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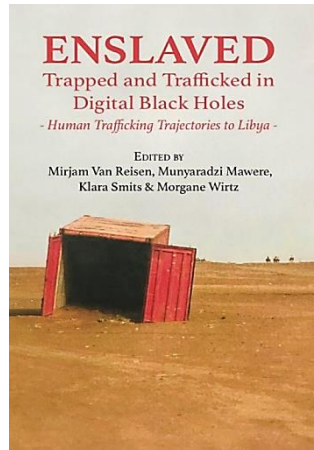
*Morgane Wirtz, Klara Smits & Mirjam Van Reisen*

## Chapter in: Enslaved

Trapped and Trafficked in Digital Black Holes:  
Human Trafficking Trajectories to Libya

### From the book Series:

Connected and Mobile: Migration and Human Trafficking in Africa



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### “Gate Closed”: The Situation in Libya during COVID-19<sup>1</sup>

*Morgane Wirtz, Klara Smits & Mirjam Van Reisen*

#### Introduction

*All the borders are closed. It's not just Niger, it's Libya too. Before we understood the situation, we had left [from Niger to Libya] in four vehicles. [...] The Libyan security forces occupied the whole border; they said that everyone must get off. Everyone got off. They did the controls and then they told us to go back to Niger, all of us. They didn't let anyone in. It was from that moment that we knew that we had to look for new ways to enter. (Interviewee 1080, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, October 2020)*

Sitting on the terrace of a restaurant in Agadez in northern Niger, a young Senegalese facilitator for people on the move – a ‘smuggler’ – explains how difficult the times have been for him since the outbreak of COVID-

*The COVID-19 pandemic led to restrictions on movement, with the closure of borders and quarantines. But, did this stop the movement of people through Libya and across the Mediterranean Sea? The push and pull theory of migration suggests that more obstacles would reduce the number of people making this crossing. However, this research found the opposite. From April to October 2020, over 24,000 arrived in Malta and Italy from Libya and Tunisia. This is three times the number for the whole of 2019. Hence, it appears that such theories do not explain the reality of migration as it happens on the ground.*

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<sup>1</sup> The research for this chapter was undertaken as part of the first and second authors' PhD theses and will be reused fully or in part for this purpose.

19. Faced with the closure of borders, he has had to adapt his business.

Like the rest of the world, the Central Mediterranean region was touched by the COVID-19 pandemic. Libya, Niger and Tunisia identified their first cases in March 2020 (WHO, 2020a; 2020b; 2020c). In Libya, the pandemic presented a real challenge, because the humanitarian situation was already critical, with the country in the midst of a civil war. Health infrastructure had been destroyed, notably in the fighting between the Libyan National Army, commanded by Khalifa Haftar, and the forces backing the Government of National Accord. To stem the spread of the pandemic, the Government of National Accord closed its air and land borders on 16 March 2020, even before the first case was identified in Libya. In March, April and May 2020, various lockdowns were imposed in several parts of the country (IOM, 2020a; 2020b). After July 2020, Libya witnessed an increase in cases. As at 31 October 2020, 60,628 cases had been confirmed and 847 deaths recorded (WHO, 2020a).

In Niger too, the news of the pandemic prompted concern. Niger is ill equipped to deal with such situations, having recorded a Human Development Index of 0.377 in 2019, which places it 189th out of 189 territories (Programme des Nations Unies pour le Développement, 2019). To flatten the curve, on 17 March 2020, the government announced a health state of emergency and closed the border two days later. In addition, a curfew was put in place and movement between regions restricted. From mid-April, these measures were gradually relaxed (UNOCHA, 2020). As at 31 October 2020, the country had recorded 1,220 cases and 69 deaths since the start of the pandemic – 70% of these cases were in the capital, Niamey. The regions of Agadez and Zinder were the next most affected (WHO, 2020c). Niger reopened its air borders on 1 August 2020. During the entire period of data collection for this chapter, Niger's land borders remained closed.

Tunisia announced the closure of its maritime, air and land borders on 18 March 2020. Following the reopening of borders to a selection of countries on 27 June 2020, the number of cases in the country

started to rise. As at 31 October 2020, Tunisia had recorded a total of 58,028 cases and 1,253 deaths since the start of the pandemic (WHO, 2020b). Tunisia and Niger (particularly the Agadez region in the north of Niger) are entry and exit gateways to Libya for sub-Saharan migrants and refugees.<sup>2</sup>

The security situation in Libya in 2020, combined with the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, has led to a deterioration in the situation for migrants and refugees. The situation became so hard for migrants and refugees in Libya that many left the country:

*The economic downturn, including plummeting income-generating opportunities for migrant workers, tightened security controls and mobility restrictions due to COVID-19 are amongst the factors which have likely contributed to a number of migrants leaving Libya.* (IOM, 2020d)

Migrants and refugees living in Libya found themselves trapped between the civil war and the coronavirus pandemic, at constant risk of falling into the hands of human traffickers and slavers. At that time, an estimated, 2,370 of them were held in official detention centres, often in perilous health conditions, making them susceptible to COVID-19 (UNHCR, 2020b). However, these are only the official figures; in Tunisia, Libya and the Agadez region of Niger, their irregular situation places people on the move far from official data.

According to journalist Sara Creta, speaking in a webinar on the impact of COVID-19 on migrants and refugees, the situation during the peak of the pandemic was alarming:

*It's important to consider that due to the COVID-19 and due to the restrictions, their life [of migrants and refugees] and their situation are directly affected. They cannot work and they cannot move. They cannot earn money.* (Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung – North Africa, 2020 [transcribed and paraphrased by MW])

---

<sup>2</sup> In this chapter the terms 'migrant' and 'refugee' are used interchangeably in a non-legal way to refer to people on the move, without drawing any conclusions about their legal status (see Glossary of Terms).

In October 2020, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) indicated that:

*A rise in the well-documented and constant risk of abduction, arbitrary arrest and detention which migrants face in Libya has been recorded in recent weeks. In late September, for example, more than 300 migrants were reportedly kidnapped when armed men stormed their homes in the town of Al Ajaylat and held in an unofficial detention site. During the raid, at least two people lost their lives. IOM medical teams provided assistance to those injured. (IOM, 2020d)*

In July 2020, migrants and refugees released after the closure of Gharyan detention centre demanded to be returned to prison, claiming that Tripoli was not safe. In March 2020, the same happened in Sabha, with migrants asking to be returned to prison, not knowing where to sleep after their release (Tubiana, 2020).

For many migrants and refugees in Libya, the closure of borders has meant the tightening of a trap in which they were already stuck. With air borders closed, IOM was forced to cease its assisted voluntary returns between April and August 2020 (IOM, 2020e). In addition, all resettlement flights operated by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) were postponed from 15 March until 15 October 2020. When those activities resumed, only 501 people were able to benefit from this programme from January till November 2020. This is a very small number compared to the 2,424 people resettled in 2019 (UNHCR, 2020e; UNHCR, 2020a). Fleeing the country through land borders has also become more complicated since the pandemic. With the border checkpoints closed, people on the move have had to take other, more perilous, routes to escape to neighbouring countries. It was only in September and October 2020 that land border crossing points started to ease (IOM, 2020b).

Despite this, IOM noted that the number of migrants and refugees living in Libya has declined since the beginning of the pandemic, which indicates that they must have found a way to leave, even though the borders were closed. In September and October 2020, a total of 574,146 migrants and refugees from over 43 different



countries were identified in Libya by IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix (IOM, 2020c), compared to 654,081 migrants in October to December 2019 (IOM, 2019). An estimated 80,000 migrants and refugees left the country between March 2020 and October 2020 to neighbouring countries or across the Mediterranean Sea to Europe (IOM, 2020d).

