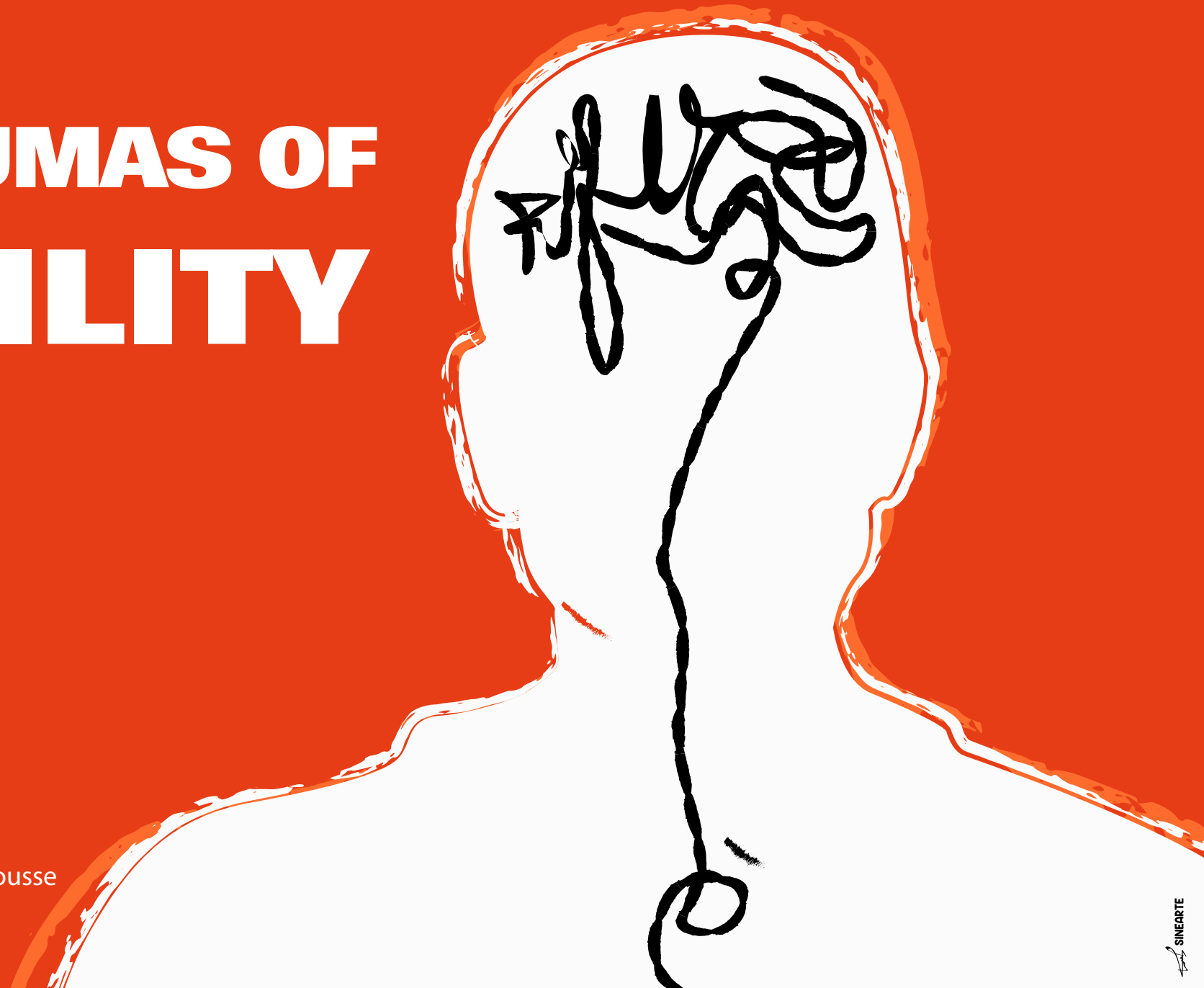


# VISA POLICIES AND THE TRAUMAS OF (IM)MOBILITY

**Wael Garnaoui**

Psychoanalyst and assistant professor at the University of Sousse



Author : **Wael Garnaoui**

Translated by **Roots prod** ( translated from French to English : **Borhen Hallek**)

Editorial design and illustration : **Yessine Ouerghemmi**

---

This publication is supported with funds from Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, North Africa Office. The content of the publication is the sole responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily reflect the position of the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung.

This publication or parts of it can be quoted by others for free as long as they provide proper reference to the original publication.

**Wael Garnaoui** holds a doctorate in psychoanalysis and psychopathology from the University of Paris, and is a clinical psychologist. He is an assistant professor at the University of Sousse, and founder of a network of researchers on “Border Studies” at the Anthropology Center in Sousse, where he conducts research on migration policies, borderization processes and their impact on the political subjectivities of populations in the global South, particularly in the Tunisian context.

He is the author of the book “**Harga et désir d'Occident**” (Harga and Desire for the West) published by Nirvana in 2022.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <b>1. INTRODUCTION</b>   | <b>5</b>  |
| <b>1.1. Stress, shock, retreat, shame, anger and protest</b>   | <b>6</b>  |
| <b>1.2. Punishment by visa: the suffering of an average Tunisian family</b>  | <b>8</b>  |
| <b>2. THE INTERVIEW</b>  | <b>11</b> |
| <b>2.1. "I missed my son": shock at the first visa refusal</b>   | <b>11</b> |
| <b>2.2. The second refusal: "we waited a long time, it was as if we were sitting for the baccalaureate exam"</b>     | <b>13</b> |
| <b>2.3. Third refusal despite proof of French nationality</b>  | <b>14</b> |
| <b>2.4. "You are unreliable": from shock to retreat</b>  | <b>15</b> |
| <b>2.5. Fourth refusal and outrage: "How do they view us? The colonial gaze still persists!"</b>                     | <b>16</b> |
| <b>2.6. Visa refusals and their impact on family ties</b>  | <b>17</b> |
| <b>2.6.1. The mother's post-rejection symptoms: "It's only natural for me to be there for my grandchildren".</b>     | <b>18</b> |
| <b>2.6.2. The father's post-rejection symptoms: "I feel anger towards myself, towards them, towards the system".</b> | <b>19</b> |
| <b>2.6.3. The impossibility of getting an appointment, and when the virtual replaces the real</b>                    | <b>20</b> |
| <b>3. CONCLUSION</b>   | <b>21</b> |

