



GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENCE – MAY 2021

COUNTRY REPORT – Tunisian Refugees in Italy

Cesar Fabian Escobar Garcia – Research Intern

(Team Europe)

Ioana Murgoci – Research Intern (Team Europe)

Anastasiia Poberezhna – Research Intern (Team Europe)

Report: Tunisian Refugees in Italy

This report aims to raise concern on the refugee situation that has been plaguing Italy in the past half of decade. It covers the historical background of the refugee problem in Europe, its new significance as a result of the increased number of migrants, as well as the most recent events in April and May of 2021. The focus of this article will be on the European Refugee Crisis.

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The history of the refugee crisis



Thousands of migrants have reached Italy following a dangerous sea crossing since the start of the year. Copyright – Bruno Thevenin/AP

Despite the lack of media attention on this urgent issue, refugees and migrants keep trying to reach Europe for a better life. According to the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), in the first half of 2020, there were almost 50,000 refugees and migrants who came to Europe.¹ Children make up the most vulnerable group of people, with over 10,000 of them being separated from their parents or entirely alone in the journey.² Despite the minimum exposure of this issue in the media, international organisations such as UNICEF and the United Nations (UN) aim to offer support and draw attention to powerful states like the United States (US) hoping that the country can become a leader in offering humanitarian aid and encourage other states to do so. Although there is no doubt that progress has been recorded, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the problem by making it more difficult for states and organisations to act.³ The access to essential services such as public health and education was affected alongside the basic

¹ UNICEF, ‘Humanitarian Action for Children’ (2021)
<<https://www.unicef.org/media/87571/file/2021-HAC-Refugee-and-migrant-crisis-Europe.pdf>>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

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supplies received by the people in need.⁴ This report aims to present the current state of the issue by explaining the chronological order of the events.

The crisis started to be majorly reported in the media and to receive public attention in 2015. According to the Independent, during the summer of that year, EU leaders decided to accept 32,256 refugees from Italy and Greece.⁵ The two countries remain the places from where most refugees reach the European continent. In September 2015, former President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker (2014-2019) urged member-states to take in more refugees than the previously agreed numbers.⁶ Before Juncker's request, France has agreed to take 24,000 refugees, Germany has promised to support 800,000 more refugees financially, and Britain has decided to take 20,000 refugees over five years.⁷ In mid-September, EU representatives met at a summit but failed to reach a common response to the refugee crisis.⁸ However, a few days after the meeting, the countries started to partially or completely close their borders to incoming asylum-seekers.⁹

In October 2015, the EU reached a deal with Turkey. The two agreed on a joint action plan that helps Europe dealing with the constant flow of people entering the continent.¹⁰ In March 2016, Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia and Macedonia closed their borders, making the journey towards Germany more difficult for migrants.¹¹ That same month, Turkey agreed to accept refugees from Greece.¹² These deals aimed to lift some of the pressure felt by the coastal countries; however, they did not provide a long-lasting solution to the crisis. Later, in April 2016, the EU initiated a redistribution procedure for Syrian refugees in Turkey, aiming to integrate them into the bloc.¹³

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Fry, L. (2015, September 15). *Refugee crisis timeline: How the crisis has grown*. The Independent. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/refugee-crisis-timeline-how-crisis-has-grown-10502690.html>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Dockery W, Deutsche Welle (www.dw.com). (2017). *Germany and refugees: A chronology*. DW.COM. <https://www.dw.com/en/two-years-since-germany-opened-its-borders-to-refugees-a-chronology/a-40327634>

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

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In May 2016, the European Commission proposed a fine for the countries that refused to take in the established quota of refugees.¹⁴

In December 2016, Anis Amri, a refugee who did not yet obtain its legal documents, drove a truck into a Christmas market in Berlin.¹⁵ This event raised questions in terms of the former Chancellor Angela Merkel's open policy for asylum-seekers.¹⁶ Thus, in February 2017, Angela Merkel publicly presented a plan consisting of much faster procedures in deportations for failed asylum-seekers.¹⁷ From the beginning of the crisis, Merkel was the European leader who firmly decided to open Germany's borders to refugees while other leaders remained reluctant or strongly opposed to do the same.¹⁸ In the first weeks of the crisis, when Merkel showed the most support for refugees, she lost support from her domestic political base.¹⁹ The individuality of Merkel's position within the EU's member-states is a painful reality. Today, we face the same issue, with very few countries admitting that the issue needs to be addressed and almost none working towards a solution.

