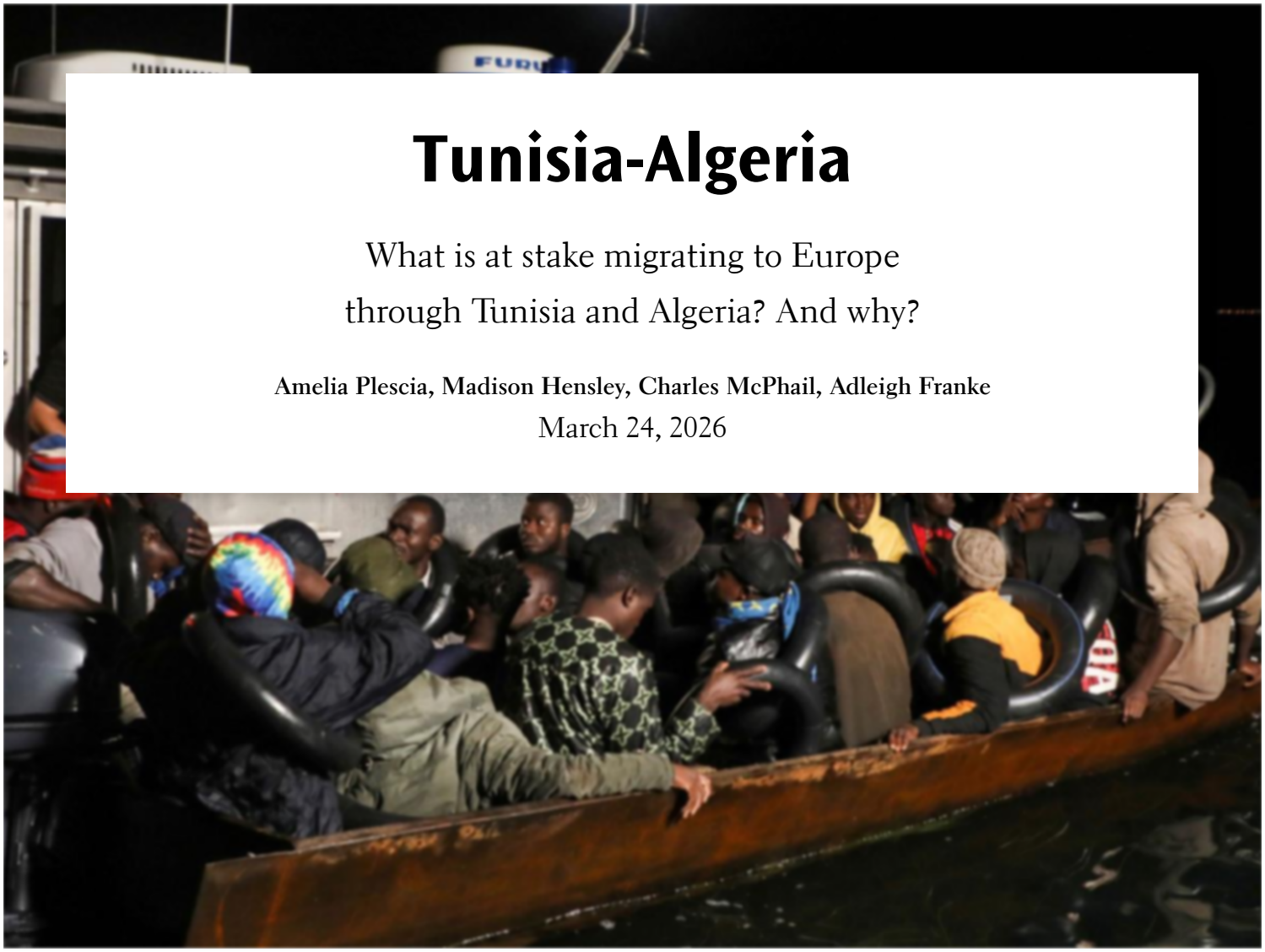


Tunisia-Algeria

What is at stake migrating to Europe through Tunisia and Algeria? And why?