**Man is born free.** This assertion is common not only to modern philosophies and ancient religions, but also to the political critique of our modern and contemporary condition. It is undoubtedly from this general assertion that the “naturalness” of considering mobility and movement as a fundamental right is derived, by all the international charters relating to human rights. But it's a fact that rich countries, transformed into fortresses, ignore the subjective dimension of migration, and repress the impulse that drives human beings to relocate elsewhere. This is the “viatoric drive”, aptly defined by Gérard Haddad as the impulse that “pushes us to travel, with the call of the unknown, of the other, of spaces”, involving space as an existential stake and a vector of subjectivity<sup>1</sup>

**Prior to the French** colonization of Tunisia in 1881, Tunisians, a subject of pre-state empires, were free to travel to neighboring territories in Africa, the Mediterranean basin and as far as China. From 1881 onwards, Tunisians gradually lost this “viatoric

drive” under the effect of bureaucratic, police and border complications. They became enclosed or controlled by borders established by the colonial powers. Although colonization created increasingly fixed national borders, a form of freedom was maintained by the very fact of belonging to the colonial empire which, while selecting populations and hierarchizing territories, did not go so far as to definitively prohibit movement within its space. With independence, Tunisians regained freedom of movement between their country and the former colonial metropolises. They rediscovered human impulsive nature and enjoyed mobility with fewer administrative restrictions: abroad studies, work immigration, tourism, visits to family members, healthcare travels, sports tourism, etc. It is necessary to recall these generalities when we contemplate today's reality in light of the complexities and travel bans. The most common reasons for travelling - as mundane as “taking part in a sporting event” or “accessing medical care” - suffer from bans.

**Since 1995**, when the Schengen Area was created, the mobility of Tunisians has been disrupted by the need to obtain a visa, a prerequisite for travel to the other side of the Mediterranean. The Mare nostrum (“Our Sea”) has become the great stranger repelling southern Mediterraneans. The natural frontier doubles as a political stratum that gradually becomes a mark of defilement. So, even if that rare visa can be obtained by some sort of an administrative miracle, the natural impulse to leave is definitively shattered.

**The following article deals with** the psychic effect that I call the “trauma of (im)mobility”, which marks former colonies at the time of the closure of political borders. The Tunisian case is an illustration of the psychic violence suffered by the whole of society confronted with the border, at the moment of politicization by the closure of the latter. I will address these traumas through the prism of family ties between individuals who have immigrated, and family members who have remained in Tunisia and are denied their right to movement. I will refer to interviews conducted as part of a new research project on the new border policy.

**How does this migration policy reveal individual and collective traumas?**

**How does the border system become an object that impacts the intimate and transforms the social order?**

<sup>1</sup> Antonietta Haddad, Gérard Haddad, Freud en Italie : Psychanalyse du voyage (Freud in Italy: Psychoanalysis of travel), Paris, Albin Michel. 1995..

## STRESS, SHOCK, RETREAT, SHAME, ANGER AND PROTEST

**This article** should be read as a commentary on an interview. The said interview was chosen from a dozen conducted as part of an ongoing investigation into the effects of borderization on the populations of former colonies, Tunisia and Morocco in this case. It represents a Tunisian middle-class reality in their struggles with visa application procedures. This interview is representative - indeed, significant - of what our objective survey in Tunisia seeks to confirm about the processes of internalizing borderization. It outlines the five stages through which middle-class families who are denied access to visas enabling them to visit their descendants and ascendants settled in the West pass; the stress of waiting, shock at visa refusal, retreat and shame, anger and finally protest/despair. These stages can thus be referred to as the “trauma of immobility”. We will also focus on the impact of visa refusal on middle-class and wealthy families in Tunisia.<sup>2</sup>

**In our previous work**, we observed how the desire to cross the Mediterranean border was driven by the rise of prohibition and the new bureaucratic arrangements governing migration.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, prior to the year 1995, the desire to leave with the claim of a definitive settlement in European territories is little observed. The family reunification policy initiated in the early 1980s massively introduced the great waves of settlement, just as it was about to entrench closure and selection in the face of migration within host countries. The desire for emigrants to settle permanently in Europe only emerged after the Schengenization<sup>4</sup> of the Mediterranean and the emergence of a Schengen culture of security<sup>5</sup>.

**From this period onwards**, the EU implemented a European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) that introduced new border management, helping to transform representations in terms of hospitality and otherness. This policy, which goes hand in hand with the considerable rise of extreme right-wing parties, now plays in several European governments, endorses a vision in which inhabitants of former colonies are apprehended as *personae non gratae*.

The five stages experienced by Tunisian middle-class people with refused visa applications is a trauma that settles on scales that our survey must measure, before considering any alternative way out of such a situation. These five phases - the stress of waiting for a visa; shock at being refused; shame; anger and protest - characterize an experience that is both collective and individual; it is collective in the sense that it is experienced by the entire community of rejected visa applicants, i.e. those who have met the selection criteria and are able to prove their innocence of the offence of *harga* (**Translator note: Harga is a local term in Tunisia that refers to clandestine migration**). It is individual in the sense that each of those with “refused” visa applications who are facing the disastrous consequences of refusal - notably families separated from their emigrant children - are experiencing the situation without the possibility of organizing themselves politically and collectively.

