

Shifting Tides: 120 Years of Migratory Flows between Italy and Tunisia

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ABSTRACT

Historically, Mediterranean Africa has been a natural destination for emigrant Italian workers. Between 1900 and 1914, Tunisia was the main destination for Italians emigrating to Africa. Many Sicilian workers, accompanied by their families, settled there, buying small plots of land and thereby changing their status from temporary immigrants to permanent residents. By the late 1920s, nearly 100,000 Italians were living in Tunisia. Between 1940 and 1965, however, first the French colonial authorities and then, after Tunisia became independent on 8 May 1956, the Tunisian government expelled those Italian immigrants. When land confiscation became effective in 1964, Italian settlers returned to Italy for good with the help of Italy's programme for refugees. In June 1965, Italy passed a law indemnifying them for 50 per cent of the value of the farms they had lost in Tunisia. Attempts to obtain compensation from the Tunisian government proved frustrating for Italian refugees, and in the end the Italian government struck a deal whereby Italy offered development aid and took Tunisian wine imports in exchange for compensation for land confiscation. The migratory tide turned rapidly thereafter. From the 1980s onwards, temporary immigrants from Tunisia became indispensable to the "greenhouse district" of south-eastern Sicily and to the building sector in Italy's northern regions. This paper will examine the economic motives and impacts of these migratory flows, and the respective governments' reaction to them. In the face of growing immigration from Tunisia, Italy has recently increased economic aid and investment in order to create jobs for young Tunisians at home and reduce the stream of migrants heading for Italy's coasts. In both the earlier departure of Italians for Tunisia and the more recent arrival of Tunisians in Italy, migration

has temporarily alleviated poverty and economic hardship for individuals. Realistically, however, it is not a politically viable long-run solution.

Between 1900 and 1914, Tunisia was the main destination country of Italian emigration to Africa. Compared with the previous decades, its importance had grown thanks to well-established “migration chains.” Many Sicilians settled in Tunisia with their families, bought a piece of land and turned from temporary migrants into permanent residents. Following Tunisian independence and land confiscation, Italian settlers returned to Italy or went to France by the end of the 1960s. The efforts to obtain compensation from the Tunisian government ended with Italy’s decision to ask for a lump sum payment of 8 billion lire for the expropriated agricultural assets, to be financed by a \$10 million Italian loan to Tunisia and by increasing Italian purchases of Tunisian wine.

The tide of migration turned quickly thereafter, and less than 20 years later Tunisian immigration to Italy began to soar. From the 1980s, temporary immigrants from Tunisia became indispensable to the greenhouse district of south-eastern Sicily but they also increasingly manned the building sector in the North of Italy.

This article will examine the economic motives and impacts of these migratory flows and the respective governments’ reaction to them. In the face of increasing immigration from Tunisia, Italy has recently increased economic aid and investment in order to create jobs for young Tunisians at home and curb the departure of migrants heading for Italy’s coasts.

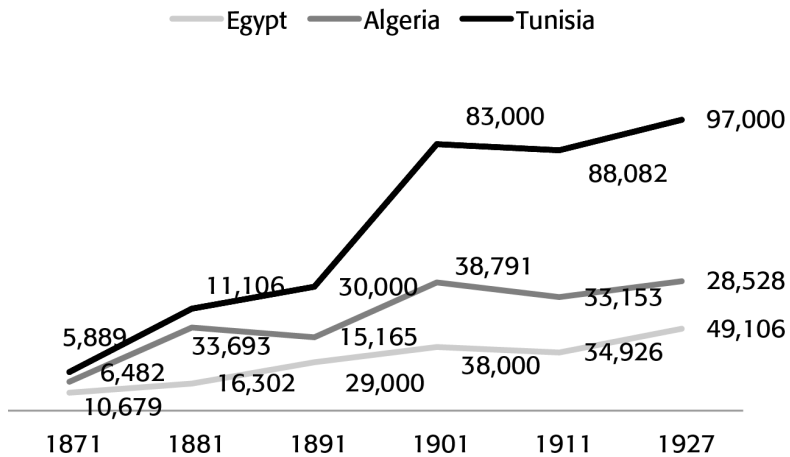
1. Italian emigration to Tunisia

Mediterranean Africa and Tunisia in particular have historically been a natural destination for Italian workers. Migratory chains developed thanks to geographical proximity, peaceful relations, trade and exchanges of knowledge (in the sixteenth and seventeenth cen-

turies Italian was the most commonly spoken foreign language in Tunisia).¹ Long before Italian unification, the Sardinian, Tuscan, Venetian and Sicilian consular offices operated in a similar manner to their French counterparts on the North African coast. The subsequent political changes (both in Italy, with political unification in 1861, and on the African coast) had little effect on the commercial, fishing and migratory routes that had historically linked many Italian communities to Tunisia.

In the 30 years preceding the First World War, total Italian emigration soared from 100,000 to 600,000 departures a year.² A small but significant share of these emigrants – between 1 and 3.5 per cent of the total in some years (1904) – went to Africa and the largest part settled in Tunisia.

FIGURE 1
The most numerous Italian communities in Africa, 1871-1927



Source: Author's calculations based on Ministry of Foreign Affairs data, *Censimento degli italiani all'estero*, 1871, 1881, 1891, 1901, 1911 and 1927.