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What Is Migration Governance Here?

Migration policies in Tunisia and Algeria are about much more than just borders. They are shaped by laws, politics, money, security, relationships with other countries, and the real experiences of migrants and refugees moving through the region.

What Does That Mean in Practice?

Governance is not only paperwork or treaties. It is experienced through force.

In practice, migration control can mean being stopped at sea, held in detention centers, forcibly removed, or pushed into isolated border regions.

Ousman Jaiteh, a migrant who reached Tunisia, described being intercepted repeatedly:

> *"They tie our hands very tight using plastic ropes, like criminals… pushing and beating us as if we are not*

human beings."

At the center of this system is **border externalization**. This is when the European Union shifts migration control beyond its own borders by working with neighboring countries to stop migration, prevent departures, take back migrants, and deal with many of the tensions and violence that come with these responsibilities.

This system was not created through one single agreement. Instead, it developed over time through a mix of regional policies, partnerships between countries, funding programs, and local enforcement practices.

As a result, migration control is now shared across many governments and organizations, making responsibility harder to identify and track.

Why Governments Defend Border Security

Border security policies in Algeria, Tunisia, and the European Union are often justified as necessary for public safety. Governments argue that these measures help prevent organized crime, smuggling networks, regional instability, and economic strain on public resources.

While border security forces can help address these concerns, there is also a human cost. Across Tunisia and Algeria, migrants increasingly face detention, expulsion, dangerous crossings, and displacement into remote border regions. The debate surrounding migration governance is therefore not only about security, but also about what sacrifices are made in the name of protection.

Understanding how this system developed requires looking at its

longer history.

How the System Formed

Migration became more connected to cooperation between Europe and North Africa through **the Barcelona Process in 1995**. The agreement linked migration to economic development, regional partnerships, and political stability.

This was an important turning point because it made migration control part of a larger regional system, rather than just a border issue.

2011: Political Disruption

The system did not develop in a straight line.

The **2011 Arab Spring** and **Tunisian Revolution** reshaped regional politics and migration policy

Tunisia became more important to European migration policy as routes and alliances shifted.

How did the Arab Spring start in Tunisia? - BBC What's New

2012–2014: Expanding Cooperation

In this new context, Tunisia's **2012 Privileged Partnership** with the EU and the **2014 Mobility Partnership** expanded cooperation.

These agreements encouraged stronger migration management and border control in exchange for economic and political support.

Power and Influence

These partnerships did more than strengthen cooperation.

They also increased the European Union’s influence over how Tunisia approached and managed migration policy. Tunisia's large neighbor, Algeria, is also facing the effects of migration.

Algeria Diverges

Algeria took a different approach, increasing enforcement on their own.

After the **Hirak protest movement** in 2019, Algerian authorities increased migration enforcement, including deportations and tighter border controls. Unlike Tunisia, Algeria kept a more distant relationship with the European Union and placed a stronger focus on protecting its national independence and control over policy decisions.

Explained: Algeria's Hirak movement

One anonymous migrant explained daily fear:

> *“In Algeria, the police will come and break your door, jail you and later deport you… we don’t sleep in our house anymore.”*

2021: Funding as Control

The system became more organized in 2021.

The EU created the **NDICI–Global Europe program**, which became its main source of funding for migration-related policies and cooperation in both Tunisia and Algeria.

Migration control was now tied directly to funding. Financial support became connected to stronger border enforcement and efforts to reduce the number of migrants reaching Europe.

2023: Consolidation

Cooperation between the European Union and Tunisia reached a new level with the **2023 EU–Tunisia Memorandum of Understanding**.

The agreement expanded cooperation through financial aid, border security support, and efforts to stop migrant smuggling.

The result is more than just closer cooperation.

It is creating a system where migration control increasingly takes place outside the EU's borders, while still helping the European Union achieve its political goals.