Despite the closure of European borders and ports, the number of people who arrived in Malta and Italy after having crossed the Mediterranean Sea from the Libyan and Tunisian shores in 2020 was nearly three times higher than the previous year. A total of 27,834 individuals arrived between 1 January and 2 November 2020. 41.7% of these were Tunisians (UNHCR, 2020c). This is an increase of 16.56% compared to the same period in 2019. (UNHCR, 2020b). This raises questions about the effectiveness of border closures and other policies on stemming migration.

Hence, the research question examined in this chapter is: *Did the conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic when borders were closed and movements were restricted lead to a reduction in the movement of people in (and to/from) Libya and a decrease in the number of migrants and refugees crossing the Mediterranean Sea to Europe?*

To answer this question, this chapter looks at the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures imposed to curb the pandemic on the movement of migrants in Libya and to Libya (from Niger and Tunisia), as well as from Libya and Tunisia to Europe. The first part of the findings is based on interviews with migrants, refugees, smugglers, journalists and other key people in Libya, Niger and Tunisia during the COVID-19 pandemic; the second part is based on a desk study of the relevant media reports at the time. This is followed by a brief conclusion.

Before presenting the findings, the next section sets out the methodology for this research, which is followed by a brief discussion of the push and pull theory of migration. The hypothesis is that if the push and pull theory is correct, the COVID-19 situation should lead to a clear reduction of movement from Libya to Europe.

## Methodology

The methodology detailed here describes the collaborative efforts of the research team Social Dynamics of Digital Innovation in Remote non-Western communities (SDDI). This team worked under the leadership of Van Reisen, who acted as principal investigator. The full methodology of the research underpinning this book can be found in Chapter 3: *Skin in the Game: Methodology of an Ethnographic Research with Exposure to Trauma*.

This chapter is based on ethnographic research to explore the situation of migrants and refugees in Libya, and neighbouring countries of Niger and Tunisia, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study is built on two distinct data-sets embedded in the local context. The first consists of interviews conducted with migrants and refugees, as well as other relevant participants. The second data-set is based on a desk study using material containing local descriptions of the situation of migrants and refugees during the pandemic, giving more of an outsider's perspective. The two sets allow for the triangulation of findings obtained through analysis of the two different data-sets.

The interviews and desk review were conducted from 1 May till 1 November 2020 in Libya, Niger and Tunisia, but covered the period from March to November 2020 (the early part of the pandemic). As it was almost impossible to travel during this time, very little information has been published on how the situation for people on the move was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 157 people were interviewed by Morgane Wirtz and Adoum Moussa.

In Tunisia, interviews were conducted in cities hosting large communities of migrants and refugees, such as Zarzis (46 respondents), Medinine (11 respondents), Sfax (24 respondents), Sousse (9 respondents), Tunis (24 respondents) and Djerba (3 respondents). Research was also conducted in Kerkennah (1 respondent), and Kelibia (4 respondents), from where boats leave towards Italy. In Niger, fieldwork was carried out exclusively in Agadez (35 respondents), which is the last stopover before the crossing the Sahara to Libya and Algeria. Due to the closure of

borders and the security situation, in Libya migrants and refugees were contacted by phone. Interviews were conducted with migrants and refugees (3 respondents) when they were in Tripoli, Zawiya, Zuwara and Garabulli. Some respondents were interviewed multiple times in multiple locations, as they were followed in their journey. In this case, they were counted in multiple locations, but not double-counted for the total number of interviewees. The respondents were selected with the help of local people or people well integrated in the migrant communities in Tunisia and Niger. The interviews were transcribed and analysed using a purposeful<sup>3</sup> and open labelling strategy, by a team of researchers and assistants.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to the interviews, a desk study was carried out of a systematic collection of press articles, radio and video reports, webinars and research reports on the situation of migrants and refugees in the Central Mediterranean region during the study time from May to mid-September 2020. Wiem Ben Hamouda and Asma Ben Hadj Hassen (students of African Studies at the University of Sousse), and Ibrahim Diallo (Director of the *Air Info* newspaper in Agadez) systematically listed a total of 565 articles, videos and podcasts published on the research subject. The search included any publication on the topic of migrants and refugees in the region (Libya, Tunisia, Niger) related to the pandemic. The focus of the search was on the collection of articles from local media, in Arabic, Hausa and French, but they also extended to the international press, in French,

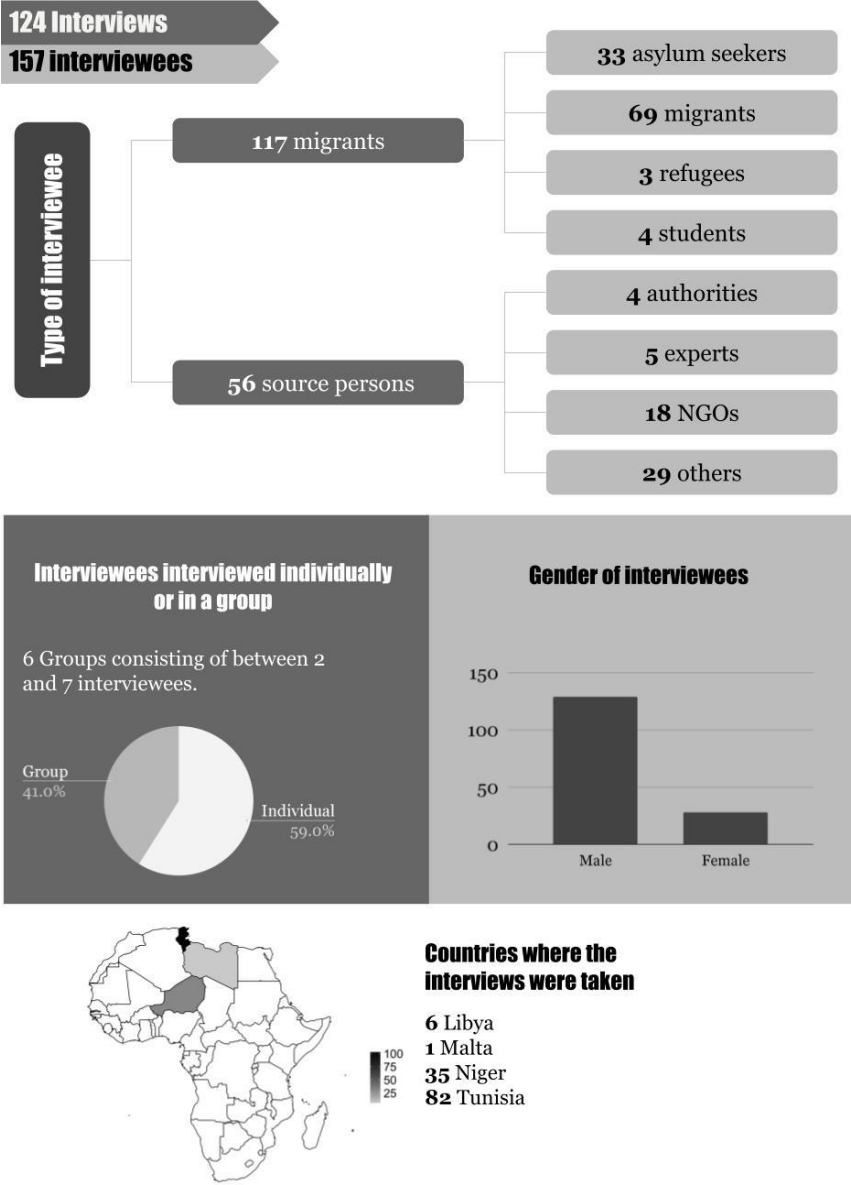
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<sup>3</sup> The labels designed included the type of interviewee (migrant, refugee, expert, NGO, authority, other), type of shelter (detention centre, rented house, etc.), ill (yes/no), how many people known with COVID-19 symptoms, access to health care, fear of contracting COVID-19, help received, economic difficulties due to lockdown, willing to depart (no or legally to Europe, illegally through Libya, illegally through the sea in Tunisia, illegally through Algeria, return home), and reported as having departed after the interview.

