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## BRIEFING PAPER

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# Destination North Africa – Syrians' displacement trajectories to Tunisia

## Executive summary

This briefing paper provides an overview of Syrian refugees' diverse displacement trajectories to Tunisia after 2011, revealing differences between Syrian arrivals in terms of the timing of their travel, socioeconomic profiles, journeys, and settlement patterns in Tunisia, which in turn impact integration outcomes.

Syrian forced migration to Tunisia unfolds in the context of longstanding migration and trade connections between Syria and Tunisia and in the wider Mediterranean, as well as changing border regimes in Arab countries. Therefore, although European border policies have become increasingly restrictive, limiting refugees' access to Europe, this alone does not account for Syrian forced migration to Tunisia.

Pre-war trade, migration, and family ties between Tunisia and Syria enabled some Syrian refugees and mixed Syrian-Tunisian families to travel to Tunisia at the beginning of the Syrian conflict. Many of these Syrians have settled in coastal urban centres and set up successful businesses in the host country.

Syrians without pre-war ties to Tunisia spent several years in informal refugee camps in Lebanon before travelling to Tunisia through Algeria. Since Algeria introduced new visa requirements for Syrians in March 2015, Syrians have joined established migration routes through West and East Africa to reach Tunisia. These journeys have tended to be longer, costlier, and more dangerous, leaving many Syrians with substantial debts to relatives, friends, and/or smugglers. Many members of this group of Syrians live in deprived areas in southern Tunisia and the interior of the country and survive through day labour and remittances.

Ten years after the onset of the Syrian conflict, Syrian displacement and cross-border mobilities persist. Summer 2021 saw the arrival of a new refugee profile in Tunisia: young men from the southern Syrian region of Deraa, which had been reshaped by worsening economic and security conditions. Often supported by family remittances, this group generally aims to cross the Mediterranean to Europe.

A better understanding of the heterogeneous nature of the Syrian community in Tunisia will allow policymakers and aid providers to tailor existing support to Syrians' specific needs and livelihoods strategies. Whereas "early" Syrian refugees generally have better integration outcomes, it is often those who came later who need better outreach and support.

## Introduction

In this briefing paper, we consider the case of Syrian refugees' displacement trajectories to Tunisia after 2011, i.e. the onset of the Syrian conflict, to draw attention to complex cross-Mediterranean movement dynamics. By examining their pre-war ties to Tunisia, their migration routes, and their movements within the country, we argue that Syrian forced migration to Tunisia unfolds in the context of more longstanding migration and trade between Syria and Tunisia and in the wider Mediterranean, as well as in the context of changing border regimes in

Arab countries. Syrian refugees' journeys to Tunisia are thus not simply a by-product of refugees' decreased access to the European territory. Contrary to European policymakers' assumptions, mixed migration patterns to North Africa and across the Mediterranean Sea are complex: many refugees and migrants engage in long and fragmented journeys and Europe is not always their intended destination, at least initially.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the European Union's increasingly restrictive border policies have reordered existing migration routes. Since the early 2000s, these policies have made movements in North Africa costlier and more dangerous, pushing refugees and migrants to use smugglers and increasing their vulnerability to arbitrary detention. As a result of these policies, complex movement patterns have emerged, with former countries of emigration such as Tunisia turning into transit zones and final destinations for people on the move.<sup>2</sup>

This briefing paper shows the need for a more nuanced understanding of Tunisia's heterogeneous Syrian community: it demonstrates that Syrian refugees differ along class and ethnic lines, flight trajectories and settlement patterns, and extent of contact with the humanitarian system. All these factors shape Syrians' opportunities for economic and social integration in Tunisia.

## Background

Since 2011, Tunisia has provided sanctuary to growing numbers of refugees, but an asylum framework has been in limbo since 2014. Tunisia is a signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. Its 2014 Constitution recognises the right to political asylum, but Tunisia has yet to adopt its own domestic asylum or migration legislation.<sup>3</sup> For now, UNHCR, together with the Conseil Tunisien pour les Réfugiés (Tunisian Refugee Council), is responsible for the registration of asylum seekers and for conducting Refugee Status Determination. As UNHCR grapples with a growing and increasingly diverse refugee population,<sup>4</sup> its opportunities for financial support and to identify durable solutions are limited. With domestic asylum legislation pending, a durable solution for refugees' stay in Tunisia is not on the horizon, exacerbating the need for resettlement. However, only 76 refugees were resettled from Tunisia in 2021.<sup>5</sup>

1 Crawley, H. Duvell, F. Jones, K. McMahon, S & Sigona, N. (2017) *Unravelling Europe's 'Migration Crisis' - Journeys Over Land and Sea* Bristol: Policy Press.

2 Boubakri, H. (2015) *Migration et asile en Tunisie depuis 2011: vers de nouvelles figures migratoires?* Revue européenne des migrations internationales 31(3/4): 17-39.

3 For an overview of Tunisia's adherence to international instruments of human rights protection, see Ben Achour, S. (2019) *La Tunisie, une terre d'accueil pour les réfugiés?* In: *Frontières, sociétés et droit en mouvement*, ed. by Sylvie Mazzella and Delphine Perrin, Brussels: Editions Bruyant, 221-244.