One migrant recalled being intercepted at sea:

> *"Instead of rescuing us, they pushed us back into the sea and left us there… We thought we would die that day."*

Tunisia vs. Algeria: Different Positions in the System

Tunisia (Left) vs Algeria (Right) Comparison

Tunisia and Algeria do not play the same role in this system. Tunisia has worked more closely with the European Union on migration policies and agreements, while Algeria has kept more distance and has been less willing to formally cooperate with EU migration plans.

This difference matters because the situation is more complicated than a simple story of Europe controlling North Africa. Tunisia is not just following Europe's orders, and Algeria is not completely separate from the system. Tunisia has adjusted and negotiated EU policies in ways that also support its own political goals, while Algeria has focused more on protecting its independence and avoiding deeper involvement.

Even so, both countries are now part of a larger regional system where migration control, development funding, diplomacy, and security issues are becoming increasingly connected.

Tunisia Domestic Pressures

Tunisia faces major political and economic challenges that have increased pressure to crack down on migration.

After the **2011 Arab Spring uprising**, many people hoped Tunisia would create a stronger system to protect migrant rights. However, that system never fully developed, and Tunisia still does not have a clear process for giving migrants asylum or legal protection.

As the economy worsened and political instability grew, migration became more connected to public frustration and political tensions. Under President Kais Saied, Tunisia has adopted increasingly authoritarian policies, while anti-migrant rhetoric and protests linked to economic problems have become more common.

For migrants, these structural problems are experienced directly in everyday life. One migrant who reached Tunisia explained:

> *"Life there was very difficult. I was intercepted not long after arriving. There was no protection, no stability. Migrants were treated badly."*

Another woman described the constant insecurity migrants faced during the journey and after arrival:

> *"The journey was full of suffering, hunger, fear, and uncertainty."*

As Tunisia's political and economic problems continue to grow, the country will likely continue increasing restrictions and enforcement measures aimed at migrants.

Algeria's Security Focus

As instability and migration pressures in the Sahel push more refugees and migrants northward, Algeria has tightened its migration policies and border controls to reduce the number of people entering the country. Concerns about smuggling networks, human trafficking, and extremist groups have made border security a major priority for the Algerian government.

In 2023, Algeria recorded

expulsions totaling

26



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...many of which are forced back out into the desert or into poorly supplied refugee camps at the border.

Algeria's role as a key transit country for migrants traveling toward Europe has also created opportunities for cooperation with European countries.

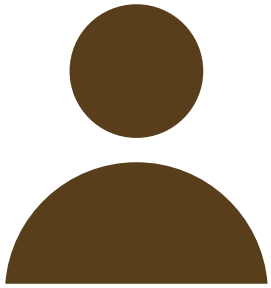
Italy plays a major role in stopping migrant crossings in the Mediterranean, and Algeria has worked closely with Italy through the **Mattei Plan** to improve infrastructure, economic development, and regional cooperation.

The plan also aims to provide investment and support in Africa to help reduce migration toward Europe. For Algeria, this partnership supports both economic development goals and stronger migration enforcement efforts, especially along routes from Sub-Saharan Africa.

Routes & Flows

The graph, from a UNHCR and IOM Joint Annual Overview, shows sea movements across the central Mediterranean Sea in 2023.

The breakdown gives a picture of the significant number of journeys taken by sea by migrants from Northern Africa to Europe. It is important to note that:



21%

of departures from Tunisia end up back in Tunisia.

Routes & Flows

Many of these departures include migrants from all over Africa and, in some cases, other continents. In 2023, the main countries of origin for irregular migrants arriving in Italy from Tunisia included Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Egypt, Tunisia, Bangladesh, and Pakistan.

Many arrivals into Tunisia happen first by land or air, and these routes are heavily patrolled by border enforcement.

The major increase in departures from Tunisia to Europe by sea after 2022 shows that Tunisia is a major hub for migration to Europe to Africa.