Before illustrating this situation with the interview conducted with the Snoussi family,<sup>6</sup> let us recall the general situation of the “problem” before the new

<sup>2</sup> The article complements previous work dealing with the consequences of the schengenization of the Mediterranean on young Tunisians. It thus complements the study of the families of the dead and missing at sea, as well as the study of unconscious motivations for crossing the sea. See Wael Garnaoui, “Harga and Desire for the West in Time of Jihad”, the Research in Psychoanalysis journal, vol. 33, no. 1, 2022, pp. 81-95. Also: Wael Garnaoui, “European border externalization and Tunisian migration policies: A psychology of sociopolitical impacts”, the Confluences Méditerranée journal vol. 125, no. 2, 2023, pp. 107-122.

<sup>3</sup> Wael Garnaoui, Harga and desire for the West. Psychoanalytic study of Tunisian illegal migrants, Nirvana. Tunis. 2021

<sup>4</sup> Ruben Zaiotti, «La propagation de la sécurité : l'Europe et la schengenisation de la Politique de voisinage» (Spreading Security: Europe and the “Schengenization” of the Neighborhood Policy), the Cultures & Conflits journal, 66 | 2007, pp. 61-76.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> The name has been changed for reasons of anonymity.



schengenization policy. In the past, access to visas was differentiated according to both subsidiary and socio-economic categorizations. Firstly, the right of married couples to reunite did indeed facilitate movement, despite heightened suspicion of sham marriages (marriages of convenience). Secondly, this same right will be extended to include descendants and ascendants with no apparent difficulties. What's more, obtaining a visa was not difficult for all social categories. This was particularly the case for the middle classes, mainly comprising civil servants with institutional links to the Tunisian state, as well as for the affluent classes and businessmen and women in general. The first visa refusals primarily affected the most precarious categories, who then reacted by adopting a practice that has become increasingly dangerous thanks to progressively repressive technological and police measures, condemning them to take perilous routes. These categories have opted for clandestine departures in cargo containers, ships or handmade fishing boats to reach the northern shores of the Mediterranean.

**In addition to the schengenization** already underway, we should mention the singular international situation relating to the management of the Covid-19 pandemic, which began in 2020. The latter has had a considerable impact, exacerbating the sorting and the ban on movement. Generally speaking, intra-state travel is largely affected by security measures restricting freedom of movement. The 2020 spring lockdowns and the widespread adoption of telecommuting (telework), as well as the closure of several factories and production companies must be understood not only as measures of biopower in the foucaldian sense, but also as a laboratory of public policies regarding the ability to produce, apply and extend movement-restrictive measures. Long-distance travel was progressively hampered by the closure of borders and restrictions on movement. This exceptional period prompted many players to undertake in-depth reflections on our mobility system and lifestyles.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Garnaoui, W & Ben Lazreg, H. 2020. "The Passport Paradox and the Advent of Immobility Justice". Reset-doc, 8 june 2020.



New individual and collective behaviors have emerged, and public policies have been put in place to anticipate post-pandemic changes, also known as “the world after”. However, it was the border issue for foreigners that emerged as the vanguard of the repressive policies that remained in force following the pandemic and public health restrictions.

**In point of fact,** French Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin announced in this context, on September 29, 2021, a 30% reduction in the number of visas granted to Tunisian nationals compared with 2020, and a halving of that quota for Moroccans and Algerians. The reason given is the refusal of these countries to issue the consular passes required for the return of the deported immigrants from France. The French government's aim is to “push the countries concerned to change their policy and agree to issue consular passes”.<sup>8</sup>

Former government spokesperson Gabriel Attal asserted at the same time that “It's a drastic decision, an unprecedented decision even, but it's one made necessary by the fact that these countries won't accept to take back nationals we do not want and cannot keep in France”». <sup>9</sup>

This unprecedented situation leads us to collectively question the hypothesis of a continuous restriction of our movements, on which the migration policy has long been based. It also makes us think that visa refusal has become a trauma for people who previously had the right to travel.

## PUNISHMENT BY VISA: THE SUFFERING OF AN AVERAGE TUNISIAN FAMILY

**The story of this interview,** conducted in January 2024, dates back to 2017, when I met a couple of Tunisian architects in Paris, part of the new generation welcomed to France through the “Passeport talent” immigration device that came into force in November 2016<sup>10</sup>. This residence permit issued to specific “skilled professionals” with no need for family ties in France is part of a global strategy encouraging “controlled” and selective immigration. Salma and Hassen are among the few Tunisians with whom discussions didn't stagnate on the scale of administrative workings and tactics and woes linked to residence permits, renewals, attestations, appeals and proof of residence. Apparently at least, the “talent” status freed them from the kind of assignment that no foreigner from the former colonies with “weak passports” can escape, thus being the subject of paperwork checks when settling in. Incidentally, after five years, Salma's integration enabled her to obtain French naturalization, whereas her husband, Hassen, failed to do so, a setback that tarnishes the image of the talented migrant. Financial considerations were cited as the reason for the refusal, despite Hassen's salary being equivalent to that of his wife, Salma. However, he finds solace in the fact that his parents managed to obtain visas three times between 2016 and 2020 to visit him. Indeed, it's after 2020 that this situation will turn into a nightmare, leading to the collapse of the promise of positive, differentiated treatment of “skilled and talented” migrants. The French government's adoption of punitive visa quotas will give rise to a series of travel denials for Hassen's parents, and a long descent into hell for this family, who will from then on be deprived of the right to travel, without fully comprehending the reasons for this ban. The latter comes at a time when the couple are “perfectly” integrated, with the arrival of a newborn child, access to private property thanks to a bank's agreement to grant a real estate loan, and finally access

<sup>8</sup> Le Monde. «Immigration : la France durcit “drastiquement” l’octroi de visas aux Algériens, Marocains et Tunisiens» (Immigration: France “drastically” tightens the granting of visas to Algerians, Moroccans and Tunisians); 28-09-2021.

