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MORE**

# **RESISTANCE AT THE BORDERS**

**STORIES OF LIFE AND STRUGGLE BETWEEN TUNISIA AND ITALY**

**DECEMBER  
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# THE BATTLES OF THE "UNKNOWN"

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*"From the beginning of our journey, we have passed through different countries, with lives, people, cultures, and traditions we did not know. We have had to fight in every place or country we found ourselves in, just to survive. And we are still heading towards an unknown land."  
Mohammed and Fanta.*



*"I told her to be strong, to finish what we had started, and to remember that we were doing it for our daughter, not just for her. Despite everything, we have dreams."*

# WHEN LEAVING IS RESISTANCE: A POLITICAL ACT AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE.

The first story in the series "**Resistances at the Borders**" represents the motivation behind creating this space for sharing and spreading the daily struggles and resistance actions of migrants. **This young family** embodies, on one hand, the vast spectrum of **exploitation, violence, insecurity, and abuse** that affects those forced to cross borders without documents, the only way to leave their country in a securitized regime that tightly controls human mobility. On the other hand, **their strength** challenges this system, **bringing humanity, dreams, hope, help, and care** to a context that seeks to deny them.

I met Fanta and Mohammed, a young couple from Sierra Leone, in Tunisia in August. Their story, marked by unspeakable violence that began in their home country and continued through their journey across various African states, reflects an oppressive system that defines every border. The **border**, fluid and multifaceted, **reproduces practices of exclusion and abuse** that, though varying in detail, **constantly repeat along transit and stay routes**.

I remember the moment I first met Fanta. I was walking along Mongi Slim, a very busy street in the center of **Tunis**. Sitting on a step was a young woman with dark skin, holding a child in her lap, visibly exhausted under the scorching August sun. She was asking for alms. In Tunisia, even offering help to migrants can be risky. I hesitated. I wanted to approach her, talk to her, ask if she needed anything, but for months, anxiety and fear had been overwhelming me. In a country where the **escalation of xenophobia**, fueled by President Kaïs Saïed's rhetoric, has made it dangerous to interact with foreigners, particularly Black people, offering support means exposing oneself to unpredictable and often serious consequences.

Despite the fear, I approached her. I left her my phone number, inviting her to call me once she found herself in a "*safe place*," away from the judging eyes of a society that was becoming increasingly intolerant of Black people's presence.

A few hours later, I received a call. The woman had decided to reach out to me.

Her name is Fofanah Fanta, she is 18 years old, and she has been in Tunisia for just a few months. Her journey, along with her two-year-old daughter Kadija and her partner Mohammed, began in September 2023 when they decided to leave Sierra Leone. They call me together and, with great trust, they share their story. Mohammed starts telling me, he is less shy than his partner.

***"My name is Mohammed Sanoh, I come from Sierra Leone, West Africa. We left Sierra Leone probably last year, on September 16, 2023. We left for a specific reason: the safety of our daughter. She was born on June 25 of last year, and from the moment she was born, we knew there was a society in Sierra Leone called Bondo. This society requires the practice of cutting part of women's genitalia. [...] Both our families wanted Kadija to join this society and undergo this procedure, which involves the removal of the clitoris. But we opposed it and decided to make this sacrifice for her. So we left Sierra Leone and arrived in Guinea, facing great financial difficulties. [...] There, I decided to take my family to Libya with the goal of reaching Europe, because we were scared and didn't want Kadija to experience what happened to Fanta. This practice was indeed imposed on Fanta, and we didn't want Kadija to suffer the same fate."***

Mohammed and Fanta's testimony tells a story of **courageous resistance** against a deeply rooted and violent practice: **female genital mutilation**. In Sierra Leone, the Bondo Society represents a traditional institution that perpetuates this mutilation as a rite of passage, legitimizing **control over female bodies and the subordination of women**. When Mohammed and Fanta's families expressed the desire to subject their daughter Kadija to this practice, the couple decided to oppose it. This choice, made with determination despite immense cultural and familial pressures, represents an act of **feminist resistance**. Protecting Kadija from this structural violence meant abandoning everything: their home, their community, and the relative safety of their land.

For them, **migration** was an immense sacrifice and a form of **political struggle**, undertaken to guarantee their daughter the **right to physical integrity and freedom from oppressive norms**. This decision underscores the political value of an apparently private act. **Resisting** this practice means **challenging a broader system of control and violence over women's bodies**, breaking away from traditions that perpetuate oppression. **Leaving** is not merely an act of escape, but a **declaration of dissent** against dehumanizing norms, in favor of dignity and freedom.