At the same time, Algeria remains both a destination and a country to pass through, particularly for people moving north from Sub-

Saharan Africa and for those attempting to continue toward Spain or Italy.

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Guinea - Place of Origin

In 2023, Guinea was reported as the most popular place of origin for migrants arriving in Italy after departing from Tunisia. Guinea totaled 17,979 arrivals in Italy from Tunisia.

The Gambia - Place of Origin

In 2025, the IOM's Displacement Tracking Index noted the Gambia as a popular place of origin for migrants departing from Algeria.

Kasserine, Tunisia - Point of Interception

The National Guard intercepts migrants at various points throughout their journeys.

The Airport - Point of Interception

Wealthier migrants, especially those from The Gambia, will book flights directly to Tunisia in an attempt to then reach coastal cities like Sfax. However, a majority of these migrants don'…

Hazoua Desert - Relocation Point

Rather than being put in a detention center after being arrested by the National Guard, migrants are loaded into government vehicles and dropped off in the desert with little to no…

Assamaka, Algeria - Relocation Point

Similarly, the Algerian government sends migrants they detain to the Assamaka Desert region on the border of Algeria and Niger. The same risks exist in this desert, where migrants have…

Sfax, Tunisia - Port to Europe

Those lucky enough to avoid detention by the National Guard will depart for Italy from the port in Sfax.

Algiers - Port to Europe

For those departing from Algeria, Algiers is a coastal city with ports to Spain.

Spain - "Final" Destination

Although the final destination is any coastal city in Spain, a popular landing spot is the Balearic Islands. People can seek asylum at these ports, but appointments are backlogged, a…

Italy - "Final" Destination

Only 150 miles from the Tunisian coast, many migrants are intercepted by the Italian government on the island of Lampedusa. Migrants have the opportunity to seek asylum wh…

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Sfax Case Study

Why Sfax Matters

Sfax, Tunisia's second-largest city, became a major gathering point for migrants hoping to reach Europe.

For many, it was a place of waiting, work, and hope. One migrant explained:

> *"I worked hard, but I could not earn enough to take care of my family. Every day felt like survival, not progress."*

Another said:

> *"Life was very hard. I wanted to support my family. I believed Europe was the only way."*

For authorities, it became a place of control.



When Enforcement Intensified

In June and July 2023, Tunisian police and military forces carried out raids and removals in Sfax.

Migrants were rounded up and forced onto buses toward remote border regions.

What began in the city did not end there.

From Sfax to the Desert

Some were taken toward **Ras Jedir** near Libya. Others were expelled toward the Algerian border.

Many reported being left in isolated desert areas with little food, water, or shelter.

One Congolese migrant described it simply:

> *"They dropped us in the desert… We've been there for many days."*

Another said a shepherd was the first person to help them:

> *“He gave us bread and water.”*

More Than One City

Sfax shows how migration control works today.

It is not only about stopping boats from reaching Europe.

It is also about pushing people into camps, detention systems, remote borders, and spaces of abandonment.

Algeria & Chain Displacement

Algeria plays a crucial role in migration through North Africa to

Europe. In addition to being a point of departure, Algeria deals with the forced relocation of many migrants.

The Tunisian government dumps the migrants they detain in the Hazoua Desert on the Tunisian-Algerian border.

The migrants who are able to survive in desert conditions often end up in Algeria, where the Algerian government is now also actively looking to relocate migrants before they can reach points of departure towards Europe.

When the Algerian government detains migrants, they will often drop them in desert terrain on the Algerian-Nigerian border. There is a significant number of women and children being displaced throughout Algeria, as well as a large Moroccan population being displaced on their journeys.

The IOM graph to the right shows some of the migration routes used by people traveling from West Africa through Algeria. The number of routes, along with migrants arriving from Tunisia, highlights the growing migration pressures the Algerian government is trying to control. It also helps explain why Algeria has increasingly used chain deportations and other stricter enforcement measures. As migration flows have increased, the government's response has become more aggressive.