<sup>9</sup> Libération. «Maroc, Algérie et Tunisie : la France va durcir l’octroi des visas» (Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia: France to tighten the granting of visas), 28-09-2021.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.actu-juridique.fr/social/immigration-professionnelle-le-point-sur-le-titre-de-sejour-passeport-talent-salarie-dune-entreprise-innovante/>



to French nationality for Salma. All these actions - and efforts - were met with the refusal of visas for the parents, who were then unable to attend the birth and accompany their daughter-in-law who had expressed the need for their presence. Four visa applications followed, all refused for absurd reasons that will be amply described in the interview.

**I met Hassen's parents** at their home in a town in northern Tunisia, where they warmly welcomed me into their villa. The mother, aged 54, owns a cyber-café which she has been running since her son left for France. The father, aged 58, is a civil servant with the Ministry of Health. They have obtained visas for France on three occasions, in 2016, 2018 and 2020, although the last one could not be used due to mobility restrictions during the Covid-19 crisis. These visas were issued for a non-renewable six-month period.

In June 2022, they submitted a fourth visa application, which was refused on the grounds that “the intention to leave the territory of the member states before the visa expires could not be established”. The second application was refused in December 2022 after a six-month wait, the application being vouched for by their son. Hassen's parents had insisted on obtaining the visa before December 2023, pending the birth of their first grandchild. The application will be rejected again, and the grandparents will not be able to attend the birth of their first grandchild.

For the third visa application, it was the daughter-in-law, a French national, who “invited” Hassen's parents. This is the umpteenth strategy used by immigrants and naturalized citizens to convince the consular services of the family link with their now “French” descendants. However, this request met with a third refusal in June 2023, after a six-month wait. The fourth refusal, in December 2023, also came after six months of waiting, this time by the Italian consulate. We see here the same individual strategies put in place by visa applicants, on the lookout for rumors and information about the least restrictive consulates.

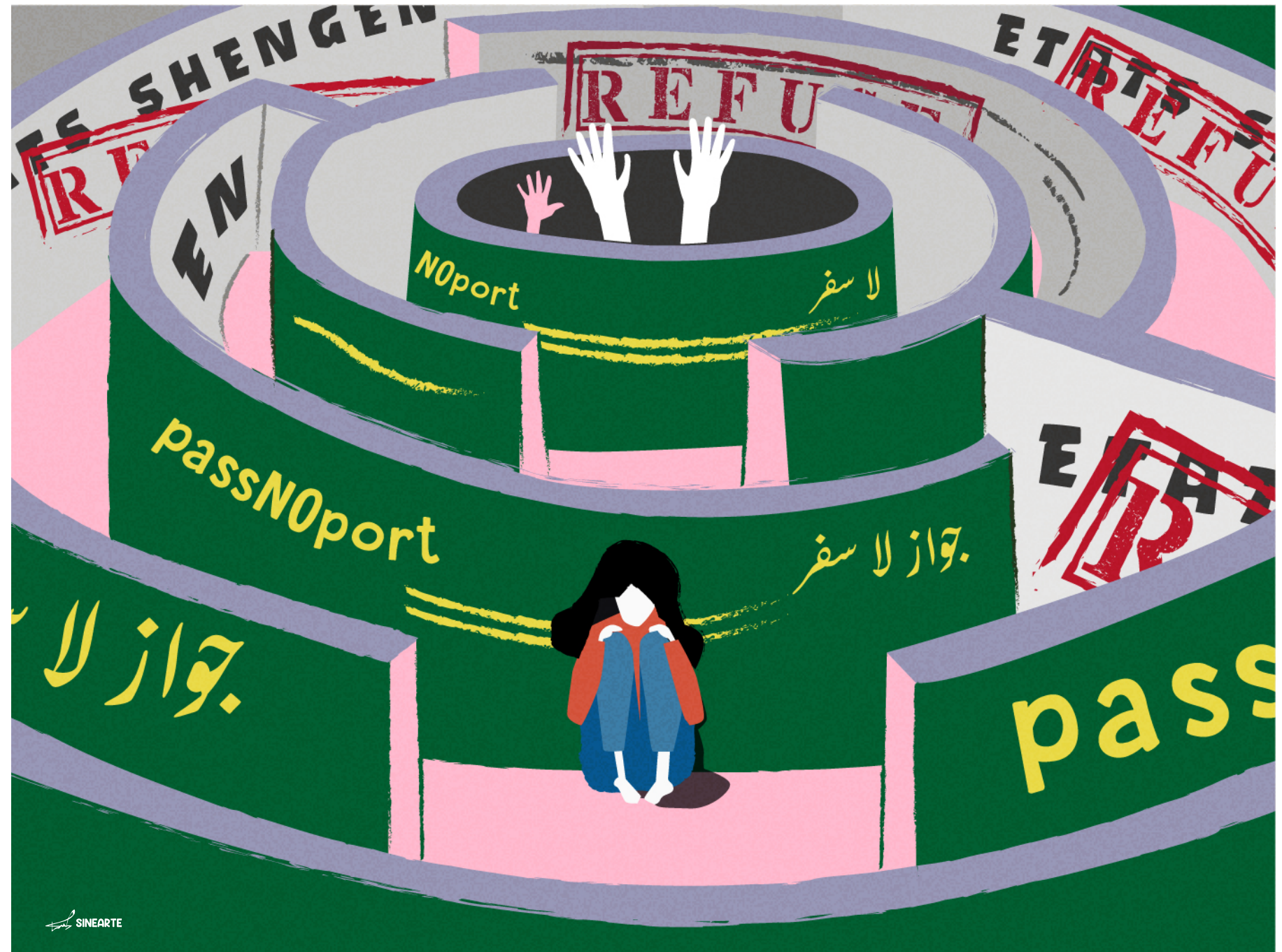
**This interview** with Hassen's parents took place in the presence of their second daughter, Ahlem.<sup>11</sup> Presenting itself as both an ethnographic and a therapeutic interview, Ahlem too expresses the desire to leave, while witnessing the sum total of the difficulties hindering her parents' journey. Her way out of this situation remains that which refers to another selection presented as legitimate: immigration to study in France. The interview was an opportunity to describe her shock and frustration, as she too had been refused two successive study visa applications, despite having been accepted by a prestigious university in France. The meeting with the three family members resembled a group therapy session following a family accident or disaster, rather than a simple research interview informing about visa refusal situations.

