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THE FOURTH AGE OF EMIGRATION

a survey of families of the disappeared



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INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we set out to study the structures and implications of a “new age of emigration”, which we shall situate from 1995 onwards, the date marking the entry into force of the Schengen agreement. In cementing freedom of movement within the European territory, these agreements instituted a ban and limitation to mobility for populations originating from former colonies. Following on from Abdelmalek Sayad’s¹ analyses, this paper outlines the new relations of domination that have been entrenched between formerly colonized societies and European metropolises, based on the management of borders and the control of migratory flows.

We can sum up our argument as follows: ever since 1995, migratory flows from former colonies to Europe have been subject to a visa policy which, while superseding the former colonial domination, perpetuates its fundamental objectives, namely the domestication and subjugation of the populations of the South. By administering migratory flows and bolstering borders to a deadly extent, this policy produces profound effects and major fractures within the societies concerned, which are immediate consequences of this new form of border management. In a global economy, this new era of North-South relations constitutes an unprecedented system of government, hinged around two main axes: the regulation of human mobility and the control of goods. This system reduces the economies of the South to a state of structural underdevelopment, relegating them to the simple role of suppliers of selective labor and raw natural resources to the economies of the North.

Before delving into the specifics of this “new age of emigration”, we have opted to base our study on migratory relations between Europe and the Maghreb societies, two fields of analysis with which we are already acquainted, and in which we have already carried out several research projects². Specifically, this article draws on surveys of the families of the disappeared, in order to ascertain the distinctive features of this migratory era, which is also redefining relations between former colonial states and post-independence societies. Through the experience of families of the dead and disappeared, victims of European borders, we analyze the mechanisms of domination established by border systems, as well as the emerging forms of resistance within the collectives of the families, at arm’s length from traditional political organizations.

We posit that we are currently experiencing “a fourth age of emigration”, typified by the appeal of European borders, which is profoundly destabilizing local communities in the South. Unable to implement a policy to preserve their members, these societies are confronted with unprecedented phenomena, such as the inability to identify and bury their deceased exposed to the repressive policies that close the northern border. This powerlessness is set against a backdrop of criminal migration policies pursued by former colonial states. These policies, camouflaged by far-right populist or philanthropic rhetoric, conceal the responsibility of states for the massacres of migrants, whose crossings are criminalized by the legislation of destination and transit countries. They combine ordinary law and exceptional law, lethal technologies and cold indifference to death, thus resulting in human tragedies on an unprecedented scale.

While the appeal of industrialized countries and liberal democracies has existed since the “se-

¹ Abdelmalek Sayad, *The suffering of the immigrant (La double absence. Des illusions de l’émigré aux souffrances de l’immigré)*, Paris, Le Seuil editions, 1999.

² Garnaoui, W; Sakhî, M; Giglioli, I, « Méthodes d’enquête ethnographique, regards, croisés sur le sud global » (Ethnographic survey methods, crossed perspectives on the global South), *Revue De l’Institut Des Belles Lettres Arabes*, 86(232), 2024, 105-130. <https://ibla.tn/index.php/ibla/article/view/427>

cond age of emigration"³, as explored by Abdelmalek Sayad, it was then inscribed in the distinctive context of urbanization and modernization in the former colonies, impelling members of these societies to seek an alternative where labor power was more needed⁴. However, the current "fourth age of emigration" involves a quite different dynamic: the desire to settle in European countries is now emerging as a mirror image of border repression and migratory selection policies.

This age marks the advent of "Fortress Europe/West", built notably by means of visa regimes that prohibit free movement. This Fortress maintains a multifaceted technological, racial, organizational and symbolic superiority. The principles of closure and selection become the pillars of a hierarchical migration policy, which operates along two main lines; Firstly, this policy distinguishes between lives worthy of circulation - subject to visa requirements and demands for integration into the nation - and those who die on the borders, or struggle to "achieve legal status" (to be documented). Secondly, it establishes a clearer dividing line between societies in the North, which are sovereign and possess "sacred borders", and those in the South, whose borders are only worthwhile insofar as they serve as additional barriers and layers to protect Europe.

We shall first outline the singularities of the fourth age of emigration. The objective of this demonstration is straightforward: to establish a global diagnosis that will reintroduce the conflictual aspect of migration management imposed by the North, and reveal its disastrous consequences for societies in the South. This diagnosis is an essential prerequisite for a more even-handed, egalitarian and respectful relationship between the North and the South.

Secondly, we will explore the code of a conflicting policy towards the state, initiated by families hurt by the disappearance. Faced with the inability to mourn until the truth behind the demise of their loved ones is confirmed by the desisting states of the South, families cling to the hope of searching for and finding their children, dead or alive, through struggle and protest.

Unlike mainstream studies, we will also delve into the words of the families, who do not dissociate the material conditions of their experiences from their struggles for the truth: a survey of families is also a survey of the reality of their children's death. Likewise, the families' political commitment, devoid of all attempts at aestheticization, promotes concrete and urgent struggles, such as DNA identification of the bodies. The article shows how this demand is, in essence, a call for a public policy that is unwilling to exist.

The article concludes with a lengthy interview with Imed Soltani, a leader of a particular kind of political representation, embodying and expressing the suffering and struggles of families dealing with Europe's borders.

³ Abdelmalek Sayad, *The suffering of the immigrant (La double absence. Des illusions de l'émigré aux souffrances de l'immigré)*, op. cit.

⁴ Giraud, Pierre-Noël, *The Useless Man. A political economy of populism*, Odile Jacob editions, 2015.

In order to grasp an understanding of the specific nature of the new age of emigration that dawned in 1995, and which we are exploring through the study of migratory relations between the Maghreb and Europe, it is crucial to define the nature of the ages that preceded it. Sayad recalls that the first age of “orderly” emigration⁵ begins with colonization (1830 in Algeria, 1881 in Tunisia, 1912 in Morocco, etc.) and concludes with the assertion of the superiority of the industrial metropolis over the colonized territories. In his view, this first age was marked by the ability of villages - of the village community as a whole - to neutralize the disintegrating effects of immigration. The second age, on the other hand, ushers in the peasant community’s “loss of control”⁶ over the emigration of its members, leading to disintegration and “Depeasantization”⁷, synonymous with individualization within the immigrant society. The second age culminates in the generalization of emigration relations throughout the colonized country (Algeria in his case study) and the establishment, within the metropolis, of a “permanent structure”⁸ of immigration and a “sort of small ‘societies of compatriots’”⁹, since, despite the autonomization of immigrants, the feelings of “provisional” and “transit” (10)¹⁰ persist, while at the same time establishing a community.

A “third age” is emerging with the new generations of migrants’ children. In the eyes of the Franco-Algerian sociologist, it is typified by the logics of a community that is doubly autonomous - with regard to both the society of emigration of the parents (the former colonies) and the society of immigration (France and Europe more generally), a hiatus that will give rise to political debates on the theme of “integration” fuelled to no end by nationalist discourses in Europe.



Following this brief detour through Sayad’s sociological analysis, we can now highlight, by

⁵ Abdelmalek Sayad, *The suffering of the immigrant* (La double absence. Des illusions de l’émigré aux souffrances de l’immigré), op. cit., p. 68.

⁶ Abdelmalek Sayad, *The suffering of the immigrant* (La double absence. Des illusions de l’émigré aux souffrances de l’immigré), op. cit., p. 77.

⁷ Ibid, p. 78

⁸ Ibid, p. 110

⁹ Ibid, p. 111

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 112

way of contrast, a number of characteristic features of the sequence that commenced in 1995, a major date, as we have said, for a catastrophic upheaval in migration policies. This new sequence of the fourth age would be distinguished by several features, which we summarize as follows:

Firstly, this is the age when emigrant populations hailing from former colonies are confronted with a sprawling public policy continually fueled by mobility-restricting measures. With each election or major political event (war, terrorist attack, or diplomatic crisis with a country in the South, etc.), these measures are tightened, particularly affecting emigrant populations from former colonies. Unlike the previous age, when visas were not yet commonplace, this policy has had a profound impact on the mobility of people from the South, altering both relations between members of the societies of origin and the conditions under which migrants settle in host countries. Family reunification, for instance, initially designed to encourage the reunification of immigrant workers' families, has paradoxically brought to an end the right to a transitional settlement between the country of origin and of the country of employment. It compelled families to settle in Europe, yet at the same time made the temporary access that once guaranteed a permanent connection with the country of origin impossible by means of a visa.

This restrictive border policy imposes omnipresent management of emigration and immigration, profoundly altering individual identities and relations of family, community and national affiliation. It reduces the choices of migrants and communities, leaving them exposed to dangerous itineraries (clandestine immigration) and repressive injunctions (detention centers, clandestine status pending regularization, family separation, feelings of persecution in an inhospitable society, etc.). These measures include visas, residence permits, naturalization criteria, forfeiture of nationality and deportation.

Secondly, the new age of emigration is also stripping societies in the South of their elites, resulting in a two-pronged mutilation. On the one hand, European migration policy, with its stringent selection criteria, puts pressure on these elites. The visa, which is temporarily open to broad social categories, constrains individuals to swiftly seize the opportunities it offers, leading to a massive exodus of talent. On the other hand, the elites of the South, lured by Europe, lost their ability to contribute to the elaboration of an independent national policy, thus shattering the dream of autonomy that had enlivened the anti-colonial struggles¹¹. The hasty departure of members of the South's bourgeoisie, dictated by the logic of selective borders, effectively reduces this class to a spectator position, being alienated by the political decisions taken by the former colonial countries. As mentioned above¹², the North's bourgeoisie, heir to colonial structures, remains dominant in this context. Through control of its borders, it asserts its culture and values as hegemonic references. However, despite such identification, the elites and middle classes of the South suffer the devaluation induced by visa regimes. As a result, they are coerced into investing in the "freedom of movement" of their members, an effort that translates into emigration to the North, which in itself constitutes a manifestation of the mutilation of post-colonial society.

Thirdly, the pressure exerted on emigration societies, amplified by unprecedented policies of selection and closure, is tragically embodied in the spectacle of death and disappearance. This reality particularly affects the most fragile populations and the working classes, giving rise to the phe-

¹¹ Fanon, Frantz, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Maspero, Paris, 1961.

¹² Sakhi, M et Garnaoui, W, « La fabrique du désir de l'Occident frontérisé », *Revue De l'Institut Des Belles Lettres Arabes*, 86(232), 2023, 189-209. <https://ibla.tn/index.php/ibla/article/view/47>

nomena of *“hrig/harga”* (irregular migration) and a host of tragedies on various migratory routes: the perilous Mediterranean crossings to Europe or the Atlantic to the Canary Islands; the dangerous overland routes, such as the Balkan routes or the Sahara desert leading to transit countries; the desperate attempts to cross the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, where the barbed wire is an embodiment of the violence of these borders. These mass deaths, the consequences of the Schengen agreement, have devastating effects on the societies of origin: community anguish linked to the mutilation of the community and the complicated mourning of the families of the disappeared, the reinforcement of a trans-class desire for the West and a profound sense of inferiority when facing the power of the North.