Tunisian Refugees in Italy: Important case in 2021

Political Situation in Tunisia

In January of 2011 the autocratic leader of Tunisia Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was overthrown after 28 days of civil unrest that has been dubbed as Tunisian Revolution, Dignity Revolution or Jasmine Revolution.²⁰ The protests and demonstrations in Tunisia arose in response to two decades of corruption, political repressions, lack of freedoms and poor economic and social security under the government of Ben Ali. The revolution is believed to have led to a more democratic society with greater access to basic human rights. The events of the revolution in

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Nardelli, A. (2017, November 29). *Angela Merkel's stance on refugees means she stands alone against catastrophe*. The Guardian.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/nov/08/angela-merkel-refugee-crisis-europe>

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ryan, Y. (2011, January 26). *How Tunisia's revolution began*. France | Al Jazeera.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2011/1/26/how-tunisia-revolution-began>

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Tunisia have inspired a wave of uprisings in the Arab world that became known as the Arab Spring.

Despite the Tunisian Revolution becoming a great example of democratisation and resulting in Tunisians being able to enjoy political rights and civil liberties at a relatively higher rate than other countries in the region, Tunisian residents still experience poverty and insecurity. The political regimes that followed that of Ben Ali display signs of residual corruption, economic challenges, security threats, and continued unresolved issues related to gender equality and transitional justice²¹. Additionally, because of the increased hardships due to the Covid-19 crisis, Tunisian people have faced more unemployment, lack of access to healthcare, inequality and food insecurity. According to the International Food Policy Research Institute, the Covid-19 crisis was estimated to lead to a 46.4 % decline in Tunisia's GDP in 2020.²² Poverty rate has increased more than twofold up to 20,9%, with most precarious groups being youth and women, often employed without a contract and with large families.²³

Now, 10 years after the revolution, many Tunisians feel let down by their government and wary of the rise of a new police-state.²⁴ In January 2021 hundreds of protestors marched through the streets of Tunis with signs that said: “Police everywhere, justice nowhere”. The protestors expressed dissatisfaction with the power struggles of the political elite, ignorant of woes of the common people such as growing inequality, poverty, and ever-increasing prices. During the January protests more than 1,400 people have been detained, 30 percent of them were minors. Journalists and humanitarians were among those arrested, raising concerns over the freedom of expression²⁵. Overall, the crackdowns signify a threat of political repression for the Tunisian

²¹ Freedom House. (2021). *Tunisia: Freedom In The World 2021 Country Report* | Freedom House. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/tunisia/freedom-world/2021>

²² E.Z.O. (2021). *The impact of COVID-19 on Tunisia's economy, agri-food system, and*. IFPRI. <https://www.ifpri.org/publication/impact-covid-19-tunisia-economy-agri-food-system-and-households>

²³ Kokas Lopez-Acevedo El Lahgavibhuti Mendiratta, D. G. R. (2021). *How COVID-19 Is Impacting Tunisian Households*. How COVID-19 Is Impacting Tunisian Households. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/arabvoices/how-covid-19-impacting-tunisian-household>

²⁴ Al Jazeera. (2021, January 30). *'Police everywhere, justice nowhere': Hundreds protest in Tunisia*. Arab Spring: 10 Years on News | Al Jazeera.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/1/30/police-everywhere-justice-nowhere-hundreds-protest-in-tunisia>

²⁵ Yasmina Abouzzohour, *“Caught In Transition: Tunisia's Protests And The Threat Of Repression.”* (2021). ECFR. <https://ecfr.eu/article/caught-in-transition-tunisia-protests-and-the-threat-of-repression/>

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people, who are dissatisfied with the current power-structures and who worry about the economic prospects of the country.

Asylum seekers from Tunisia in Italy

Following the events of the Dignity Revolution and the Arab Spring, thousands of Tunisians fled to other countries, in search of a safer and better life. Because of the uprising, 2011 saw a spike in Tunisians traveling to Europe to seek asylum, with at least 28,047 Tunisian refugees reaching Italy²⁶. After the revolution the number of refugees from Tunisia dropped significantly, in the following years the number decreased 20 times and remained relatively low until the Covid-19 crisis. In 2020 the number of asylum seekers reaching Italy from Tunisia increased fivefold compared to 2,654 in 2019, meaning that at least 13,000 men, women and children have been rescued from the Mediterranean or have landed in Italy since the start of 2020. In 2021 the numbers are expected to surpass last year's mark given that at least 8,604 people have arrived in Italy from Tunisia between January 2021 and May 2021.