¹ D. Occhipinti, *In Tunisia*, Rome, 1939, p. 11.

² See F. Fauri, *Storia economica delle migrazioni italiane*, Bologna, 2015.

Census data of Italians living abroad, which reflect both the size of the migratory flow and the natural increase of the Italian colony's population, confirm Tunisia's primacy among the main African destination countries – Tunisia, Egypt and Algeria (Figure 1). By the late 1920s, nearly 100,000 Italians were living in Tunisia, and they remained the largest foreign community there until the French surpassed them at the end of the 1930s.

Why did Italians move to Tunisia and which regions did they come from?

Most Italians going to Africa after 1900 came from Sicily and Sardinia, geographically closest to African and offering low transportation costs (for 5 lire, a migrant could travel from Palermo to Tunis in 6 hours on small sailing boats called *bilancelle*).³ Sicilians and Sardinians were drawn to Tunisia for several reasons. First of all, favourable legal provisions dating back to an 1868 agreement with the Bey of Tunis protected Italian immigrants, granting them immunity, freedom to engage in commercial and industrial activities, and extraterritoriality for their enterprises. The treaty was renegotiated in 1896 with nearly identical terms under French rule. Second, wage differentials were an important push factor. Italians moved to Tunisia because they were offered better paying jobs. In 1905, an agricultural day labourer in Sicily earned 1 franc per day, but if he moved to Tunisia as a temporary worker employed in agriculture or public works he could earn between 2 and 4 francs a day, while the Sardinians working in Tunisian mines, the highest-paid specialized category of workers, earned between 5 and 9 francs a day.⁴

³ In the case of North African destinations, proximity to the Sicilian coast allowed even the poorest Italians to leave. They often chose Africa instead of the Americas exactly for this reason. R. Faini and A. Venturini, "Italian Emigration in the Pre-War Period", in Timothy J. Hatton, Jeffrey G. Williamson, *Migration and the International Labour Market 1850-1939*, London, 1994. See also: E. Moretti, "Migration and Social Network Italy 1889-1913", in *International Migration Review*, no. 3, 1999, pp. 640-657.

⁴ F. Fauri, "L'emigrazione italiana nell'Africa mediterranea 1876-1914", in *Italia Contemporanea*, no. 27 (4), 2015, pp. 34-62. See also: D. Melfa, *Migrando a Sud: coloni italiani in Tunisia (1881-1939)*, Rome, 2008.

Third, Sicilians were also attracted to Tunisia by the prospect of becoming owners of the land that they originally worked as hired hands. (Sardinians, by contrast, rarely acquired land and were mainly temporary migrants). Many Sicilian landless labourers managed to become small landowners, taking advantage of the traditional contract of *enzel* (or *inzâl*) and of their capacity for hard work and saving.⁵

As time passed, the Italians formed a cohesive community impermeable to French influence. This had two consequences. One was that chain migration quickly developed and so did Italian institutions (specifically: 32 schools, an orphanage, two hospitals and several mutual aid societies).⁶ The second consequence was that the French governing the Protectorate increasingly feared a Sicilian invasion and, from the turn of the century and then more markedly in the interwar years, cancelled many of the privileges enjoyed by the Italians.⁷

⁵ Under such a contract, a Sicilian farmer could buy 5 to 10 hectares of land by paying rent for 16 years. M. Trombetta, *Lezioni di geografia economica e emigrazione*, Riposto, 1914, p. 66; R. Foerster, *The Italian Emigration of Our Times*, Cambridge, 1919, p. 216. See also: G. Loth, *Le peuplement italien en Tunisie et en Algérie*, Paris, 1905, pp.175-176, and F. Fauri, "Italians in Africa (1870s-1914) or How to Escape Poverty and Become a Landowner", in *The International History Review*, no. 37, 2015, pp. 324-341; Melfa, *Migrando a Sud: coloni italiani in Tunisia*, pp. 153-158.

⁶ When the Allied army arrived in Tunis in May 1943, all the Italian institutions were shut down, dispersing the wealth of experience and expertise they had developed and severing the local community's ties with its culture of origin. M. Pendola, *Gli italiani di Tunisia: Storia di una comunità. 19-20 Sec.*, Foligno, 2007, p. 72.

⁷ M.I. Choate, "Identity Politics and Political Perception in the European Settlement of Tunisia: the French Colony versus the Italian Colony", in *French Colonial History*, no. 8, 2007, pp. 101-2. See also A. Chaldeos, "The French colonial policy in Tunisia between 1920 and 1930 and its influence on the Greek community", in *The Journal of African Studies*, no. 21, 2016, pp. 379-391. On the Italian community in Tunisia, see S. Finzi, *Métiers et professions des Italiens en Tunisie Mestieri e professioni degli italiani in Tunisia*, Tunis, 2003, p. 65, and M. Brondino, *La stampa italiana in Tunisia. Storia e società 1883-1956*, Milan, 1998.