The question of death, which is at the heart of this border management, refers to a warlike rationale that European societies struggle to recognize. This warlike habitus¹³, based on a historical evasion of responsibility, is part of a long tradition of implicit acceptance of structural violence: whether it’s silence on colonial wars, shunning of debates on the destruction of Palestine or Ukraine, or indifference to the deaths at borders. This denial is echoed in official discourse, where responsibility is laid at the feet of vague figures such as “gangs of traffickers”, thereby obfuscating the reality of a war waged against migrants.

Fourthly, since 1995, the tightening of borders, now impassable without a visa or at the risk of death, has profoundly altered relations between migrants and their countries of origin. This closure has led to painful separations, preventing travel (including that of migrants’ ascendants and descendants) for important events in the lives of individuals and communities, such as the burial of one’s own parents¹⁴, weddings, births and religious ceremonies. Regularized migrants and wealthy families, who are able to obtain a visa, become the only ones able to maintain cross-border links - provided that the southern country does not fall under the sanction of the governments of the northern countries. On the other hand, the others remain blocked, estranged from their loved ones, further undermining intergenerational relations, particularly between the children of migrants and their grandparents.

This major alteration renders the former “society of compatriots” more autonomous, further detaching its immigrant members from the country of origin as never before, and even separating, for instance, the children of migrants from their grandparents, who face the hassles of visa requirements that are difficult and sometimes impossible to access. Rather than a disorganization of relations between migrants and their societies of origin due to the “integration” policies that have emerged since “family reunification” and the introduction of visas, it is the feeling of inferiority and marginality that now reigns in the immigrant community. Indeed, what the sociology of Islam in the suburbs, which is alarmist about the symbolic markers of Islam or the suburbs of Islam, treats as “radicalization” is an aversion to taking borderization seriously. It is within this new separation that an affliction culminates, one that the sociology of the suburbs refuses to address, and which is expressed, in certain areas and among populations that are often quite young, by a rejection of the discourse of integration, and the cultivation of a mythologized imagination of the society and

¹³ Elias, Norbert. *The Germans. Power struggles and development of habitus in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries*, Seuil, 2017.

¹⁴ During our interviews and observations with immigrants who have become undocumented in France and Belgium, we came across numerous situations where people did not go to their parents’ funerals, for example. Some of them are students who, for obscure reasons, have not been issued residence permits. Leaving the country without a residence permit is synonymous with being exposed to visa application procedures and the risk of refusal

religion of the country of origin¹⁵. This fourth point is not unrelated to that concerning the contestation among the children of immigrants to this new closure. This is the age when the generations of post-colonial immigrants, having experienced integration, binationality and the struggle to assert their distinctiveness, face a new phase of identity-based and political attacks. These multiple attacks - ranging from the forfeiture of nationality to Islamophobic practices - are steadily escalating in the wake of anti-terrorism laws and the rise of the far right in Europe, legitimized by immigration and asylum laws. This is the age when these new generations experiment with policies of struggle, ranging from legal challenges to exiting and returning to their parents' countries of origin.

Fifthly, in the face of this reality, contestation of the government's immigration rules is organized in an intimate, subterranean setting, unrecognized by the traditional instruments of mobilization (parties, unions, established associations, etc.). At the forefront of this contestation of the border regime are the "clandestines", the candidates for clandestine emigration and the families of the disappeared. They constitute the cutting edge - both individual and organized in movement - of the critique of the new sequence that unfolded in 1995. This is an age of emigration in which, in the face of the conservative practices of the governments of the former colonial states¹⁶ the ultimate act of dissidence consists in "burning" the borders of the fortress and organizing all the solidarities and struggles that emerge from this act: the organization of migrants and solidarity for the increasingly perilous crossing, the struggles of families for the identification of bodies and for the truth about the disappearance, the struggles of undocumented [migrant] collectives for regularization, the solidarities weaving around the reception of undesirable migrants, the struggles against the criminalization of emigration, and so on.

These phenomena bear witness to an age in which the border is no longer merely a geographical line, but rather an instrument of systemic domination, reshaping North-South relations and dictating to societies in the South a framework of dependence and marginality. This fourth age of emigration is thus imbued with a dual dynamic: the violence exerted on bodies and identities, and the emergence of resistances that, notwithstanding the obstacles, are striving to restore meaning to mobility and to the human dignity chanted, among other moments, in the Arab Spring of 2011.

¹⁵ See, Olivier Esteves, Alice Picard, Julien Talpin, *La France, tu l'aimes mais tu la quittes. Enquête sur la diaspora française musulmane*, Seuil, Paris, 2024.

¹⁶ We argue that the desire to establish border management policies in the face of mobility belongs to a conservative tradition obsessed with the very idea of governance. It is conservative not in the liberal sense of the stato-modern tradition which, from Hobbes to Weber via Montesquieu, theorizes the rule of law on the basis of the monopoly of violence, but rather in the sense of fascist governance, which finds its incarnation in the regimes that marked Europe in the last century, and is based on the purity of the idea of governance through rationality without the need for justification. Mussolini defined fascist thinking as follows: "Our program is quite simple: we want to govern Italy. People always ask us about our programs. There are already far too many such programs. For the salvation of Italy, it's not programs that are needed, but men and the power of will" (quoted by Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, editions of the la Maison des sciences de l'homme Foundation, 2006 [1929], p. 111), (Reden [speeches], edited by H. Meyer, Leipzig, 1925, p. 105. Cf. also p. 134 ff.)

2

**FAMILIES OF THE DISAPPEARED
IN THE MEDITERRANEAN :**

POLITICIZATION THROUGH BORDER EXPERIENCE



In order to exemplify the domination that runs through the fourth age of immigration, the "terrain" of disappearance and death is of crucial importance. Often sidelined when discussing immigration, integration and relations between Northern metropolises and former colonies, the victims of borders strike us as the most immediate manifestation of these issues. The dead, the disappeared and their families reveal the nature and face of the new relations between North and South. We have opted for a survey of the living rather than a post-mortem study of the victims, and have turned our attention to the families of the disappeared, who tell us about their suffering and their mobilization against the lethal measures of a policy perpetuating border closure and selection.

When we contact the families, we first express our solidarity and sympathy for their disappeared children, inform them of our work and, above all, dispel any illusions that might fuel false hopes. In these families, the plight of bereaved mothers is comparable to that of a shipwrecked person yearning for a helping hand. We are not journalists on the lookout for a scoop; we are not an "association" promising to pressure on the government, and running the risk of ending up, as several of these mothers who are sensitive to any extractivist approach put it: "enough with taking photos with no tangible results"; nor are we informers capable of gaining access to Italian detention centers or prisons to search for their disappeared children. The immediate expectations of families, especially those who have recently lost a child, lie above all in the materiality of the search and in the pursuit of a trail to shed light on the disappearance. Parents, torn between hope of a reappearance and grief, often cling to the idea of seeing their disappeared sons or daughters "come back" one day. Mothers ask for help to get witnesses who have chosen to remain silent to talk, in court cases, or to find people with visas, residency permits or European passports to visit closed detention centers in Europe, sus-

pected, in their belief, of holding their children. In the absence of official information, every "white" person or European citizen is perceived as a source of hope. The families are calling on their interlocutors to find their way to European humanitarian associations who would be in a position to submit forensic search requests to the Italian government and, in general, to issue wanted notices to the authorities. For instance, in Tunisia, as in Morocco, it is also a question of building up a movement of families and supporters to initiate research (compilation of files, administrative procedures) with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other groups of families in order to investigate the disappearance, while at the same time placing the various groups of disappeared people on the public agenda.

When we make contact, what we offer, apart from unconditional solidarity, is listening, support and help in getting the word out in the public spheres to which we have access through our modest means. Over in Morocco, for example, we worked with a group of 33 families who had lost their children, all of whom had left Tunisia for Italy. Only two families were able to recover the bodies of their two sons previously buried in Tunisia, after they had managed, through personal efforts, to identify themselves to the Tunisian authorities. Armed with this experience, we are now helping to support other families who have been excluded from any information about the shipwreck - and who continue to follow false leads about the possibility of their children's incarceration in Libya - in order to refocus the efforts on the right to DNA identification and the State's assumption of responsibility for the disappearance file.

Investigating these families forsaken by the classical politics of partisan representation poses the researcher with a difficult choice: to engage with people who trust only those they perceive as potential allies in the urgent quest to address their needs. To understand this reality, this commitment has no other option than to move beyond the idealism often applied to

exploring the lives of bereaved families or those engaged in the pursuit of truth. It's about involvement in conflictuality, and cooperation built on that basis.

Our work with families involves establishing lasting ties and remaining available to interact on complex psychological issues such as grief. The therapeutic function of this support, which is also part of our political commitment, is a form of therapy. This support enhances the mobilization of families in the public events they organize, often in the absence of links with traditional intermediary bodies. Although we do not advertise ourselves as politically organized protagonists, we make no secret of our commitment to the issue of disappearances and deaths, and our contestation of Europe's borders. As soon as we make contact, we would express our solidarity with the families, and set out the conclusions drawn from our previous investigative experiences. We voice our support for our southern states (Tunisia and Morocco, in the context of our survey), which curtail the rights of families and ignore their demands. We declare our support for their children's right to freedom of movement and to cross borders in all forms, even so-called "irregular" ones. Finally, we reiterate our commitment to families against the criminalization of crossings and for an unconditional right to visas. These positions are taken following information meetings with groups of families, in public places such as cafés and the headquarters of human rights associations.

Our experience of interacting with families is a practice of political inquiry. By establishing a relationship with them, we know that they embody, both individually and collectively, at once a suffering linked to border repression and a clarity of precise political thought. They claim repressed rights and confront policies that stig-

matize their children's actions. In other words, the mothers, and more broadly the families of the dead and disappeared, suffer an unacknowledged mourning, a quest for truth that is neither accepted nor supported. This mourning is a political act insofar as it questions both the immorality of European border policies and that of governments in the South, which submit to and apply the policies of the North.