4 UNHCR (2022) *Tunisia Fact Sheet February 2022*.

5 UNHCR (2021) *UNHCR Tunisia Operational Update - December 2021*.

Less than 1% of displaced Syrians (i.e. around 42,000) live in North Africa.<sup>6</sup> With around 2,700 persons registered with UNHCR in May 2022, Syrians make up one-quarter of Tunisia's official refugee and asylum seeker population.<sup>7</sup> In 2012, former President Marzouki announced that all Syrian refugees would receive humanitarian protection in Tunisia, but this never materialised. Today, many Syrians have "asylum-seeker" status, with their application for refugee protection pending.<sup>8</sup>

That said, were asylum-seekers to be recognised as refugees, they would not have automatic access to residency and work permits in Tunisia. As there is no clear legal pathway to work permits through Tunisia's asylum system, many Syrians in Tunisia remain excluded from the formal labour market and thus rely on informal and often exploitative jobs.

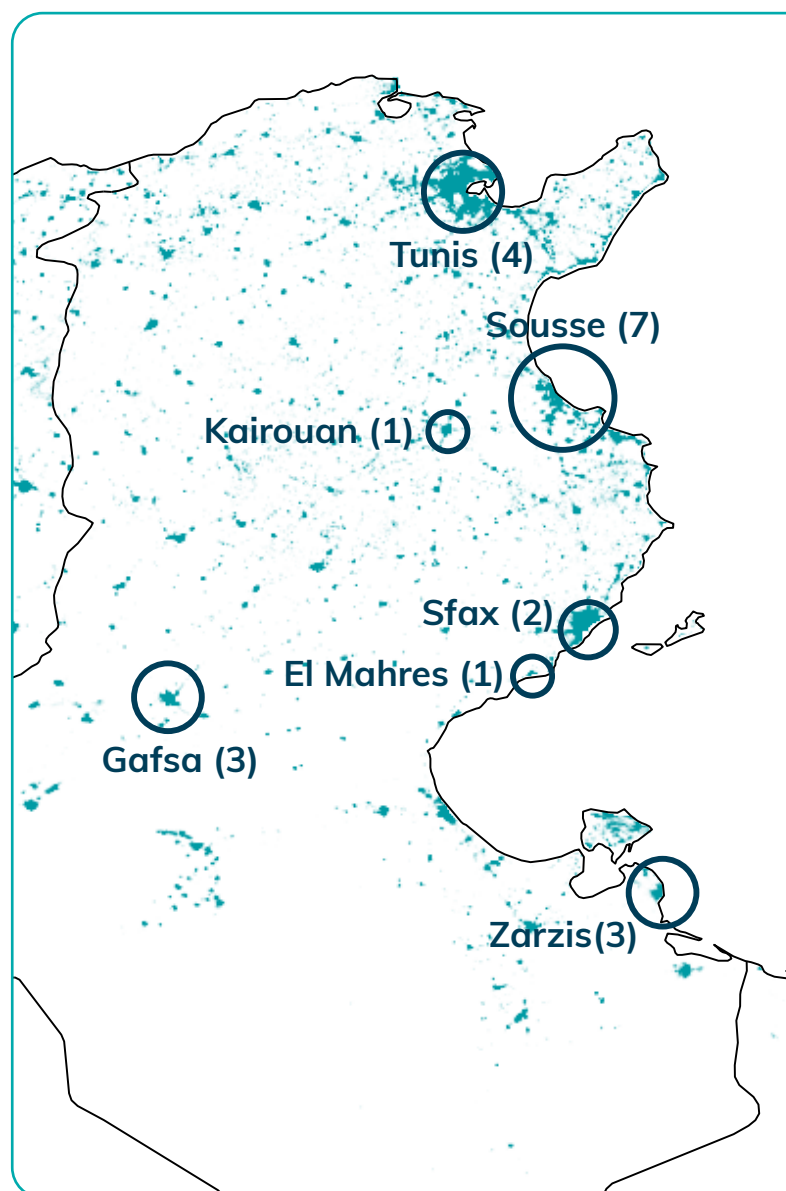
Existing research and policy discourse on mixed migration to Tunisia focus on refugees fleeing the Libyan civil war and conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa, as these displaced populations vastly outnumber Syrians. The protracted displacement of Syrians is often overlooked: as is the case for other refugees in Tunisia, Syrians' opportunities for resettlement and repatriation are limited, prompting many to end up on the margins of the Tunisian society and economy. From our stakeholder interviews with Tunisian and international aid providers, it also emerged that Syrian refugees are considered to integrate more easily into the host population because of their shared language, culture, and religious beliefs. However, this assumption may divert attention from Syrian refugees' specific needs and experiences in Tunisia.

## Research methodology

Between October and December 2021, we conducted interviews with 21 Syrian households in Tunisia. Not all Syrian interviewees are legally registered as "refugees": the majority are currently listed with UNHCR as "asylum seekers". Through alternative legal routes, a few others have already obtained Tunisian residency permits and even citizenship. However, except for one Syrian man who had migrated to Tunisia in the 1980s, all households in this study were directly affected by the Syrian conflict. While most left their home country after 2011, a few were already in Tunisia and unable to return home. Interviewees were recruited through snowball sampling and often put us in touch with other members of their kinship group. Thus, we obtained access to Syrian families in smaller cities in the south and interior of the country and to hard-to-reach refugee

groups, especially from the Syrian Dom community, a nomadic ethnic minority present all over the Middle East and North Africa region. Syrian Dom have historically suffered from extreme poverty and marginalisation; in Tunisia, they are often reluctant to interact with local authorities and live in isolation in poor suburban areas. Our findings capture the mobility patterns and livelihoods strategies of extended multigenerational households that live and travel together. In addition, we conducted seven stakeholder interviews with representatives of Tunisian municipalities, international and Tunisian non-governmental organisations, and UN agencies. With a limited sample, results are not representative of all Syrians in Tunisia – but they provide a snapshot of different patterns of Syrian displacement to Tunisia.