The Migrant Journey

Ousman Jaiteh's story:

Ousman grew up in The Gambia with hopes of a better future for himself and his family. Ousman was involved in the migrant smuggling business, and mentioned that at the time he didn't understand the danger and consequences of the journey, **"When people started calling back with stories about deaths in the desert, kidnappings, torture, I began to feel something was not right. But by then, I was already part of it."**

Later on, Ousman decided to make the journey himself. Ousman describes his life in Tunisia along his journey noting that, **"There was no protection, no stability. Migrants were treated badly. We were less of a human being."** He recalls a time when the Tunisia Coast Guard forced the migrants to fight as the guards sat and watched. He remarked that **"This system does not care about anyone."**

The dehumanizing and degrading experiences stuck with Ousman. Even as someone who was once a part of the system, he acknowledged that he had little understanding of the dangers and vulnerabilities of the migration journey until experiencing it himself.

Ousman's message for young Gambians considering making the journey is that **“It’s not what you think... You can lose your life, your dignity, everything”.** He hopes that sharing his experience will prevent others from going through what he did.

Ansumana Manneh's story:

Ansumana was a trained plumber who wasn’t making enough to support his family. His decision to leave was heavily influenced by seeing the success that his friends achieved after making the journey to Europe. His journey quickly became dangerous as soon as he got to areas where he no longer knew the language or understood the culture. There were frequent checkpoints where he had to pay bribes and ransom to be able to continue. Ansumana explained that **“If you didn’t have money, you were beaten”.**

Ansumana arrived in North Africa and shared that "**Before I realized, I was taken out of the group beaten and deported back to Niger, left without hope and food.**" His journey took him off route many times. Along his journey he experienced racism, forced removal, and abandonment in the desert. He reflects that, “**We were treated like we didn’t belong anywhere. Like we were not human.”** Ansumana finally crossed the Mediterranean and made it to Europe. Although this seemed like the end of his journey, he noted that life didn’t immediately get better once he arrived in Europe.

More Danger, Not Less Movement

A major pattern across the region is that enforcement does not stop migration. It changes its form. The Memorandum of Understanding agreement between Tunisia and the EU has not ended migrant movement, and neither have the restrictive policies and increased enforcement efforts within Tunisia and Algeria. These actions are only making the migrant journey less safe. As routes become more heavily policed, people are pushed toward more dangerous paths, more remote crossings, and have to rely more heavily on smugglers.

Smuggling networks expand because safe and legal pathways remain limited. Migrants become vulnerable to kidnapping, detention, extortion, trafficking, torture, forced labor, and sexual violence. This is especially true when states criminalize humanitarian assistance, rely on raids and arrests, and make existence as a migrant dangerous. In other words, enforcement creates the conditions in which "irregularity" becomes even more exploitative and lethal.

Fatou Jallow, a Gambian migrant, shared that she wasn't able to reach Europe:

> *"After one failed attempt, I decided to return.* ***I just wanted to survive.*** *" Migration to Europe has become an increasingly life threatening journey due to decline in safe legal pathways.*

Disproportionate Vulnerability

The human cost of this system is profound, and it is not evenly distributed. Black migrants and refugees, especially those from Sub-Saharan Africa, face racialized targeting and disproportionate abuse. There is also a heightened risk for women, LGBTQ+ people, and religious minorities in Tunisia, where constitutional protections are weak, inconsistently enforced, or undercut by vague legal standards

and social violence.

The Vulnerability of Women

Being a woman adds another layer of vulnerability. Female migrants are subject to gender based harassment and violence. Female migrants express that throughout the journey there was no place where they felt safe. This constant fear creates lasting trauma.

Isatou Camara, a woman from Bakau, The Gambia, shared that:

> *“Women were often targeted. Some were pressured or threatened. You feel like you have no control over your body or your choices.”*

Fatou Jallow, a woman who attempted to migrate from Brikama, The Gambia, explained that as a female migrant:

> *"You feel powerless because the men controlling you have weapons."*

Systematic vulnerability

Tunisia's weak asylum system makes these risks even worse because migrants often have little legal protection and can instead face violence or mistreatment from authorities. This means the

migration journey is dangerous not only because of the long distance or lack of resources, but also because political systems can treat some groups of people as less protected and more vulnerable than others.