<sup>4</sup> The team was led by Morgane Wirtz and Dr Mariem Ghardallou and included: Zohra Touati, Sarra Achour, Whitney Atieno, Wejden Ben Aziza, Asma Ben Hadj Hassen, Wiem Ben Hamouda, Cyrille Bozon Seabe, Bryan Eryong, Kobe Goudo Désire, Francis Kinyua Gathua, Abir Menssi, and Anouk Smeets.

English, Italian and Dutch. Just over a third (35%) of these articles concerned travel during the pandemic, despite the closure of borders.

Figure 16.1. Overview of interview statistics<sup>5</sup>



<sup>5</sup> Some interviewees were interviewed in multiple locations, but only counted once towards the interviewee total. Some interviews were held with more than one respondent. Some interviewees were both migrant/refugee/asylum seeker and

The articles were analysed using a closed coding labelling strategy.<sup>6</sup>

The next section briefly discusses the push and pull theory of migration, before the presenting the findings of this research (interviews and desk study).

**Push and pull theory of migration during COVID lockdowns**

The EU’s migration policy is underpinned by the logic that creating more obstacles will curb the number of people attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea (see Chapter 2: *Living in a Black Hole: Explaining Human Trafficking for Ransom in Migration*). This approach is based on the logic of push and pull: if obstacles to reaching a particular destination increase, these act as a deterrent, a theory first presented by Lee (1966).



**Figure 16.2. Push and pull theory of migration (adapted from Lee, 1996)**

However, the concept of push and pull theory, which has its origins in an economic theory rooted in rational choice, has been challenged, as it does not always explain the behaviour seen on the ground. Kidane (2021) refutes Lee’s model of rational choice, pointing to the

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source person – they were counted in both categories, but not double counted in the total interviewees.

<sup>6</sup> The articles were classified according to the topics covered; the impact of COVID-19 on the financial situation of migrants/refugees, on their access to health care, and on their movement.

psychological effects of trauma and how emphasis on dangers ahead can stimulate a flight response in some people. She argues that policies should aim at increasing resilience in a place where refugees and migrants feel secure and protected.

Brachet and Scheele (2019) speak of ‘remoteness’ to identify the fact that official policies and regulatory frameworks may play out differently on the ground than in the places (centres) where they are formulated. In some cases, these policies can have the opposite effect of what was intended. Remoteness, these authors argue, “translates both a structural vulnerability and is certain form of power – the power to make one’s self invisible, unpredictable and hence ungovernable” (Brachet & Scheele, 2019, pp. 168–169). Hence, the fact that something is unlawful or regulated, does not mean that it ceases to exist.

Confirming the observations of Brachet (2010) that the facilitation of travel was pushed in a sphere of criminality, Creta (2020) argues that the increase in obstacles to reach a safe place has had the opposite effect: by pushing the movement of people into the realm of illegality it has enhanced the scope for human trafficking. This position is also taken by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime:

*Where migrants continue on their journeys, they will be increasingly reliant on smugglers to facilitate their journey through environments that are increasingly hostile to migration. This enhanced dependency, and decreased ability to rely on any state organs for support, compounds their vulnerability to exploitation at the hands of their smugglers.* (Wagner & Hoang, 2020, p.7)

Van Reisen, Estefanos and Rijken (2014) demonstrated that human trafficking in Sinai was partly a result of a series of agreements between Italy and Libya that had made crossing the Mediterranean Sea extremely difficult. By studying the impact of the Libyan conflict and of the containment policies on migration, Morone (2020) found that paradoxically, European policies to contain migration have led to more African migrants attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea. Morone found that these policies actually lead to a worsening of the

conditions for migrants in Libya and motivate many to leave, whereas their first motivation when deciding to go to Libya may have been to stay there and work as a foreign worker.

Castles set out the need for more research on migration from a social science perspective including: “Emphasis on the social meanings constructed by people in diverse communities and societies, and on the relativity and context-dependence of these meanings” (Castles, 2012, p. 21). Following the same rationale, Van Reisen, Stokmans, Mawere and Gebre-Egziabher (2019) advocate for research on migration as a social and ethnographic topic, but with a view to establishing common factors across specific situations located in time and space as a means of contributing to the understanding of it as a global phenomenon. Comparing studies set in time and space allows the development of theoretical frameworks that are relevant to describe (new) associations between (new) factors that are identified as relevant in the specific studies. Their conclusion is in line with Castles, who found “that attempts to create a ‘general theory of migration’ are unlikely to be helpful”(Castles, 2012, p. 31).

The COVID-19 pandemic, and the measures implemented to restrict movement to curb the pandemic, provide a perfect opportunity to test the push and pull theory of migration. The following sections set out the findings of this study from the two data-sets – the interviews and the desk review – on the impact of the pandemic on the movement of people in (and to/from) Libya, as well as across the Mediterranean Sea to Europe.

### **Findings of the interviews**

The COVID-19 pandemic and the measures taken to contain it have had vast repercussions globally, for people in all countries, including migrants and refugees. From the interviews, the impacts can be grouped roughly into the following five areas, which provide the structure for the presentation of the findings of the interviews and the desk review: closing of borders, increased deportations and creation of new routes; new health protocols and quarantine



arrangements; economic repercussions; access to support; and crossing the Mediterranean Sea.

### ***Closing of borders, increased deportations and creation of new routes***

Given the climate of illegality created for migrants and refugees in Libya and the broader region, the migration routes have already changed over the past decade. The closing of borders due to the COVID-19 pandemic further compounded the situation, restricting movement and increasing the dependency of people on the move on those who facilitate such movement. However, in the early days of the pandemic migrants and refugees largely respected the measures taken by states to contain the spread of COVID-19. Mahgoub Hassan, the officer in charge of UNHCR in Zarzis in Tunisia, observed the following:

*Very few people have arrived [from Libya to Tunisia]. As a matter of fact, two groups recently arrived. They were confined for 14 days and then released. But that happened in Sfax. Those people arrived by boat. [Also], since the eruption of this pandemic, no significant movement from Tunisia back to Libya has been observed. (Mahgoub Hassan, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)*

Smugglers have also been affected by border closures. A smuggler in Agadez shared the following:

*Really, COVID-19 has blocked our activities. Since coronavirus arrived, migrants have no road to get to Agadez. (Interviewee 1078, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, July 2020)*

Located in the centre of Niger, Agadez is a gateway to the Sahara. It is an important stopover on the migration routes. It is where the tarmac ends and the desert begins. In Agadez migrants and refugees have to negotiate with smugglers to continue their journey to Algeria or Libya. With COVID-19 and the closure of borders, several interviewees explained that they felt trapped in the city. Many waited to continue their journey north or south. A Cameroonian woman explained:

*Corona has delayed our trip. When I see that I have been here for three months... I would have saved maybe Central African Franc (FCFA) 100,000 [EUR 160] [if I had not stayed here]. So it has blocked us in fact. (Interviewee 1067, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, June 2020)*

A man staying at the IOM transit centre while waiting to benefit from the assisted voluntary return to travel to the Ivory Coast explained:

*This is not my home. [...] I'm a bit demoralised, because [...] I left for adventure, I couldn't enter [Europe]. I'm in Niger, I haven't returned home. It demoralises me. (Interviewee 1083, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, June 2020)*

The feeling of being stuck in this city, at the doors of the Sahara, is exacerbated by the almost impossibility of crossing the border illegally. 'Almost', because, of course, while there have been much fewer illegal migrants arriving in Libya since the coronavirus pandemic struck, smugglers have found new ways to complete the journey. A smuggler in Agadez explained:

*Before, we paid for each vehicle [at the Libyan border to enable it to cross]. It was 100,000 FCFA [EUR 154] per vehicle. But, since coronavirus, the police will not let us go through. They are a bit strict. So we bypass the checkpoints to pass. We have created new routes. (Interviewee 1080, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, Agadez, October 2020)*

This quote suggests that the close of borders did not stop the transportation of people to (and from) Libya, but it changed the routes, increased the cost and the risks, and pushed such movement further in a sphere of illegality. The intensification of border controls places migrants who insist on leaving in a more vulnerable position. A smuggler shared:

*[To get from Libya to Niger], if you had 60,000 FCFA [EUR 92], 75,000 FCFA [EUR 114], the smugglers would bring you. But now they are asking for 100,000 FCFA [EUR 153], because the driver pays [the customs officers] in Madama to enter [Niger]. (Interviewee 1080, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, Agadez, October 2020)*

In addition, the new routes that people on the move had to take during the border closures were longer. Smugglers took many

precautions to avoid the security checkpoints. One of them described the situation as follows:

*It's more difficult for us to leave since the borders are closed. It's very difficult now. It's very difficult. Before, it took two days to get to Tamanrasset [at the border with Algeria] and now it's six days. We leave by steps now. We observe how the security forces are oriented and that's how we leave. We are looking for information on their position so that we can pass.*

*Before, the road [to Libya] took five or six days. Now it is a week in the desert. When you leave Agadez, you have to go around all the barriers until you reach the border with Libya [...]. Sometimes you even have to go through Chad to enter Libya. (Interviewee 1080, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, October 2020)*

The new tracks made by the drivers in the Sahara are more dangerous than the usual roads. The smuggler explained:

*If you break down there, don't even think of a vehicle passing by to help you out or to pick up passengers. (Interviewee 1080, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, Agadez, October 2020)*

For safety reasons, given the length of the road and the increase in controls by security forces, this young smuggler decided to reduce the number of passengers per vehicle. Before, he used to load between 28 and 30 people into a Toyota Hilux that would take them across the desert. When the borders closed, he reduced it to between 23 and 25 people. This also led him to increase his price. He explained:

*Now it's very, very expensive for migrants. Transport is more complicated, more expensive and more difficult. Before, when leaving Agadez to Libya, you paid the smuggler FCFA 250,000 [EUR 380] for Sabha, FCFA 200,000 [EUR 305] for Qatrun, FCFA 400,000 [EUR 610] for Tripoli. But at the moment, when you leave here for Sabha, they ask you for FCFA 300,000 [EUR 458]. (Interviewee 1080, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, October 2020)*

In Tunisia too, after the first months of stagnation following the outbreak of the pandemic, (illegal) movement restarted. Chiara Cavalcanti, Communications Officer for UNHCR in Tunisia, said

that, between January and April 2020, more than one hundred people crossed the border from Tunisia back to Libya. She explained:

*It's really unfortunate. [...] We are raising awareness of the danger of returning to Libya. But we also know that in Tunisia the options are extremely limited.* (Chiara Cavalcanti, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2020)

Ten migrants and refugees who were followed during this research decided to leave Tunisia for Libya. The lack of prospects in Tunisia pushed them to leave. An Eritrean refugee explained:

*We don't have hope! We don't have a future. Instead of living for nothing, you have to die for something.* (Interviewee 1059, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

The return of refugees to Libya is quite alarming and shows their level of desperation. The ten people in this research who returned to Libya had experienced the conditions in Libya in the past, and some of them had been kidnapped for ransom or had been in official detention centres in Libya. However, the hopelessness of their situation led them to see Libya as the only option.

### ***New health protocols and quarantine arrangements***

When the pandemic started, some migrants and refugees were surprised to discover a health protocol on their arrival in Assamaka, in northern Niger, 15 kilometres from the Algerian border. A Cameroonian who arrived in April 2020 recalled the following:

*When we were in Assamaka, on the way, we heard about the disease, "corona, corona, corona". I thought it was a joke. When we arrived, they took us to another camp. They took our temperature with a machine. We were put aside and confined.* (Interviewee 1082, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, June 2020)

Confinement camps were set up across the Agadez region to accommodate migrants and refugees rescued in the desert. But the obligation to confine oneself has not always been well received by migrants and refugees. In Agadez, in the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an urgent need to take in people expelled from its northern neighbours. Those newcomers remained stuck in the region.

It is difficult to know how many migrants and refugees contracted COVID-19. Their precarious and irregular situation keeps them away from health facilities and they often prefer to treat themselves at home rather than entering a hospital. The UNHCR Communications Officer in Tunisia explained:

*If people have symptoms, they can call our helpline. Some have approached us this way. In this case, they are tested and if they are positive [for COVID-19], we have provided apartments to isolate them. But, to my knowledge, those who have been tested through this device have all been negative. And if they do not approach us, we cannot know.* (Chiara Cavalcanti, interview with Wirtz, phone, November 2020)

It is often when intercepted at borders that migrants and refugees are automatically tested and placed in quarantine:

*For those who have been rescued at sea, around 10 people have tested positive since the beginning of the pandemic. Depending on the circumstances, those rescued at sea are hosted in government structures or by IOM for the quarantine period, which is why it is difficult for us to follow. They are placed in quarantine and tested, then they are taken to our shelters after profiling, if they expressed the intention to seek international protection.* (Chiara Cavalcanti, interview with Wirtz, by phone, November 2020)

Several people on the border between Tunisia and Algeria were also quarantined and tested. In Niger too, the closing of the borders did not prevent the arrival of several thousand people, expelled from Algeria and Libya. Lockdown centres had to be quickly established to place the new arrivals in quarantine. Azaoua Mahaman, the Senior Communication and Reintegration Assistant, IOM Niger, explained:

*We had to manage lockdown sites for migrants. We have supported these sites by providing food, water, hygiene, health care. On average, we have injected over 200 million West African CFA franc (FCFA) [EUR 305,000] into the management of this crisis by supporting containment and the Nigerien government.* (Azaoua Mahaman, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, August 2020)

From the fieldwork carried out for this research, it appears that the fear of contracting coronavirus is rarely a major concern for migrants and refugees. The closing of borders and the economic difficulties

resulting from the crisis are more worrying. Of the 117 migrants and refugees interviewed for this research, only 2 reported having seen migrants with COVID-19 symptoms. One was talking about himself, feeling ill when he crossed the border from Tunisia to Libya. Being in a totally irregular situation, he was unable to access treatment or be tested. After his recovery, he concluded that it was probably malaria. The other suspected case was in an IOM transit centre in the Agadez region. A young Cameroonian reported:

*I have a friend, since we travelled together in the desert she has been coughing. But we do not know what she is suffering from as we have not yet taken her to the hospital for examinations or a test. Every day she goes to the hospital at the IOM centre and she is given medication, but she still coughs a lot, she is losing weight. (Interviewee 1063, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, June 2020)*

A Somali refugee in Zawiyah said that:

*Libyans, they think that Africans have corona. "Corona!", they call us like that. "Corona, go back to your room". Because we are black, I don't know... (Interviewee 1027, interview with Wirtz, WhatsApp, April 2020)*

The belief shared by many is that coronavirus is imported by foreigners, which has directly impacted on the access to work of migrants and refugees living in Libya. A smuggler who arranges the transfer of migrants between Agadez and Sabha in southern Libya shared the following:

*There is so much mistrust between blacks and Libyans. You know the Arabs! When it comes to illnesses, they don't approach black people. It is so hard. Everything has changed. Even with your boss, whom you used to chat with, there's no such thing if it's not on the phone. Arabs are very suspicious of black people, that's why they don't want to take you, even to bring you to work. Everything has stopped. (Interviewee 1080, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, Agadez, October 2020)*

The spread of coronavirus has aroused great fear that migrants and refugees may be infected. They are a highly mobile population, extremely vulnerable and with few resources in case of infection. In Libya, which is in the grip of armed conflict, the scarce health facilities are often inaccessible to migrants.

The spread of the virus in legal and illegal detention centres in Libya is a real risk and would be a disaster, exacerbated by overcrowding, lack of hygiene measures, and shortages of water. In Tunisia, several associations have highlighted the impossibility of migrants and refugees respecting social distancing. Speaking of urban migrants and refugees in Tunisia, Romdhane Ben Amor, Communications Officer from the Tunisian Forum of Economic and Social Rights (FTDES), talks about the risk of coronavirus spreading among migrant communities:

*They live in small apartments. In most cases, these apartments are overcrowded.*  
(Romdhane Ben Amor, interview with Wirtz, phone, April 2020)

Some refugees also expressed fear of contracting the virus in IOM and UNHCR shelters. A young woman hosted in a UNHCR shelter in Medinine, South Tunisia, explained that the situation is extremely conducive to the spread of COVID-19:

*The shelter makes us afraid. When coronavirus started to spread we kept doing things the same way, like 10 people using the same toilet and 10 people in the same kitchen.* (Interviewee 1051, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

Hence, the lack of access to a safe and healthy place is also a potential driver for people to move on.

### ***Economic repercussions***

Migrants travel clandestinely, from stopover to stopover, each time waiting to collect enough money, to continue their trajectory. For the majority of them, the end goal is to reach Europe. Their precarious economic situation and irregular status places them in a difficult situation, which the coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated. The majority of migrants and refugees interviewed in Tunisia claimed to be in a difficult economic situation due to the lockdown:

*Vulnerable people are becoming even more exposed and also the refugees who are usually self-reliant have become vulnerable.* (Chiara Cavalcanti, interview with Wirtz, phone, April 2020)

A young Cameroonian resident explained:

*Imagine, you are a migrant, you work in a cafe, then suddenly the cafe is closed. The boss calls you, he doesn't give you a salary. You are in a country where you have no one, and the landlord tells you to pay for the house. You have to pay the electricity and the water bills. For at least three weeks, he shut off the water. (Interviewee 1053, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)*

In Agadez, seven migrants said they were suffering economically from the coronavirus crisis. Some migrants have been settled there for several years. The pandemic did not really impact on their employment, as there was no lockdown. However, they live in precarious situations and work mainly in restaurants, bars, or gold mining and construction sites. Due to the closing of borders, the price of foodstuffs increased and it was very difficult to find work:

*Here, we live badly. We don't have a job. We don't make money. We have stayed here for two months, without work. (Interviewee 4004, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, June 2020)*

In Libya, too, the economic situation of migrants and refugees has deteriorated because of the coronavirus pandemic. A young Sudanese man who had been living in Tripoli for almost two years said that he used to go to the 'station', a place where Libyans would recruit day labourers, every morning to look for work:

*It is not easy to find a job. People talk, they say the number of infected people is increasing every day. But me, I don't see COVID 19. [...] Now, in the morning at the station, there are 500, 600 people. Before, it was not like that [...] I stay for hours at the station without finding a job. (Interviewee 1022, interview with Wirtz, phone, July 2020)*

The worsening of the economic situation of migrants and refugees is stressful. The majority of them left their country in order to help their families. They have pressure on their shoulders to send remittances. Many also have large debts to relatives who paid for their journeys or the ransom for their release from human traffickers. It has to be noted here that, despite the difficulties, a few interviewees in Tunisia said that the crisis actually improved their situation, as they finally received help due to the pandemic. This is developed in the next section.



### ***Access to support***

Migrants and refugees in the Central Mediterranean region usually do not have good access to medical facilities. This further deteriorated due to the pandemic, according to some of the migrants interviewed for this research. An Eritrean refugee in Tunis shared the following:

*There was a guy among us who was sick a few days ago. He has diabetes and is 55 years old. We called the doctor, but he didn't want to come. They fear coronavirus. So no doctor would come and our friend died.* (Interviewee 1022, interview with Wirtz, phone, July 2020)

A Gambian migrant in Zarzis reported:

*I have a friend who miscarried during the lockdown. When she went to the hospital, she was treated badly. They didn't even look at her because she doesn't have any money.* (Interviewee 4005, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

Returns to Libya continued unabated during COVID-19. However, the support structures for refugees and migrants were impacted. For example, a Somali refugee noted:

*There is corona [virus] in Tripoli. The town [is closed]. But corona [virus] is not in every place. In prison, we don't see that. Among migrants we don't see corona [virus], but the UNHCR office is closed.* (Interviewee 1027-2, Interview with Wirtz, WhatsApp, April 2020)

Around half of the migrants and refugees interviewed reported poor access to health care. Many NGOs are present in Tunisia, Libya and Niger to support migrants. But in Tunisia, many of the migrants and refugees targeted by programmes said that they do not know how to benefit from these programmes. Others complain about unanswered calls for help and discrimination in hospitals. Some also fear seeking treatment because of their irregular situation. A Guinean man shared the following:

*In Libya, I had a problem. One day, I was sitting. I felt that my chest was hurting. By that time, I was afraid to go to hospital. Because if you go there, maybe they can bring you to prison, because they don't care. [...] At that time, I didn't have a passport.* (Interviewee 1042, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

Some find support on the way. In an apartment on the outskirts of Tunis, the tenants (migrants and refugees) said that it was with the help of small associations that were able to get through this difficult period. One of the Cameroonians living there explained:

*It is thanks to them [Cellule de Solidarité Africaine]. They are the ones who have given us great support – really, it must be said, in food, in kind, in cash. He said to us: “There you have it, you can buy something”. Because it was difficult. Even still, at this moment, we are still experiencing the immediate consequences of the lockdown.* (Interviewee 4006, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

Many people, associations and NGOs were quick to help the most vulnerable people during the lockdown in Tunisia. Across the country, many operations were launched. The majority of the migrants and refugees we met in Tunisia said that they received extra help during the pandemic. One Ivorian migrant recognised the generosity that Tunisians have shown towards them:

*The associations came from time to time, but the neighbours did a lot. For me, the Tunisians were perfect with us, I thank them very much.* (Interviewee 4007-1, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

His friend added:

*At home, we have a lot to eat. [...] Our neighbour prepares us food every evening.* (Interviewee 4007.2, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