# UNDER THE WEIGHT OF THE BORDER: STRATEGY AND RESISTANCE IN MIGRATION CHOICES

Mohammed continue:

*"In Libya [...] with the little money we managed to earn, we tried to reach Tunisia, but we were caught at the border between Libya and Tunisia. [The Tunisian authorities] sold me to the Libyans, who then asked for a ransom. My wife Fanta and my daughter Kadija had disappeared, I didn't know where they were. I was in prison in Libya for about two months. I did everything I could to contact some friends of mine, who helped me raise the money they demanded, and finally, I was released. [...] From my small experience, they are very, very inhumane people. They beat us day and night, treated us as if they were better than us, you know? The prison in Libya is one of the most dangerous places I have ever been. Even in my dreams, I pray that my enemies die rather than end up there. Those people call themselves Muslims, but they are far from being such. [...] Well, sometimes they say they are police officers, that they protect their country, that they are state authorities, but they seem to have no real government."*



Ph. Silvia Di Meo, Tunisian National Guard boats, Tunisia.

*"While I was in prison, Fanta was raped. When I was finally able to speak to her, she told me she had been raped. Kadija was in a terrible situation, she was very small and unwell. Fanta was worried about having contracted a disease or being pregnant, but luckily, after taking her to the hospital for a check-up, the doctors confirmed that she was healthy. After this experience, we decided to continue our journey. I worked hard to gather enough money to allow Fanta and Kadija to reach Tunisia, while I would follow them later."*

*"It was very difficult, you know, very difficult. I can't imagine the day I found out. From my point of view, one of the worst moments of her life was the day she was raped. That day, when I found out and she explained it to me, she was in a terrible emotional state. She thought maybe I would leave her, that I would abandon her. I had to make her understand that it wasn't her fault. Those people are inhuman, you know, they can do anything they think of. If they can kill you, they can also rape you, it's a common thing for them. I told her to be strong, to finish what we had started, and to remember that we were doing it for our daughter, not just for her. Despite everything, we have dreams."*

This testimony sheds light on the **multiple dimensions of structural and physical violence** that characterize the migratory journey through Libya. The story highlights how migrants are trapped in a system of exploitation and systematic abuse, where state authorities and trafficking networks collaborate to profit from those trying to cross borders. The episode of Mohammed's sale by the Tunisian authorities to the Libyans reveals the degree of **collusion between neighboring states and local armed groups**, where **migration control** translates into **extortion and arbitrary detention practices**. The conditions described in Libyan prisons, with torture, inhuman treatment, and the absence of the rule of law, reflect a **normalized system of oppression** that dehumanizes detainees.

The **sexual violence** suffered by Fanta and the **emotional and psychological consequences** that follow represent an **extreme form of domination and control**, often inflicted on migrant women as a weapon to annihilate their dignity. The narrative also offers a rare glimpse into **resilience and mutual support** within the family, despite the trauma endured.

Far from abandoning Fanta, Mohammed refuses to blame her for the violence she suffered, emphasizing the **importance of the emotional bond as a form of resistance** against the annihilation imposed by the perpetrators. The family's **determination to continue the journey** to secure a future for their daughter embodies an act of hope and struggle, contrasting with the dehumanization they have experienced.

This **testimony** not only **denounces** the **responsibilities** of **state authorities** and **exploitation networks** but also invites reflection on the **failure of international institutions and migration policies** in guaranteeing protection and justice for the most vulnerable people. Mohammed continues his story, full of hardship and suffering, but also of daily struggle for the freedom and safety of himself and his small family. After the experience at the Libyan-Tunisian border, Mohammed and Fanta decide to adopt a completely **renewed migration strategy**, showing awareness of the dynamics of borders and the risks associated with crossing them. Their choice is not just a change of route—from Libya to Algeria and then across the border into Tunisia—but also includes the decision to separate in order to offer mutual support in case of difficulties. Fanta leaves with their daughter following the new trajectory, while Mohammed stays in Libya, where he works and tries to save money to support both their journey. Regarding this, I ask him:

***"Why did you enter Tunisia from Algeria and not from Libya?"***

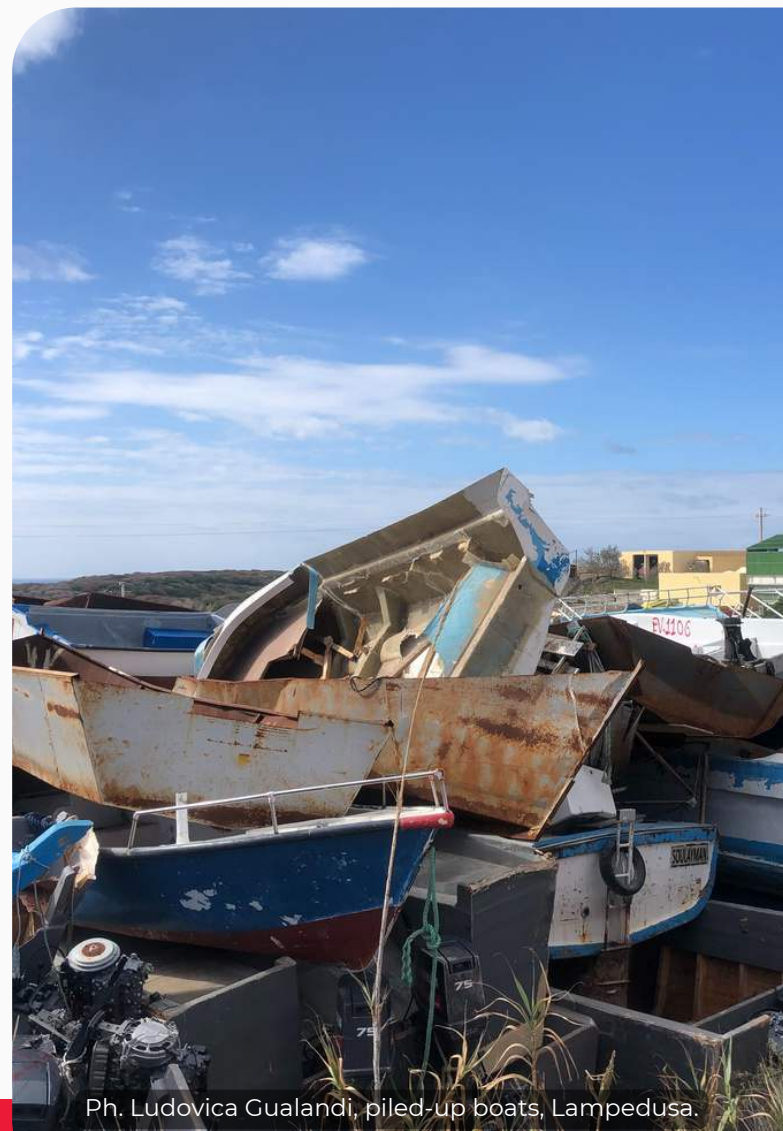
Mohammed responds:

*"After the experience at the Libya-Tunisia border, we decided to change our route. We didn't want to be captured again and sold to the Libyans. When we crossed from Algeria, we weren't together, we were separated. Yes, we were separated. She was with the child, and when they arrived in Tunisia, I was still in Algeria. I didn't want her to face problems again. If they had taken her, I would have found a way to free them".*

This strategy reveals a deep understanding of the **porosity and fluidity of borders**. Mohammed and Fanta's decision, therefore, reflects **active resistance to the closure and militarization of borders**. Their strategic separation represents an additional form of struggle: it reduces individual risks while enabling the **construction of a mutual support network** that extends through the different stages of their journey.

This approach directly **challenges securitarian narratives** that portray migrants as incapable of planning and highlights their profound awareness of the inherent **inequalities in global mobility regimes** (Hess, 2017; Mbembé, 2017). Their journey embodies not just a **physical migration** through complex geopolitical spaces but also a process of **resistance and self-determination**, where **adaptability and solidarity** emerge as essential tools to navigate the challenges imposed by border regimes.

I then ask both of them if they are willing to share their personal experience of crossing the border between Algeria and Tunisia, in order to understand its characteristics and difficulties.



Ph. Ludovica Gualandi, piled-up boats, Lampedusa.



I turn to Fanta, more introverted and reserved than her partner, and I would like to hear from her about her perspective and her experience crossing the border alone, with Kadija. Fanta, with a bitter smile on her lips, begins to tell me:

***"I didn't know the journey would be so hard, I didn't know. So, from Libya to Algeria, we walked through the desert, and I carried the child. But it was very difficult, the police were very harsh. They told us that if they caught us, they would send us back to prison in Libya. The only way I survived was because of these guys, some Guineans, Malians, people from other countries. They helped me, some people held the baby for me, because at that moment I couldn't even walk and had no appetite. The baby didn't have food either. Sometimes there was no food, nothing. The journey lasted two to three weeks, and I survived thanks to these guys who helped me."***