**Map 1. Locations and numbers of Syrian households interviewed for this study**



6 UNHCR (2022) [Syria Regional Refugee Response - Total Persons of Concern by Country of Asylum](#).

7 UNHCR (2022) [Refugees and asylum-seekers in Tunisia](#).

8 Garelli, G. & Tazzioli, M. (2017) [Tunisia as a Revolutionized Space of Migration](#). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

## Direct connections: Syrian refugees with pre-war ties to Tunisia

While statistics about the established Syrian diaspora in Tunisia are hard to come by, our interview findings suggest that pre-2011 trade, migration, and family ties between Tunisia and Syria shaped the flight trajectories of some Syrian refugees and mixed Syrian-Tunisian families.<sup>9</sup> A Syrian lawyer who has lived in Tunis since the 1980s and co-founded a support organisation for Syrians estimates the number of Syrian residents prior to 2011 at around 500-600 persons. In the 1980s and 90s, Arabic-language Syrian higher education was popular among Tunisian university students, some of whom stayed in Syria after the end of their studies and married Syrian women. Additionally, Syrian merchants engaged in small-scale “suitcase” trade between the two countries, especially in Syrian textiles, as part of expanding international trade links traversing the Mediterranean since the 1980s.<sup>10</sup> Some young Syrian men also came to Tunisia as labour migrants. For example, we interviewed several middle-aged Syrian men who had worked in hospitality and as hairdressers in Tunisia in the 2000s. Some had married Tunisian women and moved back and forth between Syria and Tunisia until conflict broke out in 2011. Finally, a small group of respondents had first arrived in Tunisia as family members of diplomatic staff and later decided to pursue careers in the country.

In February 2012, Tunisia expelled the Syrian ambassador and cut all diplomatic ties with the Al-Assad government in solidarity with the Syrian revolution.<sup>11</sup> Still, Syrians with pre-war business connections to Tunisia and Syrian-Tunisian families were able to capitalise on their ties which allowed them to travel to Tunisia at the beginning of the Syrian conflict. A Syrian woman in Tunis told us that many former Tunisian students had returned from Damascus with their Syrian spouses and children and were still “living the Syrian way” in Tunisia. These older connections with Tunisia made the country a plausible destination for this group of Syrian refugees, as well as Tunisian returnees from Syria. In addition, the displaced benefited from existing knowledge of travel routes, means of transport, and visa regimes in North Africa. For those who left Syria shortly after 2011, this led to relatively safe and short journeys, at least compared to later arrivals. Several respondents arrived in Tunis by plane from Beirut, after having crossed the land border from Syria to Lebanon. One family joined an organised tour, traveling overland via Jordan, Egypt, and Libya.

### Tunis - The return of Syrian traders

In Tunis, Um Khalil, a middle-class housewife from Damascus, lives with her husband, grown-up children, and various grandchildren in a spacious apartment in the affluent Menzah neighbourhood. Um Khalil's husband used to import carpets from Kairouan to Syria and export Syrian wedding textiles to Tunisia. Beginning in the 1980s, the couple visited Tunisia many times; Um Khalil's sister also settled in the country. In 2013, Um Khalil's family first travelled overland from Syria to Libya and then spent two years in Tripoli. With the security situation in Libya deteriorating, Um Khalil was afraid for her daughters' safety and they briefly returned to Syria – and then boarded the bus again, through Jordan, Egypt and Libya. This time, Um Khalil's sister paid for the entire trip and picked them up in Ras Ajdir, on the Tunisian border. Um Khalil's knowledge of tourist areas in Tunisia, together with a start-up grant from the non-governmental organization (NGO) Terre d'Asile, allowed her to establish a home-based catering company. It now employs her two adult sons, their wives, and occasionally Tunisian helpers, supplying Syrian delicacies to weddings and funerals all over the country. As an entrepreneur, she quickly obtained a Tunisian residency permit and later Tunisian citizenship. While Um Khalil does not have a file with UNHCR, she registered her sons for fear they might be deported to Syria. She has close ties to the “more longstanding” Syrian diaspora in Tunis: “Syrians in Tunisia have often been here for thirty years, they have restaurants [and other businesses], you don't hear a single complaint from them, only alhamdulillah [thank God].”

9 In this paper, Syrians with pre-war ties to Tunisia are also referred to as “early” or “old” Syrians in reference to the fact that they generally arrived in Tunisia in the early days of the Syrian conflict. This is in contrast to Syrians without pre-war ties who tended to arrive in Tunisia later.

10 Peraldi, M. (2005) [Algerian routes: Emancipation, deterritorialisation and transnationalism through suitcase trade](#) History and Anthropology 16(1): 47-61.

