

Maghreb Migration Policies Bereft a Compass

The news -bomb of February 21, 2023²

What's been happening in Tunisia since early in the year concerning migration issues, and not only, is staggering brutality and irrationality on the part of officials - in fact, by the highest official of the State – in a country rightly known and recognized until recently for its wisdom, its humanity, and competence of its leaders. On that date, a declaration by the President of Tunisia characterized migration from elsewhere in Africa as a plot against the nation.

Attacking migrants – from the African continent in particular – by promulgating extreme right notions of invasion, replacement and, ultimately, conspiracy seals stigmatization and ostracism as well as being as totally unfounded as it is counterproductive. It is particularly risky in that it could inspire a similar turning against Tunisian migrants and other North Africans present in large numbers in some countries around the world.

An impulsive approach, weighted with a triple error:

First, in terms of statistical data, the number of sub-Saharan migrants present in Tunisia does not amount to millions or hundreds of thousands of people. It would be in 2023, according to the most reliable estimates, between 25,000 and 40,000 people, or, at best less than 0.3% of the total Tunisian population. A proportion not very far from that observed in Algeria and Morocco.

Secondly, in terms of objective reality, the primary desire of almost all sub-Saharan migrants present in Tunisia, as in Morocco or Algeria, is to find a way to Europe. To the extent that no migrant is attracted by an economic situation that does not offer employment or a decent income to live on, the Maghreb countries in general, according to all current surveys, are an intended final destination for only a small proportion of migrants, and most often by default.

Thirdly, in terms of national migration policy (and social cohesion), a rule of law --or at least a somewhat reasonable one-- does not resist migration, however irregular it may be, by inspiring feelings in its population of hatred and rejection of foreigners that would ultimately lead to unrestrained violence.

In reality, the response to the official message on migration conveyed since February has been given by Tunisian civil society - its women, its young human rights activists, its academics, its trade unionists and others. That response has expressed solidarity with migrants and sought to enlighten with rational interpretations and analyses more related to the real drivers of migration, particularly in Africa.

In fact, if a few tens of thousands of citizens of sub-Saharan African countries seek to leave their native soil each year for Europe or elsewhere --many transiting through the Maghreb including Tunisia-- it is because Africa continues to be a sort of open-air mine where former European colonizers, and more recently, Americans, Canadians, Chinese, Russians, Turks and others come to help themselves - whatever the discourse used to cover it - leaving some dust, literally and figuratively, to Africans. The example of Niger, a country with as much uranium as poverty, is one of the most perfect illustrations of this. Moreover, such extractive work is not limited only to the subsoil, but it extends to the forest, to fishery resources and increasingly to human skills. Thus depriving Africa as a whole of one of the main springs of its development in the future.

-
- 1 Mehdi Lahlou is Professor of Economics at the National Institute of Statistics and Applied Economics (INSEA) in Rabat, Morocco, and Associate Professor at the Mohammed V University, Rabat). He earned his PhD in economics from the Université Paris 1, Pantheon-Sorbonne.
 - 2 Date of the declaration by the President of Tunisia qualifying migration of African origin as a plot against his country. See for examples: <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/tunisias-saied-denies-racism-repeats-view-that-migration-is-plot-2023-02-23/> <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/02/world/middleeast/tunisia-president-migrants-africa.html>

This, in addition to well-known political factors, contributes to generalized depredation which explains why Africa represents in 2022 18% of the population on a planetary scale, but less than 3% of the world's GDP.

This is where the real scandal of poverty and migration lies. This is where the real *plot* takes place, not the one that would aim to transform Tunisia into an "African country", when it already is, by the laws of nature. But the one that consists in removing the most economic values from Africans while claiming to protect them, respect them or even, sometimes, love them. In order to attract the most competent - as we used to select the strongest - in order to cover here and there the employment needs of certain economic sectors now said to be "under tension", especially in a position of sharp decline in birth rate in most developed countries, both European and Asian.

Expressed differently, such reality says much of what fuels African migration – well beyond taking into account the effects of global warming or the violence that is consuming entire regions of the Sahel and beyond. In this way, any objective analyst today is obliged to note that, from the French ecologist René Dumont, and his "*Afrique noire est mal partie*" (1962) to the Swiss Jean Ziegler, and his "*Main basse sur l'Afrique*" (1978), Africa, in its large dimensions has not changed economically since independence in the 1950s and 1960s. It has only become more numerous, more abrasive... torn between Bolloré tycoons (see box) and new trend mercenaries, like the Wagner group, a modernized copy in Russian fashion of the groups commanded until in 1995 by the Frenchman Robert Denard³. Fragmented, as the continent remains, between Royal Dutch Shell and Total Energies, the latter a group whose 20.8 billion euros in profits made in 2022 exceed the annual budget of several countries from which it extracts "its" oil. Oil often transhipped by fraud on the high seas, beyond any control of the States concerned. Or in pure trickery, as one would leave a restaurant without paying for his meal, and not just once.