As we approach the families, often right at the start of the ethnographic interview, we set out our conclusions from previous investigations, before exploring the singularity of each story and discovering the new interpellations specific to each case. Do our conclusions influence the point of view, or even the narratives, of our interlocutors? Indeed, discussions with families are a matter of exchange and, in certain cases, of support: some families, buoyed by false hopes of their children's eventual extra-judicial incarceration, are urged by our discussions to militate in favor of identification. We raise this issue because we're questioning the method of "axiological neutrality" taught as dogma in Western sociology textbooks. In our view, it's not a question of observing without intervening: we put our knowledge to the benefit of a truth - relating to disappearance. This goes against the grain of the work of sociologists and social science entrepreneurs¹⁷, which is often oriented by the institutional objectives set by the European Union and conducted from a position of the global North. Concealing commitment and adopting a "neutrality" in the face of a highly politicized public is tantamount to depoliticizing the problem. In all our interlocations, the families document our earlier conclusions, while at the same time revealing new realities that unveil measures and practices hitherto uncharted in local border policies

As such, the interview acts as a ground for exchange, reciprocal learning and the promise of collective political participation. The survey becomes a sounding board for discourses on govern-

17 Bourdieu, Pierre, *Questions de sociologie*, Les éditions de minuit, Paris, 2002.

ment responsibilities and a legitimization of narratives in spheres saturated by Western discourse on immigration. Ultimately, our relationship with the families is first and foremost one of inter-family networking. We provide them with contacts with other families and links to associations that can offer concrete support, notably in the struggle to identify and repatriate bodies, or in the exchange of experiences on issues such as grief, which are shared within networks of recognition and identification: at one meeting, a father told a couple of mothers of the disappeared, before bursting into tears: "Only you can relate to what I'm feeling"¹⁸.

¹⁸ Casablanca, Sidi Barnoussi, information meeting we are organizing with the group of 33 young Casablancans who disappeared in Tunisia. 04/01/2025.

3

BETWEEN MOURNING AND THE HOPE OF FINDING THE DISAPPEARED : A CODE OF COMMITMENT DEVOID OF POLITICAL INTERMEDIARIES

“Where’s justice for Hamid?” It’s with this phrase, stamped on a T-shirt and written on a stack of sheets ready for distribution, that Salima welcomes us to her home in the southern suburbs of Monastir. A modest room in an apartment located in a quiet, quaint neighborhood, despite its proximity to the beach, renowned for its tourist activities during the summer season. We later learned from both Salima and her neighbors that most of the young people in this neighborhood had left for Europe, and that many of them had disappeared.

This is our second interview, conducted a year apart. In this interview, she welcomes us in the presence of her mother, now in her sixties, who will be a further witness to the story of this grandson who disappeared despite economic conditions deemed “decent” and in spite of the fact that he “could swim like a fish”. Above all, she will bear witness to a world that has changed:

“Before, we used to go to Italy by boat, legally, with our passports only. We’d go back and forth to visit the Italian islands, buy cheaper goods and return home to Tunisia. Now, young people are forbidden to travel and they disappear while crossing the sea.”¹⁹

Our visit to this family coincides with the official visit of the Italian Prime Minister, Giorgia Meloni, in April 2024. To mark the occasion, Salima and the Une Terre pour Tous (UTPT) association²⁰ have organized a demonstration of the families of the disappeared and those held in Italian detention centers, in front of the Italian embassy in Tunis. On our arrival, Salima showed us a video of this mobilization, lamenting the lack of media coverage and the absence of associations supporting the cause of the families represented by Une Terre pour Tous. According to our host, this indifference explains why the subject of the disappearances was not raised by the Tunisian president or the Italian head of government, an extreme right-wing politician, during her fourth consecutive visit to Tunisia since coming to power.

The presence of the researchers was deemed an opportunity to provide information on the speeches delivered at the demonstration. Together, we watched videos showing speeches condemning the closure of borders by Italy and the European community, and denouncing “the Tunisian police state” and “a European Union that is criminal towards migrants”, as Salima had said in the video. Speaking into the microphone of a journalist present, the families’ spokespersons accused the Tunisian and Italian governments of collusion and criminal complicity in covering up the cases of the disappeared and dead Tunisians in the Mediterranean.

In the video that Salima showed us, other mothers spoke out about the sufferings of the fam-

¹⁹ Interview with Rahma, the mother of Salima and the grandmother of Hamid, who was reported missing in the Mediterranean Sea. Monastir, 21/04/2024.

²⁰ For the association’s history, see the following section and the interview with Imed Soltani.

ilies: “My son has been missing for two years. Since then, I’ve had no news, but some people tell me he’s in a centro (detention center in Italy), others say that he’s in prison, and still others tell me to just perform an Absentee Prayer and start mourning.” In the same video, some of the families claimed to have been looking for their children and mobilizing since 2011.

Salima’s video is a report broadcast on the Tunisian state-owned Al-Wataniya (National) 1 and 2 TV channels, dated April 18, 2024. But for Salima, this broadcast is derisory, because it is not relayed by organizations, and because political leaders, led by the country’s presidency and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, are “turning a blind eye.”

“My son is a sailor. He worked on a boat. The day he disappeared, he left with four other sailors. The others came back, but not him. All they tell me is that my son wanted to get to Pantelleria and that he had jumped off the boat near the island. An Italian woman who works in a detention center in Italy confirmed to me that she had seen him among the people in the center. I’ve been trying to get hold of her to find out more, but she refused and will no longer answer my calls (...) when I checked the dates, I found that there were seven other people who disappeared during the same period, they had left Hergla and there has been no news of them to date. I’ve met their families. Sometimes I would tell myself that maybe my son drowned, but then I’d soon start telling myself that it can’t be true: he is an excellent swimmer”.

Interrupting, the grandmother says: ***“I’ve been teaching him to swim ever since he was a child. We went to the seaside every day, because the beach is right in front of our house.***

I made sure he learned to swim. One day, he came home all blue: he swam over 20 km because he’d got angry with his mates while they were off fishing, and jumped into water and swam home. I cannot believe the drowning story.”

Salima is keen to emphasize the link between the premises and her son’s story: “I have three apartments here that I used to rent out, but which I haven’t used since Hamid disappeared.” Salima’s apartments remain closed, because for her, the rental business is inseparable from visitors, mainly tourists who are drawn to the region’s beaches: the same beaches that revive her suffering and remind her of her son’s disappearance. Later, she would confide that she can no longer stand the sea, and that she can barely take a shower, such is the extent to which contact with the water exacerbates a trauma she has been enduring for over three years. This is evidenced by the medication she shows us as soon as we arrive: “I have been falling asleep and waking up using this medicine ever since my son disappeared”.

The agony of disappearance is described by Salima as the result of a situation of unbearable ambiguity surrounding the truth. Very often, the families we meet would insist on this major claim, seemingly simple and ordinary, yet constantly denied: “We want to know whether they’re dead or alive.” Frequently, they would add, “If only someone would confirm their death, I’d be relieved.”

Salima's situation serves to illustrate that of the families of the disappeared, torn between the hope of finding a proof of life and the desperation of knowing about the practices of burial without identification of the bodies, or the disappearance at sea and on the roads. Distress and trauma are rooted in the official denial of these situations, where the "need to know the truth" is of the utmost urgency. The "truth-telling" and the "official"²¹ attitude of the state take on their full importance here, since the recognition of life or death is not only a bureaucratic and symbolic monopoly of the state - such as the death certificate, which opens up rights and solves essential problems, such as those relating to inheritance - but also constitutes a concrete state action.

In essence, it's a practical awareness that families are reinventing through investigations and mobilizations: they are putting the state on public trial, demanding recognition of life or death. This trial is part of the questioning of governments about one of the fundamental functions of the modern state: the management of the population and precise knowledge of its situation. Over and above this interpretative reading, however, it is the practical intelligence of the families that is evident in their denunciation of the state's failure to ascertain the life and death of the disappeared.

They are calling for concerted action, including research and DNA sampling of the mothers, in order to collaborate with European governments and neighboring countries where clandestine departures have taken place and where boats have run aground. They are also calling on authorities in bordering countries (Libya, Italy, Spain, etc.) to verify the conditions in prisons and holding centers.

Such practical demands appear to be the only way to regain dignity, recognize the right to a decent burial, repatriate bodies buried anonymously, and decently mourn the dead. A sister tells us about her brother, a Moroccan young man, supposedly dead and buried in Tunisia: "I just want to repatriate his body close to home, to the village cemetery near Settât, so that he's not just another figure thousands of kilometers away. I want to visit his grave, I want to pay homage at his grave. Without that, our family will remain the way we have been since he left, sick, divided and sad"²².

To these families, this is a fundamental recognition, which implies the accountability of border-closing measures. It also offers the prospect of a counter-discourse on the recognition of victims, compensation for families, and the decriminalization of immigration.

The politics that families inform and practice find their *raison d'être* in the subjective experience of injustice and social denigration, while at the same time intersecting with the contestation of a political order that refuses to recognize the most fundamental emotions²³: mourning, memory, burial, responsibility for information about the death, as well as questioning responsibility for death and disappearance. By demanding the right to the truth about their children's fate, the families we met unveil - and denounce - the visa policies that are directly responsible for these deaths, and show the immediate reality - anchored in social misery, of situations of political and administrative repression, which are fueling risk-taking on the European border.

When sociologists tackle a subject as vast as "migrations in the Mediterranean"²⁴, the suffering and contentious politics of families are often omitted from the study, even though they are central to

²¹ Bourdieu, Pierre, *On the State. Lectures at the College de France 1989-1992*, Seuil editions, Paris, 2012.

²² Interview with Basma, in Settât (Morocco), 04/01/2025.

²³ Amadio, Nicolas; Sakhi, Montassir, "Unravelling emotional dynamics in violent extremism: injustice, loyalty and solidarity in (dis)engagement trajectories", *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, pp. 1–24, 2024 doi: 10.1080/17539153.2024.2430137

²⁴ , C. Schmoll, H. Thiollat and C. Wihtol De Wenden, *Migrations en Méditerranée (Migrations in the Mediterranean)*, CNRS éditions, Paris, 2015.

the questioning of the modern migratory political order. This dimension, far from being peripheral, is in fact one of its fundamental elements. Similarly, when they look at “public mourning”²⁵ and the “families of the disappeared in mourning and struggle”²⁶, they are frequently content to describe what fits into a repertoire of legitimate action, without questioning their own responsibility in the face of tragedy. By limiting themselves to a sociology of social movements, they tend to fixate on discourses structured by organizations, representatives and whistle-blowers, often reduced to an aestheticization of reality and a detached neutrality. Capturing a politics of intimacy and indignation, this approach ignores the complexity of mobilization and the processes that result in public demonstrations, as much as in their interruption.

And yet, when we go into the homes of families - including those taking part in Commemorations²⁷ - we observe that the political discourse extends beyond the framings of the organizations and is taken up by specialized sociologists who study the phenomenon from the prism of public policy in the North. Studies that focus on the “politics of mourning” and memory in the context of commemorations and public demonstrations tend to focus on the visible image of a mother mourning her child, but fail to retrace the trajectory of the invisible, perennial struggle that pervades the family from the time of the disappearance until the border crossing. By isolating and aestheticizing the phenomenon, these studies focus on the work of civil society associations, reducing solidarity to a sectoral, fragmented and consequently depoliticized approach. At best, specialist researchers are content to focus on short-term solidarity, without daring to explore the long and difficult path taken by families. They are peripheral observers, waiting for the epilogue of a tragedy, mediated by associations or cause entrepreneurs, instead of assisting these policies in their genesis and development.

And yet, in our meetings with the families, they would not only tell us about the challenges of mobilization, but also about a description and criticism of a social and economic situation that is rarely reported by specialists.