2. Unwelcome residents: Italians in Tunisia during and after the Second World War

Between 1940 and 1965, France and then, from 8 May 1956, an independent Tunisian government rid Tunisia of the Italian immigrants. The number of Italians in Tunisia fell from 84,000 to 66,000 under French rule and then to virtually nil.⁸ During the war, France confiscated all Italian assets in Tunisia (as enemy assets),⁹ repealed the Establishment Conventions of 1896, which had allowed Italian citizens to reside and work in the Protectorate, and enacted a law under which Italians born in Tunisia after 10 May 1940 of Italian parents of whom at least one had been born in Tunisia automatically received French citizenship.¹⁰ The French government also launched a propaganda campaign encouraging Italians to sell their vineyards (which they eventually did).¹¹ The Paris Peace Treaty in 1947 dealt a further blow to the Italian community because under Article 79 the victorious powers had the right “to seize, retain, liquidate or take any other action with respect to all property, rights and interests which ... belong to Italy or to Italian nationals” on their national territory and in colonial dependencies, as payment for war damages.¹² It would eventually be up to Italy to compensate its citizens. The ac-

⁸ A. Morone, “Fratture post-coloniali. L’indipendenza della Tunisia e il declino della comunità di origine italiana”, in *Contemporanea*, no. 1, 2015, pp. 41-2.

⁹ Assets such as schools and hospitals were confiscated without compensation. Requisitions reached absurd levels: “In addition to land and buildings, furniture, dishware and bed linen were also targets.” M. Tomasetti, “Gli italiani in Tunisia: dal 1944 agli anni sessanta” in R.H. Rainero, *L’Italia e in Nordafrica contemporaneo*, Milan, 1988, p. 237.

¹⁰ According to Anna Baldinetti, the push towards naturalisation by the French “dominant minority” represented “a limitation of the legal pluralism that all religious minorities and different European communities had enjoyed until then, with repercussions also in the post-colonial era”. A. Baldinetti, “Cittadinanza e comunità italiana nella Tunisia coloniale”, in F. Cresti (ed.), *Minoranze, pluralismo, stato nell’Africa mediterranea e nel Sahel*, Rome, 2015, pp. 63-82. See also: Finzi, *Métiers et professions des Italiens en Tunisie*, p. 68.

¹¹ Archivio Storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri (ASMAE) DGAP Ufficio III 1948-1960 Busta 129 31 marzo 1958, “Questione beni sequestrati dai francesi in Tunisia”. See also Tomasetti, “Gli italiani in Tunisia dal 1944 agli anni sessanta”, p. 241.

¹² <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/us-treaties/bevans/m-ust000004-0311.pdf>.

quisition of Italian assets by the French authorities extended beyond the assets of individuals and included the requisition of movable and immovable assets of the institutions that had been the pillars of the Italian community. All Italian schools were closed down, as were the Italian Chamber of Commerce, the Dante Alighieri Institute, the Garibaldi Hospital, the Garibaldi Asylum, the Arts Club, the Workers' Hall and the Principe di Napoli Orphanage.¹³ With the closure of the Italian schools, Italian youths had to attend French schools, producing a generation with "a Franco-Italian identity" for whom the use of the Italian language was often limited to the private sphere of family members. Between 1946 and 1956, almost 14,000 foreign residents in Tunisia opted to become French citizens; the majority were probably of Italian origins, but the data do not specify nationality.¹⁴ When Tunisia gained independence in 1956, the new government pursued a policy of removal of foreigners and expropriation of their assets in the name of decolonisation. Italians started to leave the country. The crescendo of decolonisation climaxed on 12 May 1964, when the Tunisian government proceeded to nationalise foreigners' land, including the attendant buildings and farm machinery and equipment.¹⁵

Land confiscation dealt a severe blow to the Italian community in Tunisia, which generally owned small plots of land purchased with the savings accumulated in years of sacrifice. After the Second World War, Italian properties covered a total of 70,120 hectares (an eleventh of the French-owned hectarage) and belonged to 2,380 owners, for an average property size of 29 hectares.¹⁶ By 1964 many Italian settlers had already decided to leave, but about a thousand remaining Italian smallholders were suddenly stripped of all their

¹³ Morone, "Fratture post-coloniali", p. 43.

¹⁴ G. Gianturco, C. Zaccai, *Italiani in Tunisia*, Milan, 2004, pp. 48-49.

¹⁵ The new law stated: "*A compter de la promulgation de la présente loi, la propriété des terres a vocation agricole ne peut appartenir qu'à des personnes physiques de nationalité tunisienne*". On this matter, see also: M. Elloumi, "Les terres domaniales en Tunisie. Histoire d'une appropriation par les pouvoirs publics", in *Etudes Rurales*, no. 192, 2013, pp. 43-60.

¹⁶ P. Sebag, *La Tunisie essai de monographie*, Paris, 1951, pp. 42-48.

possessions. Ousted from their homes and business, many moved to the main cities with their families to be close to an Italian consulate in the hope of finding protection and assistance in repatriation. The alternative to nationalisation was to opt for Tunisian citizenship. Very few Italians chose this course – no precise data are available, only episodic evidence – and those who did were all motivated by the desire to save their properties and jobs.¹⁷ The rate of repatriation rose from 1000/1500 individuals per year in the immediate post-war period to 6000/6500 per year by the first half of the 1960s, leaving very few Italians in Tunisia at the end of the decade.¹⁸

3. The Italian government's repatriation effort: refugee camps and plots of Sardinian land

In 1960, the Italian government launched “a repatriation operation for underprivileged Italians in Tunisia.”¹⁹ The programme granted Italian nationals repatriated from Tunisia the same provisions offered to refugees, including free accommodation – at first often in refugee camps – and a daily allowance based on household size.²⁰

A second viable option emerged when the prospect of land nationalisation advanced. The Tunisian government had voiced its intention to nationalise the lands owned by foreigners ever since the

¹⁷ M. Tomasetti, “Gli italiani in Tunisia: dal 1944 agli anni sessanta”.