Fanta's crossing of the border represents a powerful testimony to the **complexity** and **violence** inherent in **migratory journeys**, particularly for **women** traveling alone with children. Her account highlights not only the **"vulnerability"** arising from the **physical and psychological conditions** of the journey but also the crucial importance of **solidarity among people on the move**. Fanta faces the Libyan-Algerian desert and the border crossing between Algeria and Tunisia carrying her daughter on her back, with insufficient food or water. The hungry and exhausted child increases the risk of being detected. Fanta's fear of being caught and returned to a brutal detention system is deeply rooted in a reality of systemic gender-based violence, which disproportionately affects migrant women. In these extreme conditions, mutual aid among travelers emerges as a lifesaving element. Fanta shares how fellow travelers from Guinea and Mali supported her by carrying her daughter when she could no longer walk. This **mutual aid** not only enabled her survival but also created a sense of **community and solidarity** among individuals who share the same vulnerability and fate. Physical exhaustion, constant risk, and the threat of violence intertwine with acts of **mutual care**, especially for her daughter, which testify to human resilience in the face of the hostility of border regimes.

This narrative underscores the importance of **analyzing migration** not only through the lens of structural violence but also by considering the **survival strategies and forms of solidarity that emerge**. In a transnational system that criminalizes and dehumanizes migration, Fanta and her daughter's journey sheds light on both the dramatic consequences of securitarian migration policies and the transformative power of human solidarity in the most adverse situations.

# EUROPE AND THE BORDER OF BRUTALITY: HOW MIGRATION POLICIES FUEL VIOLENCE

Fanta continues:

*"The Algerian police would leave us alone at night. They told us not to go back, but to go to Tunisia. But, for example, the Tunisian police, if they see you, they send you back, they just tell you to return to where you came from. The Tunisians, if they caught you during that period, would sell you back to the Libyans, because those Libyans had prisons. They have a 'fake police' that puts people in the desert. But the real police know. They all know that they are fake cops. They do all these things for money. Yes, and if they catch you, they take your phone, your money, everything, and they still put you in prison, they beat you. Sometimes, some people die there."*

Fanta's account provides a firsthand testimony of a **deeply corrupt system**, where the collusion between authorities, traffickers, and militias makes the **migration journey** not only extremely dangerous but also an opportunity to **exploit people in transit** for economic gain.

The description of the **"ping-pong"** between **Algerian, Tunisian, and Libyan police forces** is not an exception but an integral part of a consolidated practice, where local authorities actively participate in trafficking and exploitation networks, often with the tacit or explicit support of other actors. In Libya, militias manage detention centers where migrants are sold as slaves or subjected to torture and rape. The complicity of Libyan authorities has been widely documented by organizations like Amnesty International, which has highlighted how security forces collaborate with traffickers to manage and exploit migration flows. Similar dynamics emerge in **Tunisia**, where the **National Guard**, responsible for **controlling the borders**, is accused of **systemic abuses**, including rape and violence, against migrant women.



Ph. Silvia Di Meo, remains of life jackets, Tunisia

An investigation by **The Guardian** revealed incidents of **rape** by members of the **National Guard** and practices of **forced deportation**, where migrants are handed back to Libyan militias or left in the desert with no chance of survival. This **exploitation network** is actively **supported by European governments**, which fund **training programs and provide material resources to the Tunisian and Libyan border authorities within the context of the externalization of borders policy**. The **European Union**, through **bilateral agreements** such as the **Italy-Libya Memorandum of Understanding** and **direct financial support to Tunisia**, has transferred billions of euros to **strengthen external border controls**. However, these **funds** are used to **fuel a violent and corrupt system** in which local authorities exploit their position for profit, leaving migrants in an extreme state of vulnerability. This **border externalization mechanism** is **justified** by European authorities as a means to **reduce migration flows to Europe**, but in practice, it **contributes** to the widespread **perpetuation of human rights violations**. The system described by Fanta, in which people are pushed back, robbed, and sold, is not only the result of local initiatives but the product of a **global policy that deems the lives of migrants expendable in the name of security**. A reconsideration of these policies is urgent, with particular attention to **European responsibility** in financing and supporting actors involved in systematic human rights violations.

# TUNISIA, THE GENDARME OF THE MEDITERRANEAN: VIOLENCE, RACISM, AND EUROPEAN COMPLICITY

In recent years, **Tunisia** has taken on a **central role in European border externalization policies**. After the controversial **2017 Italy-Libya agreement**, which delegated control of migration flows to the Libyan Coast Guard in exchange for funds and technical support despite the severe and systemic human rights violations in the country, **Tunisia** has become an **alternative starting point for people** on the move. The **Italy-Tunisia Memorandum of Understanding in July 2023** intensified this dynamic, transforming the **North African country** into the **'gendarme' of the Mediterranean**.