**In this interview,** we focus on the story told by the parents, without mentioning the second daughter, Ahlem, or our interviews with Hassen and Salma. The decision to devote most of this article to the interview with the Snoussi family alone is explained by the consistency it offers in pinpointing the visa refusal suffered by the middle classes with selected immigrant children living abroad. From a methodological point of view, this choice makes it possible to follow the therapeutic work enabled by a psychoanalysis adopting the point of view of the subject of the investigation. This benevolence offered by a conscious search for the misfortunes engendered by the repression of the desire of movement frees the patient to speak; the patient would be invited to seek and locate words that comfort and alleviate the suffering.

---

<sup>11</sup> The name has been changed for reasons of anonymity.

**This interview**, which we present here in its entirety, should be read as a first attempt to approach psycho-analytically, and through the words of those concerned, the suffering and political viewpoint that emerges within middle-class families confronted with new border policies. Visa refusal has consequences for family structure, and for intra- and inter-community ties. The daily life of a family prevented by the border from maintaining a natural bond - the word natural is used by Hassan's mother - will be forever marked by negative and pathological transformations in psychology and collective relations. Finally, the interview with the Snoussi family illustrates a phenomenon that runs through the whole of society, confronted with new repressive mobility policies.



# THE INTERVIEW

## « I MISSED MY SON »

### SHOCK AT THE FIRST VISA REFUSAL

**Wael : How did you feel about your first visa refusal?**

**The father :** *It was unexpected.*

**The mother :** *We were shocked.*

**The father :** *I asked my wife to check the passport carefully. She had a fit in front of TLS<sup>12</sup>.*

**The mother :** *I was completely shocked, I cried. I told myself that this time would be the last.*

**Wael : When you were turned down, did you think long and hard before making another appointment?**

**The father :** *For my part, I said to myself I'm not going to go anymore. I'm really tired, because the procedure itself is exhausting. One would have to prepare the documents, the payslip, and pay the fees. My documents have to be sent here from Tunis, seeing that I work at the regional administration offices. These documents have to be signed by the regional director, then the ministry. Preparing the payslips took me forever, as the system closes on the 6th of each month. The consulate doesn't take all that into account. It was exhausting to obtain those documents. Once they're ready, the said documents are forwarded to the central general office (Bureau d'Ordre). So you have to keep track, calling every day to ask the employees at the aforementioned office to forward them. Then I reached out to my acquaintances for help, so that someone will do me the favor of bringing them back to me from Tunis.*

*Thus, I have been feeling exhausted and annoyed. And my wife is desperate to visit her son. My son also wishes for us to go and see him.*

<sup>12</sup> Founded in 2008, TLS Contact (which acts as an intermediary for visa applications) is a major partner of the so-called Schengen states. Specializing in services for diplomatic representations, the company is a branch of the Teleperformance Group, a French-owned multinational telecommunications company. The emergence of a "national champion", a company with a national identity but aspiring to assume a global role, dates back to 2007. Since 2022, the TLS agency has brought together the Belgian, Italian and French consulates in a single building at Lac 2 in Tunis, a configuration that had not previously existed.





SINEARTE

**Wael : It's normal, you miss your son.**

**The father :** *Yes, it was for my son, otherwise I would never have gone. I would have chosen another destination; I would have visited Turkey or rather Jordan, since our passport doesn't take us anywhere except to countries without a visa requirement, like Arab and African countries. For instance, I suggested going to Turkey and asked my son to meet me there.*

**The mother :** *But I wanted to visit my son at his home and see him there.*

**Wael : The purpose of your trip was not to have fun, but to reunite with your son at his home.**

**The mother :** *Yes, I wanted to visit his new home, to which I have not been before. The last time I was there, we stayed in his old house before he got married. I have not been to his current home, especially now that he has had a baby.*

*(...)*

**Wael : You have known the first refusal in June, and you reapplied for a visa.**

**The mother :** *It was my son who inspired the courage in us to try a second application. We thought that the first refusal was linked to the 500 euros we exchanged using the passport, thinking it might have been insufficient in the eyes of the consular authorities. We figured that for our second attempt, we'd exchange the maximum amount allowed for the trip, i.e. six thousand Tunisian dinars per person. But unfortunately, we were once again turned down.*

# THE SECOND REFUSAL

« WE WAITED A LONG TIME, IT WAS AS IF WE WERE SITTING FOR THE BACCALAUREATE EXAM »

(...)

**The mother :** *But I missed my son and wanted to see him. So we made So we made another appointment around December 2022.*

**The father :** *Only it was hard to make an appointment this time around.*

**The mother :** *Yes, it was tough. We had to do a lot of research to find an appointment. To collect the passports from the TLS agency, we had to head to Tunis.*

**The father :** *It was really stressful, we waited a long time; it was as if we were sitting for the baccalaureate or the doctorate exam.*

**The mother :** *I was frightened, my heart was pounding, and in the end, we were turned down again. Since it's a refusal, the passport comes with an additional document.*

**Wael : How did you respond to this refusal ?**

**The mother :** *I almost slipped into a state of shock. The whole process of preparing the documents was really stressful and exhausting.*

**The father :** *I, too, were under stress.*

**The mother :** *Up to this very moment, it is all affecting me, I cannot sleep at night. I wake up in the middle of the night. These refusals have created a state of hallucination and insomnia; the stress and the anxiety of waiting and wondering whether or not they will accept our visa application.*

**Wael : The wait can be nerve-wracking.**

**La mère :** *Yes indeed. Last time, we had to wait about three weeks between making the appointment and attending the appointment. But the next big wait is to get the appointment. And that takes months, not weeks.*

