

# Safe on Paper, Unsafe in Reality: Tunisia and EU Return Policy

In 2025, the European Commission launched a major overhaul of the EU return framework, proposing an EU list of safe countries of origin, a revised safe third country concept, and a new regulation to accelerate returns.

Under these new rules, Tunisia is considered a “safe” country of origin, could be treated as a “safe” third country, and may become a destination for forced returns through bilateral agreements.

**But Tunisia is NOT safe – not for Tunisians, nor asylum seekers, migrants, or refugees. Here's why:**

## What happens to Tunisian nationals?

Under President Saïed, **civic space is shrinking**: stigmatization and repression of human rights defenders increase, many facing judicial harassment:

- **Decree-Law 54 on cybercrime** is used to jail critics for “fake news” — in 2024, **400 people, including 24 journalists**, were prosecuted under it
- Lawyer and journalist **Sonia Dahmani** has been arbitrarily detained since May 2024 for denouncing abuses against people on the move
- The **judiciary is no longer independent**: judges and institutions have been dismissed by decree, and fair trials are routinely denied
- **Torture and ill-treatment** by security forces are on the rise: **81 cases** were documented between June 2023 and June 2024



**This is the reality for  
Tunisian citizens —  
not a “safe country.”**



**Read about:**

- the **“conspiracy case”**, that sentenced to jail 37 opposition figures!
- the prosecution of **Ahmed Souab**, defending lawyer in the case



## What happens to people on the move in Tunisia?



### Arbitrary detention , torture and ill-treatment

- People on the move face pre-trial and immigration detention with no procedural guarantees: no access to translators, doctors, lawyers, and confiscated documents
- Mid-September 2024: **3,800 individuals** under international protection in Tunisia reported being subjected to torture during their migration journey



### Sexual and gender-based violence

- A humanitarian organization reported a **400% increase** in cases among its beneficiaries on the move between January and October 2024!



### No asylum, dangerous routes, and barriers to departure

- People on the move are denied identification, access to asylum, and international protection
- 2024: **30+ organizations** working on migrants' protection faced repression
- 2024: **600-700** died or went missing off Tunisia's coast
- 2024: More than **70,000 interceptions at sea**, with violent coast guards practices widely reported



### Forced arbitrary displacements and deportation

- January-November 2024: **16,503 deportations**, mostly to Algeria (9000+) and Libya
- Deported individuals face exposure to torture, trafficking and further deportations from Algeria and Libya to Niger



**This is the reality for people on the move in Tunisia – not a “safe country.”**



Read Aissata's story below —  
based on real events, an  
account of Tunisia's inhumane  
practices



## Aissata's story

Aissata left Guinea in 2020 for Egypt, fleeing physical and psychological domestic violence inflicted by her ex-husband. Then, she moved to Tunisia in 2023 with the intent of crossing the Mediterranean



### Departure & interception

Aissata pays 15 million Guinean francs to board a zodiac with 49 others, but the boat is intercepted by the Tunisian National Guard who threatens to sink it if they don't stop the engine

### Detention & deportation to Algeria

The group is handcuffed, phones confiscated, and detained, after disembarkation. They are forcibly displaced to the Algerian border and forced to cross it on foot.

**"We were taken down, beaten, trampled, and pushed against the barbed wire"**

### Arrest & deportation to Libya

Trying to re-enter Tunisia, Aissata is arrested again. She is forcibly displaced to the Libyan border, where Tunisian security forces agents undressed, beat, and raped her and other women. She is then forced into Libya

### Trafficked back through the desert

At nightfall, they walk two days through the desert to return to Tunisia. Through smugglers, they reach Sfax, where she is then held by a criminal group, threatened with rape and sale to another gang

### Release & aftermath

Her partner in France is forced to pay €1,100 ransom for her release; 6 women remain captive when Aissata escapes. She now lives in Tunis with an acquaintance and has been hospitalized for a heart condition

**Aissata survived — but no one should endure this. Her story is not an exception, it's part of a system of violence...**

**Aissata's journey shows the brutal cost of calling Tunisia a "safe" country!**