This **agreement, strongly criticized** by organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, has enabled the **transfer** of significant **financial and military resources to the Tunisian National Guard**, enhancing its control capabilities. Since **President Kais Saied's incendiary speech in February 2023**, in which he accused **Sub-Saharan** communities of wanting to **'alter the demographic composition'** of the country, there has been an escalation of **systematic violence**: deportations to the desert at the Algeria-Libya border, violent interceptions, omissions of rescue at sea, and the criminalization of solidarity. This climate of repression also affects activists, journalists, and researchers, making it increasingly difficult to document and report violations.

In this regard, I ask the two:

***"When you decided to come to Tunisia, were you aware of the situation, or did you still think Tunisia was a good place to stay, where there was work? Did you want to settle in Tunisia or were you aiming for Europe? Do you feel that the situation in Tunisia is somewhat better than in Libya?"***

Responds Fanta:

***"Yes, when we were in Libya, we thought that maybe Tunisia would be much better than Libya, but when we finally arrived here, we found out that it's more or less the same. We didn't have in mind to settle in Tunisia, you know, we thought that by coming to Tunisia, things would get a little better, just enough time to reach Europe."***

The two, as we've seen, arrived in Tunisia at different times. Fanta and her daughter arrived first, followed later by Mohammed. Having lived in Tunisia for three years, I have witnessed and observed **profound political and social changes** that have significantly altered the fragile balances in the country, especially concerning Black migrants. The **xenophobic and racist** incendiary **speech** delivered by the **President in February 2023**, accompanied by **strengthened economic cooperation with Italy and the EU** to block population movements out of Tunisia, has translated into a **climate of violence and persecution** against migrants and anyone who helps them.

The two live in a small room in the city center. Due to the widespread systemic racism, they are **both unemployed**, in a condition of extreme precariousness and vulnerability. Fanta goes out every day to beg in the streets of central Tunis, in order to collect some dinars to eat.

Fanta speaks on this matter:

***"When I arrived in Tunisia, before Mohammed, I didn't know that people here beg for money. I thought that when I came here, I would just work. Yes, I thought there was a lot of work, but everything turned out differently. After two or three days, I saw one of my 'sisters' leaving in the morning. I thought she was going to work, but they told me that they go out to beg every day to eat and pay for rent. So yes, my friend and I started begging too."***

*"The Tunisians, even though they treat us badly sometimes, I know they do it because that's what the President says. If the President orders something, the police and others follow. But, in general, ordinary people here give us money, they are good to us. Yes, it's true, they attack us, of course, but mostly the police. If they see us begging, sometimes they don't arrest us, but they still take us to the police station. If they catch you in the morning, by evening they release you. But sometimes they take all the money you've earned begging from nine or ten in the morning until then. It's not right. Of course, it's better than Libya, but it's still not fair. Sometimes they just tell you to leave the place where you're begging, and if you don't, they arrest you."*



Ph. Ludovica Gualandi, Ellouza Port, Tunisia

## **LOVE AND CARE IN THE FACE OF ABANDONMENT AND INSTITUTIONAL VIOLENCE**

It is October 12, 2024. I have just returned to my hometown in Italy after long and intense months in Tunisia. I receive a call from Fanta. Along with her, little Kadija and Mohammed, there is another figure. A scared young boy. "What's happening?" I ask them.

Mohammed answers me, terrified:

***"We found this boy on the street, he's alone, he has no one left, he was naked and his legs were burned. He's scared. We brought him here to our house. He can't be left outside on the street at night. I went out to buy food for Fanta and the baby. That's when I met him, and he was staring at me, so I approached him and asked him a few questions. Luckily, we're from the same country. He told me that he lost both of his parents in the Mediterranean Sea and that he has no place to go, no one. Hearing his story, I felt very down, you understand? So I brought him home, and my wife asked me who he was. I had to explain everything to her, and she also felt emotionally crushed, you know? So we washed him, gave him clothes, and something to eat. We tried to talk to him to see if there was anyone, a relative, both in Sierra Leone or here."***

At the family's home, the young boy tells Mohammed and Fanta that his name is Yappio, that he comes from Sierra Leone, and that he boarded a few weeks earlier from Sfax with his family and other passengers. Few of them survived the journey. No member of his family made it. He was rescued by a fishing boat after spending many hours in the water. The burns on his legs were caused by a scorching mix of saltwater and gasoline from the boat's engine, which they were traveling on towards Europe.

