



Why African Migrants Abandon Libya for Tunisia Coasts to Europe

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the reasons why African migrants jettison Libya for the Tunisian coast as a route to Europe. The European continent is currently experiencing one of the most pronounced incursions of refugees and migrants into its borders. These migrants have either left or fled their indigenous habitation to seek for greener pastures in Europe for a myriad of reasons. These reasons vary from issues pertaining to insecurity in the migrant's home country, economic downturn, and loftier academic pursuit etc. A high percentage of these migrants are from the African continent. Until recent events that have changed the regular course of progression, African migrants, particularly those who journey all the way from sub-Saharan Africa have endured the extremely long and horrendous condition of the travelling through Libya regardless of the increased awareness of the dangers associated with the journeys. Usually, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) permits migrants to journey with ease within West Africa all the way up to Niger. However, any attempt to move northward from Niger is tagged as an illegal activity. As such, migrants who make use of that route depend on traffickers and smugglers to make their way to Libya and Algeria. The recent shift in the geographical medium of migration to Europe from Libya to the Tunisian coast calls for attention basically because prior to this period, lots of African natives were tenacious about their agitations to embark on the perilous journey through the Mediterranean. This work is essentially exploratory in nature and it relies on observations, interactions and news items to achieve its objective. The study concludes that the Tunisian coastlines are now preferred African migrants routes to Europe because there are lesser dangers associated with travelling through the routes.

Keywords: African migrants, African natives, Libya, Tunisian coast, Mediterranean, Sahara Desert, Migration crisis

I. INTRODUCTION

Africa is often considered to be a continent that is largely characterized by mass displacement of people and migration. The aforementioned situations are associated with the horrendous condition of living of its inhabitants, internal insurrection and external aggression. There are multiplicities of reasons why the African migrants recline to exiting their respective countries to seek refuge in an entirely different continent. These reasons vary from insecurity, human rights violation and armed conflict that have plagued the African continent. Large populations of African migrants are also known to migrate into Europe to seek international protection on account of ethnic, religious or political persecution due to their sexual orientation or gender identity or to escape different forms of sexual or gender-based violence (Adesina, 2021). Besides these, some African migrants have also been identified to make these journeys in order to reunite with their family members in diaspora. The European continent has long been the most favored destination for the migrants. This perhaps is because of its apparent promise of security and better living conditions. Undoubtedly, Europe is presumed to be host to a lot of opportunities that ranges across several spheres. There is an existing notion in the subconscious of the African migrants that in Europe, a wonderful paradise awaits them (Olawale, 2021). Albeit, this notion may not be entirely true as the European continent can also be identified to be prey to some horrific conditions as well.

The desire of the African natives to escape the unfavorable conditions prevalent in their home country has resulted in them engaging in illegal immigration from Africa down to Europe. Large



populations of African migrants from underdeveloped countries embark on the dangerous journey to Europe in the hopes of experiencing a more comfortable life abroad. Importantly, the backward state of the African continent cannot be tagged to be the singular mono-causal factor that facilitates illegal migration to Europe. The roles played by the traffickers and smugglers who amass wealth from manning the process of migration cannot be downplayed in this regard. In parts of Africa, particularly states in North Africa such as Morocco, Mauritania, and Libya, trafficking African migrants to Europe has emerged a more lucrative venture than drug trafficking (Attir, 2012).

For a number of reasons, Libya is one common route that migrants make use of to get to the Mediterranean Sea which is the most preferred route for illegal immigration into Europe. One of these reasons is the fact that Libya is renowned for her prosperity on one end and its geographical proximity and contiguity to Europe on the other end. In the last two decades, migration from Libya to Europe has skyrocketed. This assertion is true considering that prior to the political tension in Libya in 2011, the boom in wealth from oil trade made the location vulnerable to migration tensions. The discovery of crude oil in Libya in 1957 led to large numbers of migrant workers from North Africa, Middle East and the sub-Saharan Africa in particular coming into the country to be beneficiaries of the wealth that accrued from oil trade. In other words, the economic prosperity of Libya subjected it to intense migration pressure.

Asides getting to Europe through Libya, Tunisia is also another location that African migrants utilize. In recent times, Tunisian smugglers have also offered migrants seeking for a fresh start in Europe a new route to travel on overcrowded boats between the Gulf of Tunis and Sicily (Tarek, 2017). At current, it is gradually unveiling that these illegal migrants now prefer to utilize the new route offered by Tunisian smugglers for numerous reasons all of which will be the central theme of this study.

