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On the discourses of *el harga*: What if the grass is greener on the other side?

By Imen El Amouri¹

Introduction

*“When my dad woke me up in the night with my backpack in his hand telling me that I had to leave, I did not mind. This is not a place to live. I had nothing to lose.” My cousin, Mehdi, is 15; he was born in 2006, and so were my two other cousins. After taking the boat to Lampedusa, he ended up in a facility for unaccompanied children in Rome. The other two boys stayed in our coastal town, Chebba, in Tunisia. The narrative of *el harga* is weighing on them too. *Harga* is an Arabic word widely used in North Africa to refer to irregular maritime migration to a dreamt-of better life, or to overstaying one’s visa in destination countries.²*

The *harga* narrative knows only one truth: Europe is the destination; Tunisia is the just place where you wait to leave. Our village is one of the main hotspots for migration from Africa to Europe. Around Tunisia, it is common for young people to leave and seek a better life in France, Italy, or Germany.

The proximity to Lampedusa—a measly 135 kilometres across the Mediterranean from Chebba—throws kids like my cousins into the arms of a hard-to-resist temptation. But what drives a young student to seek a life far away from home, friends, and family? How can we comb through the different discourses around the choices of *el harga*? Mehdi survived the journey. Other kids on other boats did not. This essay will let my cousin’s story narrate *el harga* from a Tunisian perspective, challenging the hegemonic European perspective on the choice to leave the country through the journey across the Mediterranean.

Home is where... you can afford a house, a car, and dignity

I am sitting with my cousins in a café on the beach of Chebba. Everyone, myself included, is scrolling through their phones. One of them sighs: “If I stay here, will I ever build a house and marry a beautiful girl? They take those with papers and cars!”³ Mehdi is silent.

A few months later, I received a call from my uncle: Mehdi had made it to Italy! He tried his luck with leaving Tunisia twice. The first time the boat was overcrowded. The smugglers tricked them with a damaged vessel. Eventually, the Tunisian coast guard caught up with them. Mehdi was detained for a day and released after paying a fine. My uncle drove Mehdi to the coast the second time and left him on a boat with two families. One family’s father was the boat owner and knew how to navigate: “It was slightly scary when the boat started leaking, but Lampedusa was already in sight. We made it in 12 hours. We were lucky!” They arrived and slept for two weeks outside a crowded detention centre on mattresses on the floor. The unaccompanied children were separated from the rest of the crowd and assigned to different case *famiglie*.⁴ Mehdi ran away several times because of either bad living conditions or restrictive rules. After reaching Milan, he took a train to Rome with the help of strangers. He walked into the first police station and asked: “*Casa famiglia?*”

It’s March 2022, I am still sitting in the café in Chebba, this time talking on the phone to Mehdi while he is on the other side of the sea. He recalls: “I gave up on school. I lost motivation. I was spoiled at home, but hanging around did not make sense. Even university graduates are hanging around. When the summer holidays came, I decided, ‘let’s give it a try!’”

When talking about his dreams, he said of Italy: “To be honest, I don’t care about this place. I love Tunisia, I just need dignity. I did not find it there, so I decided to leave. Who chooses Italy out of love anyway?” Mehdi goes to a language school with the other minor migrants. When he turns 18, he might start an apprenticeship. “It’s only two-and-a-half years from now. I will go home and see my family and bring them a lot of money!”

1 Imen El Amouri is a Tunisian-German researcher specialising in ethnography, migration, health, politics, and decolonisation.

2 The literal translation of *harga* is “to burn” – a reference to the common practice of destroying identity papers on arrival in destination countries. *Harga* is also the title of a Tunisian [TV drama](#) about irregular migration to Europe.

3 My cousin is referring to men who already got their residence permit or even citizenship in a European or another western country.

4 Literally, a “family house”, in Italy a *casa famiglia* is an official shelter for unaccompanied minor refugees or migrants.

A short spring in an everlasting winter – Tunisia in turmoil

Where does the story of Mehdi stand on a national and global scale? Today, 11 years after the fall of Ben Ali's dictatorship in 2011, Tunisia is harvesting the crops of decades of economic and political erroneous decisions. Debt and political crises are raging through a country that has not yet recovered from the economic effects of the Covid-19 pandemic⁵. The outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war led to the unfolding of a food crisis in a country that imports almost 50 percent of its wheat from Ukraine and Russia.⁶ The National Institute of Statistics published a non-surprising number regarding the wish to emigrate: about one in five (19.9 percent of) respondents over 15 expressed their desire to leave Tunisia in the survey published in 2021.⁷ Between January 2020 and December 2021, the Tunisian security forces intercepted 35,040 migrants⁸ leaving Tunisia, while the Italian authorities recorded the disembarkation of 28, 124 Tunisians.⁹

Is the choice of *el harga* the problem?

