



Forgotten Refugees at the Tunisian Border with Libya #MeadCompetition

written by Marta Scaglioni
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My forefathers were born to slavery, they worked their skin out of them. We are born to suffer.

In spite of the wide-spread European alarmism on the subject of the so-called “invasion of refugees” , the highest political and economic price for the refugees’



humanitarian crisis is being paid by non-European countries in the [MENA region](#) – targets of the “externalization of the EU-border” – which have been delegated the execution of procedures for managing migrant flows and assessing [UNHCR refugee status](#), notwithstanding the constant human rights violations these countries perpetrate.

In the remotest part of Tunisia, the “garden of Europe”, in the middle of the desert, dozens of threadbare UNHCR tents signal the presence of the remains of a refugee camp. No running water, intermittent electricity, the only facilities left to around fifty sub-Saharan, former asylum-seekers, are a small café and three self-run places of worship. Refugees survive by means of small trading activities on the borders with Libya and begging on the main street for food and water, under a blinding, blazing sun.



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“On the 20th March 2011 I entered Tunisia. When France started bombing Libya,” says a 30-year-old Somali, holding only good-for-nothing UNHCR refugee



status. All the refugees had been previously working in Libya, and had to escape after the conflict broke out. According to the [Migration Policy Centre](#), Libyan unrests beginning in 2011 caused a huge flow of migrants to North African countries, with sub-Saharanans most at risk. The unrests triggered a humanitarian crisis in Tunisia, a country unprepared to welcome migrants either at an institutional or a local level.

Libya: it is not a country, it is a stress!

After a series of uprisings were triggered in many Arab countries by the self-immolation of Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi on 17th December 2010, insurrection against the former President of Libya, Muammar Qaddafi, also exploded in Libya, accompanied by the quest for a new redistributive logic for oil revenues and the dismantlement of a totally one-party system. In the short run, the conflict escalated into a civil war, exacerbated by the international military intervention of the UN and NATO, which culminated in the UN Resolution 1973, in the subsequent imposition of a no-flying zone, and in the capture and assassination of Gaddafi on 20th October, 2011 .

The Libyan crisis of 2011 had severe consequences for international migration movements.

Due to its dynamic economic growth (6% per annum), Libya has been attracting migrants since as early as the 1960s, when the discovery of oil and hydrocarbons attracted cheap manpower from neighboring Arab countries (Tunisia and Egypt) and sub-Saharanans through the “Libyan migration corridor”, that is, the transit zone through the Sahara used by illegal sub-Saharan migrants to reach Southern Libya.

“I will turn Europe Black!” threatened Gaddafi during his harshly criticized visit to Rome, in August 2010. Gaddafi’s policy of hosting or expelling foreign workers



in order to influence diplomatic relationships with Arab, sub-Saharan, and European neighbors had been one of the key instruments of Libyan foreign policy since the 1970s; it had meant that Gaddafi was able to emphasize his key role in controlling illegal migration, in spite of data which showed that migrants tended to stay in Libya rather than embark on a highly treacherous journey. Nonetheless, the Colonel was consistent in presenting his country as a place to pass through, rather than a destination.

But why were these high numbers of sub-Saharans registered in the country at the outburst of the conflict?

The reason has to be traced to Gaddafi's Pan-Africanism or "open door policy", launched to counterbalance the consequences of the economic slowdown of the 90s. Deeply disappointed by the lack of support from Arab countries during the international embargo years (1992-1999) and by the failure of his Pan-Arab projects, Gaddafi promoted Pan-African policies, leading to a rapid increase in the number of sub-Saharans in the country. The open door policy did not solely involve the legal framework, but was also embodied in billboards promoting African unity, TV programs subtitled in French, the broader agenda of the Libyan national airline company, and Gaddafi's speeches inviting sub-Saharans to work in Libya. Nonetheless, life for migrants in Libya was far from idyllic and their time in the country remained highly precarious and subject to arbitrary decisions by the Libyan police. Meanwhile, differentiating between regular and irregular migrants became an arduous task for the Libyan authorities. Most migrants were not registered once they entered Libya, or were regularized a posteriori, when they applied for health insurance cards. Karim, a 37-year-old from Ghana, lived in Tripoli under the constant threat of expulsion and harassment:

They come to collect everything from you. They come and ask you the documents; they call it "iqāmah" (a long-term visa for a foreign national; in the Libyan case, it consists in a stamp in the foreigner's passport). This is just how they are doing to Blacks. Even if you have an iqāmah you're not safe. The police rips it off from



your passport and ask you where is your iqāmah? And then I am taken to prison without iqāmah. Libya: it's not a country, it's a stress.



[Photo](#) by [Elisa Finocchiaro](#) (flickr, [CC BY-NC 2.0](#))

Gaddafi's national agenda was therefore hindered by practical problems at the frontiers, where military authorities were unprepared to welcome migrants, and where abuses, corruption, and arbitrary arrests were practiced daily. Moreover, migrants were employed mostly as unskilled workers and became the targets of violent attacks, culminating in actual "Black-bashings" like the ones in Tripoli in October, 2000.