Due to the constraints that the migrants face in their attempt to get to their destination country, strict economic policy and harsh terrain etc. migrants and refugees from sub-Saharan Africa often pay smugglers and traffickers a huge amount of money to assist them to cross the Saharan Desert to reach Libya or Tunisia and proceed to Europe afterwards by boat. The trip to Europe costs several dollars and yet may take years to complete. So usually, these migrants often remain in hubs along their routes to work to afford the next leg of their trip (Adesina, 2021). This study aims at ascertaining

the reasons why African migrants are gradually abandoning Libya for the Tunisian coast as a route to get to Europe by majorly delving into a comparative analysis of the pros and cons of these two channels of conveyance.

African Migrants and the Libyan Coast

As postulated earlier in this paper, the route from Libya over the years has been one of the most utilized routes for African migrants to get to Europe. For the sake of emphasis, there are three major migratory routes that traverse the Mediterranean Sea from Africa down to Europe. These routes are the Western Mediterranean that leads into Spain, the Central Mediterranean that leads to Italy and Malta and lastly is the Eastern Mediterranean that leads into Greece (Council of Europe, 2019). For the Western route, migrants are from source countries like Gambia, Senegal and Mali whilst from the Central route, migrants from source countries like Nigeria, Niger and Ghana all connect in the Sahel and from the Eastern routes, its sources are from countries like Somalia, Dafur and Eritrea. Whatever route that these migrants make use of, they all converge in North Africa i.e. Libya to be precise, for the sea crossing down to Italy. In years past, this route served as the major route for illegal refugees and migrants seeking to reach Europe.

Of the three migratory routes mentioned in the previous paragraph, the Central Mediterranean route turns out to be the most used. Asylum seekers and migrants all make use of the Central Mediterranean route to get into countries of the European Union illegally but regularly. Some migrants also make use of it to reach other countries outside of Europe.

It is however necessary to mention that in recent years, the sub-Saharan African migrants are gradually abandoning this route for a more preferred location. This development can be ascribed to quite a number of reasons, primary amongst which is the ever-increasing dangers associated with traveling through Libya. The discovery of oil in Libya in 1957 was one factor that largely exposed the state to intense migration pressures. During this period, several migrants from different states came with various skillset and took up occupational positions in the oil industry. Some of them equally engaged in working in the construction and agricultural sectors. As of 1957, the advent of migrants into Libya's economy was considered to be instrumental to its formal and informal development. From the 1970s, the government of Libya under the administration of Muammar Gaddafi adopted an open-door policy that granted these migrants a visa-free entry. Gaddafi



positioned himself as an African leader by establishing the Community of Saharan and Sahelian States (CEN-SAD). This expanded and consolidated the migratory routes that already existed and linked Libya with the Sahel and West Africa. However, by the year 2000 the existent cordial relationship that had been established between the Libyans and the migrants begun to experience strains. The government of Libya perceived the increasing population of the migrants as a threat. It blamed them for the increase in crime rate, disease outbreak and social tension. Unfortunately for the migrants, the change in narrative coincided with the period when international bodies had begun to meddle into the situation of migration. It was around this same year that the European Union began emphasizing on the need to control irregular and illegal migrations.

In September 2000, there was a serious clash between certain Libyan indigenes and foreign workers that resulted in the death of about fifty (50) sub-Saharan. Afterwards, the Libyan government reacted to this development by introducing strict immigration policies. This was after carrying out a serial arrest of migrants by the police after the incident. The government of Muammar Gaddafi which had previously pursued the ideology of pan-Africanism and pan-Arabism now began to liaise with the European government to tackle illegal immigration across the Mediterranean (Adesina, 2021).

In subsequent years, both the Arabs and the Africans in Libya were mandated to own visas. This changed the previous norms on stay and labour which in turn officially made a large number of these migrants illegal and irregular. There so many cases of expulsion of these migrants as a result of these developments. Interestingly, the expelled migrants did not cut across all the foreigners present in Libya. In other words, most of the migrants that were sent packing of the country were sub-Saharan Africans. This suggests that the devastating change could not be primarily associated with the issue of migration but rather the idea of African migration into Libya. In addition, Migrants lost access to essential services such as healthcare, education, etc. the progressive trend culminated in the adoption of a law that combated irregular migration in the year 2010. This law allowed for indefinite detention, forced labour and deportation of those who are considered to be aliens on the Libyan soil (Amnesty International, 2017).