The journey that the asylum seekers must take is not a safe one. Accounts of migrants who died trying to cross the Mediterranean appear in news reports at an alarming frequency: at least 743 migrants have died in 2021, many of them Tunisian.²⁷ The fatality rate in the Mediterranean migration route as of 2021 is around 1,5% of all the attempted crossings, however dangers do not end at arrival. Because of the pandemic, a significant fraction of the migrants was quarantined on boats with poor conditions and overcrowding issues²⁸. The Tunisians, who reached Italy to seek asylum, face the reality of immediate deportation²⁹. The EU's asylum policy states that access to the asylum procedure must be granted without discrimination, however Tunisian asylum seekers have found it nearly impossible to get their applications processed in Italy. Italy considers Tunisia to be a "safe country of origin"³⁰. Tunisia is one of thirteen countries designated as 'safe'

²⁶ Foroudi, L. (2020, September 1). *COVID-19 fallout drives Tunisians to Italy despite deportations*. The New Humanitarian.

<https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2020/09/01/Italy-Tunisia-migration-deportations-coronavirus>

²⁷ *Missing Migrants Project*. (2021). Mediterranean Region / Missing Migrants Project.

<https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean>

²⁸ Foroudi, L., & Marsi, F. (2021, April 15). *Tunisians risking their lives to escape Italy's quarantine boats*. Italy | Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2021/4/15/the-tunisians-risking-their-lives-to-escape-quarantine-boats>

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Direttiva 2005/85/CE del Consiglio del 1o dicembre 2005

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by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, along with Algeria, Morocco, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Ukraine, Ghana, Senegal and Cape Verde³¹. Based on a bilateral agreement between Italy and Tunisia, Tunisian refugees regardless of their circumstances can be deported back to their homeland without following the procedure that refugees from “unsafe” countries are entitled to. Approximately 120 Tunisian asylum seekers are deported each week.³²

This process of repatriation violates EU asylum policy and specifically Directive 2013/33/EU of the European Parliament, which grants all asylum seekers equal rights to apply for asylum and dignified standards of reception, by making the application process as inaccessible as possible.³³ Fast-tracked repatriation leaves vulnerable groups, such as for instance LGBT+ people and individuals fleeing political persecution — the two groups especially vulnerable within refugee populations, without the protection that they are entitled to. Moreover, there are reports of Italian border officials using illegal tactics to speed up the process of repatriation. For instance, Tunisian migrants were given a pre-filled *foglio notizie* (notification form) upon arrival, “which declared that the signatory intended to look for work rather than apply for international protection”³⁴. According to Al Jazeera, some forms included statements handwritten in Italian saying: “I am not interested in requesting international protection.” There are testimonies of officials using physical violence on specifically Tunisian refugees to compel them to leave Italy and limit access to legal aid or means of communication³⁵.

Migrants and refugees from Tunisia are the most numerous from the ‘safe country of origin group’ and, as they face blatant discrimination, Tunisians on quarantine boats are succumbing to

recante norme minime per le procedure applicate negli Stati membri ai fini del riconoscimento e della revoca dello status di rifugiato (2005)

³¹ [Ecre.org](https://www.ecre.org/italy-list-of-13-safe-countries-of-origin-to-boost-return-policies/) (2019). *Italy: List Of 13 Safe Countries Of Origin To Boost Return Policies | European Council On Refugees And Exiles (ECRE)*. Italy: List Of 13 Safe Countries Of Origin To Boost Return Policies | European Council On Refugees And Exiles (ECRE).
[https://www.ecre.org/italy-list-of-13-safe-countries-of-origin-to-boost-return-policies/>](https://www.ecre.org/italy-list-of-13-safe-countries-of-origin-to-boost-return-policies/)

³² Foroudi, L., & Marsi, F. (2021, April 15). *Tunisians risking their lives to escape Italy's quarantine boats*. Italy | Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2021/4/15/the-tunisians-risking-their-lives-to-escape-quarantine-boats>

³³ Direttiva 2005/85/CE del Consiglio del 1o dicembre 2005 recante norme minime per le procedure applicate negli Stati membri ai fini del riconoscimento e della revoca dello status di rifugiato 2005. (2005).