¹⁸ F. Fauri, D. Strangio, “The economic bases of migration from Italy: the distinct cases of Tunisia and Libya (1880s-1960s)” in *The Journal North African Studies*, no. 25, 2020, pp. 447-471.

¹⁹ “A total of 2000 underprivileged Italian families live in Tunis thanks to consular subsidies and the support of the Italian Assistance Society and of Catholic organisations. We are talking about 15 thousand people, real remnants of the Western shipwreck in Africa... they certainly represent a drain for the local community; those who remain here will certainly indigenise and Islamise due to the abandonment.” ASMAE, DGAP Busta 131 Ambasciata d'Italia a Tunisi telespresso a MAE 13 novembre 1958 Situazione collettività e “operazione rimpatrio italiani indigenti” da A.M. Mazio.

²⁰ M. Valenzi “In difesa degli italiani di Tunisia. Discorso pronunciato nella seduta del 13 luglio 1969”, Rome, 1969.

first independence agreements with France in 1955. Consequently, many Italians tried to sell their properties as early as the second half of the 1950s. This proved impossible, however, as the Tunisian authorities prohibited the indigenous population from purchasing those properties. Furthermore, a specific measure of the Tunisian government capped the amount of money that an individual could transfer abroad when leaving the country at only 40 dinars (just over 40,000 lire).

Thus, in 1960 a Sardinian public entity called ETFAS (*Ente per la Trasformazione Agraria e Fondiaria in Sardegna*), responsible for land reclamation and agricultural improvement for some 100,000 hectares of land on the island, entered the picture. ETFAS proposed to assign plots of public land in Sardinia to Italians who had been employed in or owned agricultural businesses in Tunisia. ETFAS worked in collaboration with the Italian consulate in Tunis and many Italians decided to apply, obtaining their first allotments starting in 1961. The properties, which could not exceed 30 hectares, were granted under a redemption arrangement: allotment gave the right to immediate possession of the property without a direct payment of money, but obliged the farmer to pay a 30-year lease to cover the cost of the farm house and land. From 1961 to 1965, ETFAS estimated “the number of Italian/Tunisian immigrants arriving from those – now – inhospitable lands at 650 people... working on an area of 1800 hectares. ... The Italian refugees from Tunisia who have reached Sardinia are for the most part originally from Sicily and apparently intended to devote themselves to winegrowing and to the cultivation of an orchard (citrus grove).”²¹

Finally, with Law 718 of 5 June 1965, Italy undertook to pay 50 per cent of the value of the land owned (and lost) in Tunisia to Italian settlers whose farms had been expropriated. In the same period, the Tunisian government apparently opened to the possibility of applying for compensation.

²¹ A Terrosu Asole, “L’immigrazione nella Sardegna di agricoltori italiani profughi dalla Tunisia”, in *Bollettino della società geografica italiana*, no. 9-10, 1965, pp. 461-4.

4. The “realpolitik” of the 1960s: tied aid and wine purchases as land confiscation compensation

Realpolitik, a prominent feature of the new Italo-Tunisian relations, developed in the 1960s with the signing of trade and industrial cooperation agreements (1961 and 1962) and the finalising of Tunisian compensation (financed by Italy) to the Italian settlers who had been expropriated (1967). These developments will be briefly analysed below.

President Habib Bourguiba was very active in organising international meetings to promote his country’s development.²² Within a year (November 1961), Tunisia signed an economic and technical cooperation agreement with Italy, to be fleshed out in the following months. One of Tunisia’s key requests concerned technical assistance from Italy (see below). Another concerned the realisation by Italian firms of a number of projects, including the construction of six dams already designed by Italconsult, for a total cost of 2.93 billion lire, the construction of a catering school with an adjoining hotel, the supply of materials for agriculture and industry and the construction of sixty repair shops for agricultural machinery for an estimated cost of about 900 million lire. The Italians suggested that this Tunisian proposal should be negotiated simultaneously with the execution of FIAT’s pending tractor assembly line project.²³

As to the negotiations on compensation for the expropriated Italian farms, in October 1966, the value of the lost Italian assets was estimated at 30 billion Italian lire, whereupon the Italian minister,

²² From 4 to 6 November Tunisia hosted a conference of African and Middle Eastern central bankers. At the inauguration, Bourguiba illustrated what had been done to retrieve the sources of wealth from foreign control, organise an autonomous monetary system, create adequate monetary reserves and, finally, give a national outlook to the country’s economy. Archivio Storico della Banca d’Italia (ASBI), BI, Studi, Pratiche, n. 366, fsc. 5 p. 2.

²³ In the words of the Italian diplomatic representative: “This could consolidate Fiat’s position here also in the motor vehicle sector”. ASBI BI, Studi, Pratiche, n. 366, fasc. 5 Pagina 17-19. ASMAE DGAE Ufficio VIII Telespresso n. 48/04613 Oggetto: Commissione Mista italo-tunisina Roma 18 febbraio 1962.