# THIRD REFUSAL

## DESPITE PROOF OF FRENCH NATIONALITY

**The mother :** *Yes, this time we made an attempt with my son, mainly because his wife has obtained the nationality. She was responsible for all the paperwork. We included all the necessary supporting documents in a complete dossier.*

**The father :** *We didn't leave out a single document, and every time they asked for something, we systematically made sure we provided everything they requested. This is the third time we've been turned down by France.*

**Wael :** **And how did you cope with this situation? Have you considered reapplying?**

**The mother :** *At first, I told my son it was over, and that we wouldn't be going back. Then a little hope sprang up in me, and I thought, "Maybe my son will initiate the family visit procedure and they'll accept that." That's how I once again had hope. There's a Facebook group I go to*



*for information, and people share their advice when you're looking for ways out. We followed all the procedures. My son also went through the process, and we hoped to be accepted. However, we later received yet another refusal.*



# YOU ARE UNRELIABLE

## FROM SHOCK TO RETREAT

**Wael : Pardon me, could you remind me what was the reason for the refusal in December 2022 ?**

**The mother :** *The reason for the refusal has always been the same, and I doubt they even looked at the dossier. There is also the possibility that they opted for a draw. It's as if they were making excuses by suggesting a lack of funding for the return trip, when in fact I had already bought a return ticket.*

**The father :** *And they argue that "you are unreliable".*

**The sister (Ahlem) :** *We sometimes joke at home, teasing each other with the expression "you are unreliable".*

**Wael : So you changed your strategy, but you were still told that "you are unreliable".**

**The mother :** *Yes, once again, the same phrases come up: "you are unreliable", "you have no real intention of leaving the country at the end of your stay", even though the ticket has been paid for, resulting in a financial loss.*

**Ahlem :** *The reasons for my refusal are slightly different, but they include the same reasons as theirs, and correspond to reason number 5.*

**The father :** *They turned us down for the third time. That was in June 2023. We claim to have completed all the necessary steps again. (...) We saved 6,000 dinars per person, which totals 12,000 dinars exchanged using our passports. We provided all the requested documents. When we got there, they handed us an envelope; everything fell apart as we discovered the same sheet mentioning that "you are unreliable".*

**Wael : What was your reaction again?**

**The mother :** *I was nervous, I cried a lot, and I buried myself under the comforter.*

**Wael : Why under the comforter?**

**The mother :** *I thought it would be nice to be able to hide away and bury myself completely .<sup>13</sup>*

---

<sup>13</sup> Ferenczi identifies the unspoken and the silence surrounding the shock-event as the main traumatogenic factors. The dramatic experience becomes a "living dead enclave" kept secret in the patient's psyche.

## FOURTH REFUSAL AND OUTRAGE

### «HOW DO THEY VIEW US ? THE COLONIAL GAZE STILL PERSISTS! »

**Wael :** Yes, it's an intense emotion, given that they're depriving you of your right. You have every right, and you have your own money and have made all the necessary payments.

**The father :** *Without as much as a reimbursement of expenses. In return, they have the right to enter our country at their convenience. We welcome them with female dancers, traditional outfits "Malya" (Translator note: The "Malya" is in essence a long cloak woven of wool typically worn by women), and a Tunisian folklore show "Bendir" (Translator note: a Bendir is a Tunisian frame drum with snare mainly, but not solely, used in Tunisian religious music). They would arrive with a modest budget of 1000 euros, but they manage to enjoy themselves nevertheless. In comparison, we have to spend 12,000 dinars for just one week, which could cover our expenses here for a whole year.*

**Wael :** 12 salaries' worth for an employee; a paradox.

**The father :** *It implies that we are disdained (Translator note: the author reported the use of the Hogra expression, which is a local Tunisian expression referring to disdain and contempt) or disregarded and deprived of all dignity. How do they view us? The colonial gaze still persists! I do not understand it. And let's not forget the fatigue and stress I've endured.*

**Wael :** This also distances you from your son, forcing you to do the impossible to be reunited with him.

**The father :** *We mustn't forget that they thought we were going to stay*

*there illegally, whereas I have my job here and I'm going to retire soon. I have my own plans here. So there's no way I'm leaving my country to stay there illegally. I'll never give up my life here. Last time, we mentioned in our documents for Italy that we have properties here. My wife also has her properties and her fortune here. It should be pointed out that we obtained visas and returned home twice before, so it should be clear that we had no intention of staying illegally.*

(...)

**Wael :** How did you come up with the idea of applying for a visa at the Italian consulate?

**The mother :** *Since France wasn't getting us anywhere, my son suggested we try and enter another country, and from there we can go to France. So we chose Italy.*

**Wael :** Was it easy for him to make an appointment?

**The mother :** *Yes, he managed to secure an appointment, and he thought that with Italy it might be easier; because France has set its quota at 70%. We went through all the procedures again, and this time we filed the certificate for our properties here in Tunisia. (...) My son says he always pays his taxes and doesn't understand why France forbids his family to visit him. He's still trying to find another way to get a visa. On our part, we shouldn't have let this pass so easily; we should have appealed.*

# VISA REFUSALS

## AND THEIR IMPACT ON FAMILY TIES

**Wael :** It was a difficult time for your family when your visa applications were refused.

**The father :** Right, yes. I don't feel well at all, I've lost my money. And I insist that my wife not bring up this subject again due to these disturbances. Now my relationship with my wife is no longer the same, it's more stressful, the tension is mounting (...) yes, it's true, and I often argue with my wife (...) it is a sort of punishment.

**The mother :** Particularly since this time, with Italy, my husband told me that they're going to refuse to give us a visa, but I convinced myself that no, this isn't France. (...) I know that even executives and directors have been refused. For instance, my husband's boss was refused a visa too.



