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AHMED JEMAA

University of Osnabrück

Harga and the visa nexus: The securitization of youth mobility in Tunisia

ABSTRACT

By studying the Schengen visa regime from the perspective of applicants – ‘youth on the move’ in Tunisia – and their subjective experiences of (im)mobility and ‘stuckedness’, this article sheds light on the bordering practices of the EU border regime in post-2011 Tunisia and its entanglement with the multiple axes of power between the two shores of the Mediterranean. In this local political context, the process of externalizing the European Union’s borders is reflected upon by unpacking the labels of ‘cooperation’ and ‘Euro–Mediterranean partnership’. Indeed, the emphasis on the ‘border spectacle’ images of the undocumented sea crossing from the Maghreb to Europe, known as harga, has contributed to the prominence of the crisis discourse and the securitization of mobilities in the Mediterranean Maghreb. As a result, this setting obscured mobility inequalities and the broader extractive political economy of EU–Maghreb relations. Alternatively, this article embraces the crucial role of anthropology in challenging the inherent nature of border regimes. It adopts an ethnographic approach of ‘looking at the border from the other side’ to shift the gaze and examine the ‘regular mobilities’, governed by the Schengen visa regime. This shift in perspective enables us to examine the regime’s various invisible borders – material, symbolic and affective – and reveal the subjects they produce and their struggles.

KEYWORDS

Schengen regime
invisible borders
neocolonialism
(im)mobility
bordering
externalization
stuckedness

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1. *Harga* in the Maghrebi dialect refers to the phenomenon of 'irregular' or undocumented sea crossings from the Maghreb to Europe. It emerged as a reaction to the new visa requirements imposed by European countries on nationals from the Maghreb in the 1980s and 1990s, among other new rigid regulations on family reunification and mobility in general (Mabrouk 2010).

While border walls usually have short lives, their impact on people's ways of thinking remains for a long time. Borders signal that the people on the other side are different, undesired, dangerous, polluting, and even non-human.

(Khosravi 2019: 414)

FREE TRADE AND CLOSED BORDERS

This article sheds light on the working mechanisms of the EU border regime and its practices from the other side of the border, as exemplified by the case of post-2011 Tunisia. More specifically, it examines the Schengen visa regime from the perspective of Maghrebi applicants – 'youth on the move' (Souiah 2019; Zitouni 2025) – and, in doing so, contributes to the existing literature on their subjective experiences of (im)mobility by offering additional empirical insight. The article has two main dimensions: the first is the macro, where I situate this visa regime as part of a complex border regime and power relations between the north and the south of the Mediterranean, embedded in processes of neocolonial accumulation and extraction (M'charek 2020). The second, the micro, focuses on the empirical findings of everyday border struggles at EU embassies and private visa companies studying cases of young Tunisians.

I argue that it is academically and politically useful to shift the gaze and shed light on the uneven 'regular' mobilities governed by the Schengen visa regime to reveal other invisibilized aspects of the border as well as the struggles and subjects they generate. My research showed that the dualities of '*harga*'¹ and 'visas'; 'regularity' and 'irregularity' are always interconnected; looking at their intersections in law and practice is indispensable for a firm understanding of the border regime governing (im)mobilities between the Maghreb and Europe. Hence, there is the need to further explore the complex relations between migration laws and policies on the one hand and migratory imaginaries and practices on the other hand.

Overall, I see mobility and migration as a total social phenomenon that is revelatory of multiple power relations and social and political processes. Accordingly, I situate transnational mobility from Tunisia to Europe – governed by the Schengen visa regime – as first and foremost part of a larger complex border regime itself composed of 'a multiplicity of actors, movements, and discourses' (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015: 69). This border regime that separates the two shores of the Mediterranean generates multiple questions and dichotomies characterizing the wealthy Global North and the poor Global South, the dominant and the dominated, the colonizer and the colonized (Giglioli 2016). Questions of mobility and migration remain at the heart of EU–Tunisian relations, in which the (re)production of domination is a crucial element. However, this modern bordering of the southern Mediterranean is also closely entangled with the neocolonial political economy of the 'Free Trade and Closed Borders'. In 1995, the same year the Schengen Convention was implemented, Tunisia became the first southern Mediterranean country to sign an 'Association Agreement' – a free trade deal – with the European Union (Limam 2020). This turning point established a new reality of one-way freedoms: a free circulation of capital and goods while restricting the movement of people from the southern side of the Mediterranean. This was followed by multiple 'cooperation on migration' agreements between Tunisia and several EU member states, mainly with France and Italy – historically the main

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destinations and economic partners – centred on tackling ‘irregular’ migration and enhancing cooperation on deportation (Cassarino 2014). As Pécoud (2013) notes, these agreements force sending states to continuously cooperate with more powerful receiving states in outsourcing EU border management to third countries to build and maintain the so-called ‘Fortress Europe’.