³⁴ Foroudi, L., & Marsi, F. (2021, April 15). *Tunisians risking their lives to escape Italy's quarantine boats*. Italy | Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2021/4/15/the-tunisians-risking-their-lives-to-escape-quarantine-boats>

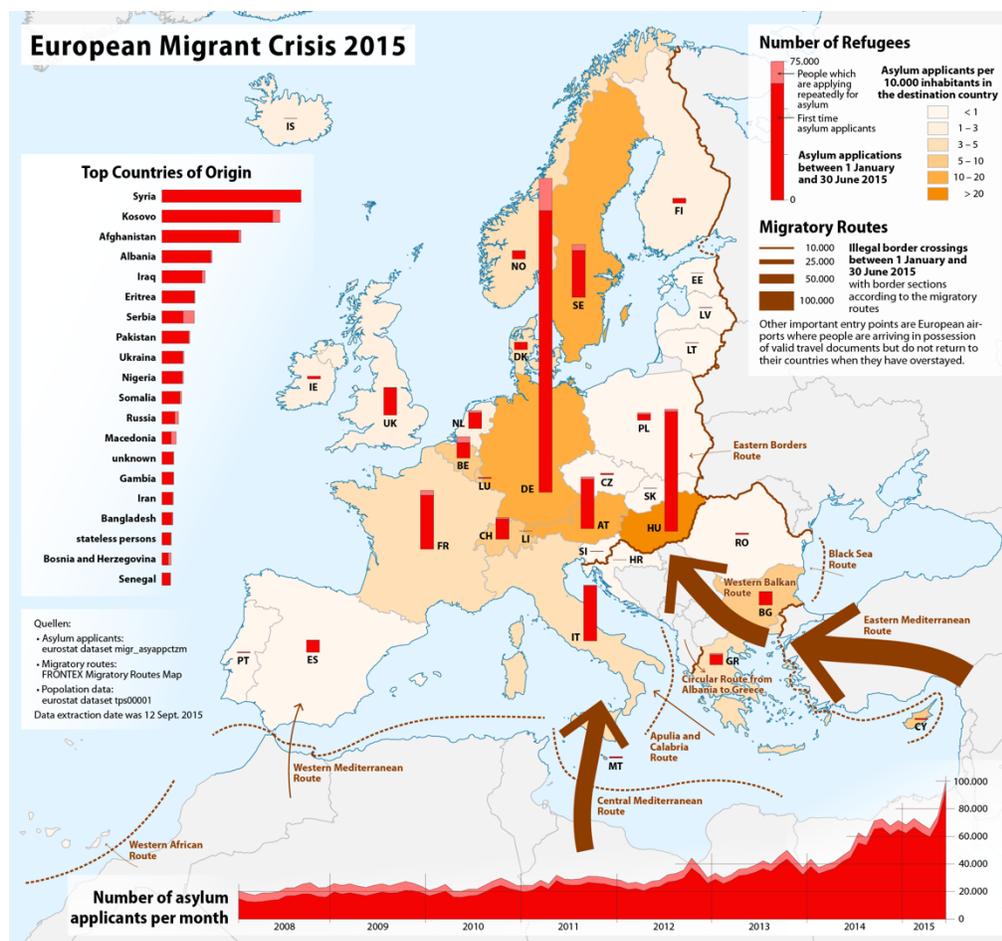
³⁵ Ibid.

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the pressure and hopelessness. Without hope to go through the asylum application procedure and with certain chances of being repatriated, some of the migrants' resort to extreme measures of self-harm. For some self-harm is a sign of depression, for others it is a last resort to escape deportation by going to the hospital - either way Tunisian migrants who follow through with acts of self-harm are a danger to themselves and others. Self-mutilation, swallowing batteries and other forms of self-harm can cause infections, bleeding out, psychological re-traumatisation of those who commit the act and those around them, and even death. The story of Bilel is one of those where hopelessness led to tragedy. On May 20 of 2021 22-year-old Bilel, a Tunisian migrant, was found by the coastguards dead in the water - the young man evidently jumped from the cruise ship where he was quarantining.³⁶ It is unclear whether this act was that of a suicide or a desperate attempt to reach land. All that is known for sure - Bilel's death is a symptom of extreme desperation that Tunisian refugees experience when arriving in Italy.

The increasing number of refugees - a recurring issue

³⁶ Ibid.



Source: Eurostat dataset migr_asyappctzm Author: Maximilian Dörrbecker

This year, Euronews wrote about the current situation in Italy: 2,100 migrants arrived in May on Lampedusa, an Italian island.³⁷ News agencies in Italy have reported that people come into the country on water, around 400 at once on a single ship.³⁸ Although this is the most significant number of refugees recorded in 2021, Sicilian judicial authorities have already re-established a ban that forbids any intervention at sea with the German rescue ship Sea-Watch 4.³⁹ The refugee crisis seems only to worsen, considering that Belgian authorities have rescued 49 migrants found close to the shore only nine days later.⁴⁰ Therefore, while Italian authorities want to keep refugees out of their country, the Belgian authorities face the difficult task of saving them all.