The journey to Libya from other African states and nation is merely a preparatory phase into the journey to Europe in its entirety. According to

Olawale Lawal (2021), a large number of people who envisage making it to Europe end their journey in Maghrebian States where they are compelled to live their lives as slaves, labourers and mercenaries. The most devastating case would have to be that some of these African migrants who leave their home countries in search of a better life end up being prisoners and captives in several Libyan immigration camps. Tragically, majority of the migrants end their sojourn in life there. In some cases, the migrants get forgotten in such camps, never to be seen by their families and loved ones again. In addition, some set of migrants end up being stranded in Libya. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) approximates the number of stranded migrants in Libya to about 1 million individuals. Interestingly, amongst this large of people, only a little above 55,000 are registered under the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (Frank Kuwomu and Louis Donovan, 2019). Some of the migrants become tools in the hands of smugglers and militias.

Without doubts, there is a need to pay attention to the activities of smugglers and traffickers in Libya. Migrants and refugees are often robbed by the people paid to oversee their transportation process. In most cases the African migrants are forced to pay more than they agreed on with the smugglers. The fact that even after getting to Libya, there are numerous checkpoints that have to be crossed always makes it difficult for illegal migrants to get into the heart of the country with ease. As such, the migrants are compelled to journey on a “pay-as-you-journey” arrangement leaving them vulnerable to abuse and trafficking. Children particularly may be forced into begging or theft by the traffickers (Mafu, 2019).

Furthermore, there is a need to proceed in this discuss by stating that the African migrants are not the only set of migrants that engage in journeys to Europe through Libya. A percentage of migrants are from neighboring Arab states that also belong to the Middle East. However, the fact that Maghrebian states and their middle east counterparts have from time immemorial maintained close relations prevent the latter from experiencing similar inhuman treatments that the Sub-Saharan African migrants are exposed to. In other words, what this means is that embedded within the migration policies of Libya are certain Ethno-Racial policies that makes the Libyan route very unfavorable for the African migrants. Traces of racial discrimination and xenophobia can easily be identified in Libya’s immigration policy. There are two sets of rules that are applied in the Libyan migration policies that



bother around the subject of colour and skin pigmentation (Olawale, 2021). Although, these rules may not be formally entrenched but they can undoubtedly be identified in practice. The streets of Libya have become endangered locations for the Sub-Saharan African migrants to thread upon. Usually, the people belonging to this population are often objects of discrimination and severe human rights violations. The Sub-Saharan African migrants are always tagged with the false presumptions of being responsible for crimes, both major and minor, in Libya. As such, they are mostly mobbed in locations like the capital of Libya, Tripoli and its environs. Migrants from the location in focus are always and most times falsely acclaimed to be responsible for crimes committed in Libya. These crimes vary from major offences such as destruction of government properties, murder, kidnaps and terrorism to minor crimes like fraud, petty theft etc. (Olawale, 2021).

Afore is the reason why upon the arrival of African migrants to Libya, there is often a segregation of the blacks from the other immigrants. The African females that are separated often become preys to sexual activities that they mostly never consent to. And usually, there is literally little active effort to advocate for the correction of this misdemeanor. Not to neglect the issue of religion, Libya is supposedly renowned for their strict compliance with religious stipulations as taught by the Prophet Muhammad (SAW). This means that the African migrant who publicly practices other religions contrary to Islam which is the predominant religion in Libya automatically becomes endangered species. Their safety becomes jeopardized by religious bigots and extremist who feel insecure by the presence of anyone who refuses to give in to their own doctrines (Olawale, 2021).

The unfavorable condition of African migrants transiting to Europe through Libya has drawn the attention of some international bodies. One international body that has shown concern for this situation is the United Nations. The organization has called for urgent attention to address the dire situations of migrants attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea and also to tackle the shocking conditions that they are often subjected to in Libya. A UN human rights team delegated to monitor the cases of human rights violation have highlighted that the condition of suffering that the African migrants often go through revolves around a cycle. There are cases whereby the migrants after having gone through one cycle of unimaginable horrors in Libya were left to drift for days at sea but later had their boats intercepted and were returned to

suffer arbitrary detention, torture and other serious human rights violation in Libya, which cannot be considered a safe port for migrants (UN Human Rights, 2020).