We shall summarize the families’ warnings in three situations, illustrated by extracts from our interviews with mothers of the disappeared who have tried to penetrate Fortress Europe. A fourth situation - that of political commitment - will be explored at the end, through an interview with a leader representing the families’ struggle against aggressive borders.

a. Commitment in the midst of a lack of support and care

An initial warning from families concerns how they perceive mobilization and its urgencies. They are looking for concrete answers, while belonging to a different temporality than that of the world of militancy, yet with an absolute motivation to uphold the fervor of the struggle.

Families perceive any outsider with academic credentials as a lifeline, a moral crutch enabling

²⁵ Carolina Kobelinsky, Filippo Furri, *Relier les rives. Sur les traces des morts en Méditerranée* (Connecting shores: Tracing the dead in the Mediterranean), La Découverte editions, Paris, 2024.

²⁶ Bisiaux, S., Costa, M. and Zagaria, V. (2023). Familles de disparu.e.s en deuil et en lutte : aperçus des deux derniers moments de CommémorAction en Tunisie: Commémorer et agir contre les frontières meurtrières (Families of the disappeared in mourning and in struggle: glimpses of the last two moments of CommemorAction in Tunisia: Commemorate and act against deadly borders), *Afrique(s) en mouvement*, N° 6(2), 87-91. <https://doi-org.gorgone.univ-toulouse.fr/10.3917/aem.006.0087>.

²⁷ Amira Souïlem, « Tunisie : “Commémor’action”, hommage aux morts sur les routes migratoires », RFI.fr, 06/02/2023

them to share their pain, often magnified by a sense of guilt: “Have we done all we can do to find our son/daughter?” is the question that gnaws at the families we meet. The researcher is often seen as a “journalist” or a figure close to the state, a scholar with access to the magical, cold and cruel world of power. This power is often associated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Head of State, the governments of neighboring countries and international associations and organizations active in the field of rescue and identification. When a foreign researcher is a citizen of a northern country, they are seen as a potential ally, particularly in helping to find their children in prisons, camps or morgues in bordering European countries (Spain and Italy, in this case, in the western Mediterranean).



This opportunity to reopen “files” for tracing the disappeared is seized regardless of the period coinciding with the researcher’s arrival on the families’ doorstep: at the beginning of the disappearance, several years afterwards, in the presence of suspicions of a death foretold, or in situations of conflict and rifts with other families, disillusionment with human rights associations, etc. This quest demonstrates the steadfast determination of families to organize and defend themselves, but also the structural failure of these initiatives, so much so that states in the South deny the disappearance as a major problem in the public sphere and in term of policies.

The long journey towards the creation of political pressure groups, epitomized by the families of the disappeared, can be explained in part by the denigration and criminalization of the category of “clandestine [immigrants]”. These attitudes are rooted in North-South relations of domination, which researchers often struggle to address in their academic work. One Moroccan mother describes her experience as indicative of what is happening to all families:

“I no longer trust the associations. They’ve done nothing with our files except take photos without even disseminating them. We the families have been treated like people who have leprosy. Where are women’s rights? Do we count as women or not? We are women who do not matter. The women who matter are those with means, a good position, and a good job. So I want you to come and see for yourself why my son has risked his life at sea. Come and see the misery in which I live: no water, no electricity. I don’t even have a housing certificate, because as far as the authorities are concerned, this isn’t housing, it’s a slum. I receive no help with anything. I’ve had enough of mobilizing, but if you give me your word of honor, if you tell me that you’ll help me find out the truth, that you’ll do what you can, then I’ll agree to tell you my story (...) We need to help the families to come together and claim their rights. At the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, they trade on our weakness (dou’f). Mothers are not given any guidance.”²⁸

We personally witnessed this mobilization and the authorities' denial. We accompanied some thirty parents from the four corners of Morocco to demonstrate in front of the Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, after having experimented with several individual approaches (complaints, missing persons reports, requests for intervention with the Royal Cabinet, letters addressed to various institutions, etc.). We joined these mothers on November 26, 2024 in a mobilization in which we also spoke out. It was the fifth of its kind, bringing together mainly mothers. Some of them spent the night in bus stations, unable to afford a hotel room.

Inside the Ministry's new annex building, the instructions were clear: close the doors, wait and avoid all contact so as not to further infuriate the families. As movement inside the building waned, we approached the entrance to try to contact an official. The same pattern would be repeated: an official, refusing to disclose their name and position, would ask the mothers to go to the kiosk across the street to print out a missing person report form, have it legalized at the nearby sub-prefecture, and then return to submit it. For the families, this strategy was simply a time-saving measure. The more experienced mothers shredded the form on the spot, while the less desperate ones simply filled it out, knowing perfectly well, as they themselves put it, that it would end up in the ministry's dustbin.

As for us, we warned by the local Caïd present on site: "Beware, this is an unauthorized demonstration, it could cost you dearly if you persist on coming back." Avenues of appeal were few and far between, but together with the families, we decided - at least for the file opened on November 26, 2024 - to resume the demonstration and improve our organizing by collaborating once again with associations and lawyers.

In other cases, the families we met declined to see these collective actions as an end in themselves, or as a necessary struggle against borders which, despite their presence in the wider background, are of little concern to them, given the more pressing need to find out the truth about the disappearance. These families invite us to follow them in their negotiation process, free from any spectacular mobilization. On an individual level, it's a concrete struggle aimed at tangible results. In Morocco, we have accompanied many families in their efforts to report a disappearance to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to request contacts to investigate information painstakingly collected by relatives, or to discreetly question officials who refuse to take on "these files".

For many, collective mobilization is perceived as a last recourse, an action on the verge of despair after the collapse of negotiations and the demeaning, irresponsible silence of the administration and the ministry. Politicization, in this context, does not commence with collective mobilization structured by organizations; rather, it is rooted in the intimate conviction of defending the life of a child, victim of a border war and a social misery well documented by first-hand testimonies. When families are worn down, faced with a cause that finds no relay and their rights overlooked by a state neutralized in its relationship with the powers imposing the border, disengagement is often no more than a truce. A mother's guilt, desire and unshakeable love for her missing child inevitably rekindle the flame of struggle. Here's how Salima in Tunisia describes these forms of commitment:



Montassir : Are any families trying to band together in associations?

Salima : I'd like us all to come together and defend our children, that's what I told the families. A hundred [people] are much better than ten. We must unite as one. There are plenty of disappeared people. Look at what happened in Zarzis, but the President never raised the issue. The families demonstrated, but they were tear-gassed and banned from demonstrating in front of the Presidential Palace. I myself was forbidden to go in front of the said palace; I even attempted to approach it three times. As a result, some of the mothers were exhausted and lost heart (*berdet*), others didn't have the means to pay for transport, and one was waiting for her son to call and ano-

ther said “what do you want me to do” or “maybe our president will bring our children back to us”. Nothing happened, however, either on the part of the President or anyone else.

Wael : *Political parties should have supported the struggle of families. There are Imed and the forum who are trying...*

Salima : *Exactly. Apart from them, there aren't that many a people. What's more, to establish an association, you need money, you need transport to organize the demonstration and all the logistics required for protests. That costs money, and it's a lot of work. I swear, the protests before the last, I called on the families to come on my own dime, and I was the one who paid for their transport from the different regions to demonstrate in front of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, upon the arrival of the new Tunisian minister [of Foreign Affairs].*

Wael : *Yes, people have lost heart and hope. But you're still holding on, in spite of the hardships.*

Salima : *There are those who fall apart too (yanharou). I get that feeling myself at times and I leave the house immediately in order to put it behind me. I go for a coffee, I travel and then I feel a bit better so I can carry on fighting. When I sit at home and look at the photos, it's rough. At the Ministry, they told me “you've been coming more than anyone else, and you never leave us alone”. I replied: “Imagine it was your son, would you just give up? I didn't come to your house, I came to find a solution for my son. He said, “But you come here every two weeks». I told him, “I'll come every day and every week if I can't find my son. Your job here consists of responding to our requests and to be of service to us, not to make such remarks. I have not come to your house”.*

People just cannot stand the humiliation bestowed upon them by officials, and they never come back. On the contrary, if they shout at me, I respond with more shouting, because, conversely, I believe that they work for us and that they are paid for by our taxes. Even the President of the Republic: we voted for him to serve us and our country, and if you don't shoulder your responsibilities, then get lost! ²⁹

b. Linking the indivisible

A second warning is issued by the families: there can be no separation between the fact of disappearance, material living conditions and the sanction of border closures.

As the preceding interview excerpts reveal, families do not dissociate the phenomenon of disappearance from the material conditions of their own lives. In the testimonies we gather, they retrace their children's journeys, leading us to take a renewed look at our neighborhoods, at state policies towards a youth devastated by misery and repression, and at the new problems of post-colonial societies. The border, in this context, appears as an additional problem, singled out as responsible for the ultimate crime: death or disappearance.

In order to denote such responsibility, families recount the stories of their children, while identifying the actors involved in border management. The families mentioned:

- Imprisonment in neighboring countries after an attempted departure;
- Detention centers suspected of holding their children after a successful crossing;
- Visa refusals prior to the attempted irregular departure;
- Policies turning a blind eye to crossings in regions marred by political tensions, such as the Rif in Morocco or Tunisia during the revolution.

The families blame the border and its measures, while addressing various actors either involved in its implementation (the Red Cross, embassies, ministries of foreign affairs, prison and detention center directors, etc.) or those involved in its contestation (migrant rights associations, lawyers, journalists, researchers, etc.). Despite this plurality of interlocutors, they are confronted with a constant and disheartening silence.

Whenever the issue of "clandestine immigration" is raised in the media, it contrasts sharply with the families' own experiences and testimonies. What's more, families are not invited to address a cause that is first and foremost their own. The issue is then dissociated from reality: it conjures up an indistinct crowd of deviant youth, marked by irresponsibility and lack of education³⁰. Such organized disinformation manifests itself in the scarcity of media coverage of the suffering of the families and the real life of the border and those who cross it. It is further accentuated by a dehumanization that replicates the same clichés in the North: the shipwrecked migrant invading pristine borders; the miserable, tightly packed throng attacking peacekeepers. Ideally, these treatments feature images of children's innocence, submerging responsibility in a welter of actors and indistinct categories such as "war". The whole treatment diverts attention from the problem of the border, the demands of mothers and the need to respond to the urgency of identification. And yet, the families here exemplify how a massive phenomenon in society becomes diluted and then perishes without

³⁰ This analysis dominates the official explanation in times of crisis, see for example, Moroccan News Agency (MAP), "Le rôle de la famille et de l'école, crucial pour prémunir les jeunes contre les incitations à la migration irrégulière (Experts)" (The role of family and school is crucial in protecting young people from incentives to irregular migration (Experts)), Mapexpres.ma, September 19, 2024.

being taken into account, even by research that purports to be critical.

c. An emergency solution to disappearances: DNA and diplomacy

The families alerted us to the urgent need to systematically adopt DNA identification, and for the authorities to take charge of the case as soon as it concerns a disappearance. Likewise, they call for diplomacy on the part of emigration countries to ensure that missing persons' files are taken into account, as well as cooperation with neighboring states to ensure that the case is properly handled in a way that would respond to families' doubts.