Despite its failure to achieve equal mobility between the two shores or to stop ‘irregular’ movements, not to mention the high cost of human lives and growing border violence, this securitized approach remains at the top of the European Union’s agenda. This can be seen in the EU officials’ state visits in the summer of 2023 led by the far-right Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni to negotiate a new ‘migration deal’, known as the ‘EU–Tunisia Memorandum of Understanding’. It particularly aimed to reduce ‘irregular’ migration and speed up deportations. This approach sparked concern and opposition within Tunisian civil society and beyond (Tababi 2023). Overall, these deals are far from being equally beneficial; they are a matter of bargaining and political blackmail, using financial and political pressure (Limam 2020). Interestingly, in September 2021, this pressure was extended to target the already restricted freedom of movement when the French government decided to reduce the visa quota for Maghreb nationals by 30 per cent for Tunisia and 50 per cent for Algeria and Morocco in order to push the respective governments to cooperate in the readmission process.

The EU vision of transnational mobility between the two sides of the Mediterranean is thus essentially based on the securitization and externalization of border control (Cuttitta 2022). In this context, Tunisia and Maghreb states act as a pre-frontier ‘buffer zone’ (Teti et al. 2020: 174) to ‘keep people in the region out of Europe’ (Genova 2017: 35).

FRAMING THE BORDER REGIME

The post-revolutionary transformations marked a turning point in this process of border externalization for several reasons, namely the significant migrant arrivals in Lampedusa in 2011² and the Libyan displacement crisis, which led to the country becoming a ‘revolutionised space of migration’ (Garelli and Tazzioli 2016). In this conjuncture of problematized mobility, new ways of ‘management’ and ‘governance’ were required according to the EU policies. Indeed, this context, as well as the post-2011 climate of political freedom, provided a fertile ground for the diversification of EU-funded non-state actors involved in border management (Dini and Giusa 2020). Building on the migration industry concept defined as ‘the array of non-state actors who provide services that facilitate, constrain or assist international migration’ (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Sorensen 2012: 6–7), this article examines the post-2011 border regime transformations.

The use of the Foucauldian concepts of discipline and governmentality in critical border studies (Walters 2010) is useful here in revealing different forms of domination and border struggles. Considering that governmentality creates spaces in which populations are classified and managed (Shore et al. 2011), the European Union has used this migration industry as an externalized layer of control to anticipate the treatment of people on the move within its own borders. While the direct control of the European Union’s physical borders has been outsourced to local coast guards, the self-discipline as a precondition of control (Pécoud 2013) has been delegated to civil society. This border tactic aims to shape the subjectivities and perceptions of the constructed category of

2. In 2011, the island of Lampedusa recorded 52,000 migrant arrivals.

'pre-migrants'. By using communication tools such as information campaigns, it seeks to deter migrants from coming to Europe by raising awareness of the dangers of 'irregular' (Pécoud 2013) migration, thereby persuading them to abandon their mobility projects.

Different media were used for this goal. However, the most prominent one was the prime-time two-season TV series *Harga*. This giant joint production of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and Tunisian National Television, named after the phenomenon of 'irregular' migration, took a mainstream and detached approach to *harga*. It reduced this complex phenomenon to the neo-liberal ideology of self-responsibility and free choice on the one hand, and the dramatic suffering of migrants and their families on the other, while neglecting the symbolic and material violence of borders and the structural origins of this phenomenon.

Similar trends have been observed in the IOM campaigns in West African countries, using artistic content to diffuse the EU migration propaganda through the explicit messages of 'Don't risk your life', 'Immigration is only good when it's legal', 'Stay in Africa to develop it, there is no better place than here', 'Young people, what you don't know is that abroad it is not as easy as you think it is' (Pécoud and van Dessel 2021). This 'Europe is no longer a heaven' rhetoric, aimed at influencing young people's choices, was also the theme of various youth-oriented activities, such as a roundtable organized on 7 May 2022 in the marginalized Tunis suburb of Sidi Hassine within the *harraga* Project co-funded by the European Union's Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund and the Austrian Federal Ministry of Interior.

Borders and border regimes are means of managing populations, classifying, filtering and othering mobile subjects through apparatuses of state power, discipline and bordering practices (Mezzadra and Neilson 2012). They determine who is permitted to move and who is immobilized, who is welcomed and who is rendered undesirable within the broader governmentality of transnational mobility. These dynamics have been shaping the field of transnational mobility in post-2011 Tunisia as a field of crisis by reducing people's movements to the securitization framework and thereby legitimizing borders and visa restrictions. These processes of migrantization and the stigma of 'migratory risk' (Scheel and Tazzioli 2022: 10) are essential to understanding the immobilization of youth by the Schengen visa regime.