11 Karasik, T. & Cafiero, G. (2019) [A thaw in Tunisian-Syrian relations](#) Middle East Institute.

## Circuitous routes: Syrian refugees on African migration routes (pre-pandemic)

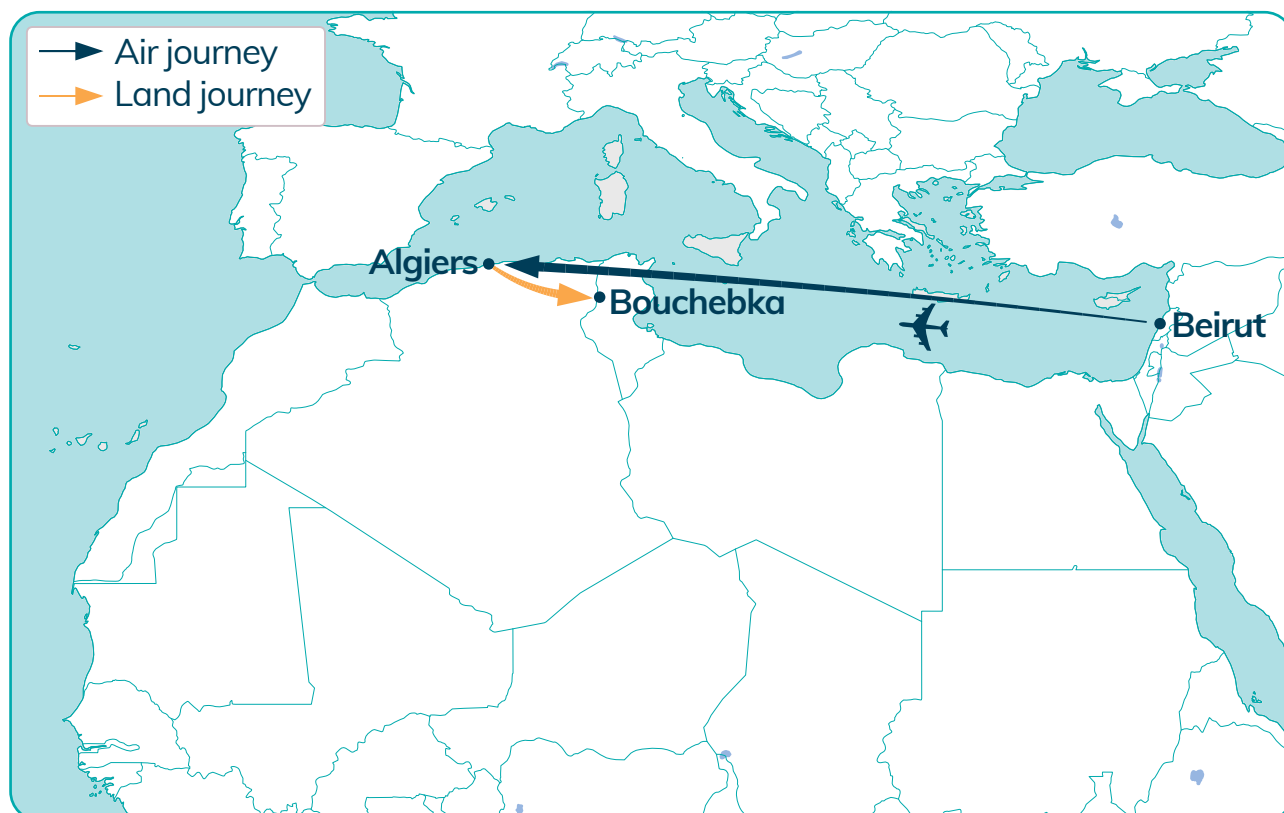
A second profile<sup>12</sup> of Syrian refugees arriving in Tunisia after 2011 comprises those without pre-war ties who arrived through indirect and increasingly lengthy routes: as most members of this second group initially settled in Algeria, their journeys took more time than those of Syrians with pre-war ties to Tunisia. Since March 2015, when Algeria ended visa-free travel for Syrians, members of the second group have had to engage in circuitous and dangerous journeys through West Africa (and sometimes East Africa) to reach Tunisia.

After 2011, many of these “new” Syrians had spent several years in informal camps in Lebanon, experiencing severe hardship, labour exploitation, and racism. They used savings and wages from informal labour in Lebanon to pay for travel to Algeria, a country with a sizeable Syrian diaspora and a reputation for good job opportunities.

Once in Algeria, they struggled with high living expenses. Interviewees cited biannual rent payments as their biggest challenge: for refugees surviving on day labour in the informal economy, making advance payments for up to six months of rent often proved impossible. While some spent several years in Algeria, others moved on to Tunisia after only a couple of days, further highlighting the diversity of movement patterns. A previous MMC report details that some Syrian refugees in Algeria chose to travel to Morocco and from there join the Western Mediterranean route to reach Europe.<sup>13</sup> Our findings show that other refugees, afraid of the heavily guarded Moroccan-Algerian border or unable to pay high smuggling costs, travelled to Tunisia instead.

In March 2015, Algeria’s decision to end visa-free travel for Syrians reoriented refugees’ trajectories: before this date, refugees had flown directly from Beirut to Algiers (Map 2). After March 2015, refugees travelled along considerably longer, more fragmented, more expensive, and more dangerous routes to reach Algeria (Map 3).