Since then, Fanta and Mohammed have taken Yappio into their small room in Tunis, despite their extreme financial difficulties and the ongoing persecution they face. Despite everything, they are trying to take care of him. In response to this situation, we tried to intervene to offer support to the boy: to locate any family members or ensure he was taken in by child protection services. However, in Tunisia, for a foreign child without documents, assistance has proven almost non-existent. A dramatic example of this context is represented by the arrest on **November 12, 2024, of Abdellah Said**, president of the *Enfants de la Lune* association in Medenine. Said's association provided **support to orphaned children**, both Tunisian and migrant, but his efforts collided with the growing climate of **repression and criminalization** that affects not only migrants but also anyone who helps them. Arrested on trumped-up charges of **money laundering and threatening state security**, his case is emblematic of the government's strategy: to suffocate dissent and repress any form of solidarity towards migrants, while simultaneously depriving the most vulnerable of any form of protection or aid.

We still decided, with disillusionment, to contact a member of the **International Organization for Migration (IOM)**, explaining the situation and requesting assistance. Mohammed receives a first appointment. Here are his words:

*"Your friend (a civil society activist in Tunisia) had sent them (IOM) my number, and they contacted me the same day. I made an appointment for the next day at 9 in the morning. I went there with the boy, but the number I had made the appointment with wasn't answering. I tried countless times, sending messages, but no response. I was there in front of the gate with the boy. I spoke to someone, but there was no answer. Eventually, I spoke with an office employee, who told me that my name and the boy's name were not on the list. I felt very bad, for me and for him. I went twice. The second time was the same, but I didn't stay long because I had already had the same experience the first time. After a few hours of waiting, I left the place."*



Ph. Silvia Di Meo, garbage with "UNHCR logo," Tunisia

Mohammed's testimony highlights **two crucial dimensions**: on one hand, the **failure of international institutions**, such as the **IOM** (International Organization for Migration), to take responsibility for protecting and supporting migrants; on the other, the **strength of human solidarity** among migrants themselves, often the only immediate and effective response to "emergency" situations. The **humanitarian narrative** surrounding the IOM **clashes with the operational reality** Mohammed describes. The **organization's mission** increasingly reduces itself to so-called "**assisted voluntary return**" programs, **policies** that **operate under a guise of humanity** but, in practice, **align with the securitarian agendas of states and the European Union**.



Mohammed's experience highlights the **IOM's failure to address immediate needs and the broader systematic exclusion of migrants from protection systems.** The lack of responses, administrative confusion, and absence of tangible accountability left Mohammed and the boy in a state of total abandonment, deepening their sense of vulnerability and isolation. The **rhetoric of returns, cloaked in humanitarian language,** becomes a **tool** that not only **fails to provide protection** but also actively **reinforces the securitarian logic** aimed at the rejection of migrants.

The **contrast** between the **IOM's failure** and **Mohammed's act of solidarity** underscores how care and support emerge not from those designated to ensure protection but from individuals who, despite shared hardships, forge **connections through resistance.** This gesture embodies both immediate assistance and a **subtle critique** of a **system** that not only **neglects its duties** but also plays a **role in sustaining the border regime and its associated violence.** Despite being abandoned by institutions, Mohammed and Fanta remain resolute in their efforts to locate the boy's relatives, inform them of his loss, and update them on his current care.

Mohammed:

***“After a few weeks, we managed to contact an aunt who was in Kasserine. But, you know, it was just an attempt because the number she was using wasn’t her phone, so we haven’t been able to reach her again since. With no contacts and given the situation here in Tunisia for us (Black people), I felt that this boy needed my help, and he certainly deserves it. I really need to help him because he’s just a kid—maybe 10, 11, or 12 years old. He’s all alone here in Tunisia, with nowhere to go, so, you know, helping him, deciding to take care of him, I think it’s the least I can do. It’s the least I can do to feel like I’ve done something I can truly be proud of, you know, despite the difficulties. I think whatever happens, happens for a reason, and I feel like I’m doing the right thing, truly.”***

The young couple decides to take the child into their "custody," treating him as their own and keeping him "safe" in a friend's nearby accommodation. However, Mohammed and Fanta do not plan to stay in Tunisia for long. **Their ultimate destination remains Europe**, driven by the **dreams** and **ambitions** that fuel their journey, as well as the violence and hardships they endured across the African countries they traversed. These experiences have convinced them that crossing the sea is their only remaining option.



