving geography of mobility in a globally unequal system.

In this context, it's worth looking more closely at Tunisia not just as a steppingstone, but as a country where migrants could live, work, and contribute.

Despite the political noise, Tunisia is not experiencing a migration "invasion." According to the 2025 national census, foreign residents make up just 0.55% of the population. This figure is consistent with the 2021 survey on international migration in the country (Tunisia-HIMS). This translates to merely a few tens of thousands of people. And yet, migrants dominate headlines and political speeches, portrayed as threats to national identity, social order, and the economy.

This disconnect between perception and reality is striking — and hardly unique to Tunisia. It reflects a broader truth: current anxieties around migration are driven less by numbers than by narratives. Migrants, particularly visible and vulnerable minorities, have become convenient scapegoats for issues rooted elsewhere: inflation, unemployment, or failing public services. It's a familiar political tactic with a long and global history.

But beyond the slogans, who are these migrants? Many are students. Actually, in 2023, over 6,800 Sub-Saharan students were enrolled in Tunisian universities. Others work in agriculture, construction, and domestic labour — sectors with chronic labour shortages. Contrary to stereotypes, a significant share is highly educated, multilingual, and entrepreneurial.

Another enduring fear is that migrants are "stealing jobs." But this claim doesn't hold up to scrutiny. While it's often repeated as common sense, the vast majority of serious studies, even in Tunisia, find no significant negative impact of migration on wages or employment levels. In the few cases where slight effects are observed, they are marginal and limited to specific sectors or groups. In truth, migrants often expose the dysfunctions of already broken labour markets rather than cause them.

In Tunisia — as in many countries — undocumented migrants work in sectors where labour is needed, but rights are absent, such as agriculture or domestic care. Their precarious legal status, social class, and racialisation make them more easily exploited. That's not a glitch in the system, that is the system.

And this exploitation doesn't only affect migrants. Tunisian workers in these same sectors face informal contracts, stagnant wages, and eroded protections. The labour market crisis is structural. Blaming migrants simply distracts from the deeper causes: austerity, deregulation, and decades of neoliberal adjustment.

We also need to address the persistent labelling of North African countries as mere "transit countries." This term suggests that the country is merely a waypoint on the route to Europe, a temporary stopover for migrants who never intended to stay. It's a narrative repeated in international reports, EU policy briefs, and in mainstream media.

But this framing is misleading. Migration isn't linear. Aspirations shift. Plans evolve. People may come intending to pass through and end up staying; others may leave after years of settlement. Life circumstances, borders, and opportunities all change. Real migration trajectories rarely fit neatly into policy categories.

Labelling Tunisia a "transit country" erases this complexity — and in doing so, erases the lives of those who settle, study, work, and contribute here. It renders them temporary by default, undeserving of rights or inclusion. It justifies political inaction. Why reform legal status or offer integration programs if people are just "passing through"?

Yet research and reality tell another story. In interviews conducted by researcher Ahlem Chemlali, Ivorian women described Tunisia as “our own Europe”, a genuine destination. And the Tunisia-HIMS survey showed that many Sub-Saharan migrants considered their lives in Tunisia better than in their countries of origin, despite facing racism and social exclusion. Migration is not always about reaching Europe. Sometimes, it’s about reaching *somewhere better* — even if only relatively.

Tunisia is not just a transit zone; it is increasingly becoming a hub of regional mobility. And more broadly, migrants’ journeys are rarely linear. They evolve over time. Over the past few years, I’ve met many migrants: some eventually reached Italy; others launched businesses and built a life in Tunisia; some returned to their countries of origin with enough savings to start new projects. Migration isn’t about fixed plans — it’s about navigation. It is both fluid and adaptive.

But the “transit” myth persists because it serves powerful interests. It allows Tunisia to avoid confronting its own racial hierarchies and obscures its role as part of an African migration system. And above all, it racialises the distinction between those imagined as "passing through" and those imagined as "belonging." But Tunisia’s ‘migration crisis’ didn’t start in 2023. Reducing it to recent political shifts ignores a much deeper history.

Tunisia’s restrictive migration policies were largely shaped in the 2000s under the Ben Ali regime. And despite the democratic transition following the 2011 revolution, migration policy was ignored. No major laws or reforms have been adopted since, even as migration flows changed and numbers rose. At a deeper level, Tunisia continues to grapple with unresolved questions of national identity, particularly around anti-Blackness, xenophobia, and the boundaries of belonging. These are not new tensions as it is well-documented Tunisian and African scholars, sociologists, and historians. And in all this, the European Union plays a central, if often concealed, role

In 2023–2024, the EU signed a multimillion-euro deal with Tunisia aimed at curbing irregular departures, organizing voluntary return programs for migrants inside Tunisia, and facilitating the return of undocumented Tunisians from Europe. This is part of a broader strategy known as externalisation — the outsourcing of European migration control beyond its own borders where countries become flagship examples of this evolving architecture of containment.

This strategy in the Mediterranean is far from being n new. In 2017, Italy signed a memorandum with Libya, enabling the Libyan Coast Guard to intercept migrants in international waters and return them to Libyan detention centres — where abuse, torture, and extortion have consistently been documented. This dynamic continues to this day. One of the most shocking recent examples was videotaped by militants and journalists of the Freedom Flotilla Coalition in 2025: Libyan authorities, posing as Egyptian officials, intercepted asylum seekers at sea aiming to return them to Libyan soil. This is a blatant violation of international law.

On paper, these partnerships are about “managing flows.” In practice, they displace responsibility. They allow Europe to shield itself from the political costs of visible repression while outsourcing the risks to countries with weaker rights frameworks, limited legal safeguards, and their own internal fragilities.

This is what some scholars described as the externalisation gamble. It rests on a calculated illusion that borders can be sealed by proxy, that ‘strength’ will reduce arrivals, and that

political legitimacy at home can be bought by repression abroad. Yet the evidence tells a different story. Despite billions spent, arrivals continue, repatriation rates remain low, and deaths at sea continue. Since 2014, at least 28,000 people have disappeared in the Mediterranean. This tragic number exposes the true cost of this model.

At its core, externalisation reflects a broader policy failure. It is built on the illusion of control and the idea that migration can be turned off like a tap. But people don't move because borders are open; they move because of their conditions, personal and/or structural. And when borders harden, migration doesn't stop – it becomes more fragmented, more expensive and more dangerous. I myself heard one those stories. Ahmadou, responding to tightening border controls, was forced to take a far more dangerous route to reach Tunisia. His journey spanned multiple countries, involved detention, days of walking, exposure to theft and violence.

This so-called regime is built not on coherence or humanity, but on selective tolerance and strategic displacement. Real cooperation would look very different. It would mean acknowledging mobility as a legitimate and enduring part of the human condition, not something to be suppressed. It would especially mean when centring migrants themselves in the debate not only think of criminalising behaviours. Above all, it would involve expanding legal pathways for work, study, and protection, and sharing responsibility not exporting it.

Ultimately, this article does in no way aim to cover everything. Migration is a deeply complex, historically situated, and ever-evolving phenomenon. As someone who studies these issues through a critical lens, I see this as a contribution that highlights certain contradictions — not a definitive answer. There's still much to explore about the long-lasting impact of colonialism and economic inequality, or the ways that culture, identity, and family ties continue to shape how people move and settle. These stories and structures are all part of the bigger picture of mobility around the Mediterranean, and they deserve more space in the conversation.