The EU usage of the *harga* movement functioned to reinforce the securitization of mobilities and the criminalization of migration. By implicitly casting 'youth on the move' as potential *harragas*/migrants, it legitimized the tightening of visas. As such, the duality of '*harga*' and '*visa*' in these broader contexts is central in my research, as I shall demonstrate further in the following sections.

Accordingly, my research seeks to change the gaze and look at the 'regular' (im)mobilities through the case of post-2011 young Tunisians' Schengen visa applicants. Furthermore, the border regime approach as a theoretical tool to deconstruct the boundaries of the migration field and the categorization of (im)mobilities (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015) will contribute to a better understanding of the different forms of bordering as part of the same sociopolitical reality.

SHIFTING THE GAZE: THE SCHENGEN VISA AS 'THE BORDER FROM THE OTHER SIDE'

The preceding two sections provided a critical framework by delving into the macro aspects of structural inequality in the Mediterranean mobility and shedding light on the working mechanisms and narrative of the EU border regime

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in Tunisia. This narrative is rooted in the rhetoric that stems from ‘irregular’ migration and promotes ‘regular’ mobility. In the subsequent sections, the article empirically investigates this rhetoric by examining the Schengen visa regime, foregrounding the perspectives of Tunisian youth and exploring the state of ‘regular’ mobility within the context of securitization.

Drawing on the Tunisian case, this article seeks to deconstruct the categorization of mobilities and people on the move inherent in the epistemology of migration studies (Dahinden 2016). In academic scholarship, public discourse and policy narratives, ‘irregular’ migration and ‘regular’ mobility are often framed as distinct and opposing categories, legitimized through legalistic framing. However, my research with university students and graduates reveals contradictions within these common assumptions. Drawing on prevailing legalistic and meritocratic frameworks, these profiles of youths are typically classified under categories such as ‘student mobility’, skilled migration or ‘brain drain’, but rarely imagined as immobilized youth. Conversely, irregularized migrants are often presumed to be uneducated or unskilled, implying they have not sufficiently ‘earned’ access to regular mobility channels to Europe. Yet, my research indicates that suspicion of *harga* – in this context, the potential overstaying of a visa or using it for unintended purposes – was prevalent in most interviews and constituted a central aspect of the visa application review process.

In fact, assessing ‘migration risk’ is central to the visa procedure and decision-making process, as previous ethnographic studies of the visa regime in Algeria, Morocco and the Maghreb region more broadly have shown (Souiah 2019; Infantino 2019; Scheel 2019). This underscores the importance of analysing *harga* and visa practices as interconnected phenomena, moving beyond the conventional dichotomy of ‘regular’ and ‘irregular’ migration – a division that often aligns with distinctions in target groups and social classes. The border regime approach, as conceptualized by Casas-Cortés et al. (2015), serves as a theoretical tool to deconstruct the boundaries within migration studies and the categorization of (im)mobilities. This framework facilitates a deeper understanding of various forms of (im)mobility as integral components of the same border regime, reflecting interconnected sociopolitical realities and practices.

In doing so, I will look beyond the dominant political epistemology of migration in Tunisia, which is often nation state and policy-centred, either in academia (Boubakri 2013; Cassarino 2014) or in policy reports (Saïb Musette 2016; ONM and INS 2020). Instead, following an ethnographic approach of ‘looking at the border from the other side’ (Khosravi 2019), I examined the bordering practices and tactics of the EU border regime in post-2011 Tunisia. I will adopt the autonomy of migration (AoM) approach by ‘looking at migratory movements and conflicts in terms that prioritize the subjective practices, the desires, the expectations, and the behaviours of migrants themselves’ (Mezzadra 2010: 1). Accordingly, I will be studying the Schengen visa regime from the perspective of applicants and their subjective experiences of (im)mobility and border struggles.

To conduct this ethnographic research, I drew on semi-structured interviews with eight Schengen visa applicants, offering them a space to share their experiences, perspectives and perceptions. The participants – men and women aged between 24 and 32 – came from diverse socio-professional backgrounds, including students, employees and freelancers, with slight variations in social stratification, and hailed from different regions of Tunisia, including the capital, the north-west, and the south-east. At the time of the interviews, they were applicants for the Austrian visa and the French visa at different stages

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3. These virtual spaces are a primary source of information and sharing of experiences and tips for applicants.

of the application process, some of them in the middle of the procedure, whereas others had either been rejected or had already been granted a visa and were residing in Europe. Due to the sensitivity of the topic and the reluctance of some applicants to share information that they felt might 'damage their chances of getting a visa', it was not possible to interview more applicants at that time. I complemented my research with an auto-ethnographic account (Khosravi 2010) of my own experience as a visa applicant, which allowed me to closely observe the everyday mechanisms of the visa regime. This approach has added descriptive depth to my analysis of the application process and its temporality as well as its effects. My research also benefited from an in-depth interview with Romdhane Ben Amor, the spokesperson for the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES) and head of its migration department. All the interviews were held in person in Tunis in April 2022, with one interview conducted in Vienna.