Despite the wave of generosity expressed by Tunisian citizens towards migrants and refugees, many people lived through this period in fear of being put on the streets. Some were forced to find alternative solutions to survive. A family planning employee in Sousse said:

*Of course, prostitution is increasing! Even for Tunisians.* (Interviewee 4008, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

Large agencies, such as UNHCR and IOM also provided help to deal with the new challenges that migrants and refugees were facing. The UNHCR Communications Officer in Tunisia explained:

*Vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers receive cash from UNHCR. Before the lockdown, we had 700 to 800 people benefiting from this assistance every month. During lockdown we reached around 2,500 beneficiaries. We recently received an additional contribution of EUR 750,000 from the European Union to respond to the coronavirus crisis. This will allow us to cover the expenses that we incurred in the emergency, but also to further expand the base of our beneficiaries and to improve access to healthcare and communication on risks.* (Chiara Cavalcanti, interview with Wirtz, phone, November 2020)

However, more than half of the migrants and refugees interviewed in Tunisia stated that it was not enough. Compared to the size of these organisations, the actions they took in response to the crisis were generally considered insufficient. In Zarzis, nearly 700 people received vouchers worth 100 Tunisian dinars (EUR 30) from IOM during the lockdown. A Cameroonian woman complained:

*The 100-dinar ticket, what do we do with that? When you buy the chicken, the milk, you can't buy the rest. The ticket ended two days ago. Humans must eat. Organisations must take care of that, but there is nothing.* (Interviewee 1039, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

When asked about problems during the coronavirus crisis, a member of a Tunisian association said:

*There is an association – the Tunisian Council for Refugees (CTR) [UNHCR partner] – it just takes pictures to say that it is working. It makes promises to migrants, but does nothing, despite receiving a large budget from UNHCR. The CTR contacts organisations like ours to ask them to distribute aid on their behalf.* (Interviewee 4009, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

An asylum seeker living in the UNHCR shelter in Medinine, southern Tunisia, reported:

*They are doing something to say that they are doing something. But on the ground it is not enough. They do it, so that they can answer journalists. [...] At last, Tunisia*

*looks like a mental prison. With time, people start to lose their mind.* (Interviewee 4010, interview with Wirtz, WhatsApp, July 2020)

United Nations agencies and their partners have stressed that everything is being done to meet the needs of migrants and refugees, within the limits of the allocated budgets and the legal framework. However, Krimi Abderrazek, Tunisian Council for Refugees project manager, warned:

*The sharing of responsibilities starts with the countries of origin, and then the countries of transit, until it reaches the country of destination. As long as there is no sharing of responsibilities, the problem will persist and again thousands of young Africans will find themselves swallowed up in the Mediterranean [Sea].* (Krimi Abderrazek, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, July 2020)

While migrants and refugees were happily surprised by the support they received from Tunisian citizen, they were quite frustrated by the lack of help from UN agencies. Many consider this kind of support as their right, due to their vulnerability, especially after what they have been through in Libya.

### ***Crossing the Mediterranean Sea***

As detailed in the introduction to this chapter, during the coronavirus pandemic many people attempted the crossing of the Mediterranean Sea, despite the closure of borders. A young Somali man in Libya explained how he is prepared to take high risks to leave Libya:

*Now, a lot of people are also leaving because of corona [virus]. Libya is like hell for refugees, like petrol. Corona [virus] is like the lighter. Refugees are all willing to leave this country. [...] I am going to cross soon insballah [God willing]. I am preparing. If God is willing, I will go to Sicily.* (Interviewee 1090, interview with Wirtz, Facebook Messenger call, April 2020)

During this research, a dozen interviewees with whom the researcher remained in contact, attempted the crossing of the Mediterranean Sea. Some started from Tunisia and then crossed the border to Libya before joining a smuggler to embark on a boat. One passed away. Two were still in Libya at the time of writing this chapter. Nine of them reached Europe. Before completing their odyssey, some passed

through detention centres in Libya. This was the case for one young refugee who communicated:

*I was caught at sea. I went to a prison that is worse than all the others I have been to so far. It is more dangerous than Guantanamo Bay. People are so hungry there that they eat Colgate [toothpaste].* (Interviewee 1027, interview with Wirtz, Facebook Messenger phone call, August 2020)

None of the migrants interviewed for this research highlighted specific measures taken by smugglers against the coronavirus. On the contrary, according to one testimony, the pandemic was a new way to swindle migrants:

*Because of coronavirus, when you pay the money, they will chase you away. They say, "You have corona, go away!" If we ask for our money back, they will not give it to us.* (Interviewee 1027-2, interview with Wirtz, Facebook Messenger Call, April 2020)

The Mediterranean crossing is known as the most deadly migration route in the world. The COVID-19 pandemic worsened the negotiation power of migrants and refugees with the smugglers, thereby also worsening the conditions of their departure. Chamseddine Marzoug, a fisherman, activist, and rescue and burial volunteer confirmed that the coronavirus pandemic has changed the business and increased the power of the large human trafficking networks:

*The boats are no longer made in Libya. [Now the boats are imported] from Europe or Egypt. The majority are big [traffickers] who import inflatable boats and gasoline engines; *zodiacs* as they say. They import it as a fisherman, but they sell it on the black market. [...] But, with the Corona, there are no imports. The borders are closed. [...] What we are going to see shortly are things that we have never seen before, such as the overloading of the boats. The pity is that now, because of the Corona, I think, there aren't even life jackets. Before we had life jackets, even if they were not up to standard.* (Chamseddine Marzoug, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

Marzoug is known for having set up a migrant cemetery in Zarzis, in the south of Tunisia. He pointed out that the NGO boats were forced

to stop their rescue activities at sea, because of the closure of the ports.

As in Libya, in Tunisia, the summer of 2020 was characterised by an increase in attempts to cross the Mediterranean Sea. New migration dynamics emerged during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, despite the closure of borders. Sub-Saharan migrants and refugees started to cross the Mediterranean Sea from the Tunisian coast and, some of them crossed the border to return to Libya, knowing the dangers they were about to face.

In March 2020, Romdhane Ben Amor, Communications Officer at the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES) explained:

*Immigration from Tunisia is more complicated, because the police checks are still a bit high and they cannot trust the smugglers. The smugglers are well aware that sub-Saharan migrants are the most vulnerable. They cannot file a complaint. They can't do anything. [...] Between 50 and 60% of the interceptions of sub-Saharans are done on the ground. There is a kind of complicity between the smugglers and the Tunisian police. (Romdhane Ben Amor, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, March 2020)*

In Tunisia, many smugglers are fishermen in a vulnerable economic situation. Others are people who got into this business out of financial interest. A large part of the departures are also 'self-managed migration'. They make a group and buy a boat, which they themselves captain to Europe (Romdhane Ben Amor, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, March 2020). In recent years, the number of sub-Saharan migrants and refugees joining Tunisians in crossing the Mediterranean Sea has increased. Romdhane Ben Amor explained that:

*More and more interceptions of departures concern sub-Saharans. We went from between 9 and 11% of interceptions, from 2010 to 2016, to 37% this year. This year, we have reached 37% of departures from Tunisia intercepted, including sub-Saharan passengers. (Romdhane Ben Amor, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, March 2020)*

This trend increased during the summer, a favourable season for the crossing. Nourredine Gountri, a journalist in Zarzis, a coastal town in the south of Tunisia from where many departures are organised, explained:

*The sub-Saharanans understood that they could leave with the Tunisians. They know the prices now.* (Nourredine Gountri, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, August 2020)

This shows that, for migrants and refugees, lockdowns and border closures are often considered as just another obstacle. In Libya, as in Tunisia, the interviewees sketch a picture of ongoing movement, despite COVID-19 border closures and despite elements of the journey becoming more difficult, as well as changing circumstances in countries of transit.