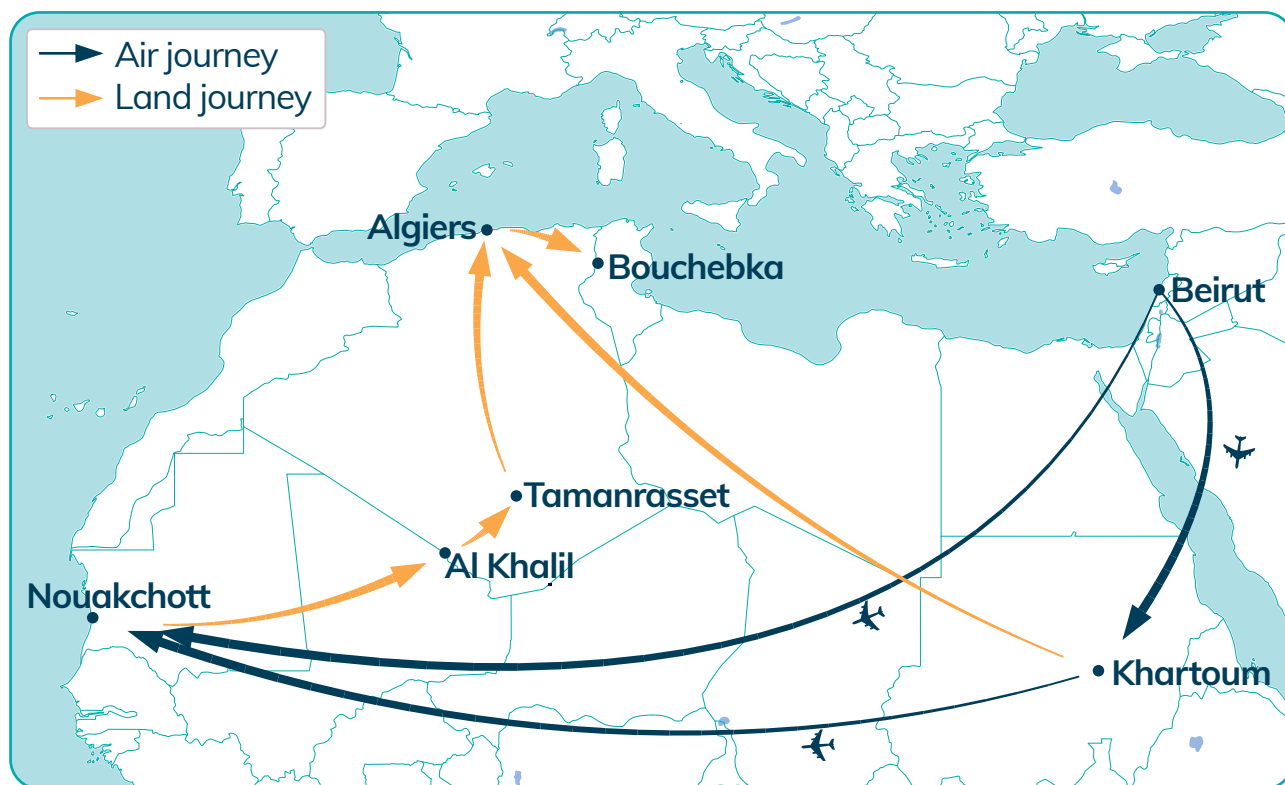
**Map 2. Syrian refugees without pre-war ties to Tunisia: Displacement trajectories before March 2015**



12 This group of Syrians without post-war ties to Tunisia are referred to in this paper as “later” or “new” Syrians, referring to the fact that they generally arrived in Tunisia more recently than did Syrians with pre-war ties to Tunisia.

13 Reach and Mixed Migration Centre (2018) [From Syria to Spain: Syrian Migration to Europe via the Western Mediterranean Route](#)

**Map 3. Syrian refugees without pre-war ties to Tunisia: Displacement trajectories to Tunisia after March 2015**



Respondents who had travelled after March 2015 described boarding planes to Nouakchott in Mauritania or Khartoum in Sudan, two countries that still permit visa-free travel for Syrians. From there, they joined established overland migration routes to the Mediterranean, either via Mauritania, Mali, and Algeria, or, to a lesser extent, via Sudan, Libya, and Algeria. A small number of Syrians also first flew to Sudan and from there to Mauritania and then continued their trip by car. Many had to interrupt their journey repeatedly to gather money for the next step. For example, one Syrian family, now based in Sousse, spent half a year in Nouakchott, operating a small falafel restaurant to save money for the desert crossing. On the road, refugees also accumulated debts to family members, locals in host countries, and smugglers who facilitated their journey. Larger kinship networks often split up into smaller groups for parts of the journey and later reunited in Algeria or Tunisia.

To cross the Sahara, interviewed Syrian refugees relied on existing migration routes used by West African refugees and migrants travelling to North Africa. Those Syrians coming from Mauritania reported passing through well-known smuggling hubs and frontier settlements, such as Al Khalil in Mali and Tamarasset in Algeria. In West Africa, all interviewees used West African smugglers. From Syrians' recollections, it emerged that some smugglers specialise in Middle Eastern refugees:

Syrians often travelled together with Palestinian, Egyptian, and Lebanese refugees and migrants through the Sahara and were housed together in hostels in Mali and Algeria. Most had heard rumours about the mistreatment of other Syrian refugees by smugglers, but all confirmed that their personal experience had been positive, partly due to shared Arabic language skills and Islamic beliefs. Some interviewees were later arrested by Algerian police and deported to the Algeria-Niger border, despite being registered with UNHCR in Algeria. From the border, they returned to Algeria. Their experience chimes with reports by human rights organisations and UNHCR about frequent deportations of refugees and migrants to Niger.<sup>14</sup> For example, in December 2018, a group of 120 Syrians, Palestinians and Yemenis, some of them registered with UNHCR, were deported to Algeria's southern border with Niger.<sup>15</sup>