Vincent Bolloré, French multi-billionaire and a man of the extreme right, took advantage of the wave of privatizations imposed in Africa by the structural adjustment programs of the World Bank and the IMF in the 1990s to win the day and gradually build his fortune. The group he chairs, Bolloré Africa Logistics – which has benefited from the support of French presidents from both right and left – is important in West Africa in particular. Present in 42 ports, it manages container terminals, from Douala (Cameroon) to Pointe-Noire (DRC), via Cotonou (Benin), Tema (Ghana) and Abidjan (Ivory Coast). It also operates in 16 container terminals on the continent through PPPs (public-private partnerships). At the same time, it has a network of 85 maritime agencies including 74 African agencies, spread over 32 countries. The Bolloré group is also the main shareholder of Socfin – a holding company registered in Luxembourg – which owns industrial oil palm and rubber plantations in Cameroon, Liberia, Cambodia and Côte d'Ivoire. The areas planted by Socfin's African companies increased from 87,000 to more than 108,000 hectares (280,000 acres) between 2011 and 2014, a 24% increase which was at the expense of the land of local communities, thus multiplying tensions, according to the NGO ReAct. However, if V. Bolloré is withdrawing from what is called "hard power" with the activities mentioned above, he remains highly present on the continent through the Vivendi group and its subsidiaries, Canal+ and Havas. The latter still allow the businessman to deploy his network, in particular via telecommunications and the Internet.

Awareness of these truths, intangible today, requires reversing the reasoning, reversing the burden of proof as the lawyers would say. In other words, it is for the political powers in Africa, including the Maghreb, as in Europe, to ask themselves the real questions in order to be, one day, able to provide the right answers. So, who is responsible for what, what phenomenon is the cause of what other phenomenon? Clearly here, with regard to migration, why are young Africans leaving, and in increased numbers, despite the reinforcements of all borders? And since they are being deprived of both employment and a reasonable chance to live decently at home, why do

3 Robert Denard, known as Bob Denard, born April 7, 1929 in Bordeaux and died October 13, 2007 in Pontault-Combault in Seine-et-Marne, was a French mercenary. He was involved in numerous coups in Africa from the independence period around 1960 until 1995.

we continue to talk about *economic migration*? In this sense, would not so-called economic migrants also be refugees in search of rights? The essential right to live, the Right to Life.

Of course, such a right is neither easy to support nor easy to achieve. But many means, other than security or the shielding of borders, exist for this. Such means can only be found, when it comes to migration across the Maghreb in particular, at three levels: the diplomatic and political and, ultimately, economic:

That first of the Maghreb countries, from Mauritania to Libya:

Morocco was one of the primary promoters and signatories in 2018 of the Global Compact for safe, orderly and regular migration and Tunisia timidly endorsed it, while Algeria - like Matteo Salvini's Italy or Trump's United States of America or Austria's far-right government to name a few-- refused to endorse it because, they argued, it would limit sovereignty in the management of migratory flows at their borders and on their territory. At the same time, Morocco initiated from well before 2019, what has happened in recent weeks in Tunisia. As if, in some cases, bad practices seem easier to duplicate than good ones. And not only on migration matters.

However, the need to build and conduct a common Maghreb migration policy, based on reliable and verifiable data, is an unavoidable imperative. And this is what a group of academicians and Maghreb associative and administrative leaders set about as part of a research network called NAMAN⁴, founded, precisely in Tunis, in July 2019. This network - totally autonomous both in its approach and in its reflection, at least as far as its Moroccan and Tunisian components are concerned – has always maintained that:

- Knowing the figures on the ground and the real reasons for migration (economic, social, security, environmental, etc.) is an absolute prerequisite for any policy aimed at managing/administering/regulating it in one direction or another.
- Nothing significant, politically sustainable and, above all, opposed to the partners concerned in the rest of Africa as in the countries of the European Union, can be carried out in migration matters (as in many other economic, social and security domains) in the countries of North Africa without a North African approach. An approach taking into account all the parameters at stake, all their implications and all their repercussions, on each of the Maghreb countries, but also on their more or less not distant Sahelian neighborhood.
- It remains absolutely necessary to build a Maghreb strong in its economic integration and truly democratic institutions - to improve the standard and living environment of its own populations, whose propensity to emigrate irregularly will diminish - which will then serve as a relay of development to all of sub-Saharan Africa, from which it will be able to receive and provide a decent living for a large number of migrants, rather than erecting Maghreb North Africa, from the Mauritanian-Senegalese border to the Egyptian-Libyan border, as a rampart or advanced protective wall for the European area at its southern external border. Against, sometimes, words of thanks in Brussels or Strasbourg.