Mario Mondello, proposed to Tunisia a lump-sum settlement of 10 billion lire. Tunisia was expected to pay only half of this amount and to grant a maximum of 10 million lire to each person entitled to reimbursement. "Clearly the agreement with Tunisia is strictly connected and determined by the counterparts that can be offered by Italy and among these the concession of wine quotas to cover, according to the incessant requests by the Tunisian delegation, the value of the expropriated assets."²⁴ Tunisia linked compensation to the amount of wine purchased (the more wine Italy imported, the more compensation Tunisia would pay). "For the solution of the compensation problem, the Tunisians requested a loan, for an amount to be specified and for a period of 25 years, including a grace period of 5 years, at a 3% per annum interest rate. 60% of this loan was to be used for payment of Italian goods imported into Tunisia, 20% made available to the Central Bank of Tunisia, and only the remaining 20% was to be used to cover part of the agreed compensation."²⁵

On 27 January 1967, the Italian government finally decided to formalise a request for 12 billion lire, "reducible to a minimum of 8 billion," as lump sum compensation for the expropriated agricultural assets. In exchange, the Foreign Ministry offered the Tunisian government a loan of 10 million dollars²⁶ and a quota of 100,000 hectolitres of Tunisian wine for export to Italy, which could be subsequently increased to a maximum of 130,000 hectolitres. The money paid by Italian importers of Tunisian wine was to be deposited in a special account in lire held at the Bank of Italy in the name of the Central Bank of Tunisia. The funds in this account were only to be used by

²⁴ ASBIT, Studi Pratiche, n. 791, fasc. 1. sottofasc. 5 p. 3-4.

²⁵ ASBIT, Studi Pratiche, n. 791, fasc. 1. sottofasc. 7 p. 9

²⁶ The loan was signed on 4 August 1967, finally granting Tunisia a credit line of 10 billion lire. On the basis of this agreement, the Italian-Tunisian commission established that Tunisia could import Italian goods up to a value of 4 billion lire (out of the 10 billion lire granted). Of this amount, about 3.25 billion could be used for the purchase of capital goods, while the remaining 750 million could go to the purchase of steel products (ASBIT, Studi Pratiche, no. 791, fasc. 2, sfasc. 1 p. 2 Commissione Mista Italo-Tunisina Tunisi 11-19 dicembre 1967).

the Treasury to make compensation payments.²⁷ In the words of Nullo Pasotti, “The compensation of the farmers thus became an exclusively Italian problem, moreover in return for the development aid promised by Rome.”²⁸ However, reimbursement proved a long and complex operation, becoming the “central issue for the two refugee associations founded at this critical juncture.”²⁹

The Italian government’s attitude towards Tunisia, determined by the goal of establishing good political, diplomatic and economic relations with the new independent state, was not fully understood by those Italians who had been forced to leave the country after losing everything they owned there. As Patrizia Audenino observes, the African-Italians “were reinforced in their belief that their country had forsaken its duty to protect their interests in order to pursue a new policy of good relations with their neighbours on the other side of the Mediterranean; they consequently felt betrayed by their motherland, which had turned into a wicked stepmother.”³⁰

5. From the land of migrants to the land of immigrants

Soon after the last wave of post-war Italian emigration came to an end in the 1970s, Italy began to turn into a land of immigration.³¹ Geographical proximity and ancestral Mediterranean ties made Italy a privileged destination for Tunisian migratory flows. The first destination of Tunisians in Italy was the Sicilian coast, where growing numbers of Tunisians were engaged in fishing and agriculture.³² By the 1980s, temporary immigrants from Tunisia had become indispensable, for instance, to the greenhouse district of south-eastern

²⁷ ASBIT, studi, pratiche n. 791, fasc. 2, sottofasc. 20 pp. 6-7.

²⁸ N. Pasotti, *Italiani e Italia in Tunisia dalle origini al 1970*, Rome, 1970, p. 177.

²⁹ M. Tomasetti, “Gli italiani in Tunisia: dal 1944 agli anni sessanta”, pp. 244-5.

³⁰ P. Audenino, “Memorie ferite: esuli e rimpatriati nell’Italia repubblicana”, in *Meridiana Rivista di Storia e Scienze Sociali, Profughi*, no. 86, 2016, p. 87.

³¹ Fauri, *Storia economica delle migrazioni italiane*, cit.

³² Ministero del Lavoro e delle politiche sociali, *La Comunità Tunisina in Italia*, 2014 http://www.integrazionemigranti.gov.it/Attualita/Approfondimenti/Documents/rapporti_comunita_2014/Tunisia.pdf#search=Tunisia.

