

Maurizio Veglio (ASGI lawyer)

Italian migration policy has brought Tunisia to the forefront, as demonstrated by recent data on expulsions and detainees in Pre-Removal Detention Centers (CPRs). In 2021, Tunisian nationals accounted for 50 percent of returns and as high as 60 percent of the total number of people detained in Italian CPRs. The glaring over-representation of the Tunisian population in Italy's expulsion system has been directly caused by a series of agreements stipulated between the two countries on immigration issues, and by the designation of Tunisia as a safe country of origin.

Samia Benamor (cultural mediator)

After 23 years of dictatorship, the 2011 revolution deluded us into believing we had finally won freedom and equality. However, Tunisia has plunged into such a drastic social and economic crisis, this has even triggered the spread of fundamentalism. Rampant poverty, inaccessibility of services and resources, lack of healthcare, soaring unemployment and discrimination against certain categories of people (I especially have in mind single mothers and people with health needs) account for the high level of emigration. There is also the unspoken horror of missing persons: the phenomenon of those lost at sea, or after disembarkation, or else in prison or CPR. Since 2011, there have been an estimated 5,000 missing persons, whose families are still waiting for answers.

Majdi Karbai (Tunisian MP)

Unfortunately, immigration is still seen by Europe as a threat, rather than as an economic and social phenomenon. This is no different from the way Tunisia treats many sub-Saharan immigrants, who are detained and rejected in violation of the principle of non-refoulement. What is needed is a change in vision, one that puts people's rights back at the centre of politics and restores human dignity.

Moreover, the praxis of stipulating agreements between Italy and Tunisia is ambiguous and dangerous. These agreements are not public or discussed in Parliament (I have personally attempted to obtain copies, but we were denied access), and this only reinforces the image of power relations based on self-interest, where resources are traded for readmissions. We cannot accept the idea of a Tunisia reduced to being Europe's controller and coastguard.

Martina Costa (Avocats Sans Frontières)

The EU's securitarian approach to migration has utterly degraded the protection of individuals' fundamental rights and guarantees. Tunisia is in a particularly strategic position for the development of Europe's border externalisation policies: it is a country that is described as safe and with which agreements are stipulated, yet is affected by a severe institutional crisis and unable to operate independently of the interests imposed by European states.

Over the past several years, Tunisia has become the leading country in terms of arrival numbers in Italy, and the response of the Italian authorities was quick to follow. Agreements, often confidential, between representatives of both countries ensure funding and equipment to the Tunisian coast guard to prevent irregular departures, alongside guarantees to speed up procedures for readmissions from Italy. This has led to an exponential increase in interceptions at sea by the Tunisian coast guard, with total disregard for the needs of the local population.

Bilel Mechri (Tunisian lawyer)

Up until 1995, there had been free movement between Tunisia and Italy, but the Schengen Agreement represented a point of no return for many Tunisians, who were from then on forced to migrate under conditions of irregularity. The 2011 revolution led to a new increase in departures and to a massive influx of asylum seekers from neighbouring countries. This all took place in a country, Tunisia, which, despite a bill filed in Parliament in 2012, has not yet regulated the recognition of international protection.

In parallel, the increase in applications for international protection from Tunisian nationals in Italy has fostered significant collaboration between lawyers from both countries, which in many cases has enabled requests to be supported through the retrieval of opinions, documents and information from qualified sources.

Barbara Spinelli (ASGI lawyer)

Despite the definition of Tunisia as a safe country of origin, there are many categories of people whose fundamental rights are not respected. I am thinking of members of the LGBTQI community, of young adults, who are often victims of domestic violence and labour exploitation, of people who are denied access to medical care or to the labour market.

Yet the designation as a safe country of origin suggests that administrative bodies consider asylum seekers from Tunisia as economic migrants. The application of the accelerated procedure for recognition of international protection severely restricts the time allocated to processing the application, preventing proper information and full understanding of what is happening. This all seriously undermines the effectiveness of the right to asylum, with the risk of re-victimisation of individuals who are already highly traumatised.

Monica Cristina Gallo (Ombudsperson for the Rights of Persons Deprived of Liberty, Municipality of Turin)

The high percentage of Tunisian citizens in the CPR of Turin makes it difficult to take care of individual detainees, who often do not understand the reasons for their meaning of detention. Their disorientation worsens during the repatriation operations, which in some instances we have been able to monitor. This is a sequence of events that many migrants experience under harsh and distressing conditions: the abrupt awakening in the early morning

hours; the body search and hasty gathering of personal belongings under the surveillance of riot police; the bus transfer to Turin Caselle airport and gradual awareness of imminent repatriation; the desperate gestures of those who try to somehow oppose the transfer; the arrival in Palermo and identification interview with the consul; the further body search and boarding the flight to Tunisia; the handing over of people from Italian to local authorities. This mechanism leaves little room for listening or for individual needs.

Berthin Nzonza (General Director of Mosaico-Refugees)

Detention is a factor that exacerbates the suffering of people who have been forced into marginalised conditions, depriving them of access to educational and socialisation activities, and even preventing them from communicating with the outside world.

Likewise, we must vehemently denounce the brutal way in which individuals are discharged from the CPR, for this implies - especially for people with psychological and/or health vulnerabilities – extreme abandonment. This inevitably heightens the sense of disorientation experienced by the foreigner, especially if he/she is without any sort of local network, and is furthermore prevented from accessing an adequate reception and health care service.