Finally, I also conducted digital ethnography and online observations in visa facilitation Facebook groups,³ such as Démarches Campus France Tunisie (Entraide) and TLScontact. VFS Global – Tunisie (Aide au visa) to identify the emerging dynamics and new practices of the visa regime. The findings derived from the various research methods revealed similar patterns, as I shall explain in the following analytical sections.

BORDERED SUBJECTS: RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS' TALES OF VISAS AND (IM)MOBILITY

My research participants, for whom I use pseudonyms here to protect their anonymity and privacy, have different stories and experiences with the visa. Some have successfully crossed; others have been denied or are in the middle of the process or awaiting a final decision on their application. Most of my interviewees have experienced the French visa process, except for Rami (25 years old), who has been through a year-and-a-half student visa process at the Austrian Embassy. As a result, he was forced to spend his first master's year remotely due to the long processing time and delays. Rami finally made it in his second year to Vienna, where I met him in March 2022. In the case of Anouar (31 years old), who is a political science graduate and a volunteer with a UN organization in his hometown, Zarzis, his visa application was rejected three times while he was getting ready to join his master's studies in Paris in 2020. A year later, despite having successfully completed his first year remotely, his application was rejected again for his second year. He eventually lost his enrolment due to the mandatory on-site attendance requirement.

Similarly, Omnia (27 years old), a Spanish philology graduate who works in a company in Tunis, was also denied her dream of a master's degree at the prestigious Sorbonne University due to visa rejection. Cheker (32 years old), a freelance translator and student at the Tunis Theatre School, was accepted into a renowned art school in France, but when he asked for a short-stay visa to attend the in-person audition, his application was rejected. Similarly, Marwen (28 years old), an IT engineer, was preparing to start a new job in Paris, but his visa application was unsuccessful. When I met them in April 2022, Cheker, Omnia and Marwen were in the process of submitting a new application. Regardless of their current situation or the visa decision, all of the participants expressed feelings of injustice, anxiety and humiliation during the application process (Figure 1).

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Figure 1: The border in everyday life: a photo I took during my fieldwork in Tunis of the morning waiting queue in front of TLScontact, the main private visa company operating for France, Germany and other EU destinations.

AN AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE SCHENGEN BORDER(S)

I started thinking about this research at the beginning of the 2021–22 academic year, while I was stuck in Tunisia waiting for my student visa to be approved, even though classes had already started in Vienna. Much of the critical literature on border regimes that I discuss in this research is based on my personal experiences during a reflective process to make sense of my liminality and sense of being ‘stuck’ (Hage 2009: 99). As a social anthropology student, I was able to explore this both academically and as a form of self-relief. This enabled me to examine the structural and political dimensions of my situation, rather than viewing it as an individual issue.

The first contact with the visa authorities is critical in setting the basis for the subsequent process. One of my interlocutors described the visa process as a ‘labyrinth of procedures’ because you never know what you will face. You cannot expect the questions, hidden requirements or rules, which are the result of a deliberate lack of transparency and rigidity aimed at immobilizing people. I later learnt that these bordering practices (Stierl 2017) and tactics were the central topic of our ‘game’ with the visa authorities. Despite having been accepted by a well-known university on a scholarship, having a valid rental contract in Vienna and health insurance, and having met all the requirements for my stay, I had to be hyper-vigilant about the hidden details I had learnt about. In light of previous experiences of successful or denied applicants, there is a sense of uncertainty, anxiety and fear surrounding this labyrinthine process.

Following the outsourcing of border control, most Global South students have to apply for an Austrian residence permit in their home region and await approval. Once approved by the central immigration authorities, applicants can apply for a Visa D and finally travel. In the best-case scenario, with no mistakes made during the process, this is based on five appointments and usually takes three to six months. The appointment time slot is fifteen minutes. Any delay of a few minutes can result in the appointment being rescheduled

for two weeks later, which would disrupt the entire scheduling process and thus delay the expected visa issuance date. Furthermore, documents that are stapled or printed on both sides are not acceptable and will also cause a delay. Therefore, as an applicant, you must be prepared for the worst. For instance, I printed multiple copies of the necessary and non-necessary documents, brought more cash than the requested amount for the apostilles just in case, took a taxi an hour ahead of the appointment to easily get to the visa application centre and avoid being late, and practised what I had to say in response to the expected questions in two languages. In short, I prepared for the visa application process and appointment as if I were taking a national exam. Looking back, the experience reminds me of video games where your ability to avoid unexpected obstacles and demons on your journey determines your success.