Left to their own devices or quoted between the lines that blend the actors of border domination and absolve them of their responsibilities, the families we meet between Tunisia and Morocco are in comparable situations. These similarities stem from the homogenous treatment meted out by Europe and its effects on the Moroccan and Tunisian governments, as well as on the families. In both countries, mothers are becoming increasingly aware of the urgent need to identify bodies by means of DNA testing. And yet, in the midst of the complex and meticulously-organized repression of mobility and reinforcement of borders, no policy has been put in place, either in the North or the South, to ensure a technically uncomplicated procedure: the identification of bodies lying in morgues prior to burial³¹. The mothers we met quickly understood the implicit message conveyed by the failure to set up such a system for collecting, identifying and repatriating bodies: a collective punishment inflicted upon parents and border "penetrators". Such collective punishment transcends the framework of disappearances leading to death. It manifests itself in two types of situations:

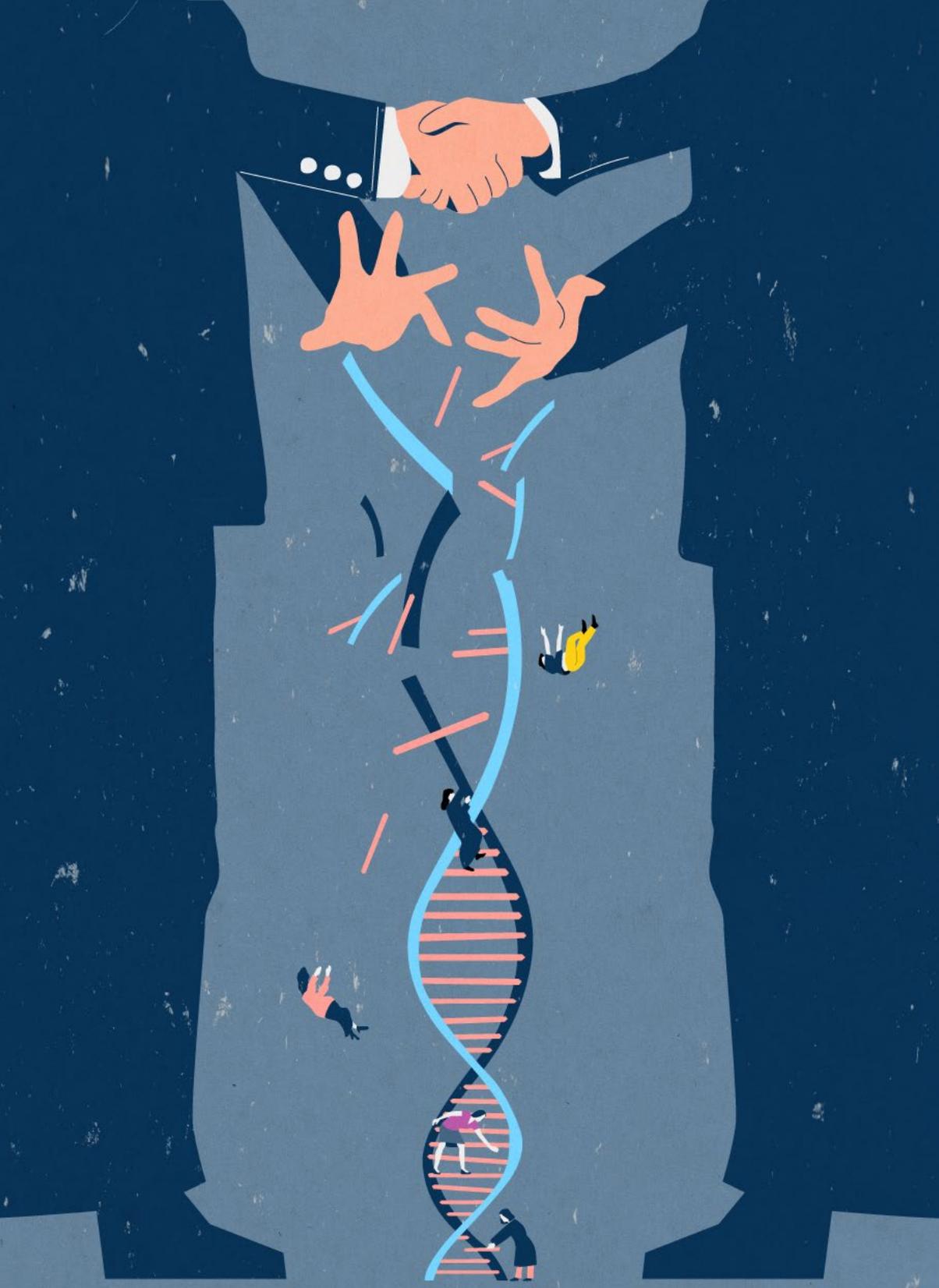
1. **Disappearances potentially leading to incarceration;**
2. **Disappearances linked to shipwrecks, where remains are recovered in the southern Mediterranean.**

In both cases, the authorities opted for a policy of silence, declining to respond to demands for the recovery of the bodies or for the release of extrajudicially³² detained prisoners.

The following are two emblematic testimonials, illustrating the families' practical awareness and knowledge of possible solutions. The first is from a Moroccan mother. Drawing on her own experience, shaped by the disappearance of her son and by the solidarity forged over three years with other families, she underlines the crucial role played by the identification system. She also points out that its absence is the result of a systematic policy of denigrating families and the disappeared.

³¹ This analysis dominates the official explanation in times of crisis, see for example, Moroccan News Agency (MAP), "Le rôle de la famille et de l'école, crucial pour prémunir les jeunes contre les incitations à la migration irrégulière (Experts)" (The role of family and school is crucial in protecting young people from incentives to irregular migration (Experts)), Mapexpres.ma, September 19, 2024.

³² During our fieldwork, we cross-referenced this issue with the detention of Moroccans and Tunisians in prisons in northern Syria and in refugee camps in the same country. Aside from this more or less documented situation, several families are demanding the truth about disappearances allegedly taking place in detention centers in Libya.



«My son's name is Mohamed, and he left Salé (a town near Rabat) on a boat with 24 other young people on September 04, 2022 at 4am. I haven't heard from him since. He called me a few hours before setting sail, but didn't tell me he was going to immigrate. He simply asked me to pray and perform invocations for him.

Listen son, I have been thinking day and night about our problems as families of the disappeared for three years and four months. There is only one answer to our problem. For us, the families whose children left via the ocean or the Mediterranean Sea, the solution is DNA [testing]. We know that there are numerous cemeteries in Spain where migrants and Muslims are buried under numbers, and each number corresponds to a DNA code. But what are our countries, Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia, waiting for? For Spain and Italy to come and take DNA samples from our countries? Nonsense. No, it is our countries' duty to organize the collection and communication of DNA test results.

With no such decision, some families struggle to obtain visas and go to Spain with photos and request DNA testing. They do this free of charge once they arrive in Spain and begin the search. But organizing the trip is time-consuming, expensive and requires a visa. Not all the families can afford it. If the DNA matches the dead, then the families would accept, concede and submit to Allah's will. If not, they can access the names of people in prisons in case their children are incarcerated for offences such as drug dealing. Or they can remain hopeful and continue their search. First and foremost, there must be no doubt about the thousands of unidentified dead. Officials must come up with solutions for the citizens. We aren't mere nobodies; we're mothers and parents in pain» ³³.

The second interview, with a Tunisian mother, relates a similar practical experience. While recounting the circumstances of an irregular departure for Europe, the aforementioned interview illuminates the nature of governmental responses which, in Morocco as in Tunisia and the rest of the emigration countries, absolve themselves of responsibility for the fate of an undesirable population

Rim : *The entire family has become ill as a result of the matter. We're in perpetual agony. I can't sleep. I feel directly affected, particularly seeing my daughter's condition, because I'm the one who raised Samir. He's well-bred. Inchallah they will find a solution following the visit of the Italian president.*

Montassir : *Did he talk to you about "clandestinely emigrating" (harga) to Italy?*

Rim : *Well, he occasionally brings up the subject because he has friends in the neighborhood who have left. But I told him to leave it alone. "What are you going to do over there?" Like all young people, he comes up with this idea from time to time, and then he drops it. And then he'll instead keep busy with the idea of setting up a drugstore. Except lately, I have no idea which way things went. I'm not informed and I'm confused. I don't know if he's alive or dead. I just want to know if he's dead. I did the DNA test in Tunis, though I don't know whether or not they'll send it to Italy.*

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has not done anything. They get a salary and do nothing. Up you go, down you go, but there's nothing. I've been there twenty times. I argued with them, but to no avail.

Montassir : *Have you tried going to Italy to look for him?*

Rim : *I need to go to Italy, but how can I get a visa? What would I tell them the visa is for; should I say that it's to look for my disappeared son? I need at least one association to take up my cause and help me with the procedures. I'm not going to go wandering around out there. My sister lives in Italy. When she went to the police looking for him, they launched a judicial inquiry into her. She was found to be involved in fraud or whatever. You're gone regarding one matter, and you end up involved in another with the Italian police. Their laws are tougher than ours. Particularly with Giorgia Meloni in power (...)*

I told our lawyer that the officials must listen to us. When a mother files a case, she has to be listened to, otherwise every mother will think of an alternative such as suicide or harga (clandestine emigration). We've been to the governor's office, but he won't listen to us (...) the state doesn't pay for DNA testing, and if you do it somewhere else, it won't be recognized! The lawyer asked me how I managed to get the DNA test done, and I told him, "I knocked on the door of the President of the Republic and asked to have it

done!” That’s right, I told the president that apparently my son had gone out with the other corpses and that you must allow me to do the DNA test. I was cunning and I was successful, but even if you file a request to do the DNA test, you’ll be turned down.³⁴

4

POLITICS OF INTERIORITY: INTERVIEW WITH IMED SOLTANI

As we leave the Tunisian and Moroccan coastal towns where we conducted a series of interviews, we cast a different light on their beaches. Through the eyes of the mothers, we captured the somber gaze they cast on the sea. These beaches, seemingly magnificent, can also be the scene of murderous violence and profound grief: transformed into borders by Europe, they turn into hotbeds of anguish accentuated by the inaction of the countries of the South, powerless to negotiate the end of the new colonial frontiers or to tackle urgent problems such as the identification of the dead and the disappeared.

Working with these mothers, we came to understand that research from the North often eschews engaging with them. This distance is grounded in a political stance opposed to that advocated by the families: an approach that reneges on traditional frameworks of representation. The families call for an inquiry into obvious realities, such as the responsibility of states in the North for border violence, and that of states in the South for their submission to new forms of colonization. Their call to tell the truth about borders is an injunction to adopt a radical stance on post-colonial inter-state relations.