Syrian respondents who came from Algeria all entered Tunisia via the same land border crossing: Bouchebka, close to Kasserine. This includes respondents who crossed during the COVID-19 pandemic when authorities closed the Algeria-Tunisia land border. Interviewees from different families, and who had arrived at different times, confirmed that Algerian and Tunisian border guards let Syrians pass and sometimes even covered their costs for onward movement to Gafsa, a nearby urban centre. This is remarkable because officially, visa-free entry to Tunisia

14 Human Rights Watch (2020) [Algeria: Migrants, Asylum Seekers Forced Out](#)

15 UNHCR (2019) [News Comment - UNHCR appeals for access to refugees on Algeria-Niger border](#)

was suspended in 2011. Several Syrian interviewees told us that they were allowed to enter Tunisia “because border guards knew we were refugees.” From our findings, it appears that border guards have a certain degree of discretion when dealing with Syrian refugees. In addition, the Algeria-Tunisia frontier close to Kasserine is known for its vibrant informal trade and smuggling and Syrians’ ability to capitalise on existing cross-border Algerian-Tunisian smuggling networks to find transport proved vital.<sup>16</sup> As more Syrians travelled through and left Algeria, Tunisia became the intended destination for later arrivals in North Africa, who hoped to join their relatives who had gone before. For example, we spoke with three Syrian households, all from the same extended family, who had travelled from Syria to Beirut, Algiers, and then Bouchebka, and eventually settled in the same neighbourhood in Gafsa in southwest Tunisia since 2011.

### Syrians in Zarzis: Crossing the desert – twice

In Zarzis, a family of four, originally from Homs, lives in an empty, run-down apartment building in a working-class neighbourhood far away from the city centre. The family, members of the Syrian Dom community, arrived in Tunisia in spring 2020. By then, they had travelled by plane, pick-up truck, and bus, and crossed multiple international borders in both regular and irregular manners. They left Syria around 2015 and first spent three years in informal refugee camps in Lebanon, but left after members of the local community set fire to their tent. In 2019, the family boarded a plane from Beirut to Nouakchott. They spent ten months in Mauritania, but the hot weather made their young children sick, so the family decided to move on. Through Syrian acquaintances, they got in touch with smugglers who arranged for them to travel on a pick-up truck through Mali, and onwards to Algeria. In Algeria, they were arrested by the police and deported to the desert between Algeria and Niger. They returned to Algeria and then crossed the Algerian-Tunisian border to reunite with family members in Zarzis. During their trip, the family accumulated debts of 11,000 USD. In Zarzis, they do not benefit from any financial assistance and struggle to find work. The family say that if they were able to save up some money, they would like to take a boat across the Mediterranean—but for now, this is a distant dream.

## Not here to stay: Syrian movement patterns in Tunisia in 2021

Ten years after the onset of the Syrian conflict, Syrian displacement persists, but cross-border and internal mobilities also continue after refugees’ arrival to Tunisia. According to a representative of the Conseil Tunisien pour les Réfugiés, members of the Dom community migrate seasonally to Djerba to work in tourism and to Touzeur and Kebili for the date and olive harvest.<sup>17</sup> In addition, many Syrians from our sample have since returned to Algeria for short visits, even though, as previously mentioned, the Algerian-Tunisian land border was closed in March 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic and only partially reopened in January 2022.<sup>18</sup> Respondents explained that as there is no Syrian embassy in Tunis, they have to travel to Algiers to renew their passports. According to the Syria Justice and Accountability Centre, issuing passports to refugees abroad has turned into a source of income for the al-Assad regime.<sup>19</sup> According to our interviewees, Syrians in Tunisia need a Syrian passport to retrieve remittances and to ready themselves for potential future travel, including return to their home country. For example, a family of six had first come to Sousse via Sudan, Mauritania, Mali, and Algeria, arriving in Tunisia in 2019. They showed us the renewal date of their Syrian passports, issued by the embassy in Algiers: October 2021. In 2019, the family had crossed the Algeria-Tunisia border without the help of smugglers, and Tunisian border guards had even paid for their onward travel. In contrast, in September 2021, at the time of COVID-19-related border closures, the family had to hire Tunisian and Algerian smugglers on both sides of the border in order to cross, paying approximately 20 USD per person. Another Syrian entrepreneur in Tunis told us that she regularly travelled to Algeria to buy material for her business, including during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Additionally, humanitarian actors continue to notice new Syrian refugee populations with different movement patterns. In summer 2021, the Conseil Tunisien pour les Réfugiés in southern Tunisia began receiving young Syrian men arriving through sea rescue and via the Tunisia-Libya border.<sup>20</sup> While the Syrians we interviewed for this study came from locations all over Syria, these latest Syrian arrivals coincided with a new pattern of out-migration from a specific region, Deraa in southern Syria, where the security and economic situation had recently worsened.<sup>21</sup> According to the Conseil Tunisien pour les Réfugiés, unlike previous Syrian arrivals to Tunisia, these young men were travelling without their

16 Miller, A. (2018) *Shadow Zones: Contraband and Social Contract in the Borderlands of Tunisia* Doctoral thesis, Duke University.

