



# A NEW CHAMPION IN THE FIGHT AGAINST ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION

*Posted on May 1, 2023 by Rubén Pulido*



A little more than four years were enough for [Kais Saied](#) to realize that illegal immigration did not bring any benefit to his country. The Tunisian president, who was sworn into office in October 2019, decided to stand up about a month ago as the champion of the fight against illegal, massive and uncontrolled immigration on his territory.

Again, what is crucial is the interference of NGOs, with their constant and repeated presence in the Central Mediterranean, which have created a niche of opportunities for human trafficking mafias at different points of the Tunisian coast, as they expand their tentacles at the demand of humanitarian organizations, and are changing their territorial preferences in the face of the return of controls to Libyan territory.

Illegal immigration in Tunisia already existed; it is not something that arrived overnight. But it was certainly a controlled phenomenon, where the Tunisian Republic exercised isolated controls in its territory, with which it created a staggered deterrent effect so that the problem did not escalate.

It was from 2019, when after the implementation of more severe controls by the Libyan Coast Guard in the triangle from Zuwara to Tripoli, that the mafias begin to realize that their operations on Libyan territory did not enjoy the same success they had back in 2016, 2017 or 2018. The number of vessels intercepted by the Libyan authorities has increased, and thus the failure of the operations of the warlords who handle human trafficking.

With the beginning of 2019, the first movements of illegal immigration of sub-Saharan origin towards Tunisian territory began to take place. A mixture of the failure of the maritime incursions from Libya and the change of habits on the part of the NGOs, frightened by the strengthening of controls by the Libyan coast guard, also changed the preferences of the mafias.

It was clear that the chartering of vessels no longer brought big profits to those warlords who established greater control over the illegal immigration business. Others of lesser capacity and less experience in the matter continue to further their activity; but the large slavers changed their business model, and began to take control of the border area between Libya and Tunisia, so that everything now works at the request of NGOs.

The operations of the humanitarian organizations have intensified their presence along the entire Tunisian coastline, from Zarzis to Nabeul, passing through Sfax or coastal areas near Sousse. And in front of this coastline, humanitarian organizations, with their presence, began to seduce criminal networks and Tunisian fishermen, who once again saw a business opportunity in trafficking migrants who wanted to go to Europe.

With all this activity, it is logical that these criminal organizations did not take long to expand, and with that, also the pockets of illegal immigration that exchanged Libya for Tunisia. And of course, this creates some instability when these gangs of slavers begin to control certain territories and the will of certain agents who, in exchange for a small bribe, turn a blind eye until the departure of boats from the Tunisian coasts.

You will see all this explained as if it were a story, I hope you will forgive me for sparing certain details, but that is what the newspaper archives are for. The Tunisian Coast Guard intensified its controls in some months, but none of this was enough to control the expansion of these criminal networks. At a certain point, the situation became totally unsustainable.

Undoubtedly, Italy has also played a part in this decision. Giorgia Meloni has undoubtedly raised awareness and has been able to forge collaboration agreements with the Tunisian government in order to establish greater control over the illegal immigration that is concentrated along the Tunisian coastline. One thing led to another and in February, Kais Saied decided to take a decisive stand against this problem.

The Tunisian president thus decided, just over a month and a half ago, to put an end to illegal immigration on his territory, establishing exhaustive police controls for the identification and repatriation of those immigrants who are residing in his country illegally.

What is everyone saying about his measures? The expected—that they are extremist, xenophobic and against human rights. What they do not say about his measures? That Saied has managed to dismantle dozens of criminal networks that saw in this illegal immigration a business opportunity with the organization of illegal trips to Europe via maritime incursions into southern Italy.

Since the implementation of these measures, hundreds of sub-Saharanans have already been repatriated

to countries such as Senegal, Mali, Guinea or Burkina Faso. And Algerian and Moroccan nationals have fled the country using the services of the mafias that have increased their illegal activity in recent years, increasing the flow of illegal immigration from Tunisia to Europe by more than 150 percent. On the other hand, controls by the Tunisian coast guard have been increased. So much so that during the first quarter of the year more than 14,000 illegal immigrants bound for southern Italy were prevented from leaving. More than 500 boats were interrupted and the criminal organizations behind these illegal incursions were dismantled.

As a result of this fight against illegal immigration along the Tunisian coastline, the Tunisian authorities have reached a figure of interceptions almost six times higher than that recorded at the same time last year. During the first quarter of 2022, the Tunisian Coast Guard intercepted a total of 2,532 illegal immigrants, in a total of 172 anti-migration operations.

The good harmony between Italy and Tunisia after Giorgia Meloni came to power has led the Tunisian authorities to increase the number of interceptions by more than 450 percent and to raise the percentage of operations carried out to curb migratory pressure by more than 190 percent.

Perhaps the entire conglomerate of humanitarian organizations is once again seeing its business model in the Central Mediterranean threatened. And perhaps, what worries these organizations the least is that these illegal immigrants lose their lives at sea, because precisely the control actions promoted by Kais Saied minimize the risk of human losses, putting an end to the major risk factors for this illegal immigration, namely, maritime incursions in adverse weather conditions and the use of increasingly precarious vessels by criminal networks that see their activity increase with the presence, on the other side of the Tunisian coasts, of the vessels of these humanitarian organizations.

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Rubén Pulido served in the Air Force for 11 years, a period in which he also completed several military training courses and a Master's Degree in International Relations at the UCAM. During his career outside the military, he has advised various organizations on immigration matters. This article appears through the kind courtesy of [\*Posmodernia\*](#).