Where practical support is lacking, even within families, a number of willing actors are taking on the responsibility of a political commitment. Their objective: to place the suffering of families and its causes at the heart of public debate. In Tunisia, and more widely in North Africa, Imed Soltani embodies an ideal that combines local political commitment with a public voice for ordinary people. And unlike “cause entrepreneurs” from civil society, his commitment stems from personal experience - the disappearance of members of his family, his nephews - and an awareness arising from his journey to Italy in search of the truth. This journey brought him into contact with families and their plight, ahead of left-wing associations concerned with the right to free movement.

Whilst his status as a male minority in a predominantly female setting makes him a singular figure in public discourse, he stands out above all for his ability to convey the statements of collectives of repressed mothers in patriarchal public spaces. Far more than a mere spokesman, he incarnates a direct conflictuality, uncovering the truth of the borders through the collective investigation of the families that constantly fuels his now public discourse. A translator and transmitter of the mothers’ voices, he is also a connector who, through painful experience, unearths the unjustness of the criminal border measures, precisely in 2011 - in the midst of the Arab revolution.

The following interview was conducted in Tunis, in a café on Avenue Habib Bourguiba, an emblematic meeting place for the revolutionaries of 2011, on a rainy night in February 2024. We have already been acquainted with Imed, having met him at demonstrations organized with the families. Our mutual commitments against the borders are published on social networks, which link academic and political perspectives. Furthermore, Imed knows Morocco - the country of origin of one of our two interviewers and the second location of our investigations - thanks to a network of Moroccan families following the news from Tunisia. These families follow in the footsteps of their disappeared children along the routes they took.

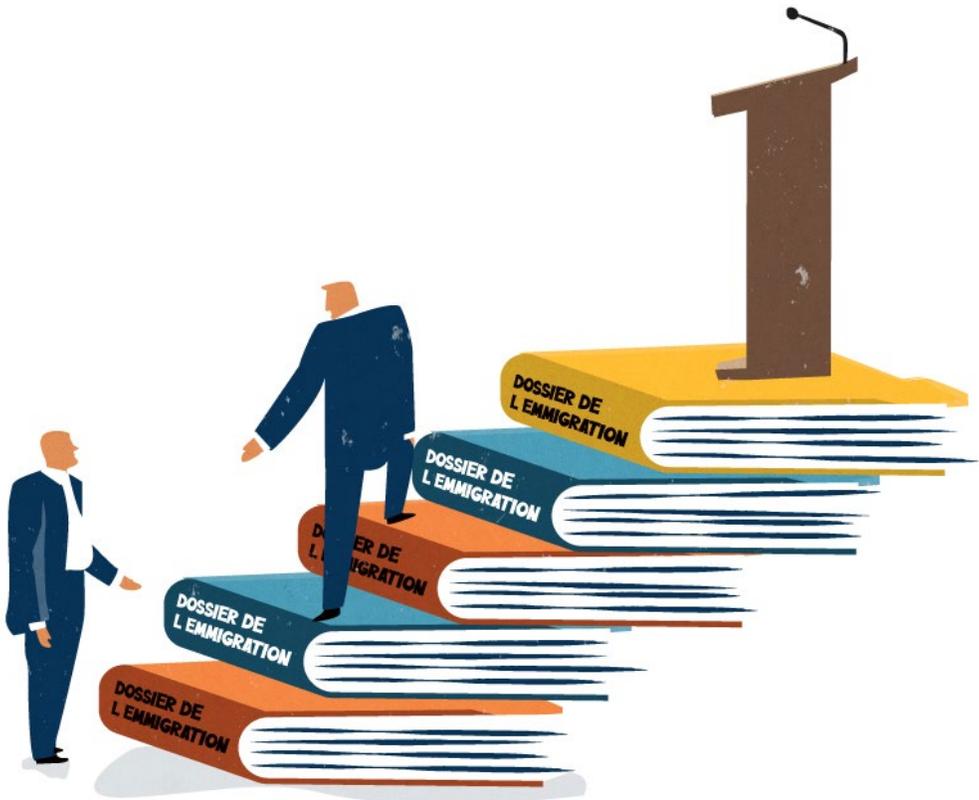
In this restitution of the interview, we have chosen to present Imed’s words as they are ex-

pressed, without embellishment or interpretation. The interview is sufficient in itself to retrace the itinerary of his trajectory, the formulation of his commitment, and the resulting policies. We have divided the interview into eight sections, tracing the rise of a singular political thought in the Maghreb's political spheres. This thinking, as we understand it in the context of formerly colonized countries confronted with the impacts of borders, transcends the sole cause of families and the bodies they seek. Rather, it invites us to think of the border as a new mode of domination. Through its multiple measures and the effects it produces within society, the border is revealed as an instrument of war conceived by former colonial centers, aimed at disciplining, domesticating and immobilizing populations and vast territories deprived of access to a humanity that regards itself as superior.

4.1

INTERVIEW WITH IMED SOLTANI

‘THE SOLUTION TO IRREGULAR IMMIGRATION CONSISTS IN A MOVE BACK TO REGULAR IMMIGRATION.’



The spring of 2011 and the need for political «organization»

Imad : I'm Imed Soltani, president of the Une Terre pour Tous (UTPT) association. But it's with great reluctance that I'm presenting myself as president of an association, since deep down I'd have liked to be an activist without going through an organization, because I'm just volunteering for a humanist cause. I believe that this is a humanist issue, far removed from all politics. And this is an issue that needs to be tackled in a humanistic

way, rather than by one-upmanship. Nevertheless, we had no choice but to organize into an association. For me, the name of this association is its very *raison d'être*. And to be able to operate in Tunisia and abroad, we are regrettably required to obtain a legal status. We became legally established in 2018, although our struggle actually dates back to 2011.

I have two nephews, my brother's sons, who have been missing since 2011. This is the reason why I joined this struggle. Indeed, I had an idea about irregular immigration prior to the Revolution, but we weren't allowed to demonstrate or speak out. Following the revolution, and when my nephews disappeared, I started to do my research, and I found out that there are unheard-of crimes. Before 2011, we knew nothing about border politics. Quite the contrary: we thought the European Union was a bedrock of democracy, human rights and other values. For this reason, together with the families [of the disappeared], we demonstrated several times in front of embassies and state institutions in 2011: our concrete objective was to leave for Italy to look for our children.

Speaking out: voicing the pain of families

Imed: I wasn't yet familiar with these files. Nor did I know that there were politicians both in and outside Tunisia who abused and exploited this issue. We have come to understand that the immigration issue is a "business" for numerous actors. Prior to that, we were unaware that "humanity" was a worthless term. Experience had taught us that. After lobbying, in January 2012 I managed, along with four other families, to set foot on Italian soil to conduct a search. In reality, the Tunisian state sent us to Italy simply to dampen our pressure and wrath.

Upon our return to Tunisia, we learned that our so-called diplomatic commission had no authority to search for the disappeared. We were in Palermo, and the Tunisian consulate there had taken us in. The truth is, when I got there, I did not keep quiet. I tried to voice the pain of the families. We therefore organized a sit-in in Palermo and pressured the consulate to arrange appointments for us at Italian detention centers. We went there carrying photos of the disappeared Tunisians. We were then asked to return to Tunisia. One mother objected: "How can I come to the country where my son is buried without being able to locate his grave? There's no way I can return without my son's remains". And thus began our journey of struggle.

We came to realize that Tunisia had no inclination to seek out the truth. So we surrounded ourselves with militant Italian associations such as Arci and researchers like Ferderica Sossi, who were supportive of us. We demonstrated and filed a complaint in Rome against the Italian state. We presented our photos and videos of people who had arrived in Italy and then gone missing. Although we thought this would trigger searches and investigations, nothing did.

I spent around eight months in Italy during this trip, searching for disappeared people in detention centers. On 06/09/2012, there was a disaster: a boat with 136 Tunisians on board. It arrived at the small island of Lampioné, near Lampedusa. The boat reported its position to the Italian coastguard and declared itself in distress. The Italian navy and a plane then made their way to the migrants, but did not proceed with the rescue. The hope of the guards was that the boat would run aground and everyone would die, leaving all info forever silenced. But 56 of the 136 Tunisians on board managed to swim to the island's shores. In their testimonies, none of them knows how they got there: they say it is as if it was an Allah-sent miracle. But they all say that the Italians let them sink. 79 Tunisians died when they could have been saved. In Italy, I saw the controversy in the media surrounding this scandal. Having decided to return home, I was certain that Tunisia would do nothing to find its children, and that Italy was an even more criminal state than I had begun to uncover. Italy was taking advantage of our country's weakness. There was a glimmer of hope on the Tunisian side, as Marzouki, President at the time, undertook the initiative of joining the families in sailing out to sea and throwing flowers in commemoration of the memory of the disappeared.

Once the Tunisian authorities approached the Italians about the rescue, the latter blamed them for failing to monitor the borders. When the Tunisians set up a commission and went to meet the 56 survivors in Italy, the survivors refused to take photos or even talk to the Tunisian ministers and officials: "You must bring us back our dead and disappeared friends, instead of taking photos with us", they chided.

«Why did the Mediterranean become a veritable graveyard for migrants?»

Imed : I therefore returned to Tunisia and met some of the families of the new 79 people who had disappeared in this tragedy, and they signed authorizations for me to represent them: I then returned to Rome and lodged a new complaint for failure to assist people in danger. It was the feeling and discovery that there is injustice and despotism (istibdad) when it comes to this issue. I reflected on “why is the Mediterranean a graveyard for migrants”, based on my experience before and after the revolution, and I realized that this was linked to border policies first and foremost. Border policies are what have created this reality of death. Which is why, upon my return to Tunisia, I founded an association that I named “Terre pour tous” (“The Earth for Everyone”). For there is no solution to death and disappearance unless the earth is accessible to all. It bears this name because we are fighting for the Earth to be for everyone. All our struggles are focused on supporting the families of the dead and disappeared. We defend the rights of those whose bodies have been identified in Italy to be repatriated for burial here, close to their families. We are confident that it is because of the borders that these people have died, and we are keen to be armed with leverage to deal with this situation. When I say “to be armed”, I surely do not mean to sound like one of those militarists who wage war and ravage the people of Gaza, nor do I want us to have the weapons of the colonial powers, rather, to be armed is to reveal to the world the reality of borders. To expose what we have inherited from these murderous policies.

This is similar to the case of those families you met. They are victims of EU policies. And we must account for that. Thanks to our struggles and our commitment, 15 days ago we successfully repatriated six bodies of Tunisians who drowned near Italy and were buried there. Success was due to the pressure we put on the Italians to dig up three bodies and repatriate them, along with the other three (who had not yet been buried). We came up with a slogan that we used against Italy: “Sono persone, non numeri” (They are people, not numbers). We want to show Italy and the EU that these 6 dead Tunisians were simply unknown figures at home: yet, when we brought them back to Tunisia, each of the dead was survived by hundreds of people who attended the funeral. Each of the six funerals was attended by hundreds of families, friends and loved ones. Each of these dead had a first name, a surname, and a story. To bring their bodies back to their families is a victory

for us, although we do want to convey to the world that “this is what we have inherited from your criminal policies (emphasis added)”. We must prove that the policy which has existed since the very day Europe set up its borders is a veritable unannounced war against migrants. It’s a criminal policy that does not respect international human rights conventions.