### **Findings of the desk review**

In order to complement the findings of the interviews, the researchers carried out a desk study of media reports (documents, newspaper articles, radio interviews, podcast and videos) collected during the first period of the pandemic, from May to mid-September 2020, focusing on reports on the local situation. The principal categories identified in the desk study correspond with those identified in the interviews: the closing of borders, increased deportations and the creation of new routes; new health protocols and quarantine arrangements; the economic repercussions; access to support; and crossing the Mediterranean Sea.

#### ***Closing of borders, increased deportations and creation of new routes***

In Libya, the pandemic meant the closing of a trap in which migrants were already stuck. However, as detailed above, the closure of borders did not mean the end of movement. Some smugglers were even able to take advantage of the situation and make more money, as one explained on Sahara FM radio in Agadez (Sahara FM, 2020):

*Since the closedown of borders between Niger and Libya, it is necessary to take alternative routes to enter Libyan territory. It brings us a lot of money, because there are fewer smugglers. (Sahara FM, 2020)*

However, as the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime explains, the closing of borders makes migrants who persist in taking the road more vulnerable:

*Where migrants continue on their journeys, they will be increasingly reliant on smugglers to facilitate their journey through environments that are increasingly hostile to migration. This enhanced dependency, and decreased ability to rely on any state organs for support, compounds their vulnerability to exploitation at the hands of their smugglers. (Wagner & Hoang, 2020)*

Smugglers have also been reported to have abandoned migrants and refugees in the desert in view of security patrols. On various occasions since the start of the pandemic, migrants and refugees have been found alive and dead in the desert. In September 2020, 83 migrants and refugees were found near Dirkou, in the north of Niger. This is in addition to the 321 people rescued by IOM in northern Niger since the beginning of the year 2020 (Reuters, 2020).

The road from Libya to Agadez has also become longer and more dangerous due to the closure of borders. Since the beginning of the pandemic, because of the difficulty of finding a job in Libya and because of the civil war, more migrants and refugees have tried to escape Libya. But this road has become illegal too, and smugglers take roads far away from the security patrols – which also means that they are far from help in case of problems. In May 2020, 20 corpses were found in the desert. These were migrants and refugees who were leaving Libya. After a breakdown, one car left to search for help and water, but meanwhile, some of those who had stayed behind perished. Desperately thirsty, they had drunk gasoline, perfume and shampoo (Wirtz, 2020).

On 2 April, more than 250 people were found near Madama, the last stopover in Niger before entering Libya. They were brought to Agadez and put in quarantine in the municipal stadium (InfoMigrants, 2020). On 10 April, 43 of them had escaped (DIM, 2020).



Neither illegal movement nor movement organised by the authorities ceased, despite the closure of borders. In April 2020, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights reported that 1,400 people had been deported by the forces of Marshal Khalifa Haftar and left in the middle of the desert (OHCHR, 2020). COVID-19 was used as an excuse to expel those migrants to Niger, Chad and Sudan. According to a Facebook post, the head of the Shelter and Deportation Centre for Illegal Immigrants in Kufrah, First Lieutenant Muhammad Al-Fadil, stated that:

*Those who were deported had entered Libya illegally and were arrested in several Libyan cities in the Eastern Region and also inside the city of Kufra. Among those migrants are people with infectious and dangerous diseases such as hepatitis and AIDS. Among them, there are also those who do not even have identity papers to prove their nationality. This deportation came urgently and quickly for fear of the spread of the coronavirus that spread in a number of countries in the world. (Shelter and Deportation Centre for Illegal Immigrants in Kufrah, 2020)*

On 20 May, journalist Sara Creta quoted First Lieutenant Muhammad Al-Fadil on Twitter as saying that “deportations are faster than before”. She added that people were taken by truck to remote towns in Chad or to a Sahara border post in Sudan. Fifty migrants had left a few nights before (Creta, 2020).

Algeria too, expelled nearly 16,000 people to Niger between January and September 2020. Almost half of them were Nigerien. Some were already registered with UNHCR (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Migrants expelled from Algeria to Niger are dropped off at the border in the middle of the desert and then have to walk 15 kilometres to Assamaka, where they are taken in by IOM (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

So, despite the closing of its borders, Niger had to deal with the arrival of a significant number of migrants in 2020. In addition to the migrants abandoned in the desert by smugglers, they had to manage those expelled by Libya and Algeria.

In Tunisia, the end of confinement in May 2020 was marked by new population movements. As mentioned above, migratory movements

have been observed at the Algerian-Tunisian border. Hundreds of sub-Saharan Africans have left Algeria, fleeing the economic and health crisis (Blaise, 2020). Arrivals from Libya have also resumed, by land and sea. In the Tunisian town of Medinine, on the border with Libya, these new arrivals have posed a challenge in terms of finding suitable places of containment (Tuniscope, 2020; Blaise, 2020).

### ***New health protocols and quarantine arrangements***

It is impossible to estimate the suspected cases of COVID-19 among migrants and refugees, as access to health care is limited and, therefore, many cases go unrecorded. Some cases were recorded when quarantine was observed at the border crossings in Tunisia and Niger, and some cases were seen among migrants and refugees rescued at sea (Mourad, 2020d; Chabaane, 2020; Di, 2020). However, quarantines were difficult to organise, due to lack of facilities.

The obligations regarding confinement have not always been well received by migrants. In April, 40 people escaped from the Agadez regional stadium where they were being quarantined after being expelled from Libya (DIM, 2020). Protests also erupted at the Arlit transit centre, where migrants were protesting the endless quarantine and the lack of consideration by the authorities and IOM. After the migrants robbed one of the camp's stores to meet their needs themselves, the police intervened with tear gas and 13 people were arrested (Ben Hamad, 2020).

The figures for migrants who tested positive after crossing the Algerian-Tunisian border differ in the Tunisian media. According to these articles, it seems that around 20 migrants, mainly sub-Saharan Africans, tested positive at the beginning of July 2020. They were transferred to COVID positive centres (Aid, 2020; Watt, 2020; Ammari, 2020; C.B.Y., 2020; Mourad, 2020a; Mourad, 2020b; Y.N., 2020b; I.B., 2020). The Tunisian press also reported riots in quarantine centres, led by migrants who did not want to wait to be tested. Six migrants were reported to have fled such sites before receiving the result of their test (Mourad, 2020c; Y.N., 2020a).

In Libya, United Nations agencies and non-governmental (NGOs) distributed health kits and conducted sterilisations and awareness campaigns in migrant shelters (Qasim, 2020). But, in a country at war, where migrants and refugees are constantly at risk, these actions seem inconsistent. Journalist Sara Creta stated the following:

*What is the point of keeping people in a detention centre that is close to weapons, and then making a campaign telling these people that are held within the hands of a military group how to wash their hands or how to protect against coronavirus? So, if we are really worried about their health and if we're really worried about their condition, we should shut down that centre or at least bring those people to safe place.*

(Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung – North Africa, 2020)

The fear of COVID-19 also exacerbated xenophobia among health care providers and others, worsening migrants' access to medical care.