17 Key stakeholder interview with a representative of the Conseil Tunisien pour les Réfugiés in Medenine, December 2021.

18 Infos Algerie (2022) *Réouverture des frontières terrestres entre l’Algérie et la Tunisie*

19 Syria Justice and Accountability Centre (2022) *Passport Delays Threaten Legal Status of Syrians Abroad*.

20 Key stakeholder interview with a representative of the Conseil Tunisien pour les Réfugiés in Medenine, December 2021.

21 Al-Jabassini, A. (2022) *Migration from Post-War Southern Syria: Drivers, Routes, and Destinations* European University Institute.

families and their intended destination was Europe. Many did not look for work in Tunisia because they received remittances from relatives abroad. Those who arrived in Tunisia through sea rescue often returned to Libya for another attempt to cross the Mediterranean; there is anecdotal evidence of a Syrian smuggler who facilitates these journeys across the Libyan border. Observations by the Conseil Tunisien pour les Réfugiés are borne out by statistics on the increasing share of Syrians arriving in Tunisia and Italy. In the second half of 2021, UNHCR Tunisia registered three times as many newly arrived Syrians as over the same period in 2020.<sup>22</sup> While Syrians had not been among the top ten nationalities arriving in Italy from Libya between January and March 2021,<sup>23</sup> by September of the same year, Syrians were the sixth most common nationality.<sup>24</sup> Data on sea rescues also point to a new trend: in November 2021, for example, the Tunisian coast guard rescued 487 refugees and migrants from an overcrowded ship that had left Libya for Italy, including 81 Syrians.<sup>25</sup> Together, these findings indicate that local political and economic change inside Syria, and the closure of Algeria's and Tunisia's borders, may lead to the emergence of new displacement trajectories and new profiles of Syrian refugees on the move – including on Tunisian shores.

## How travel routes and pre-war ties shape Syrian refugees' opportunities for integration in Tunisia

In the final section, we reflect upon the various economic opportunities and constraints faced by distinct groups of Syrian refugees with diverse trajectories. Syrians with pre-war ties to Tunisia who arrived earlier, and later arrivals without pre-war connections, generally differ along lines of class and at times ethnicity. In our sample, earlier arrivals tend to have a middle-class background as traders, university lecturers, or business owners, and come from big cities in Syria. Later arrivals are more likely to be small-scale farmers or day labourers and often come from more rural areas. Some refugees from this second group are members of the Syrian Dom community. Besides refugees' socioeconomic background, the length and duration of the journey to Tunisia have also increased the vulnerability of some Syrians: later arrivals may have paid more and accumulated debts during their flight because they often travelled for much longer, through multiple countries, and had to hire smugglers to cross the Sahara.

These differences are reflected in diverging settlement patterns and unequal access to secure legal status and access to the formal labour market in Tunisia. In our sample, Syrians with pre-war ties now live in Tunis and other large Tunisian coastal cities, usually in central, middle-class areas. Many own restaurants, shops, catering services, or dance troupes, capitalising on the popularity of Syrian food and music at Tunisian weddings. Through setting up their own businesses, they have access to Tunisian residency permits and some have even obtained Tunisian citizenship. Their contact with the humanitarian system is limited and many never registered with UNHCR, although they may have benefited from ad hoc humanitarian assistance. However, family connections alone do not shield these refugees from precarity. Some Syrians with financial resources or business ties may have entered the country more easily and at the earlier phases of the conflict, but now find themselves in a similar situation to other asylum-seekers and refugees: surviving on day labour and occasional NGO support, and for those married to Tunisians, their Tunisian spouses' and relatives' income.

Syrians without pre-war ties to Tunisia generally settled in different parts of the country. They tend to live in suburban working-class neighbourhoods in southern Tunisia and are not usually engaged in full-time employment. While men may work part-time in construction and in the date and olive harvest, some women find jobs as domestic workers. Syrian women and children begging at roundabouts have become a common sight in many Tunisian cities. While all later arrivals in our sample were registered with UNHCR, none had obtained official refugee status, even after more than five years in Tunisia. All are still listed as "asylum-seekers." Like other refugee and migrant populations in Tunisia, Syrians with refugee or asylum seeker status have limited access to the formal labour market and more permanent residency, owing to Tunisia's lack of asylum and migration frameworks.

Protracted legal limbo and recourse to informal labour negatively affect these "later" Syrians' potential to build secure livelihoods. In our sample, this second group of Syrians is more likely to make plans for onward movement to Europe, even though most consider crossing the Mediterranean too dangerous, especially for their children. By contrast, young Syrian men having recently arrived in Tunisia view the country as a mere stepping-stone to Europe.

We found little solidarity between "old" and "new" Syrians in Tunisia. For example, a Syrian-led support organisation in Tunis sometimes provides legal aid to such new arrivals but does not consider them "real" Syrians, especially those from the Dom community. Members of the affluent

22 UNHCR (2021) [UNHCR Tunisia Registration Factsheet](#).

23 UNHCR (2021) [Arrivals to Europe from Libya - March 2021](#).

24 UNHCR (2021) [Arrivals to Europe from Libya - September 2021](#).

25 Arab News (2021) [Tunisia rescues 487 migrants in crowded boat off its coast](#)



Syrian diaspora in Tunisia referred to these later arrivals in a disparaging way and considered the begging of some Syrians disrespectful and a blemish on Syrians' good reputation in the country. As we did not interview recently arrived young men from southern Syria, we do not have information about how the latter relate to other Syrian refugees. According to the Conseil Tunisien pour les Réfugiés, this newly emerged third group of Syrians is not interested in economic or social integration in Tunisia and may receive financial support from family members abroad, rather than from other Syrians in Tunisia.