The fact that African migrants are new and unenlightened upon their arrival at Libya makes them susceptible to a lot of maltreatment. Some of the ill treatments are facilitated by government officials in Libya who for multiple reasons are not comfortable with the migrants. Another area of conflict is the collapse of business agreement between the smugglers and Libyan immigration authorities but the migrants are usually at the receiving end of this conflict who as a result of the conditions they find themselves have no other choice other than to dance to the tunes of Libyan authorities. It can thus be concluded that the major factors that paves the way for the gradual abandonment of the route in Libya to Europe is associated with the inhuman and unfair conditions that the African migrants are exposed to during the process of conveyance.

The Tunisian Coast: A Preferred Route to Europe

The previous section of this paper discusses the numerous dangers associated with the journey to Europe through Libya. This section will give insight into the reasons why the Tunisian coast has emerged to be a more preferred location to getting to Europe than Libya. Usually, the sub-Saharan African migrants embarkation points are scattered in various locations all around the 1,148 kilometre Tunisian coastlines. The common routes that are used are Bizerte, Mahdia, Sfax, Medenine and Nabeul (Herbert, 2016). These routes serve as the major departure points for migrants seeking to get to Europe through Tunisia. From these points, most vessels that transport the migrants to Agrigento province in Italy land at sites in south-western Sicily.

In recent years, there has been a drastic surge in irregular migration from Tunisia to Europe. Illegal African migration through Tunisia can potentially be proclaimed to be a long-standing phenomenon. As a matter of fact, the act has been a trend since the 1990s where African migrants who seek to get to Europe execute their aim by embarking on the journey through littoral areas in Tunisia. Although, statistics claim that the majority of those who seek to leave Tunisia to Europe illegally are Tunisian indigenes themselves, the truth remains according to Matt (2022) that many illegal migrants (who are not Tunisians) now use the Tunisian routes to cross to Europe. This means that



the few of the existing statistics that tends to negate the idea of numerous sub-Saharan African migrants going to Europe through Tunisia fail to acknowledge the percentage of the migrants who make the journey successful without being noticed. Most African migrants that go through Tunisia aims at getting to Italy either in Sicily or around the Pelagic Islands (Matt, 2022).

It is important to mention that migration to Europe through the Tunisian Coast reached its peak in 2011. Between February and December of 2011, Italy intercepted 27,646 migrants with and unknown number arriving undetected (Frontex migratory map, 2021). This was the period where the Tunisian borders witnessed a collapse during the wake of the revolution and as a result, mass numbers of indigenous Tunisian crossed the country borders to move into other countries.

The reasons for this surge as explained by Matt Hebert are very complex, with no single factor responsible for the rise in departure. However, it can be concluded that these reasons are associated with quite a number of factors that span across both internal and external spheres. It is quite obvious that the collapse of Tunisian Border Control can be said to be one of the internal factors that facilitated the rise of illegal migration. However, this alone cannot be said to be the only reason. There has also been interplay of both social and economic factors. Talk about the worsening economic situation at home, the poor career options available to the common Tunisian indigene, the social repercussions of unemployment, and the apathy on the path of the Tunisian leaders to actively participate in any promising activity that changed the fate of Tunisians and underemployment and the worsening state of the emotions at home. It can hence be said that the fact that the indigenous Tunisians themselves are absconding their nation to European states is at the core of the reasons why sub-Saharan Africa migrants are also taking advantage of the situation to get to Europe utilizing the same route.

The factors driving transit migration by foreigners through Tunisia are more opaque (Herbert, 2022). They are linked primarily with the risks associated with other transit routes in North Africa. For example, the case of Libya, which has been explicitly discussed in the previous section of this paper. In addition to this, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has also had a pronounced impact on the dynamics of sub-Saharan migrants using the Tunisian coast as a means to get to Europe. Firstly, the public health measures that were implemented at the period where the pandemic ravaged the world resulted to significant job loss

amongst the working migrants' population. Secondly, it led to the immigration of migrants from sub-Saharan African neighbours into Tunisia.

The various advantages of the Tunisian coasts must not be undermined. There are numerous opportunities that the Tunisian coast offers the migrants that are not afforded them if they choose to move through the Libya. Importantly, the Tunisian coast opens up the possibility of self-smuggling (Herbert, 2022). In other words, it is possible that a group of these migrants pool their resources together, source for boats, engines and fuel and embark on the illegal journey to Europe on their own. Self-smuggling, also called 'comita' in Tunisia has risen in popularity since the mid-quarter of 2021. This possibility has prompted interest in a large number of African to utilize the Tunisian coast to make their journey to Europe.