Mohammed tells me about this:

***"But, anyway, we plan to go to Europe to give Kadija a better life, and we have to face whatever risks come our way. That's why we're here. My strength is my daughter; I'm doing all of this to give her a better life. I overcome every obstacle I encounter along the way for my daughter. We do this because we want to set an example for her. And then there are my dreams. I'm very talented, so much so that sometimes, when I look at myself, I feel like I'm in the wrong place. Yes, I'm definitely in the wrong place, no doubt about it. But when I get to Europe, you know, history will be made soon after.***

***Because I believe in myself, I know who I am, and I have a beautiful family that makes me stronger every day. You know, no matter if we have misunderstandings or face challenges, they always believe in me. They've never stopped believing in me, no matter the situation or circumstances. Being an inspiration to them, with the talent God has given me, makes me feel like I'm just one small step away from achieving my dreams and making history. Yes, that's the only thing separating me from my dreams right now. I know that when I arrive in Europe, that day will mark the beginning of a new era in football. Yes, I truly believe that. I keep moving, you know, I keep trying. With the help of my beautiful daughter, I'm proud of myself. That's it, that's how it is."***

Mohammed's **testimony** is a powerful reminder of **hope** that endures even in the harshest of circumstances. His **dreams** of revolutionizing European football and securing a **brighter future for his daughter** Kadija embody the essence of the **human spirit**, characterized by **aspirations and love**. Faced with a system that rejects him, labeling him as a "threat" or "criminal," Mohammed overturns this narrative by **showcasing universal values like familial affection, ambition, and resilience**.

The **love** binding Mohammed, Fanta, and little Kadija is the cornerstone of their **strength**. **Kadija** is not just a daughter; she is a **symbol of hope**, a fresh start, and the yearning to break free from the chains of marginalization. This love drives them to confront dangers and challenges, transforming their **journey into an act of resistance against a system intent on erasing their humanity**.

Mohammed's **faith in his talent** and the unwavering support of his family reveal the **simplicity and profound depth of his dreams**. These are not unattainable ambitions but deeply **human desires: to protect a daughter, pursue a passion, and be recognized for one's worth**. Aspirations so basic that, in more privileged contexts, they are taken for granted become **acts of defiance for those living on the margins**.

Through his story, Mohammed reclaims his **dignity and his right to dream**, showing that **migrants** are not merely victims of circumstance but **individuals with aspirations, talents, and the power to inspire change**. His narrative celebrates the quiet heroism of striving for a better life and reminds us of the **shared humanity that transcends borders and stereotypes**.

## THE BOUNDARY OF HUMANITY: MOHAMMED'S BROKEN VOICE

It is Saturday, November 30, 2024. I receive a call from the two young people informing me that their departure is imminent. The next day, Mohammed would go to pay for the trip for his family, including Yappio. They say they have a "safe" contact who, for 3,000 Tunisian dinars, would get them to Lampedusa. The following day, I try to get in touch with them again to ensure everything is going well. They do not respond to my messages. I insist several times, but nothing. I try again the next day and the day after that. No response. One thing comes to my mind: they took the sea and didn't make it.

Wednesday, December 4, 2024, I receive a message on Messenger, it's Fanta. I open the message and read:

***" Mohammed has been kidnapped, I don't know anything more. Mohammed's mother received this video yesterday. They are beating him, beating him badly, and asking for a ransom."***

The young girl is desperate, forwarding me the video of the abuse inflicted on her partner—**stripped, beaten, and filmed while begging to be let go, asking for a ransom for his release.** It is unclear who the people holding him hostage are. Mohammed's mother promptly sends a ransom of 2000 Tunisian dinars, but Mohammed is not released. Days pass with no news.

On December 9, 2024, Fanta calls me. Mohammed has returned home. Tired, with visible signs of violence and a chronic headache from the beatings he received, I see Mohammed's ever-smiling face on a video call. I want to wait a moment before asking him what happened, but he immediately feels the need to tell me:

***"I left early in the morning, heading towards Kram (a neighborhood on the outskirts of Tunis). I had a 'safe' contact, a person who would help us leave, taking the Mediterranean to reach Italy. We had worked hard to save up the necessary money. They told me to meet them in a small square in Kram. I waited for an hour and no one showed up, so I started calling this person who told me they were on their way. A man passed by me, asked for directions, but I couldn't help, as I didn't know the area well. While I was trying to assist him, someone grabbed me from behind. Not long after, I found myself in a large house with several rooms. I wasn't alone, there were two other men and a woman with me. They were imprisoning us. They made us strip, started filming us naked with their phones, and demanded a ransom from our families for our release. My mother immediately sent the money. Needless to say, they had already stolen everything: my phone and the 3,000 dinars I had with me to pay for the crossing. During the days of captivity, they treated us very badly. They didn't give us food or water, kept us naked even though we had already paid the ransom. They raped the woman in front of me. Luckily, I managed to escape. At night, I ran out through one of the doors of the house. Fortunately, I was found by a young Tunisian guy. I was in my underwear, cold, and in shock. The guy helped me, took me to his home, and took care of me. I wanted to go back to my family immediately, but I didn't have the strength. They took care of me, gave me food and water, warm clothes, and some medicine. After two days, thanks to the care of this family, I regained my strength and returned to my home, to Fanta and Kadija. I can't believe I'm still alive and I'm seeing my family again."***

Mohammed's **testimony** represents one of the many **trajectories of violence and precariousness** experienced by migrants trapped in a **highly securitized mobility system**, shaped by **Euro-African migration policies**. The brutality of traffickers and the abuses suffered by victims, though unacceptable and inhumane, must be understood as a **direct consequence of a regulatory and political framework that systematically denies legal and safe channels for migration**. The lack of legal alternatives forces people like Mohammed to place their trust and hope in informal networks, accepting the risks associated with dangerous paths. The dynamics described in the story—kidnapping, ransom, and imprisonment—highlight how the **absence of regular routes fosters an exploitation system based on the extreme vulnerability of those attempting to cross borders**.

Traffickers, taking advantage of this situation, operate in a gray space created by impunity and desperation, perpetrating abuses to improve their economic condition. What makes this situation even more complex is that often, the same migrants, rendered victims of continuous abuse and violence, are forced to assume the role of oppressors to survive

In conditions of captivity, with access to basic rights denied and in a constant struggle for survival, some marginalized individuals cease to be merely oppressed and instead derive "benefit" from a context of structural violence. This dynamic generates a **spiral of oppression** where migrants become both victims and perpetrators, inflicting unspeakable violence on others who share the same fate.



Ph. Silvia Di Meo, hotspot di Lampedusa

Although this behavior cannot be justified, **it is the product of a system that forces entire lives to the margins, pushing them to seek survival solutions within a brutal context**. In this regard, Tunisia increasingly aligns with the Libyan model, characterized by an ecosystem of violence in which authorities, citizens, and migrants all participate, albeit in different roles, in a system of oppression and abuse.

Mohammed's account highlights the **intersection of systemic racism, lack of legal protection, and institutional complicity, making it clear that Tunisia cannot be considered either a safe place of origin or transit.** This reflection invites a deeper questioning of **European migration policies,** which, by externalizing border controls and delegating the management of mobility to third countries, perpetuate a securitized regime that results in **exclusion, violence, and dehumanization.** Stories like Mohammed's are not isolated cases but symptoms of a structural crisis that demands a radical rethink of migration management strategies in the Mediterranean.

Mohammed's story is not just a reflection of the atrocities inflicted within these gray zones created by euro-African migration policies but also a testament to his strength, resilience. Despite being in an extreme situation, Mohammed managed to execute a **desperate escape,** driven by the **vital need to return to his family.** His determination to save himself, combined with **strategic intelligence** and the ability to maintain **clarity in inhuman conditions,** allowed him to escape captivity and survive. However, there is no news of the others who were held captive with him. This silence raises disturbing questions about the fate of others trapped in similar situations, left to face a future often marked by unspeakable violence.

Once back home, Mohammed found himself in front of his family, alive and finally safe. The embrace with his loved ones marked a moment of deep relief, but also the **beginning of new concerns.** All the savings they had painstakingly accumulated to fund the journey to Europe were stolen, leaving the family in a state of **heightened economic and psychological vulnerability.** The feeling of being so close to the dream of a new life in Europe, only to have it shattered by violence and abuse, left Mohammed and his family in **confusion and frustration.** On one hand, the desire to try again remains strong: leaving Tunisia, crossing the Mediterranean, and seeking a better future are dreams that survive even the most traumatic experiences. On the other hand, the awareness of the **countless obstacles** and **potential violence** they may face makes the prospect even more daunting.

Mohammed and his family find themselves forced to start over, **trapped in an apparently endless cycle of precarity.** The brutality that has struck them is not just the result of individual actions, but the outcome of a system that fosters exploitation and abuse. This story is not unique: it is shared by countless lives that, driven by hope or desperation, are forced to navigate a system designed to exclude and exploit them. Their struggle for survival, unfortunately, is not limited to the journey to Europe but extends through every stage of their path.

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