Sicily.³³ Thanks to geographical proximity and the absence of Italian entry rules for foreign workers, it was relatively easy for Tunisians to travel to Italy and work in the formal and informal labour markets, especially in agriculture. Given that Tunisians did not need a visa to enter Italy until 1986, circular migration dominated. Typically, migrants went to Italy for several months to earn money and then travelled home to live with their families for the rest of the year.³⁴ As Italian immigration controls tightened, illegal immigration increased, but benefited from recurrent amnesties (1986, 1990 and 1995) that granted legal status to several thousand Tunisians (and other non-EU nationals as well).³⁵

Over the years, as flows have increased, the characteristics of Tunisian migration to Italy have changed. Destinations in Italy have altered, with increasingly large Tunisian communities in the North of Italy: approximately 6 out of 10 Tunisian citizens in Italy reside in the North, of whom 2 in Emilia-Romagna and another 2 in Lombardy.³⁶ Other changes relate to the main employment sectors: industry, including construction, has become predominant, employing 36 per cent of the Tunisian immigrant population. However, today's snapshot of the Tunisian community still shows traces of the community's history, featuring a large Tunisian presence precisely in those activities (agriculture and fishing still employ 22 per cent of the Tunisian community's workers) and territories (Sicily) that characterised the first arrivals.³⁷

³³ J.E. Cole, "In pursuit of 'green gold': immigration and the fortunes of a Sicilian greenhouse district", in *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, no. 12, 4, 2007, pp. 387-396.

³⁴ K. Natter, "Revolution and Political Transition in Tunisia: A Migration Game Changer?" May 28, 2015; <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/revolution-and-political-transition-tunisia-migration-game-changer>.

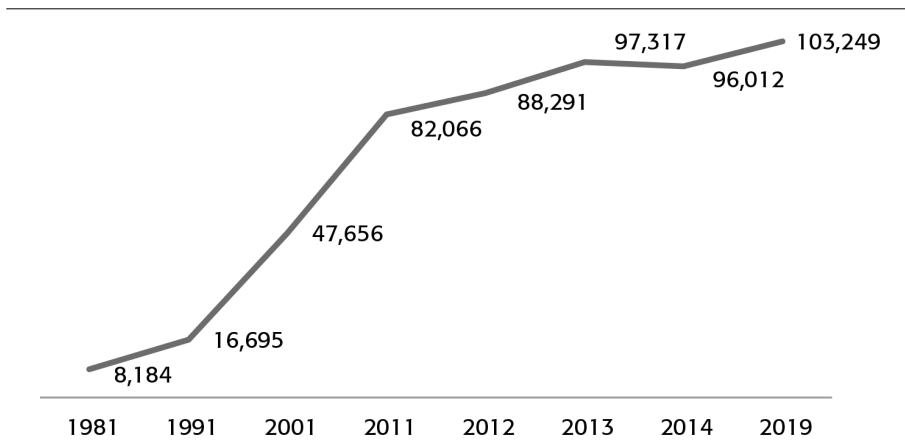
³⁵ Law 39/1990 (the "Martelli Decree") and the "Turco-Napolitano Law" of 1998 provided for the regularisation of irregular immigrants and also clarified the position of self-employed immigrants. Legal status was thus extended to independent workers or relatives who had arrived spontaneously (and illegally) to join their families in Italy.

³⁶ *The Tunisian Community in Italy*, 2019, http://www.integrazionemigranti.gov.it/Aretematiche/PaesiComunitari-e-associazioniMigranti/Documents/Rapporti%20Comunit%C3%A0%202019/Sintesi%20tradotte%202019/2019_ES_Tunisia_EN.pdf.

³⁷ Istat online.

As shown in Figure 2, Tunisian residents in Italy rose from 8,184 in 1981 to 103,249 in 2019. The Tunisian community is one of the most stable foreign communities (with a high proportion of minors, families and long-term residence permits), partly owing to its long track record of migration to Italy. Tunisians now constitute the sixteenth largest foreign community in Italy; among African countries, only Morocco, Egypt, Nigeria and Senegal have more nationals in Italy.

FIGURE 2
Tunisian residents in Italy



Source: Author's calculations based on ISTAT data, *Censimenti*.

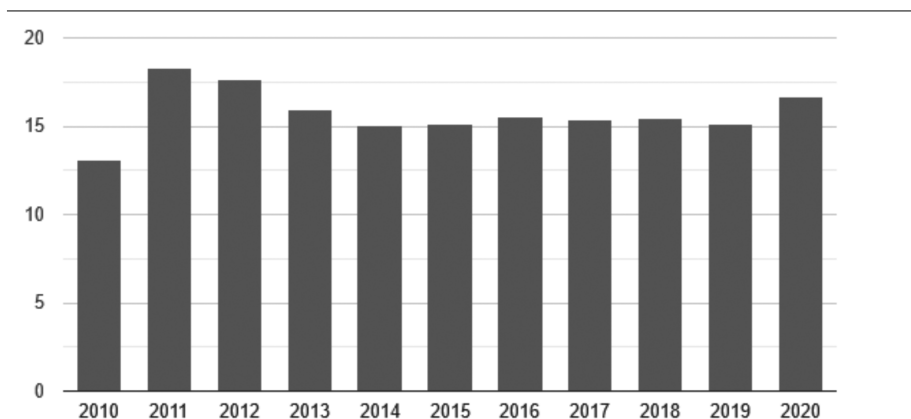
As Sicilians did a century ago when they left for Tunisia in small sailing boats, most Tunisians arriving today disembark on the Sicilians coast after crossing the Mediterranean on small makeshift boats. The main difference regards the legal sphere: Italians were allowed to come to work in Tunisia, whereas most Tunisians arrive as illegal immigrants today.