Most people in the global South have restricted freedom of international mobility and migration to the EU.¹⁰ The mobility dynamics between Europe and Tunisia cannot be analysed without considering the “epistemological violence” of western migration politics and policy approaches.¹¹ Movement and mobility are not new phenomena between Europe and North Africa. Historically, the Mediterranean had showcased several empires and power games, from Phoenicians, Byzantines, Vandals, Romans, Ottomans, Amazigh, and Arabs to the slave trade from the Caucasus and the sub-Saharan region.¹² The flow of humans and goods

in the context is complex. Western discourses around *el harga* exceptionalise the desire to move and desperately engage in silencing its legitimacy by disregarding the increasing precariousness of labour and life and shifting the discourse to simple dichotomies: political vs economic, forced vs voluntary, legal vs illegal, and high-skilled vs low-skilled.¹³

In the western development and migration agendas of the 21st century, the focus has shifted from simple aid politics to combating the causes of migration and flight.¹⁴ The development sector is channelling millions of dollars of funding into projects engaged in financing returnee or refugee integration in Tunisia, all without addressing the systemic causes of oppression that lead to the journey to Europe.¹⁵ In fact, the EU practice shows a commitment to restricting and preventing, rather than managing migration.¹⁶

Alternative perspectives on *el harga*

I argue that the desire to choose *el harga* should not be blamed on the bad governance of the Tunisian state alone, but rather on Tunisia having been exploited over its long history of colonial rule and the ensuing integration into the global neoliberal economy.¹⁷ Deprived of the right to move while being exposed to an intangible free globalised world, the narrative of *el harga* becomes unavoidable. The coloniality of western migration discourses reflects itself in the persistence of combating *el harga* as a security threat.

For Mehdi, the world is indeed greener on the other side. Keeping the greenness of Europe from those who were and are crucial for sowing the seeds while maintaining anti-migratory discourses and policies will not silence the narrative of *el harga*.

- 5 Herbert, M. (2022) [Losing hope - Why Tunisians are leading the surge in irregular migration to Europe](#). Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.
- 6 [Data from 2020](#) shows that 41.7 percent of Tunisia's wheat imports came from Ukraine and 5.14 percent from Russia.
- 7 Institut National de la Statistique & Observatoire National de la Migration (2021) [Tunisie HIMS - Enquête nationale sur la migration internationale](#).
- 8 The migrating population from the Tunisian shores shows a significant diversity, with citizens from Tunisia, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Cameroon, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Chad, Sudan, Ghana, Gambia, Somalia, Algeria, and Morocco. See Herbert, M. (2022) op. cit.
- 9 UNHCR (2021) [Italy sea arrivals dashboard, September 2021](#); UNHCR (2020) [Italy sea arrivals dashboard, December 2020](#). See also the Italian Interior Ministry's [daily statistics dashboard](#).
- 10 Zanker, F. (2019) [Managing or restricting movement? Diverging approaches of African and European migration governance](#). Comparative Migration Studies
- 11 In the field of social sciences, the term epistemological violence refers to the “interpretation of social-scientific data on the Other and is produced when empirical data are interpreted as showing the inferiority of or problematizes the Other, even when data allow for equally viable alternative interpretations.” Teo, T. (2010) [What is Epistemological Violence in the Empirical Social Sciences?](#) Personal and Social Psychology Compass.
- 12 See Oualdi M. (2020) *A Slave Between Empires: A Transimperial History of North Africa*. Columbia University Press.
- 13 Düvell, F. (2021). [Quo vadis, Migration Studies? The Quest for a Migratory Epistemology](#). Zeitschrift für Migrationsforschung.
- 14 Chetail, V. (2008) [Paradigm and Paradox of the Migration-Development Nexus: The New Border for North-South Dialogue](#). German Yearbook of International Law.
- 15 Capasso, M. (2021) [From Human Smuggling to State Capture: Furthering Neoliberal Governance in North Africa](#). Journal of Labor and Society.
- 16 Between 2010 and 2016 first-time visas for employment for African citizens reduced by approximately 80 percent. See Zanker, F (2019) op. cit.
- 17 Al Salhi, S. (2017) Internal colonialism and uneven development: the system of 'marginalisation' in Tunisia as a case study. Tunis: Sotepa Graphic.