³⁷ Euronews. (2021, May 10). *Lampedusa: More than 2,100 migrants arrive on Italian island over weekend*. <https://www.euronews.com/2021/05/10/lampedusa-more-than-1-400-migrants-arrive-on-italian-island-over-weekend>

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ *Dozens of Migrants Rescued Off the Coast of Belgium.* (2021, May 19). Euronews.Com. <https://www.euronews.com/2021/05/19/dozens-of-migrants-rescued-off-the-coast-of-belgium?fromBreakingNews=1>

UNICEF draws attention to the urgency of the matter and warns that the COVID-19 pandemic had a temporary impact on reducing the number of immigrants that reached Europe.⁴¹ The causes of immigration, including wars, natural and man-made disasters, and financial crises, still exist. Consequently, people are still looking for places where they can live better lives. Because it is unlikely that these causes will soon be solved, cooperation and aid are necessary for the people in need and all countries' well-being.

According to UNICEF, with measures around the world being lifted, an increasing number of refugees was in Europe.⁴² The statistics prove the urgency of the matter, with Greece receiving 12,000 new people in the country, Serbia nearly 18,000, and Bosnia and Herzegovina almost 12,000 in 2020.⁴³ All these people need resources but also proper allocation and integration. The bureaucratic process is demanding, and the capacities for reception, identification, protection and integration as defined by UNICEF are limited.⁴⁴ In addition, unexpected events can make this work more difficult and worsen the issue's urgency. For example, the fire in Moria Camp located in Greece affected 12,000 refugees and migrants and left them without their homes.⁴⁵ The movement restrictions and lockdowns imposed by the pandemic have transformed facilities such as Moria Camp into overpopulated environments.⁴⁶ To find solutions for these issues, there is a need for cooperation on all European Union levels: local, national and supranational.

Despite several international agreements that bind EU member-states to provide asylum to the people in need, states failed to act appropriately and cooperatively to reduce the effects of the crisis. The Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, also known as the Geneva Convention of 28 July 1951, clearly states that a refugee whose life is in danger if returned to the country of origin should receive care that ensures respect for human rights – this is known as the non-refoulement principle in international practice.⁴⁷ Unfortunately, rules of customary

⁴¹ UNICEF, 'Humanitarian Action for Children' (2021)

<<https://www.unicef.org/media/87571/file/2021-HAC-Refugee-and-migrant-crisis-Europe.pdf>>

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ UNICEF Greece Country Office, 'Moria Fire Emergency' (2020) <<https://www.unicef.org/eca/media/13776/file>>

⁴⁶ UNICEF, 'Humanitarian Action for Children' (2021)

<<https://www.unicef.org/media/87571/file/2021-HAC-Refugee-and-migrant-crisis-Europe.pdf>>

⁴⁷ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (1951). *The 1951 Refugee Convention*. UNHCR.

<https://www.unhcr.org/1951-refugee-convention.html>

international law have little impact on states' behaviour when it comes to the refugee crisis. This can be observed in the lack of sanctions when it comes to countries not respecting such agreements. As mentioned before, the EU has tried to make states comply with these international norms by fining countries that refuse to take in the refugees who were allocated to them.

However, this measure does not seem to work if we judge this by the existing bans in place and the unclear reaction of EU officials and member-states. According to Aljazeera, one case portrays this reality: the negotiations between the EU and the government of Afghanistan for the renewal of the "Joint Way Forward" agreement.⁴⁸ The agreement ensures support for the return of Afghan refugees whose asylum applications were rejected.⁴⁹ Several human rights organisations and refugee advocates have warned that the agreement places already vulnerable people into dangerous situations in their own countries.⁵⁰ These repatriations only led to severe consequences with many Afghan asylum seekers facing violence, hunger and being the victims of Taliban attacks.⁵¹ Thus, the EU has failed to construct a common response among its member-states and help tens of thousands of people in need. Many international organisations and NGOs strove to provide support and services to the people in need across Europe; however, facing hardship with little help from institutions such as the EU impacted their work. Therefore, there is a need for a determined and accurate response not only from institutions such as the EU Commission but also from major players within the international fields such as the US.

Concluding remarks: The international community, especially the European Union, must pay greater attention to the problem of refugees, particularly in light of the pandemic, as the number of people fleeing from terror, poverty, corruption, and the effects of climate change continues to rise.

⁴⁸ Mohammadi, S., & Askary, S. (2021, April 26). *The EU efforts to repatriate Afghan asylum seekers are dangerous*. Refugees | Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/4/26/the-eu-efforts-to-repatriate-afghan-asylum-seekers-are-dangerous>

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

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