I remember it was a sunny day in early June; I was formally dressed and well prepared. The agent was welcoming but spoke to me behind the armed glass barrier with a microphone. I was asked to pass my documents through the tiny, automated window and wait. It was more of a surprise that I had the right documents the first time. I wanted to use the time to ask about the next steps, ensuring I was doing everything right and hopefully get the visa in time.

Then, the discussion became more informal because, unlike my research participants who applied to study in France through Campus France, I was not subjected to the formal, police-style interview they experienced. However, I did go through what Mezzadra and Neilson, in their distinction between inclusion and exclusion, call 'a continuous parametric modulation – that is, processes of filtering and selection that refer to multiple and shifting scales, assessments and evaluations' (2012: 68).

In my case, as in that of other students, we were implicitly and explicitly treated as suspects of *harga*; i.e. believed to be using the visa for purposes other than studying in Austria or intending to overstay in the Schengen Area. The formal procedure of checking documents and asking for further proofs and signed declarations, etc. took the form of various questions during the appointments and sudden questions by phone calls between appointments.

Following the informal interview on the first day, I was asked about my parents' jobs, the sources from which I had obtained the funds to cover my living expenses in Austria and my studies: 'You know that some people borrow money from their neighbours or family and then misuse the visa for other purposes, so you should be careful', the agent said. Neither my social science degree nor my parents' jobs – a social worker and a public-school teacher – seemed to convince him that I was a 'safe candidate' and not a 'fake student' (Infantino 2019: 159). The implicit risk, as I understood it, was that I might use the student visa as an alibi to work in Europe and improve the living conditions of my family. This was later confirmed by the nature of the questions and the documents required, such as proof of tuition fees and signed letters from my parents confirming their financial support for my studies. On my way out, I was reminded to be on time for the following two appointments, as if I needed a reminder.

BORDERING PRACTICES AND MOBILITY INEQUALITIES: BUREAUCRATIC 'WALLS' AND FINANCIAL BARRIERS

All of my interviewees found the required documents and visa fees to be sometimes incomprehensible and overall unreasonable and unfair. Because

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the visa system is based on institutionalized distrust (Scheel 2017), it classifies and filters applicants based on the required documents, primarily the financial proof of the applicant's socio-economic situation. This bureaucratic judgement assesses whether the applicant's financial resources and family background are sufficient to prove that he or she will return before the visa expires. Therefore, the applicants have to prove the 'migratory risk' wrong. This judging mechanism is extended to assess the applicant's travel intentions and mobility project.

Due to the privatization of visa services through agencies such as TLScontact and VFS Global, the visa application can cost up to the country's minimum wage of around TND 400 (120 euros). The Austrian student visa, for instance, costs around TND 1700 (525 euros), approximately four times the minimum wage. What is even more problematic for many applicants is that these fees are non-refundable in case of rejection. In my discussion with Moutaa El Waer, a Ph.D. candidate who had applied for the Schengen visa multiple times, he described the visa fees as a form of surplus extraction, questioning, 'how can a government agency with administrative and diplomatic functions like an embassy have a profit goal?'. Furthermore, this fee is just the tip of the iceberg of endless expenses, especially for student visas. These include transportation costs to Tunis, the official language test fee, certified translation of documents, and a blocked bank account to demonstrate the necessary financial resources for living in Europe (between 800 and 1000 euros per month). For example, two of my interviewees had already paid their tuition, rent deposit and first month's rent in France, yet their applications were rejected. It should be noted that, following the devaluation of the Tunisian dinar in recent years, these expenses have become even more difficult to afford due to the exchange rate, with TND 1 equalling 0.31 euros (based on the 2022 exchange rate). Some of my interlocutors' families had to take out loans or sell property to finance their children's studies abroad. Applicants were also asked to provide their parents' bank statements, social security details and proof of ownership. Many consider this to be irrelevant and illegitimate and a violation of their privacy. In his second-year application, while being asked about the source of his funds and his parents' financial situation during an embassy interview, Rami qualified the questions as 'trap' questions: 'they were literally looking for a reason to reject me', he said.

These bureaucratic walls and financial barriers do not only concern actual applicants. Based on my online observations and on-site interviews, these 'borders' also affect large categories of people who would not even dare to apply, either to avoid the complex procedure or because they are convinced that they have no chance of obtaining a visa due to their financial situation, unemployment or lack of social security. Marwen, for instance, described mobility as a class issue: 'To get a simple tourist visa, for example, without a well-paid, stable job, and social security, the chances are almost non-existent'.

In this sense, the visa regime is also a class instrument for reproducing local social inequalities by excluding wide classes of people from mobility access, which is, in fact, one of the structural incentives of 'irregular migration' (Elleuch et al. 2020: 34).