(I apologize for being too emotional speaking of this matter: raising it makes me feel as if I’m slipping back into an illness. I have been sick with this issue. I could tell you that I was seeing a psychologist, because as I told them, I do not experience this issue as if I were just [a member of] an association. Quite the opposite, these cases have become deeply entrenched in my life. This is undoubtedly a problem, since it affects my entire existence. These cases have thrown up a number of problems for me, and perhaps I won’t be there the next time you return to Tunisia, as I have been opposed to my state (country) for so long; today in particular, with what’s happening to the sub-Saharan migrants in Sfax).

“The borders are a wellspring of demise”

The plight of sub-Saharan migrants is something to be ashamed of. We are ashamed of the way these migrants are treated. And we as Tunisians are deeply saddened. Yesterday, they burned their tents. Such treatment is being carried out to please Europe.

Montassir : Yes, it’s a disgrace, in all our countries. I agree that few people consider the border itself when discussing these matters.

Imed : Indeed, at our association, we realized back in 2013 that the crime lies in the border itself. The border itself brings death. And even back then, we proclaimed that “the Earth must be for everyone”. Open these borders for free movement. Fast forward to 2024, the same problematic situation is growing worse, with the same victims.

Montassir : Have you considered other alternatives? A time-limited visa, for example?

Imed : Yes, I do recall those days when borders were open. I left and I returned. However, I would like the people of Europe to consider this one point: when we call for borders to be opened and for the Mediterranean to no longer be a graveyard, I don’t mean that I hope my compatriots will

depart. Rather, I wish to point out to the peoples of Europe that if you are having problems today with irregular migrants (ghayr annidamiyin), it is because of the very borders you have put in place. Why, you ask? Because the reason these Tunisians prefer to stay in Europe is because they're not free to return home. Indeed, it is due to the fact that they are not free to move around as they please. In other words, they are unable to travel back and forth.

*I'm not addressing politicians here, for politicians exploit this issue, turning it into a marketing and negotiating tool, thus deceiving their own people. This is why I'm addressing these people to say that **"the solution to irregular immigration lies in a resumption of regular immigration"**. As I see it, this is what will enable us to reduce the number of crimes committed by migrants, whose only choice is to resort to illegality when pushed into irregularity. These are crimes for which the border is responsible.*

Montassir : *Urgent solutions such as DNA identification and the repatriation of bodies are not widely applied in our countries. How do you deal with this issue, and how did you proceed in the case of the six repatriated bodies?*

Imed : *Quite frankly, it's only through long experience that we've been able to take unofficial steps to achieve this. Because the Tunisian state has never had the will to repatriate them. It was under pressure that it gave in, and it was then that we came to understand how the system really functioned. Prior to repatriating the aforementioned 6 bodies, we had already brought back others. We had hoped that there would be an administration devoted to dealing with these cases. Unfortunately, the State refused. So families started calling our association "Terre pour tous" every time there's a drowning or a disappearance incident. One thing you need to know is that the police themselves are against migration policies. Although I do not wish to reveal everything in this regard, for I do not wish to cause further problems, you should at least know that there are police officers who are demanding access to the bodies of their children and loved ones: indeed, among those who have disappeared at sea and among those who have been buried in Italy, there are the loved ones of the Tunisian coastguard and of security officers in general. After all, they share the same problems as the rest of the people. For this reason, I express a degree of solidarity with them in my speeches. I admit that my speech is political, because there are several police officers who contact me and provide me with the files of their disappeared relatives and children.*

Now, regarding how we proceeded with [repatriating] the six bodies; I was contacted by the families of six disappeared people. In parallel, friends in Italy who knew of my involvement called to tell me that the Italian coast-guard had just found six bodies off the coast. We immediately mobilized the families and headed to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to stage a sit-in and declare that we believed it was our children who had been found. We then sent a letter written and signed by the families to the Tunisian consulate in Palermo. A case was then opened and the Ministry was obliged to send the DNA samples of the six families looking for and demanding their children. Pressure then mounted, as several of our friends from civil society were able to reach the morgue or make contact with the coastguard, who took photos of the corpses' faces, and some of the families here recognized the bodies. However, as I am sure you are aware, one does not have the right to repatriate the body, or for it to be considered as belonging to the family, even after recognizing the face. For as they say, face recognition is not scientific. So we sent DNA samples from six mothers - it had to be the mothers. These tests are then sent to the judge in charge of the case. They (the judge) would then hand them over to the Italian police, and they would compare them with the six bodies that had been found. The tests turned out to be positive. Afterwards, they turned over the bodies to us.

We conducted all these operations without any political will or coordination on the part of our State. In general, when drowned people are recovered by the Italians or when bodies arrive in Italy, the State does nothing to initiate an identification procedure. The associations and the families are the only ones to mobilize and commit themselves to exerting pressure. They would initiate contact with us, and we would mobilize to find their children.

We are also experiencing other challenges: several families are currently contacting me from Syria. There are several nationalities: a felucca (Translator note: felucca is a traditional wooden sailing boat with a single sail used in the Mediterranean) left Libya and overturned off the coast of Zarzis. Some people were saved, but 19 people died. Most of them were Syrians. Now the families of the 19 dead are calling me for help. However, the problem is that I am unable to help this many people, since whenever I approach the security services, I have to ask them to provide me with photos, but I am told that as I am not a family member, I cannot have access to them. They ask that the families be present and that they take the samples and compare the DNA test results. I then suggested that the families do as we had done, and send their DNA samples via the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. But the Syrian families unanimously replied, "The Syrian regime forbids us to say anything, least of all regarding this highly politically charged issue".

«I am also advocating for the establishment of a center for the collection of data and firsthand accounts from families.»

M: *Is there an office at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Tunisia that deals with such matters? Some families have told me that there is an official assigned to this task.*

L: *Well yes, basically it's an office for relations with Italy. After all, there are offices within the Ministry that deal with relations with each country. By the way, it's not an office specializing in cases of the disappeared. Rather, it handles all aspects of the relations with Italy.*

It should be noted, however, that prior to the current president's ascension to power, a major step had been taken with the establishment of the State Secretariat for Migration and Tunisians Abroad³⁵, culminating in the setting up of an office dedicated to the file on the disappeared. At that point, we began to compile a census and were able to identify 501 documented disappeared persons. We were active both here and in Italy, and I vividly recall taking part in the march for freedom from Strasbourg to Brussels on foot in 2014. We marched that entire distance alongside civil society associations. We subsequently organized demonstrations in front of the European Parliament. From then on, it was in my view a struggle [harb/war] waged against the EU. Spanish Green MEPs came to meet us during the demonstrations and asked for my file, which included several families of the disappeared. A year later, they got back to me. They pointed me in the right direction: they told me that there was an office dealing with the file of the disappeared within the Italian Ministry of the Interior in Rome. And so I headed to Rome, and I made an appointment and we had three meetings with the said office. We then returned to Tunisia in 2015 and held several demonstrations. We formed a commission of inquiry that was recognized by the government on June 05, 2015. The families gathered and sent all the files and testimonies, and DNA samples. All these materials were sent to Italy by the commission. However, we have not received any response to date. Italy has not responded. We have since resumed demonstrations on the street, with Naïma and the other mothers you have met. Thanks to that, we were able to meet the Italian vice-ambassador to Tunis. When he met with us, he had no idea I had knowledge of the matter. When he asked what our

³⁵ See, Décret n° 2012-1860, of septembre, 11, 2012, legislation-securite.tn, 11 septembre 2012
<https://legislation-securite.tn/latest-laws/decret-n-2012-1860-du-11-septembre-2012-portant-organisation-du-secretariat-de-tat-aux-migrations-et-aux-tunisiens-a-letranger/>

demands were, I answered on behalf of the families: namely, to reopen all the files of the disappeared since 2011 to date, as well as providing updates and information on new disappearances; with the purpose of gathering testimonies from the new families. Moreover, we have compiled a new list. I was also expecting that we would engage in a dialogue. That, however, had turned out to be tricky. In fact, the vice-ambassador called me asking about those in charge of processing the file within the Tunisian ministries of the Interior and Foreign Affairs, so that he could intercede with them. I opposed this course of action. I'm a patriot, and I refuse to let outsiders intervene on these grounds. I'm capable, together with the families, of voicing anger and applying pressure on my government, but I will not have it done by outsiders. In any case, when he approached Foreign Affairs for cooperation, it was this ministry that asked him to halt the search and collaboration. This is confirmed by our inquiry into the matter. The Italians have since blocked the way to cooperation. We continue to pressure the embassy for a response. We are also pressing the Ministry of Social Affairs, supposedly an interlocutor just like the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. We are currently awaiting their response.

M: *Is the aim to have an administration in charge of dealing with disappearance?*

I: *Whether it's an administration or a commission, the key point is to be able to register cases and set up a DNA bank of the disappeared, be they Tunisians or foreigners. In other words, an administration similar to that in Italy. For in Italy, they have created an information bank on everyone who enters the country, which they continually update, and they have a DNA information bank of all the dead. This is the type of bank we, alongside all the families of the disappeared, need in Tunisia.*

Some families have asked me to resolve their cases, and my answer is that all cases need to be resolved. We need a global solution. I also advocate establishing a center to store data and testimonies provided by the families. This would be an impersonal commission to which people would have access and which would respond to their needs. I sincerely believe that our governments are traitors. For when the files mount up, it is essential to take advantage of them by utilizing them to strike at states such as Italy, and at Europe in general, by showing who's responsible. The proliferation of registered cases means that the EU must face up to its responsibilities. Unfortunately, our countries fail to think along these lines. We see this as a betrayal, but we have no choice but to continue our fight until the human rights enshrined

in international conventions are upheld. After all, we are not demanding the impossible. These are fundamental rights that must be fully guaranteed. No, we are not demanding the impossible. We just insist that rights be respected.

“In Tunisia, there is racism against sub-Saharan migrants.”