## THE MOTHER'S POST-REJECTION SYMPTOMS

### « IT'S ONLY NATURAL FOR ME TO BE THERE FOR MY GRANDCHILDREN »

**The mother :** *The period of refusals was stressful and tiring, ridden with insomnia and anxiety.*

**The father :** *She had anxiety attacks.*

**The mother :** *One of my symptoms is rapid heart palpitation and anxiety. These symptoms persist to this day, and the refusal continues to trouble me, particularly at night when I feel pain in my heart.*

**Wael :** **Do your thoughts haunt you, too ?**

**The mother :** *All the time, yes. I often think about my son, and I regret not visiting him. I really wish to see him and my granddaughter, and hold her in my arms. The idea of cooking for them, because they're alone. As a result, I find it difficult to sleep because of these thoughts. (...) At times, I feel it's natural to be present at my grandchildren's side, especially as their grandmother from their mother's side has passed away. I wanted to be there for my daughter-in-law when she needed it, and prepare meals for her...*

**Wael :** **Have you had any nightmares recently ?**

**The mother :** *Yes, I have been having a lot of nightmares on a regular basis.*

**Wael :** **Can you tell me a little more about these nightmares? Or is it too personal ?**

**The mother :** *My mom has passed away, and I have a lot of nightmares involving her.*

**Wael :** **Are all these nightmares about your mother ?**

**The mother :** *Yes, I wake up at night thirsty and with a dry throat. My heart hurts too.*

**Wael :** **The refusals you've experienced have activated nightmares related to your mother. This reactivates the anguish of the loss of a loved one within the family.**

## THE FATHER'S POST-REJECTION SYMPTOMS

# « I FEEL ANGER TOWARDS MYSELF, TOWARDS THEM, TOWARDS THE SYSTEM »

**Wael : And you, Sir, how did you cope with all these unforeseen refusals ?**

**The father :** *I carried on with the procedures for my wife's sake, and also so as not to cause any problems. I'm a peace-loving person. She was the one who insisted on wasting her money at all costs (Translator note: the author reported the use of the phrase "she flushed her money down the toilet"). But I knew they'd refuse, and not just this time, but the other times as well, because we did put in all the requested documents every time. Personally, I don't find stories about drawing lots and betting games credible at all. When uncertainty is involved, I do not like taking risks.*

**Wael : In your opinion, what could be the reasons for these refusals ?**

**The father :** *In my opinion, it was for political reasons. That's the initial reason, and it was mentioned on TV, that Tunisia hasn't made a great effort to stop those who leave the country for illegal immigration. So to punish them, they no longer give legal visas to everyone, but rather only to 70% of the people. I've lost a lot of money, I'm tired, exhausted even. Let's take as an example the last expense, the three property certificates which cost me 160 dinars. I'm disgusted, I don't want to go any more. Even before, I didn't feel like going "I got fed up". Unless there's a political decision on their part that can change the situation, we would only be risking repeating the same procedures, the same steps and ending up with the same results. (...)*

**Wael : What was the harshest thing about the refusals ?**

**The father :** *I'm ashamed to admit it, it's as if I've made a mistake or that I'm considered a thief. I think that's why they didn't grant me the visa. In my workplace, when my colleagues ask me the question, "Sir, did they approve your visa?" I'd rather they didn't ask me that question and I try to avoid the conversation. They often repeat, "But this is the fourth time!?" They're counting. They would ask, "How much does it cost?" and I would reply, "A thousand dinars each time. They then would reply, "But it's too expensive!" and I would feel anger towards myself, towards them, towards the system!*

*I wonder why they, the Europeans, can enter whenever they want, while I have to provide 60 documents, spend money and waste my time.*



# THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF GETTING AN APPOINTMENT

## AND WHEN THE VIRTUAL REPLACES THE REAL

**The mother :** *Recently, I haven't found any available dates. This is what I've noticed in the Facebook groups as well, that now the problem lies in the availability of appointments rather than the visa itself. I've recently left all the groups because they're getting annoying; someone did this, someone else did that... I've seen that the procedure for a simple appointment takes more than three months of waiting, a year even.*

**Wael :** **Following all this, what is your opinion on a trip to Hassen's place ?**

**The mother :** *My son does not want to give up. He says he wants to try again so that we can get the visa and go to see him. This time, if our visa application is once again refused, he won't stay silent. He refuses to accept the fact that his parents can't come to see him despite his work and tax payments. That's how he sees it. His father, for his part, doesn't want that.*

*Honestly, if I'm told to go through the process again, I will.*

**The father :** *That's what I can't understand.*

**The mother :** *I don't want to give up. I really want to go.*

**Wael :** **How do you communicate with Hassen ?**

**The mother :** *We text each other via Messenger.*

**Wael :** **Do you give him any advice about your granddaughter ?**

**The mother :** *Yes, certainly.*

**Wael :** **That means you're taking on the role virtually, rather than offering it to him in person over there.**

**The father :** *Only verbally.*





# CONCLUSION

**The interview** reveals a profound psychological impact on the family following the four visa refusals, illustrating a real trauma of immobility. The symptomatic manifestations of this trauma are diverse, affecting both the mother and the father, revealing a complex and painful reality.

The mother expresses persistent psychological distress, characterized by insomnia, anguish and anxiety attacks. Her symptoms are exacerbated at night, when she feels heart pain, haunted by incessant thoughts about her son and granddaughter. Nightmares are also an integral part of her experience, with dreams linked to her mother's death, reflecting a deep-seated fear of the loss of a loved one.

The father, though determined to anticipate the refusal, also experiences psychological symptoms. He expresses anger at himself, at the system, and evokes a shame felt as if the visa rejection were a mark of infamy. Anger is mingled with a sense of injustice, highlighting the disparity between the French who move freely and their own obstacle-ridden journey.

Tension in the home is palpable, illustrated by frequent arguments between the parents, with responsibilities being passed back and forth. Social relations deteriorate, and money spent without tangible results increases stress within the couple. The father feels the need to conceal the details of these failures when discussing them with colleagues, underlining the stigma and shame associated with visa refusals.