4. Campus France is a French agency in charge of promoting French higher education abroad and managing international student mobility. It also undertakes educational and cultural activities such as the promotion of La Francophonie.

BORDERING PRACTICE AND MOBILITY INEQUALITIES: POLICING INTERVIEW

Bigo and Guild's work (2005) on Schengen visa policies is crucial to situate the visa process as part of the EU border externalization strategies. They focused on the role of embassies in filtering applicants in their regions through interviews as a policing practice (Bigo and Guild 2005). One of the most important findings of this research is that this practice of 'policing at a distance' (Bigo and Guild 2005) – in the case of the French student visa – does not take place in the embassy or at TLScontact. It is the public higher education agency Campus France⁴ whose supposed role is exclusively educational and cultural. It has recently been transformed into a border management agency, as I will explain hereafter.

After securing the university acceptance, my interlocutors had to verify their degrees and transcripts at Campus France for a payable fee of TND 250 (approximately eighty euros, as of 2022) and eventually get an appointment for an interview. Unexpectedly, the questions that Anouar was asked had little to do with his chosen academic path. He mentioned that during this interview he felt as if he were 'in a transit zone, outside the country', policed at a distance. Apart from scattered questions related to his studies, the main focus was on 'why he had chosen France as a destination' and 'whether he intended to return to Tunisia upon completion of his degree'. The same recurring focus was reported by other students. Omnia, for instance, considered that the questions on her studies were 'very irrelevant and out of context'; however, she was asked in different manners about her choice of France as her destination, and future career plans after graduation. In the same context, Cheker described the interview as such:

It was a series of tiny cabins next to each other, and applicants were assigned numbers. After waiting for my turn, I entered with all my documents, originals, and copies, including degrees, transcripts, extra certificates, etc. The agent asked me questions without looking at me; she was listening and typing on a computer. The setting reminded me of a police station.

Following this procedure at Campus France, the applicants later received an undisclosed letter reporting the employee's assessment of their application and interview to attach it to their visa application dossier to TLScontact. According to my interlocutors' experiences, the visa application decision is highly determined by this written feedback since the rest of the steps at TLScontact are formal and without any further questions. This conclusion was also shared among other students active in the Facebook visa facilitation groups. The basis on which the applicant's evaluation is made and the fact that a higher education agency has morphed into a border management actor multiplies the already existing ambiguity of the visa process while intensifying the anxiety of future applicants. Moreover, the institutional contradiction between public French universities offering enrolment to students on the one hand and other state authorities immobilizing them on the other hand remains a source of collective anger and feelings of injustice among applicants who feel deprived of their rights and dreams.

According to statistics from the Office of Tunisians Abroad (OTE) for 2022, France remains the most popular destination for Tunisian students,

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accounting for 57.9 per cent of the total. Indeed, the colonial heritage of Tunisia's education system, which is still heavily influenced by the French language and system, and the postcolonial ties leave students with very few options.

BORDERING PRACTICES AND MOBILITY INEQUALITIES: WAITING, VISA REFUSAL AND STUCKNESS

In his book *La double absence: Des illusions de l'émigré aux souffrances de l'immigré*, Abdelmalek Sayad developed the concept of 'the double absence' (1999) to refer to the state of not belonging in both the country of origin and the destination. This condition arises from the individual's internal conflict, torn between the two worlds. Similarly, Khosravi (2021) highlighted the sense of disconnectedness and the suffering that waiting causes in contexts of (im) mobility. Describing his first-year experience of being a remote student waiting for a visa, Rami said:

You always feel detached from your own reality. You are sitting at a dinner table, with your mind and heart in another country. It's like having two lives. During the day, I'm a student in Austria, and after 5 p.m., I'm Batman, living another life. It was a haunting experience, and it stays in you.

Even though he made it to Vienna for his second master's year and was admitted to his desired Ph.D. programme, when I met him, Rami was still overwhelmed by memories of the 2020–21 academic year. What still haunted him was the belief that the delay in processing his application was intentional due to a lack of transparency and rigidity on the part of the embassy staff.

Although the legal issuance of an Austrian student visa at the time was not affected by the COVID-19 regulations, he emphasized that it was used as an alibi to reduce embassy services and disregard those cases considered 'non-urgent' like his, given the possibility of remote education. The role of street-level bureaucrats and their judgement in this case, as well as in the visa process in general, is crucial, as demonstrated by Scheel's (2017) ethnographical work. Similarly, as emphasized by Romdhane Ben Amor, the head of the FTDES Migration Department, these bordering practices aim to deter applicants, such as sometimes giving applicants delayed appointments after their needed travel purpose or keeping them in permanent waiting.