Mediterranean Crossing

In the interview with Ousman Jaiteh, he shared that, in one of his four failed attempts to cross the Mediterranean to reach Italy, they were intercepted by the Tunisian Coast Guard:

> *"One day, when we were in a boat trying to reach Italy, the Tunisian coast guards intercepted us. Instead of rescuing us, they pushed us back into the sea and left us*

> *there. They left us there to die. We thought we would die that day. All this inhuman behavior was because we are Black and migrants."*

Risks of the Route

The Mediterranean crossing itself remains one of the deadliest parts of the journey. The central route from Tunisia and Algeria toward Malta and Italy is the most lethal of the three major Mediterranean routes. Migrants often travel in overcrowded and unseaworthy inflatable boats to cross the Mediterranean. In this crossing there is also a lack of search and rescue capacity so drownings occur frequently.

Ansumana recalled his experience crossing the Mediterranean

saying that:

> *“They put too many of us in one boat. No life jackets. The waves were strong. People were crying and praying.”*

Role of Tunisian Coast Guard

This danger of unseaworthy boats is worsened by the inhuman practices that the Tunisian Coast Guard has used to prevent migration such as ramming, attempting to capsize, and even puncturing the inflatable boats that migrants are on.

This corruption and neglect for migrants' lives taking place in the Mediterranean goes somewhat unseen.

Amnesty International highlighted the story of Celine, a Cameroonian migrant departing from Sfax, Tunisia. Celine explained how:

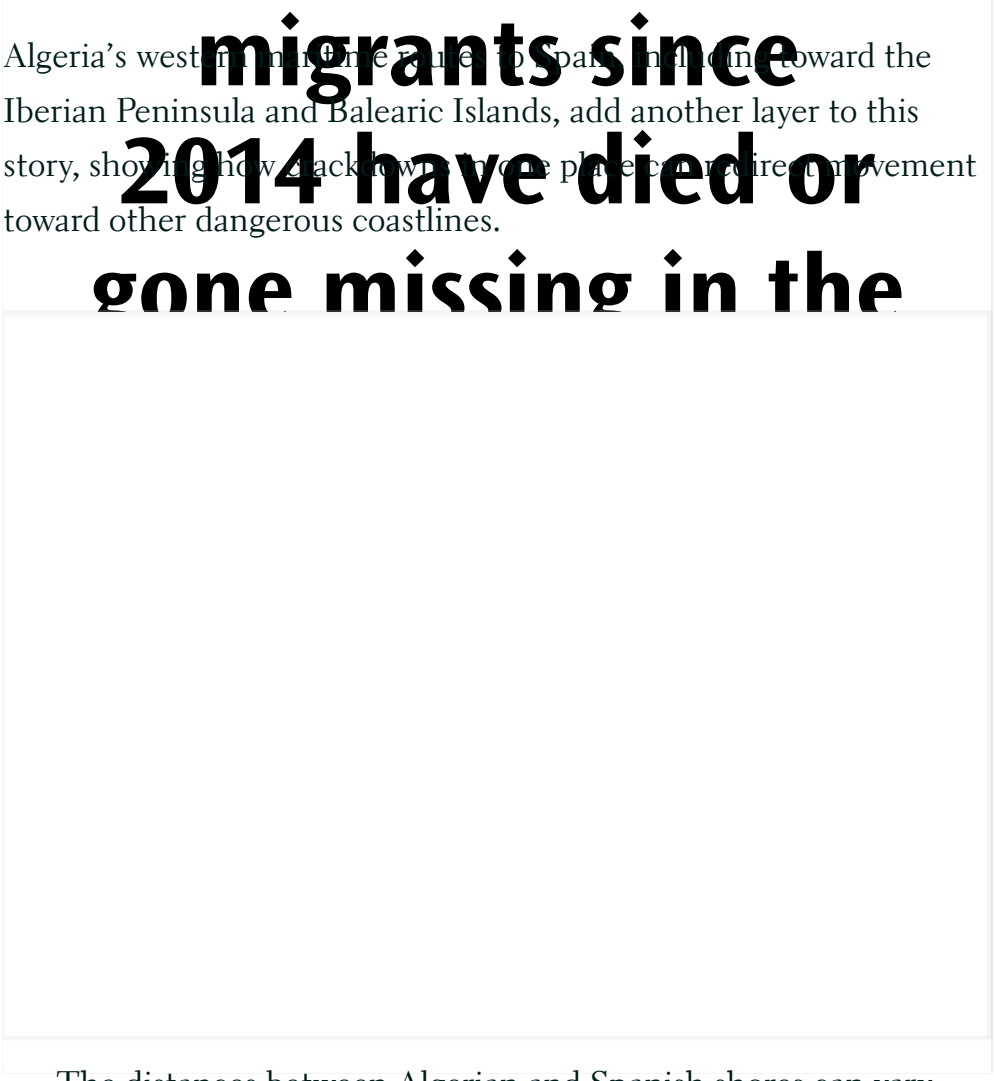
> *"They [The Tunisian Coast Guard] kept hitting our [wooden] boat with long batons with sharp endings, they pierced it… There were at least two women and three babies without life vests. We saw them drown and then we could not see the bodies anymore. I have never been so scared."*