Despite the resignation of President Ben Ali in January 2011 following popular protests over high unemployment, corruption and widespread poverty and the election of a Constituent Assembly and then a new government, Tunisia's unfortunate economic situation has been pushing an increasing number of so-called economic migrants

to cross to Italy. Migration is one of the top issues addressed by the newly appointed government and fits with the national priorities. A new migration department has been established in the Tunisian Ministry of Social Affairs through the creation of the position of Secretary of State for Immigration and Tunisians Abroad. This department (State Secretariat) aims at gradually bringing under its supervision all of the units from other ministries (Interior, Employment, Justice, Foreign Affairs, etc.) that have worked on migration issues.

The most important push factor for Tunisian emigration is the country's fragile socioeconomic situation, with stubbornly high unemployment since 2014 (Figure 3). Unemployment especially affects young people, including a growing percentage of university graduates, whose numbers have surged in the last two decades. Regional growth and employment disparities between inland and coastal areas and the consequent domestic migratory flows help to stoke unrest among the young population. A permanent source of tension is the gap between strong migratory pressure and limited legal channels for migration, which is pushing many young Tunisians to reach Europe illegally.

FIGURE 3
Unemployment rates in Tunisia, 2010-2020 (per cent)



Source: The World Bank, 2020.

According to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), Tunisia has also rapidly become a transit country for migrants mainly from the Maghreb, Libya and Sub-Saharan Africa attempting to reach Europe on clandestine vessels departing from the Tunisian coast.³⁸

The goals of Tunisia's 2016-2020 development plan include improving the population's living standards and reducing regional disparities. One of its cornerstones is the creation of a green economy. During the recent "Tunisia 2020" international investment conference, partner states and donors formulated programmes and commitments amounting to 34 billion dinars. The European Union will contribute through the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI), the main EU financial instrument for bilateral cooperation with Tunisia. EU assistance to Tunisia has grown substantially since 2011. The EU increased its annual financial assistance in the form of grants from €186.5 million to €300 million in 2017 and committed "to maintaining a sustained level of funding for the period up to 2020."³⁹ For the period 2017-2020, the EU's bilateral assistance to Tunisia focused on three priority sectors: promoting good governance and the rule of law, stimulating sustainable economic growth generating employment, and reinforcing social cohesion between generations and regions.⁴⁰ Clearly, financing Tunisia's development is meant to curb the immigration pressure. In the words of Minister Luciana Lamorgese: "In 2020 we have already registered 13,931 illegal immigrants from Tunisia compared to 3,560 over the same period in 2019.

³⁸ IOM on line <https://www.iom.int/countries/tunisia>.

³⁹ Programmation de l'Instrument européen de voisinage (IEV)(2014-2020) Cadre unique d'appui UE-Tunisie (2017-2020) https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/ssf-tunisia-c_2017_5637_1_annex_fr_v1_p1_944238.pdf.

⁴⁰ Tunisia has also been the Southern Neighbourhood's main beneficiary of the "more for more" incentive mechanism (so-called "Umbrella" funds) initiated by the revised European Neighbourhood Policy, which rewards progress made in terms of reforms. In 2014 Tunisia was the first recipient of Umbrella funds with an amount of €50 million and has received yearly contributions ever since (€99.8 million in 2018). European Neighbourhood Policy And Enlargement Negotiations https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/neighbourhood/countries/tunisia_en.

An increase of 391% fuelled by the economic crisis that hit Tunisia after the explosion of the [pandemic] health emergency...Tunisians have been by far the most numerous in landings so far.”⁴¹

Finally, the launching in 2016 of the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS) has strengthened the operational tool-kit. In November 2016, at the aforementioned “Tunisia 2020” conference, Italy committed €365.5 million for the implementation of the policies and programmes envisaged by the new 2016-2020 development plan, some 40 per cent more than the resources allocated to Tunisia in the previous three years.

It should also be underlined that Tunisia recently became the top-ranking beneficiary of Italy’s development cooperation (Table 1).

TABLE 1
Italian foreign aid and its main beneficiaries, 2013-2018 (millions of euros)

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	TOTAL 2013- 2018	TOTAL 1967- 2018
Tunisia	15.77	17.96	29.31	22.32	48.81	27.61	161.78	1,751
Mozambique	20.7	21.82	21.38	7.25	23.68	33.59	128.42	3,856
Niger	1.73	3.17	2.91	1.72	83.62	23.33	116.48	528
Libya	1.69	0.67	1.86	6.53	63.76	25.61	100.12	564
Ethiopia	-16.9	9.8	20.4	20.67	22.18	40.09	96.24	4,028
Democratic Republic of the Congo	6.92	7.79	9.17	13.56	11.8	15.94	65.18	2,008
Kenya	3.91	6.9	12.31	7.2	14.57	15.21	60.1	698
Egypt	3.6	8	14.45	5.01	9.99	8.05	49.1	4,044
Madagascar	3.08	4.18	3.68	4.18	3.53	4.27	22.92	529
Cameroon	2.55	2.85	2.78	4.22	3.74	4.35	20.49	554

Source: Author’s calculations based on ISTAT data.