Upon starting my fieldwork in the spring of 2022, the French visa facilitation groups were full of standard rejection notice pictures (see Figure 2) posted by different categories of people for various travel purposes. This was a moment when the reduction of quota policy (mentioned earlier) started to become visible as new social classes and profiles became targets of rejection. Looking at this notification of refusal that one of my interlocutors received, the fourth and fifth reasons for refusal were the most recurrent ones among applicants. Reason four reads, 'there are sufficient elements and serious reasons to believe that you will stay in France for purposes other than those for which you are applying for a study visa'. While reason five indicates, '[t]he information provided to justify the conditions of stay are incomplete and/or not reliable'. These 'motifs' or reasons for refusal have always been a source of confusion and frustration for the applicants since they are standardized and

arbitrary while representing an institutionalized mistrust (Scheel 2017) and the symbolic violence of the visa regime.

My fieldwork was conducted in a politically charged moment during the French presidential election of April 2022 when discussions about Maghrebi immigration were particularly heated. As a result, many applicants ascribed a political meaning to the outcome of their visa application. In view of the visa regime ambiguity, they were unable to make sense of the denial. Some of them suggested that the current restrictions could be a temporary wave until the probable defeat of the far-right candidate Le Pen and the re-election of Macron; then conditions can 'go back to normal'. Whereas Omnia attributed

CONSULAT GÉNÉRAL DE FRANCE À TUNIS
Liberté
Égalité
Fraternité

Objet : Notification de refus de délivrance d'un visa de long séjour pour études

Références du dossier : N° : [REDACTED] Date : 22/10/2020
Nom : [REDACTED] Prénom : [REDACTED]
Références des textes : • article L. 211-2 du Code des relations entre le public et l'administration

Me référant aux textes précités, je vous informe que j'ai refusé de vous délivrer le visa sollicité au motif suivant :

- ☐ 1 Le document de voyage présenté est faux/falsifié
- ☐ 2 Vous n'avez pas fourni la preuve que vous disposez de ressources suffisantes pour couvrir vos frais de toute nature durant le séjour en France, ou vous n'êtes pas en mesure d'acquiescer légalement ces moyens
- ☐ 3 Vous n'avez pas justifié de votre admission dans un établissement d'enseignement supérieur ou dans un organisme de formation professionnelle pour y suivre un cycle d'études
- ☒ 4 Il existe des éléments suffisamment probants et des motifs sérieux permettant d'établir que vous séjournerez en France à d'autres fins que celles pour lesquelles vous demandez un visa pour études
- ☒ 5 Les informations communiquées pour justifier les conditions du séjour sont incomplètes et/ou ne sont pas fiables
- ☐ 6 Vous faites l'objet d'une mesure vous interdisant le retour sur le territoire français
- ☐ 7 Vous présentez un risque de menace pour l'ordre public / la sécurité publique / la santé publique

Remarque :

Vous pouvez contester la présente décision devant la Commission des Recours contre les décisions de Refus de Visa d'entrée en France, BP 83.609, 44036 Nantes CEDEX 1, dans un délai de deux mois à compter de sa notification.

Le chef du service des visas

P. [Signature]

Figure 2: An example of a rejection notice issued by the French Embassy in Tunisia.

her experience to shifting political dynamics, despite holding eight prior Schengen visas, Anouar framed immobility within larger structural inequalities. He considered that being from Zarzis put him at a disadvantage compared to other candidates due to the stigma associated with his hometown's connection to 'irregular migration'.

The detailed applications, full of personal information, stood in stark contrast to the standardized interviews and evaluations, which ultimately dismissed the efforts of both applicants and their families. It is the haunting experience of procedural limbo – marked by a lack of personalized feedback and no direct contact with authorities – that has led applicants to construct their own explanations, either to sustain hope or find closure. Although the applicant has the right to appeal the decision, only one of my interlocutors was aware of this and had attempted it. She explained that the process requires going through the court in Nantes, France and involves hiring and paying a lawyer there.

The mobility projects of my research participants were driven by hope and aspirations for the future. In addition to the impasse of the 'democratic transition' (Hmed 2016), youth mobility has become more socially valued, and in many cases, it is a family project. This context makes immobility even more unbearable for them. Long periods of waiting and uncertainty hinder them from planning their future and pursuing their life choices, as the feeling of being stuck and not going anywhere in life is a major source of anxiety and despair.

Omnia, a graduate student in Spanish philology and Marwen, an IT engineer, were both stuck when I met them in April 2022 after going through long paperwork and visa processes. Omnia was accepted to her dream master's degree at the prestigious Sorbonne University, and Marwen was getting ready to start a new job in an IT company in France. They were surprisingly rejected in the last step of the visa process; the interview for them was a sort of relief and an opportunity to reflect and share their feelings: 'we are still in a dominant and dominated duality, we're not independent yet', said Omnia.