The Crisis of 2011

Calculating how many migrants used to live in Libya before the war is a hard task: Libyan authorities provided the [European Commission](#) with an estimate of around 600,000 regular and between 750,000 and 1.2 million irregulars. On the whole, migrants fleeing from Libya targeted Tunisia (44.9%) and Egypt (31.6%), two countries already suffering the post-revolutionary economic slowdown, as well as Niger and Chad. Therefore, despite media-spread European alarmism, in 2011 only 3.6% of migrants fleeing the war reached Italy and Malta, benefiting from the collapse of coastal monitoring and the consistent decrease in the cost of rubber-dinghy passage.



Sub-Saharanans flew from Libya in masses; they paid the highest price for the warfare.

The numbers of the targeted killings of “Africans”, as they are called by the Libyan population, were not precisely recorded. A side-effect of the 2011 uprising was the individuation of a “racial scapegoat”, and the “creation of the myth of the sub-Saharan mercenaries”: “If you don’t run away, you die. On the street they would say, ‘they are killing Black people because they are mercenaries’. I do not know, there were some people fighting for Gaddafi, but I was definitely not among them”.

Additionally, part of the “Colonel’s blackmailing” consisted in letting hundreds of migrants leave the Libyan coasts as a retaliation against the 2011 NATO attack. “I was the only one not paying the boat. One day some officials picked me up from work and brought me to the coast. They pushed me on a boat with rifles and I had to leave. The boat shipwrecked and I found myself in Tunisia”.

An Italian official report in 2011 stated: “It was Gaddafi who sent foreigners to Lampedusa!”

Choucha

On February 24th, 2011, the refugee camp of Choucha was created seven kilometers from the frontier outpost of Ras Jedir and twenty-five kilometers from the next village, Ben Gardene, on a low-lying plain called Jaffara, in the Governorate of Medenine. The camp was not the only one established during the peak of the Libyan refugees’ crisis: Remada, El Hayet, and Tataouine camps are nowadays all closed but have, like Choucha, hosted Sub-Saharanans, Palestinians, Libyans, and Syrians fleeing violence and harassment and seeking to start the procedure to apply for the refugee status. Whereas Arab refugees left the camp



very soon and were hosted by Tunisian households, 115,516 sub-Saharanans profited from the procedures offered by the IOM and safely returned to their countries of origin.

The camp was initially provided with running water, cafes, electricity, language courses, and other facilities, when thousands of refugees were still hosted there.

After its official closure in 2013 following the rejection of the refugees' asylum request, however, only the military remained to patrol the border, while the provision of food and water had been stopped by the UNHCR in October 2012. Currently around fifty people live in Choucha without running water and electricity, begging for subsistence on the main street heading to Libya.

The location of Choucha in the Governorate of Medenine already demonstrates the goal of hiding refugees from the world's eyes.

In the middle of the desert, closer to Libya than Tunisia, the possibilities of integrating refugees into Tunisia's society appear very slim. Refugees, in Choucha or elsewhere, experience a loss of a geographical place, which does not only refer to their physical or institutional position but also to their loss of identity, relationships, and place-anchored memory. The very position of Choucha, in the middle of the desert, creates a situation of liminality, distance, anticipation, and a sort of quarantine which is even justified by invoking hygiene. Hysteria regarding possible epidemics and hygiene risks in the camps is rife among neighboring villages and the local police force, who often avoid the place because of "Ebola, aggressiveness, diseases". The risk of epidemics, highlighted by Tunisian authorities and civil society, shapes the politics of space and the prophylactic function of the camp itself.

The frontier is already a site of contamination, pollution, and impurity due to the presence of culturally different populations, and bio-segregation is a wide-



spread policy going back to racial thinking and stigmatization in the 19th century.

At a local level, the Southern Tunisian population was scarcely prepared to welcome migrants and accept the camp's presence, and several accidents occurred. The village of Ben Gardene has a traditional population of about 80,000 people and they subsist on pastoralism and trafficking across the border, both legal and illegal. In May 2011 and March 2012, according to the news, Choucha camp was set on fire by inhabitants of Ben Guardene and some deaths occurred.

The church was also burnt down after some clashes erupted in the camp among asylum seekers, after "people in charge of the camp divided us according to nationality and created tension among us". The road heading towards Libya is entangled in the illegal economy of smuggling, and the presence of refugees is a hindrance both to illegal trafficking and to police patrolling of the border. After the second big terrorist attack in Tunisia, in June 2016, a clampdown on smuggling from Libya was enforced, and the Garde Nationale was encouraged to use any means possible to cut down on the importation of weapons, even if that meant shooting a few feet off the ground, putting the refugees' lives at considerable risk.

At the time of my fieldwork, in spring 2015, nearly 70 people occupied the former Choucha camp, living in a legal vacuum, and with limited social, economic, and psychological resources.