Last but not least, Italy is Tunisia’s second most important trading partner. Bilateral trade amounted to €5.6 billion in 2017. Italy is Tunisia’s second largest customer and supplier, with a market share

⁴¹ M. Ludovico, “Migranti, sbarchi dalla Tunisia: +400%. Lamorgese: ‘Risposta unitaria dall’Ue’”, in *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 27 November 2020.

of 15.5 per cent. The Italian economic presence in Tunisia is solid and dynamic, with over 850 companies operating in the country. These companies (some of them Tunisian-Italian partnerships, others 100 per cent Italian owned) employ over 63,000 people and account for almost a third of foreign companies' affiliates in Tunisia.⁴²

On 17 July 2020, a high-level joint Italian-EU delegation met with Tunisian President Kais Saied to discuss the question of increased illegal migration from Tunisia to Italy. Saied reaffirmed his view that "security solutions alone are not enough to eradicate illegal migration" and stressed the need to adopt a comprehensive and consensus-based approach that aims at fighting poverty and unemployment through development efforts in home countries and encouraging legal migration. Luigi Di Maio, the Italian foreign minister, agreed to help Tunisia create more jobs and develop youth programmes. But he pointedly remarked that "migrants arriving illegally will not be allowed to stay in Italy."⁴³ Italian statistics show that a total of 21,618 migrants arrived in Italy by sea between 1 August 2019 and 31 July 2020, an increase of 148.7 per cent from 8,691 during the preceding twelve months. In the end, the EU granted Tunisia €10 million to curb illegal migration. In exchange, Italians were given some assurances about the Tunisian authorities' active cooperation in stemming the flow of illegal migration and repatriating Tunisian nationals who are already in Italy. However, despite increasing repatriations from Italy (mostly by plane) and more generous development aid, Aberrahmane Hedhili, president of the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights, pointed out that

⁴² D. Letizia, "La realtà economica della Tunisia e la collaborazione con l'Italia", <https://www.startmag.it/mondo/la-realta-economica-della-tunisia-e-la-collaborazione-con-italia/>.

⁴³ The delegation included Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio and Interior Minister Luciana Lamorgese as well as European Home Affairs Commissioner Ylva Johansson and European Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy Commissioner Oliver Varhelyi. See "Italy, EU vow economic support to Tunisia to curb illegal migration", in *The Arab weekly* <https://theArabweekly.com/italy-eu-vow-economic-support-tunisia-curb-illegal-migration>.

even after their arrest and repatriation, illegal migrants are likely to try their luck again.⁴⁴

Concluding remarks

Italy and Tunisia have been linked by well-established trade, fishing and migration routes across the Mediterranean since ancient times. Even before Italy's political unification, a substantial number of Italians, mainly Sicilians and Sardinians, had settled temporarily or permanently in Tunisia, their movement there facilitated by geographical proximity and by the development of peaceful and mutually beneficial contacts. Subsequent political changes, both in Italy following unification in 1861 and along the North African coast with the establishment of the French protectorate in Tunisia, only marginally influenced these settlers. As time passed, however, Italians became unwelcome in Tunisia. First they were persecuted by the French authorities, who abolished many of their privileges in the hope of inducing them to become French citizens. Not many Italians opted to change their status, and so measures were enacted to restrict immigration in view of the need "to reinforce French colonial policy and strengthen French military establishments in Tunisia ... against Tunisia becoming overpopulated with Italians."⁴⁵ The new independent government of Tunisia, established in 1954, passed legislation that drove out the last Italian settlers, first by limiting their job opportunities and then by confiscating their land and properties. After the "economic miracle" of the 1950s and '60s, Italy became a land of immigration, and the Tunisian presence in Italy started to grow as that country's socioeconomic situation worsened. The effort to build bilateral trade, initially aimed at helping to solve the problem of compensation for confiscated land and property, intensified throughout the years and commercial relations thrived, Italy is be-

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ "Colony's Head Urges Tunisia Ban Italians", in *The Washington Post*, 12 December 1938, p. 1.

coming Tunisia's second largest supplier of imported goods. But Tunisia's acute economic problems and high unemployment have fuelled growing illegal Tunisian migration to Italy, putting development aid at risk.⁴⁶ Unsurprisingly, the Italian government and the European Union have linked increasing aid to the implementation of effective development/job-creation policies, with a view to curbing this flow. However, it seems highly unlikely that Tunisia's weak job market and economic growth will improve in the short term; migration from Tunisia to Italy is therefore unlikely to cease. The historical record clearly shows that migratory flows can be stopped, but only through strict legislation and controls; the confiscation of immigrants' assets, a measure taken in the past, is, of course, impracticable today. The emigration of Italians to Tunisia and of Tunisians to Italy temporarily improved their living standards. In the long run, however, such migration surely is not a politically viable solution. On the other hand, pure containment measures do not offer a stable remedy because they do not tackle the phenomenon at its roots. Finally, in the two historical periods considered in this paper, the "unequal relations" (albeit in different forms) between Italy, a developed country – though still relatively poor during the first period – and Tunisia, an informal colony and then, from 1956, an independent but economically underdeveloped country, grew stronger. This is evidenced by the increasing involvement of Italian capital and firms in Tunisia since the 1960s and the current flow of Italian foreign trade and development assistance, the latter aimed at fighting poverty, reducing unemployment and eradicating illegal emigration.

⁴⁶ On 31 July 2020, Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio asked the Joint Committee for Development Cooperation to postpone discussions on the allocations of funds to Tunisia until Tunisia found a way of stopping the uncontrolled flow of migrants from Tunisia.

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