Marwen reinforced this perspective, stating that:

We have a long history, but principally a colonial one, for them we are potentially a client in a market in which we're obliged to deal with this market, so we're not an equal partner with the EU. The colonial way of seeing is still persistent, it's a new costless way of colonialism in which there are no longer troops or settlers but free trade agreements and a common market that reproduces the condition of subordination. On the other hand, the European approach to mobility is to export to us your qualified youth but not your problems.

The applicant's encounter with the EU border regime was an incentive for politicization, shifting from the personal pronoun 'I' to a collective 'we'. Europe is no longer an abstract and sometimes idealized entity; rather, its violent borders recall the dichotomies of 'us and them', dominant and dominated, colonizer and colonized. These subjective narratives offer a counter-hegemonic approach to studying borders within broader and localized contexts.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I argued that it is academically and politically useful to shift the gaze from the Mediterranean 'border spectacle' (Genova 2013; Mazzara 2019)

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to look at the 'regular(ized)' mobilities governed by the Schengen visa regime as an invisible border. Contrary to the mainstream literature on migration in Tunisia, which frames 'irregular' and 'regular' mobilities as separate fields, I demonstrated that the border regime practices approach regular and irregular cross-border movements within a continuum of immobility. This perspective sees them as part of the same sociopolitical reality that contributes to the denaturalization of the border (Walters 2002).

In fact, if the dominant EU narrative of the dichotomy between 'good migration' and 'bad migration' is based on the rhetoric of immobilizing 'undesirables' in favour of promoting 'legal' channels of mobility, the bordering practices on the ground tell a very different reality. In fact, the hyper-visualization of the *harga* through media coverage, information campaigns and dominant discourses has shaped transnational mobility from the Maghreb to Europe as a security issue and a field of crisis, essentialising mobility in its irregular border crossing.

This conjuncture intensified the securitization of mobility and the criminalization of migration, stigmatizing 'youth on the move' as potential 'irregular' migrants or *harraga*. As a result, the circle of 'undesirables' was extended to include students and other categories that were supposed to enjoy certain mobility privileges. Resultantly, the centrality of the 'border spectacle' rendered the struggles and inequalities of 'regular' mobilities invisible. The political and epistemological shift of 'the other side' enabled the exploration of the multiple invisible borders of the Schengen visa regime, revealing the bordered subjects they produce.

Studying the border regime from the viewpoint of visa applicants also allows us to capture processes of individual politicization as some participants situated mobility inequalities in the persistent French colonial ways of seeing the Maghreb region. Seeing the border 'as an epistemological viewpoint [has allowed] an acute critical analysis of how relations of domination, dispossession, and exploitation are being redefined presently [as well as] the struggles that take shape around these changing relations' (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013: 18). This framework reveals multiple power relations embedded in the broader structures of colonial accumulation and extraction that are either ignored or neglected in conventional Mediterranean migration studies.

Indeed, the border and the common border struggles in the Maghreb region can be an entry point for rethinking this persistent domination and opening a debate on a common strategy to re-negotiate relations with Europe. However, the humiliating, endless queues in Tunis, Algiers and Rabat outside the visa offices of the Schengen member states, mainly those of the former colonizer, reveal the failures of the postcolonial state and the costs of the 'non-Maghreb' or the divided Maghreb.

Despite the failures of the separate negotiations with the European Union on political economy and migration, the current circumstances show no signs of improvement in the near future. In fact, with the rise of the anti-immigrant right in Italy and new immigration law projects in France and Germany, the situation may get worse. Regardless of the apparent political differences between these governments, the European Union's core strategy for transnational mobility between the two sides of the Mediterranean seems to agree on the further externalization and militarization of borders and the push to facilitate deportations. Furthermore, the new immigration laws in France and Germany promise, as a counterpart, to facilitate and encourage the 'skilled' or 'selective' immigration based on the needs of the

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French and German labour markets. To conclude, as far as the Maghreb region is concerned, there is not much new in these strategies; it would be a continuity of mobility inequalities and extractive relations of goods and human capital.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Ahmed Jemaa is a Ph.D. researcher at the Institute for Migration Research and Intercultural Studies (IMIS) at the University of Osnabrück, Germany. He is also affiliated with the Border Studies Research Group at the University of Sousse in Tunisia. He holds a BA in sociology from the University of Tunis and an MA in social anthropology from the Central European University in Vienna. His research focuses on mobility and migration in Tunisia and Morocco, with a particular emphasis on migrant disappearance and the dynamics of knowledge production on migration.

Contact: University of Osnabrück, Institute for Migration Studies and Intercultural Studies, Seminarstraße 19 a/b, 49074 Osnabrück, Germany.
E-mail: ajemaa@uni-osnabrueck.de

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-1385-3322>

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