Missing Migrants



Yet even this figure likely undercounts the full scale of the loss, because some boats disappear without survivors and therefore without witnesses.

Algeria's western maritime routes to Spain, including toward the Iberian Peninsula and Balearic Islands, add another layer to this story, showing how crackdowns in one place can redirect movement toward other dangerous coastlines.



The distances between Algerian and Spanish shores can vary, making some migration journeys more dangerous than others.

After Arrival in Europe

Ansumana shared that after arriving in Europe:

> *"I thought life would change immediately. But it was still very hard."*

The threatening journey does not end when migrants reach Europe though. There is a lack of information around places of reception, and once accessed, these systems are often overcrowded, isolating, and difficult to navigate. Often, during this time of uncertainty, physical needs are not met and phycological trauma from the journey remains.

Many migrants in Europe end up stuck in bureaucratic limbo, unsure of their legal status or how to gain legal protection. **The Dublin Regulation** can make this even more difficult.

Under this rule, the first European Union country a migrant enters is responsible for handling their asylum claim. This means migrants are usually required to seek asylum in that first country, even if the asylum system there is difficult to access or unable to provide adequate support.

Some migrants are forced to travel back to the original country they entered in order to get the protection they deserve.

These challenges after arrival in Europe matter because public debate often imagines the journey ending at the European shore.

Much research done shows that it does not. The journey continues through trauma, uncertainty, difficulty finding work, possible return, and vulnerability.

The Human Cost

These same policies can inflict serious harm on migrants.

Across this StoryMap, we have seen detention, expulsions, abandonment in desert regions, and dangerous sea crossings.

For many migrants, security systems are experienced through suffering.

A Difficult Balance

States do have legitimate interests in protecting their populations and managing borders.

But many migrants are peaceful people seeking work, safety, or opportunity.

The challenge is creating policies that protect citizens **without sacrificing dignity and human rights**.

What Was Sacrificed Here?

In Tunisia and Algeria, enforcement often prioritizes control over care.

The result raises a final question:

Who is truly being protected, and who is being excluded, displaced, or harmed in the process?

We thank Their Voice Must Be Heard, a nonprofit advocating for social justice based in The Gambia, for their support. We really appreciate the collaboration from Mustapha Manneh, the Founder and CEO, who provided us with crucial insights and migrant testimonies enabling

us to base our story on the experiences of migrants.

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Please click this link to view our references

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