## Conclusion and policy recommendations

This paper's overview of Syrian forced migration to Tunisia highlights the heterogeneous nature of the Syrian refugee community in the country and their complex displacement trajectories shaped by changing border regimes, bilateral pre-war ties, and socioeconomic status. While early arrivals capitalised on their personal trade and family ties between Syria and Tunisia, later refugees first tried to make a living in Syria's neighbouring countries, like Lebanon, before unemployment and poor security pushed them to move further afield. Refugees followed their social networks to join existing migration routes: between Syria and Algeria, across the Algerian-Tunisian border, and since 2015 from Lebanon to Sudan or Mauritania, connecting to established systems of smuggling and intermediaries from these locations.

Besides pre-war ties to Tunisia, this paper argues that refugees' socioeconomic status and financial resources determine flight routes, means of travel, and settlement patterns upon arrival in Tunisia. Syrians who reached Tunisia via West and East African migration routes experienced longer, more dangerous, and more expensive trips, and often accumulated large debts to their social networks and/or to smugglers. Unlike Syrians and Tunisian-Syrian families with pre-war connections, later arrivals continue to experience legal insecurity and precarity and their living conditions might best be described as protracted displacement.

A number of publications have put forward policy recommendations to address these more general concerns.<sup>26</sup> In the following, we suggest measures to address the situation of Syrian refugees in Tunisia specifically.

Local and international policymakers and aid providers involved in the Syrian refugee response should:

- Clarify for Syrians in Tunisia their specific rights and entitlements and where they can access legal aid and humanitarian assistance. Many Syrian asylum seekers in Tunisia first interacted with UNHCR and the international humanitarian system in Lebanon. Despite existing UNHCR information sessions in Tunisia, we found great confusion among respondents about the differences between UNHCR Lebanon and UNHCR Tunisia, the role of the Conseil Tunisien pour les Réfugiés, the availability of financial assistance, and selection criteria for resettlement to the Global North.
- Raise awareness about Syrians' access to support services. Hoping for speedy resettlement, some Syrians prioritize short-term income-generating strategies over long-term education and professional training. UNHCR Tunisia and the Conseil Tunisien pour les Réfugiés should expand information campaigns about their services to Syrian asylum-seekers and refugees.
- Design employment opportunities aligned with Syrian refugees' distinct survival strategies. Unlike other refugee populations in Tunisia, Syrians are not usually single men or women, but rather live in multigenerational households. Women have child-care responsibilities and men are often sole breadwinners for extended families. Employment and training opportunities that compel Syrians to travel to other parts of Tunisia or attend sessions in the evening or in mixed-gender groups are not a good fit for this population. Syrians would benefit from vocational training with a clear pathway to formal long-term employment. Women require access to affordable childcare.
- Ensure access to education and/or vocational training for under-18-year-olds. The lack of legal security for Syrian asylum seekers in Tunisia affects their access to education. Syrian refugee children and youth often lack evidence of their education in Syria and mobile refugee communities in Tunisia may struggle to register their young with Tunisian schools. As a consequence, many Syrian children and youth have been unable to continue their education in Tunisia and often resort to day labour and begging. When relocating within Tunisia, Syrian parents require support from the Conseil Tunisien pour les Réfugiés and local authorities to enrol their children in school.

26 UNHCR & Mixed Migration Centre (2021) [A Roadmap for Advocacy, Policy Development, and Programming: Protection in Mixed Movements along the Central and Western Mediterranean Routes 2021](#)

- Develop a culturally sensitive approach to reach the Syrian Dom community. Many municipal actors and aid providers hold negative perceptions of this group. However, Tunisian and international stakeholders often lack an understanding of the historical forms of marginalisation that the Dom community has been exposed to in the Middle East, which partly explains their reluctance to engage with outsiders. Key stakeholders should build trust and design employment and educational opportunities that account for these refugees' mobile livelihood strategies. In turn, this will foster integration with host communities and alleviate prejudices.
- Promote Syrian-led forms of refugee assistance and encourage networks and cooperation between different groups of Syrians in Tunisia. There is a small but affluent Syrian diaspora in Tunis that already offers legal and financial support to newly arrived Syrians, albeit under the radar of the official aid response. Local and international aid providers should engage Syrian diaspora members to make visible and amplify Syrian-Syrian solidarity.
- Encourage the establishment of Syrian community organisations at the local level. Sub-Saharan African migrant-led organisations have emerged as new points of contact for municipalities in big Tunisian cities like Sousse. Aid providers and municipalities should explore how they can support the Syrian community in Tunisia to self-organise and become a partner for local development.



MMC is a global network engaged in data collection, research, analysis, and policy and programmatic development on mixed migration, with regional hubs hosted in DRC regional offices in Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America, and a small global team in Geneva.

MMC is a leading source for independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise. MMC aims to increase understanding of mixed migration, to positively impact global and regional migration policies, to inform evidence-based protection responses for people on the move and to stimulate forward thinking in public and policy debates on mixed migration. MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

MMC is part of and governed by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC). Global and regional MMC teams are based in Brussels, Geneva, Dakar, Nairobi, Tunis, Bogota and Dhaka.

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