It is very pivotal to mention that even with the utility of Tunisian smugglers and traffickers, the African migrants who utilize the Tunisian coast are undoubtedly still at an advantage over those who choose to make use of Libya. This is because unlike Libya where the illegal migrants have to pay huge sums of money and yet may still get to pay more during the journey, the Tunisian coast is a lot more direct and convenient even in the terms of the financial requirements needed to embark on the journey. The price to embark on this journey ranges between TND 2,500 and TND 4,000 which is approximately 916 to 1,465 Euros (Herbert, 2022).

With the Tunisian coast, it is also very possible to avoid increased navy patrols off Lampedusa. As such, the migrants prefer to arrive on the larger island of Sicily where it is easier passed unnoticed (Tarek, 2017). The most obvious reason why the Tunisian coast is a more preferred location to getting to Europe to Libya can be identified in the fact that the penalties that are meted out to the smugglers on one end and the African migrants on the other end is considerably light when compared to the horrific conditions that the migrants who go through Libya face if they are caught. In Libya, even in cases where the migrants have met with all the requirements needed to stay in the country legally, they are indeed still exposed to numerous dangers and life-threatening circumstances and this is not the case with the legal migrants in Tunisia.

For quite a couple of reasons most of which has been examined above, the Tunisian coast has been target of many Africans who seek to get to Europe. These reasons can be summarized under the points listed below.



- The lesser dangers associated with travelling through the Tunisian coast.
- The possibility of Self-Smuggling that the Tunisian coast offers
- Lesser cost of transportation to Europe.
- Less strenuous repercussion on the migrants if they are caught in the course of the journey.

Although there are inherent benefits that the Tunisian coasts provide to the African migrants, it is as well safe to say that some of these benefits only give rise to new confrontations that these migrants are mandated to face in the course of their journey. One of the confrontations deal with the issue of self-smuggling by migrants. The smugglers and traffickers who generate great wealth from engaging in conveying the migrants to their desired destination acts as a stumbling block to the self-smugglers to a far-reaching extent. This is basically because they see the idea of self-smuggling as an idea to truncate their personal gains and as such, these traffickers and smugglers go to any extent to discourage the activities of self-smugglers, even if it involves loss of lives. Depending on what the case is, the smugglers and traffickers may or may not be directly involved in the process of discouraging the migrants from the engaging in self-smuggling.

Albeit, migrating to Europe through the Tunisian coast has proven to be a more promising endeavor. The chance of surviving the process is higher than what it is travelling through Libya.

II. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Africa, though being an admirable continent in recent times is experiencing serious migration cases. Africans from several African states are leaving their lives behind back at home with the intention to go to make a better living and get exposed to a lot more of opportunities in diaspora. Europe seems to be the most preferred location that most of the migrants desire to go. The confronting process of engaging in travelling to Europe through legal means has pushed some of the African migrants to make use of the illegal means to achieve their aim. Mostly, the illegal means is executed through journeying from the African states to North Africa and then crossing over to the Mediterranean then to Europe. In the past, Libya has been the location that the migrants have made use of because of its economic progress and then a myriad of other reasons which have been explained in the course of this paper. However, in recent times the dangers associated with travelling through Libya has

led to the migrants abandoning it for the Tunisian coast which seems to be more safe and promising.

The European Union in a bid to put a halt to the incessant rise to illegal migration has liaised with several authorities of the African States that are concerned. Faced with hundreds of thousands of refugees arriving in countries that belong to the European Union, policy makers of the member states involved have felt the pressure to show a quick reaction. The European Union has delegated a huge sum of money not for the purpose of integrating the migrants into the European countries but rather to address the root cause of irregular migration in African states with the expectation to end that the rate of Africans willing to leave their own countries.

The prospect of a halt in the rate of illegal migration is not feasible. This is because most studies actually reveal that despite that the African migrants are aware of the fact that they can potentially lose their lives in the process of illegal migration, they are still very dogged and dogmatic about their willingness to get to Europe irrespective of the circumstances involved. Some of the African migrants have even coined out a maxim for themselves to show their level of their pursuit to see to it that their intentions are achieved. This maxim is 'Europe or death'. Although the European Union continues to strive and to try everything possible within its reasonable might to put an end to illegal migration, these acts may just be something that Europe may be compelled to get accustomed to. As efforts are being made to make the Libyan strip unattractive for irregular migrations, the Tunisian flank is being opened up and yet other attempts are coming up for Africans to open convenient routes for illegal migration to Europe.

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