***M:** Do other groups show solidarity in ensuring that these demands are met? In particular the left, which hasn't spoken out much on the subject, and the Nahda [party].*

***I:** Well, a few people do, although not that many. As I said, it is a matter of a humanist nature, and so I could not turn it into a business. I must confess, until Kais Saïed, there was a process underway to achieve our goals. It was more or less effective, and official institutions paid us attention. When we called out in the street and organized sit-ins, there were those who listened and heeded our grievances. Some even approached us. Admittedly, it wasn't a giant step, but it was significant nevertheless. I mean, creating a State Secretariat for Immigration is important. And the fact that they set up an information bank on 501 disappeared persons was a positive step. Today, however, we're drifting away from all these achievements. Nowadays, our words fall on deaf ears within the State. You referred to the left, well, anyone who speaks the truth amongst the left and other groups is put in prison these days. Everybody is in fear, and all demonstrations are starting to be criminalized.*

The current president has determined to be the only one to speak. He fancies himself the sole bearer of logic. He has created Law N° 54, criminalizing those who dare to speak a truth that runs counter to him. Yet I fear nothing as I defend this cause. When you hear this gentleman (the President) in other speeches when he's furious, he expresses an entirely different opinion: he would start off by claiming that he's against the EU and the big powers, and so on. Basically, he's selling people illusions, and he's also lying. Real facts expose him, especially when it comes to immigration. How does he act against sub-Saharan migrants at El Amera (a delegation within the Tunisian governorate of Sfax)? What does he say about, and how does he act in the real world? (...)

***M:** Right. It's an injustice.*

***I:** Racism against sub-Saharan migrants is rife in Tunisia today. This ra-*

cism evolved as a result of the President's discourse. This is a catastrophe. Whenever I talk to people, including leftists, they say that "it's because of associations like ours that migrants are being defended and enticed to stay, and that basically they're coming to colonize the country". Can you believe what we've come to? This discourse is a sham. They fail to acknowledge the geopolitical shifts, the wars that are tearing countries apart and driving people to emigrate. What about the Tunisians who emigrate? How should they be treated there?

«Irregular immigration is primarily caused by the denial of visas.»

M: *And then there's the visa issue.*

I: *It's a theft system. In Tunisia, we have the National Authority for Protection of Personal Data, which prohibits the dissemination of personal data in order to protect it. Nevertheless, once you go to the embassy, they collect all your personal information. And yet, in spite of this theft, they deny you a visa. The denial of a visa is the main cause of irregular immigration.*

On Italian TV shows, they often mention illegal immigration, but in reality it's their policies that are illegitimate. Ultimately, however, it's their laws that are illegitimate, as they contradict international laws and conventions. Migrants, on the other hand, exercise their legitimate right to freedom of movement, albeit in an unorganized manner (ghayr mounadama). These visa laws are what started them down the irregular road.

M: *Have you got any links with the families and young Sub-Saharanans?*

I: *I do have links, but it is rather challenging to help them. For the disappeared, what I try to do, as I'm forbidden to act as a liaison for their families, is to post photos on social networks in the hope that they'll be seen by people who can pass them on to their families.*

M: *In your opinion, what is the researcher's duty in this field?*

I: *I'd say it is the duty of the researcher to listen to and promote the views of the (moutadarririn) victims of irregular immigration. Indeed, when civil society in Tunisia or Italy calls for the abolition of borders, the EU and its governments can always counter with a contrary discourse. But when resear-*

chers take on the files of our dead, our families, our migrants, it constitutes a weapon that can be used to refute the EU's discourse. That's what we're exerting ourselves to do: mobilizing all the families with us. I've always refused to speak alone, even though I'm a member of one of the families of disappeared people. It's up to the families to speak out and announce our problems with the border. As I often tell Europeans, "Can you imagine if your children were in a similar situation? It's illogical.

My nephews left on March 01, 2011. This was the height of the Revolution. The borders had become flexible and were now open by sea. Many died. More than 1,500 people are known to have disappeared or died during this period.

«The greater one spends, the greater their chances of eluding death.»

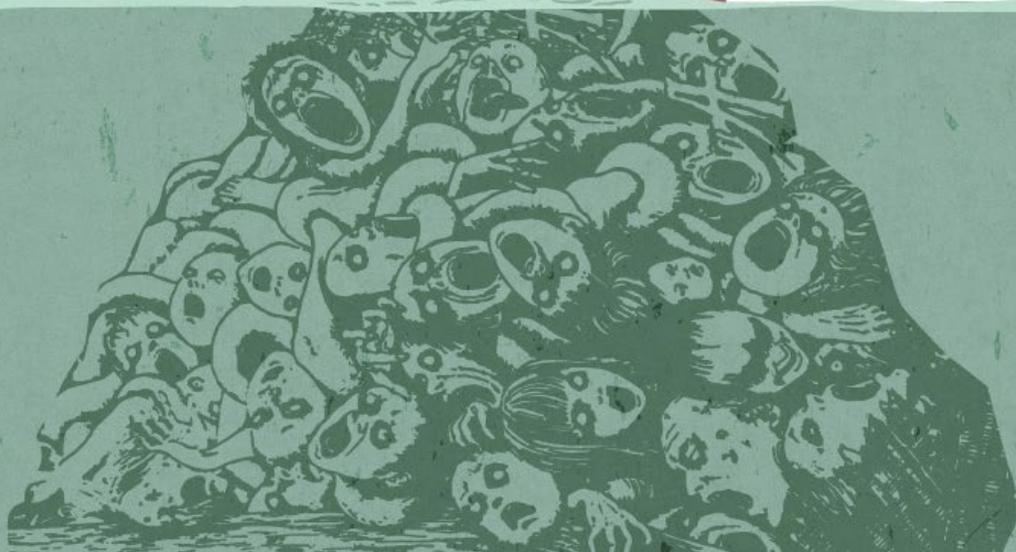
M: *Concerning the logistics of immigration by boat and the price...*

L: *Small metal boats are so affordable and inexpensive that they can cost as little as 1500 dinars. Other, more secure boats can cost 10 or even 15 [thousand dinars]. The more you spend, the more hope you have of evading death. Sub-Saharan migrants, the poor ones, most often take these unsafe metal boats. These boats are death-traps. These migrants are hopeless: facing war in their own countries, racism in ours, and closed borders in Europe.*

M: *And prior to 2011...*

L: *I come from a working-class neighborhood in the Medina quarter of Tunis. I know the people who immigrate and I know how the system induces people to migrate. Apart from the visa, there's marginality, unemployment and the fact that the government is unwilling to shoulder the responsibility. Post-2011, there has been a tendency to blame the families, the migrants themselves, and so on. The Tunisian state never seems to bother asking itself "why are my children «hargin» (migrating irregularly)?" Whereas the reasons for immigration include both internal and external aspects. There are the causes relating to economic disenfranchisement and marginalization, given that a state whose children flee at the risk of death is an incurably irresponsible state. It's a despairing state because it is well aware of the reality of its children dying without engaging in discussions with the EU to halt and end all conventions. The latter are now financing Tunisian navy boats to crack down on migrants and protect Italy's borders. And the people are the ones to pay. Subsequently, there has been a crackdown on our sub-Saharan*

NE VOUS INQUIETEZ PAS CHERS PATRIOTES!
LE DEBARRAS EST EN COURS...



sisters and brothers, simply to do the EU's bidding.

M : *What's the latest news on your nephews?*

I : *When they arrived in Lampedusa, they called us, and we keep a record of these calls. But within a few weeks, there had been no further news. As families, we are convinced that the Berlusconi government of the time traded in our children. Berlusconi went to Lampedusa to reassure the 5,000 inhabitants of the island in the face of the thousands of Tunisians who had arrived. He told the Italians that he was going to rid them of the migrants. He had brought in naval ships and bandits for that purpose.*

M : *Meaning?*

I : *As I delved into the matter for further information, I came across statements by Italian ministers who said that their country was involved in this affair. As far as several other families and I are concerned, we are certain that they have been trading in our children's body parts, and that they've sent others to war, in Libya and Syria. For us, there are no doubts about it. When I returned from Rome, after having failed to obtain an official position, I lodged a complaint against the former Tunisian president [Béji Caid] Sabsi, who had signed an agreement with the Italians when the crime had not yet been solved. I must say that I have lodged several complaints, both here and in Italy, on a number of cases. I follow legal procedures to the letter. There are lawyers in Italy who have helped me, but not here in Tunisia. Although our main partner here is the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES), we prefer to remain unfettered since we do not want any limitations being placed on our actions. Indeed, we do not own a bank account, and therefore we do not accept any money to carry out our actions. We want no funding from the EU. How can I partner with the EU when they are killing my children? Likewise, I reject money and partnerships with ministries in Tunisia, for if they were to give us money, it would be to buy our silence. Furthermore, all the members of the association are families of the disappeared. The families have lost tremendous hope, and so have the people who come to join them, but I shall remain available to work together and campaign jointly for this cause.*

CONCLUSION

The fourth age of emigration, punctuated by conflictual dynamics and tightened controls, highlights the brutal reality of migration policies imposed by the North. Far from being neutral or purely administrative, these policies exert an asymmetrical domination over societies in the South, exacerbating precariousness and inequality. The overall diagnosis that emerges from this analysis reveals the devastating effects of these militarized borders, both on individuals and on post-colonial states, often either negligent of, or complicit in, these logics of control. This observation calls for the reintroduction of a conflictual dimension into the analysis of migration management, by criticizing the power relations that structure it and advocating more balanced and respectful relations between North and South.

In this context, the families of the disappeared hold a pivotal role. Their struggle, steeped in intimate grief and a quest for truth, has been transformed into a confrontational policy towards States. Refusing to bow to the lack of answers, they challenge the inaction of governments in the South, unable or unwilling to guarantee the dignity of their loved ones, even in death. Likewise, they reveal the murderous policies of the North, which is primarily and solely responsible for the deaths caused by the closure of its borders.

These families, bereft of the possibility of mourning, engage in demonstrations, research and demands for recognition of the disappeared. Their struggle is a testament to their will to withstand injustice, while also exposing the failings of states in managing migration issues.

The enriching and empowering narratives of the families demonstrate an inseparable interdependence of the material conditions of their daily lives and their struggle for truth. Contrary to the mainstream discourse that divorces socio-economic contexts from migratory phenomena, the families jointly evoke the desire for the West formed by the closing of the border, misery in the country of emigration and repression. Their commitment stretches beyond symbolic demands to concrete and urgent struggles, such as the identification of bodies by DNA testing, a technically simple but politically disregarded process. Far more than a simple technical appeal, this demand underlines the urgent need for a public policy that tackles the human aspect of migratory tragedies - a policy that, until now, has not existed.

Our interview with Imed Soltani, an emblematic figure in these struggles, epitomizes a bold new approach to representing these issues. At the crossroads of personal anguish and political commitment, his path mirrors the emergence of a singular political thought, forged in confrontation with the realities of borders. By voicing the concerns of Tunisian families and positioning their cause in public debate, Imed Soltani and the collectives he represents denounce the neo-colonial domination perpetuated by European migration policies. Their struggle calls for transnational solidarity and collective mobilization to banish borders that destroy the bodies and mourning of overlooked families.

Thus, this fourth age of emigration is not just a phenomenon of movement: it is a terrain of political struggle, social resistance, and calls for the overhaul of international relations. The bravery

and perseverance of bereaved families and those in search of the truth underscore the urgency of redefining migration policies away from closed borders and forbidden access; not as an instrument of control, more as bridges of dignity. Ultimately, their struggles shed light on a hope: that of overcoming the logics of exclusion and oppression whereby the border becomes the matrix of colonial privilege.