A Gaddafi billboard. [Photo](#) by [David Stanley](#) (flickr, [CC BY 2.0](#))

Nonetheless, the refugees' human identity, deconstructed institutionally, was reaffirmed by the subjects themselves, who collectively organized their daily lives and engaged in an embryonic, yet sustained political mobilization, forging contacts with European advocacy groups and institutional subjects. After Choucha refugees organized a blog ("Voice of Choucha") and demonstrated in Tunis, and during the [World Social Forum](#) in March 2015, many of them were subjected to arbitrary arrests and deported at the Algerian border with "a bottle of water, a baguette, and intimidated not to come back to Tunisia any longer". Tunisia does not have an asylum law yet, despite the fact that a preliminary bill has already been drafted and is currently held by the Ministry of Justice. In practice, even asylum seekers holding refugee status from UNHCR Tunisia are rendered illegal by Tunisian authorities, and considered as unauthorized migrants living in the country. Hence, asylum seekers and statutory refugees are often



arrested in the street and detained in Whardia, a prison mostly for foreigners, on the periphery of Tunis. Whardia is run by the Tunisian Garde Nationale and is not regulated by any jurisdiction. Usually, people are imprisoned and detained without any validation of such a decision by the court. Tunisian authorities are not willing to communicate numbers, nationalities, or other information about the detainees.

Despite the constant violation of human rights that the refugees experience, those still residing in Choucha managed to recreate everyday life out of the state of anomie they were caught in.

Still living illegally on Tunisian territory, some of them engaged in artistic activities, getting in touch with Tunisian associations and thus making a living out of it, and others organized their life in Choucha by profiting from the scarce available resources. Choucha has a mosque and a church, along with minor devotional centers, and refugees (mainly native to the Ivory Coast) set up small shops with staple food coming from their begging activities (systematically organized between those who can stay on the streets and those who are too old or unhealthy to do so), and from minor economic transactions with the adjoining villages and local traders.

Following strong pressure from the media after the closure of the camp, the Tunisian government decided to offer some refugees the possibility of applying for a carte de sejour on Tunisian soil, asking for fingerprints and evidence that these individuals are willing to work and stay in Tunisia. Only some of them accepted, mainly French-speakers (Ivoirians and Chadians) and those engaged in artistic activities with Tunisian and international associations. However, the procedure was never implemented and refugees are still working in a legal vacuum. This strategy, called “local integration”, diverges from the fight for resettlement adopted by the group connected to the blog “Voice of Choucha”, which is mainly made up of English-speakers (Nigerians, Liberians, Ghanaians) and old, disabled people who are not able to work, and who strenuously reject integration into a



“racist” society.

This perception of a racist society is linked with the legacy of slavery in Tunisia, and with today’s hierarchization of Tunisian society, since new-comers are ranked into old slavery categories according to their phenotype.

As in Libya, Black migrants in Tunisia are normally hired for low-paid, dangerous jobs, competing with Black Tunisians and creating tensions. Traditionally, socially inferior jobs in the Muslim world are connected to iron and fire, as well as blood and music: Black blacksmiths, butchers, and music artists at weddings can be seen on the streets of North African countries. While Choucha was open, and humanitarian organizations were in charge of it, asylum seekers were allowed to move only to Ben Gardene for limited stays, and were sometimes employed in small jobs with special authorization from the UNHCR. After its closure, its subjects, devoid of any institutional framework which might allow them to enter the Tunisian job market, could and still can find only informal casual jobs in Ben Gardene and Medenine as construction workers and blacksmiths, thereby establishing competition with Black Tunisians. Approaching the issue of refugees in Ben Gardene during my fieldwork in Choucha has meant crashing into the usual wall of suspicion and denial, the culture of silence which covers racism and racial discrimination in Tunisia. Racist acts are an everyday reality: Tropique from Ivory Coast was denied access to cafes many times and had to hide promptly when he saw some drunk people on the streets of Tunis looking for Sub-Saharanans after Tunisia was expelled from the Coup d’Afrique, following its defeat against Equatorial Guinea.

Refugees are ranked downwards into slavery categories, yet at an inferior level to Black Tunisians.

What makes Black Foreign Nationals more vulnerable than Black Tunisians is the absence of a regular institutional position, which forces them to accept lower salaries than Tunisians, thus compromising the job market. Lacking documents



and often passports, they circulate on Tunisian soil with their UNHCR document, which is worth nothing. “The police told me I can tear it up; it’s the same”.

Conclusion

In spite of the constant violation of human rights and the determination to “illegalize” migrants by the Tunisian government backed by the European Union with its frontier management branches, refugees in Tunisia managed to recreate an identity and a living out of a state of imposed anomie.

The case of Choucha shows how the choice of externalizing the border must be carefully analyzed both at a local level as well as at an institutional one.

If the countries to whom we are assigning refugee management are systematic violators of human rights, these host societies can also be unprepared to welcome new-comers – dividing them on the basis of deep-rooted categories referring to long-standing historical phenomena like slavery, and triggering acts of racism and labor exploitation due to their perceived racial inferiority. These social cleavages, along with the institutional invisibility of refugees, and the repressive shift of post-revolutionary governments in North Africa, unveil a reality of different levels of integration, as well as competition in accessing resources and benefits.

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