### ***Economic repercussions***

The COVID-19 pandemic has also impacted on the economic situation of migrants and refugees from sub-Saharan countries in the Central Mediterranean region. In Libya, fear of COVID-19 has exacerbated xenophobia, leading to migrants and refugees living in urban areas to lose their jobs. As a result, they are unable to meet their basic needs. According to IOM, the migrant unemployment rate in Libya reached 27% in April 2020, increasing from 17% in February (IOM, 2020c). This is dangerous and can have further consequences, as IOM writes: "Virtually all unemployed migrants (95%) reported suffering from at least one difficulty including hunger, thirst, financial issues, attacks or lack of information, compared to 62 per cent of employed migrants" (IOM, 2020c).

In Tunisia, the lockdowns have put people, who were already vulnerable, in a more precarious position. In August 2020, IOM announced that 53% of migrants living in Tunisia had lost their job during the lockdown (ANSA, 2020). However, the numbers are difficult to verify, as nobody knows the exact number of sub-Saharan Africans living in the country.

### ***Access to support***

Reports on the support provided to migrants and refugees during the first months of the pandemic are many. Among other activities, in Libya, IOM conducted campaigns in different cities to raise awareness about COVID-19. Psychological support was also offered to 82 migrants in Tripoli (IOM, 2020f). Fumigation, disinfection, and cleaning interventions were conducted by IOM in four disembarkation points and three detention centres (IOM, 2020f). UNHCR distributed hygiene kits and sanitary cloth to detention centres (UNHCR, 2020d).

In Tunisia, IOM assisted migrants by offering cash vouchers to purchase critical medicine and hygiene products, in-kind donations, and medical and psychological assistance (IOM, 2020f). UNHCR donated and installed 14 Refugee Housing Units (RHU) to hospitals for the screening of patients and visitors (UNHCR, 2020g). As detailed above, in Tunisia, aid to migrants during the lockdown came from all sides. In Sousse, the municipality was at the forefront of operations to support these people (Boubakri, 2020). At the end of the lockdown, campaigns were launched by the sub-Saharan community to thank Tunisians (B.L., 2020). However, despite substantial aid, in May 2020, 70% of families of asylum seekers and refugees interviewed by UNHCR said they were unable to pay their rent and 45% claimed to be at risk of eviction (UNHCR, 2020f).

### ***Crossing the Mediterranean Sea***

Despite the lockdowns due to the pandemic, the summer of 2020 was marked by a significant number of illegal crossings of the Mediterranean Sea. In Italy, 27,834 people disembarked between 1 January and 2 November 2020, compared to 11,471 for the whole of 2019; 41.7% of these were Tunisians (UNHCR, 2020c). They were fleeing the economic, health and political crisis in search of employment, freedom and social protection. In addition, between January and October 2020, in this period of lockdown and closure of borders, the Libyan Coast Guard intercepted 9,506 people in Libyan waters and brought them back to Libya. This is an increase of 16.56% compared to the same period in 2019 (UNHCR, 2020b).

Malta is also reported to have hired vessels to intercept migrants and refugees and return them to Libya. The Guardian published the testimony of a woman who survived the crossing of the Mediterranean Sea in which 12 people died. She explained that the boat on which she was trying to reach Europe had been intercepted by a ship enlisted by the Maltese authorities, which returned the people on board to Tripoli. The passengers were then transferred to the Tariq Al Sikka detention centre (Tondo, 2020).

The closure of European ports at the start of the pandemic put migrants and refugees at sea in greater danger. Because of sanitary measure and the closure of ports, NGO ships rescuing migrants in the Mediterranean Sea found themselves tied up (Deutsche Welle, 2020). The Director of Operations for SOS Méditerranée, Frédéric Penard, explained the following to the newspaper Le Temps in May 2020:

*We have people who have been rescued by fishing vessels or merchant vessels. A freighter that was able to disembark people in Italy after being left on standby for several days in terrible conditions because a freighter is not made to accommodate more than ten people. There is no water, there is no food, there is no medical care. It is not an equipped ship.* (Chave, 2020)

On 30 September 2020, according to the news website InfoMigrants, humanitarian vessels were no longer active in the search and rescue (SAR) zone:

*The absence of NGO boats raises fears of an increase in the number of migrants and refugees who died at sea while the month of September was particularly deadly with nearly 200 deaths in the Central Mediterranean.* (Carretero, 2020)

In 2020, 999 migrants and refugees were reported missing in the Central Mediterranean in 2020. This is a lot, but is not the high level that the activists expected. In 2019, 1,262 migrants and refugees were reported missing on the Central Mediterranean path and, in 2021, that number reached 1,553 people (Missing Migrants Project, 2022).

Hence, it can be seen that the coronavirus has not driven migrants away from their dream of a better life in Europe. Instead, the crossing of the Mediterranean Sea has simply become more dangerous.

## **Conclusion: Moving on, despite the restrictions, whatever the risks**

The assumption underpinning the push and pull theory is that the creation of obstacles diminishes the number of people on the move. Hence, the assumption was that the closing of borders and restriction of movement to contain the COVID-19 pandemic would result in a drop in the number of people on the move. However, this did not happen; the border closures, lockdowns and quarantines did not stop people from moving and did not result in fewer people arriving in Europe via the Central Mediterranean route (UNHCR, 2020c).

Although, initially, between March and November 2020, fewer people were able to leave their country of origin and make their way to Agadez in Niger and on to Libya, as the pandemic went on, smugglers adapted, including by increasing their prices and finding new routes. The situation changed quickly. Within the short time covered by this research, many new routes were developed. The migrants and refugees who decided to pursue their journey, despite the situation, took greater risks. This culminated in a peak in the number of migrants and refugees crossing the Mediterranean Sea. Between April and October 2020, a reported 24,713 individuals who had embarked in Libya and Tunisia arrived in Malta and Italy. This is almost three times more than the number of arrivals during the same period in 2019 (IOM, 2020d).

This research found that attempts to restrict movement flows result in people adapting to the situation, while still moving forward. The closure of borders under the extreme situation of COVID-19 measures did not stem the number of people on the move. Instead, it exacerbated the drive of people to move forward. The findings show a super-dynamic situation in which increased hardship, vulnerability and challenges drive migrants and refugees forward, despite the obstacles in front of them.

The pattern of desperation that drives people on the move and the psychological effects, as described by Kidane (2021), provide a better explanation for the facts occurring on the ground than Lee's push and

pull theory. The theoretical concept of Brachet and Scheele (2019) of ‘remoteness’ also helps to explain the distance of the measures conceived in capital cities and foreign centres from their implementation on the ground, leading to different, unintended and unexpected dynamics that traps migrants and refugees in a “circular and closed” system (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014), without a way out and with few options of regularising their irregular status in the host country. Living on the margins of society leaves migrants and refugees vulnerable to exploitation and trafficking, and this situation, perceived as dangerous, encourages the heart-rending response to seek security in Europe, despite all the risks.

Sometimes, as researchers, we have the feeling when we see migrants and refugees taking the road to Libya or across the Mediterranean Sea that we are witnessing suicide-migration. The people we encountered know that they risk their life: “It is 50/50; 50% chance of living, 50% chance of dying”, they keep repeating. For many of them, COVID-19 and the lockdowns have just been extra obstacles to overcome, like a new fence to climb. Maybe it will delay them; many will be discouraged – but many are still deciding to risk their life to escape the desperation situation they are in.

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## Author contributions

Morgane Wirtz wrote the initial version of this chapter and is author of sections of this chapter. Mirjam Van Reisen is author of sections of this chapter and edited the overall text. Klara Smits provided input and background to the information presented in this chapter.

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