Second, that of Africa as a whole:

The African Union seems not to be involved, outside its walls in Addis Ababa and outside the statutory meetings of its bodies, neither in the economic, social and scientific development of the continent nor in the migration issue which deprives many of its countries of their vital forces.

However, in the image of the European Union gradually being constructed in protection of its economic interests, its productive sectors, its production tools as well as its geographic space against "uncontrolled migration", the African Union must be enabled to craft rules limiting the unbridled exploitation of the continent's resources, protecting its forests, coasts, soils, waters; guaranteeing a fair balance between what is taken by foreign companies and what is left to nationals and the budget of local States, and between what goes to capital and what goes to labour.

4 NAMAN, English initials for Network of Academicians and Researchers on Migration in North Africa. Network, supported by the ICMPD (International Center for Migration Policy Development), with National Committees in Algeria, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria while some actors in Morocco – not only in the administration – sought to block participation in it.

It must also be in a position to propose a continental migration policy that will better protect the life and dignity of African migrants – whatever their mode of migration – and allow it to negotiate with Europe various aspects of its own policy in the matter, particularly with regard to so-called *chosen migration* by putting on the table the principle of compensation, both financial and in the form of technology transfer, covering part of the costs of training African skills incurred by all economic sectors in Africa, also by European social services from health to catering.

Thirdly, the relations between Africa and Europe, between the African Union and the European Union

The “management” of migratory flows from Africa as currently operated – with the thousands of tragedies it causes in the Mediterranean⁵, - will likely have no significant effect on the ground if it does not take into account the drivers of two fundamental factors: population growth and poverty on the continent, which are what determine to a large extent the propensity of young people to leave it. And if it does not consider that control of the demographic variable depends on the reduction of poverty, itself determined by the adoption of other economic and social policies and new Euro-African relations, totally different from those followed over the last 50-60 years.

In the context of such a reorientation of development policies with Africa (and in Africa) and with regard to the new relations to be established between the countries of the European Union and those of the African Union, the overall changes in behavior, and mentalities, to be undertaken must be based on the need:

- To admit that the growing economic, commercial, social, educational and scientific imbalances between the North and the Global South are one of the most important sources of crisis in the African countries with which Europe is in contact, or with which it is today bound by various trade agreements or free trade zones (as is the case of certain Maghreb countries).
- To realize that the future of Africa is today an important subject of concern, and not only because of the irregular migratory flows of which it is the origin. And consequently to initiate a plan or an international "rescue" program in favor of the "dark continent", similar to what the American Marshall Plan was for Europe at the end of the 2nd World War which had destroyed Europe as much as it had impoverished it. Europe is at the gates of Africa so to speak, and it would be inconceivable that Europe could think itself out of reach in any circumstances of the tragedies of all kinds in which the African continent would have to insert itself a little more each year, if nothing significant is done to help it find solutions to deal with its multiple crises. And if, in the first place, the different forms of exploitation to which its multiple resources are still subject do not cease.
- To consider that it is better to find the means, within a Euro-African partnership framework, to redirect the military and security expenditure carried out in Africa towards agricultural, educational, scientific development projects, etc., rather than continuing to undercut these as if security and/or military approaches will solve both the problem of terrorism and that of irregular migration. The availability of financial resources for armies and armaments proves that the issue of economic and social development in Africa is essentially a matter of politics.

From all this, it follows that no one is plotting against Tunisia, Algeria or Morocco to transform them into what they already are, African countries by nature and by history. As it is clearly established that the only real conspiracy to which all three of them are subjected, at various levels, is that of their underdevelopment as well as that of the various crises - including poverty, unemployment and illiteracy - that they live with and parallel to them most of the African continent. Forced migration being only a sub-phenomenon attached to all this. However, no problem can be solved if its main variables are not previously, validly and accurately identified, analyzed and addressed.

* * *

Rabat, 5 March, 2023

Unofficial translation from the French language original by Patrick Taran (GMPA)

⁵ According to the International Migration Organization, 29,000 migrants died trying to cross the Mediterranean between 2014 and the end of October 2022. That is an average of nearly 2,400 deaths per year.