The trauma of immobility also generates a flight to the virtual, where communication between the mother and Hassen is limited to verbal advice, hardly replacing the desired physical presence at crucial events. This search for a virtual alternative underlines the emptiness created by the impossibility of getting together physically.

The symptoms observed go beyond financial stress and practical obstacles, deeply affecting the emotional state of family members and generating persistent and complex psychological suffering. This story highlights the often overlooked and underestimated consequences of visa policies on the mental well-being of individuals and their families.

The deprivation of the right and freedom of movement can cause a psychological scar that's difficult to heal, inhibition, a slowed-down life, and a permanent malaise for those who feel prevented. I call all these symptomatic manifestations the "trauma of immobility". This socio-psychological analysis highlights the devastating effects of visa policies on mental well-being, emphasizing that visa refusal can transcend the administrative sphere to become a veritable existential fracture, leaving an indelible mark on a whole generation of young Tunisians<sup>14</sup>.

---

<sup>14</sup> Ayoub's case splendidly illustrates the situation of Tunisian youth traumatized by the ban on visas to join their families. Ayoub's first name inspired his story, as did the patience of the prophet Ayoub (Job), who never loses hope in the face of life's hardships. His only sin was that he was born in his native country, which meant he grew up far from his parents. Before he was born, his parents lived in Italy, where their first son was born. In 2011, they decided to return to their country to set up a business, anticipating a post-revolutionary improvement of the situations. Meanwhile, the mother, pregnant for the second time, preferred to give birth close to her family in 2012, having already experienced the difficulty of a first birth far from them. The situation has not improved in Tunisia. On the contrary, there were many obstacles to getting established and making a success of their business. The father decided to return to Europe to try again to work and create a better future. This time, he went to France, where job opportunities seemed more promising, despite the fact that he has Italian documents and residence permit. He decided to settle there, and his wife and eldest son joined him, leaving Ayoub in Tunisia with his grandparents. The parents have made several attempts to obtain family reunification for their young son, but each time have encountered obstacles from the French government. They also tried their luck in Italy, but to no avail. They continue in their attempts to this day. 11-year-old Ayoub's only hobby is swimming, realizing that the sea is the only obstacle standing between him and his family when he looks at a map. That's why he started swimming, believing he could overcome this obstacle and challenge himself to reach the other side.

Far from being a neutral right, the bureaucratic visa system appears to be totally arbitrary, as evidenced by the fact that even people with a set of privileges that place them at the top of the social hierarchy can be refused a visa for no reason at all. In the final analysis, this is what the visa system is all about: an authority for managing so-called migratory risks, entirely given over to arbitrary, customer-driven decisions. It's easy to see why most visa applicants can't walk through the front door of a consulate or embassy without a "healthy" dose of anxiety and doubt...

When the visa applicant receives their passport at the TLS Contact visa center, the latter mentions the consular decision to refuse the granting of a visa. More often than not, it is the "famous" Reason number 9 that is invoked, in the following form: "Your desire to leave the territory of the member states before the visa expires could not be established", a sign that in the eyes of the consular services the would-be traveler risks prolonging their stay and remaining illegally in a European country after their visa has expired, as the documents they have produced do not guarantee in the eyes of the administration their desire to return and their "attachment" to their country of origin.

Convinced in advance that will can only be "bad", in this case that the desire to travel can have no other purpose than to enjoy the privileges of the destination country, the consulates' response will only confirm their preconceived idea that visa applicants are unpredictable, insincere and incapable of controlling their own actions.

In other terms, refusing the visa application of applicants who meet all the objective conditions means that the consular authorities are making a diagnosis, indulging in a wild interpretation of the unconscious desire of the person wishing to travel. They turn them into "potential illegal immigrants" incapable of demonstrating "good" will. Travel becomes a matter of administration, of random moral judgment dependent on selection criteria and the judgment of counter office staff<sup>15</sup> As a result, an unsuccessful applicant may feel relegated to the category of those suffering from a disorder of will, a kind of abulia, a deprivation of their own will. By psychologizing the will of the would-be traveler, consular services are unknowingly putting themselves in tune with the abuses committed by psychiatric institutions when they rush to make a diagnosis (and prescribe the corresponding treatment) rather than taking the time to properly examine to the patient's singularity, irreducible to a simple item in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). It matters little to them that freedom of movement or mobility are part of the "normal" capacities of the ego (the viatoric drive). They don't care that the rejection of a visa application results in a "functional limitation of the Ego" of the rejected subject, that the latter leaves the consulate with an "inhibited Ego", limited by a "barrier to their sphere of action", and ultimately as an "impeded agent"<sup>16</sup> Inhibited people are weaned from mobility, from elsewhere, from family and friends, thus blocking the natural development of their human relationships. A ban on joining their son, on access to the "civilized world" and a punishment for remaining locked up in Tunisia.

The financial issue is not insignificant, as these are sovereignist and border devices, which in reality capitalize on the fantasies and hopes of people aspiring to improve their lot or unburden their viatoric drives. Many victims of migration policies speak of the "robbery and theft" of visa systems, and not only those of their country of origin, as those of host countries are often not outdone when it comes to the mercantile logic of migration management systems. A new business fuelled by mobility control policies that attract the "viatoric" desires of travelers and migrants, while integrating these human flows into capitalist economic structures.

---

<sup>15</sup>Sur les relations dans les guichets et les critères de sélection, voir dans un contexte différent Vincent Dubois, *La vie au guichet. Relation administrative et traitement de la misère*, Economica, 2008.

<sup>16</sup>Paul Laurent Assoun, « La jouissance entravée. Psychanalyse du sujet empêché », conférence inédite, juin 2013, p. 55 : [http://www.revue-conference.com/images/stories/n36/CONF\\_36\\_PDF/CONF\\_36\\_PDF\\_LA\\_](http://www.revue-conference.com/images/stories/n36/CONF_36_PDF/CONF_36_PDF_LA_)