

# RESEARCH NOTES



## *Refugees in Tunisia*

### *Border perspectives on migration policies*

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#### **Introduction**

Anthropology allows researchers to observe refugees' conditions through an especially participatory lens, aiming to engage with 'the other' through its perspectives and knowledge. On the one hand, it questions concepts that, for a long time, have dominated migration policy. Anthropological contributions question dichotomies like territory and culture, notions of (de)territorialized identities, majorities, minorities and nationalism. They have instead forged notions of imagined communities (Anderson 1991) and predatory identities (Appadurai 1991, 2006) to address power relations in nation-states. These ideas have challenged dominant power relations in the field of migration and encouraged the exploration of transnational boundaries. In the last few years, most of the work around migration policy has emerged in reaction to the arrival of refugees and the prominence of discussion(s) about integration. On the other hand, anthropological work often shows a high degree of interest in the integration of marginalized people, like migrants or refugees who are settled in certain urban areas. The transnational approaches used have contributed to the enrichment of the discipline by exploring the dynamics of cohesion among invisible minorities (Monsutti 2012) and the dynamics of discrimination within majorities (Appadurai 2006). They make visible dynamics that are invisible to the eyes of majorities, and create networks of solidarity and forms of social cohesion among migrants living in Europe (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2011) in systems of power (Boccagni 2014; Çağlar and Glick Schiller 2013; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004; Vertovec 2007).

Yet, methodologically positioned in transnational frameworks, many contributions have investigated the dynamics of integration without addressing other relevant topics in the field of migration. The situation of the communities of refugees and of migrants living in the countries neighbouring the European Union seems to vary significantly. For example, migrants (but also refugees) face significant challenges in trying to regularize their legal status. Perhaps paradoxically, mainstream anthropology has not provided as much attention to migration in the global south as in the global north, especially in relation to the dynamics of power. In particular, greater consideration should have been given to the living conditions of those whose stay is not regularized, and more light shed on the power relations that are observable through migration outside of Europe, North America and Australia.

This contribution aims to deal with migration and notions of power, but with a thematic emphasis on migrants who live in non-European contexts. Such a focus could contribute critically to the analysis of relevant issues such as: (1) the promotion of migration policies throughout the EU against ‘undocumented migration’; (2) the spread of neo-nationalist thought; (3) and the export of the European ‘apparatus’ for fighting undocumented migration to non-EU countries. By proceeding in this way, there is a need to ‘cut off the head of the king’ in order to focus on the margins of the system of power and comprehend it through other lenses (Foucault 1976:117). Such a ‘border’ perspective allows us to understand the power struggles of those at the margins. Nevertheless, such an approach carries the risk of representing migrants and refugees as the mere victims of the system, who are incapable of any action. Indeed, a common way of depicting them is through the image of ‘helplessness’ (Harrell-Bond 1985:3). To avoid this risk, or at least to minimize it, academic approaches need to consider their interlocutors under a different light, because they actually play an active role in the migration apparatus – the system that tries to identify and place migration into categories in order to control and harmonize its management (Feldman 2011). Minorities are thus able to react and/or to resist their condition of exclusion through their own efforts.

It was against this theoretical background that I decided to plan my fieldwork in Tunisia. Once there, however, I discovered that the theoretical discussion above was overshadowed by matters of method. This contribution will thus focus on the series of problems, challenges and obstacles I faced during my fieldwork. My aim is to offer a clear outline of the main fieldwork-related challenges I faced, so that other researchers, conducting fieldwork in similar conditions, may avoid these problems or benefit from my insights in other ways. To accomplish this goal, I first briefly present my fieldwork setting, then in the following sections I recapitulate my fieldwork trajectory, with each section tackling a major challenge I faced while conducting fieldwork with a group of sixty people continuing to live in the Choucha refugee camp. This camp, located in southern Tunisia, was established in 2011 and officially closed in June 2013. There, all my interlocutors sought asylum, though some were rejected. Although not all are refugees with mandated status, most of them still regard themselves as refugees.

### **Fieldwork settings**

In February 2015 I started conducting online research about the refugees who had arrived in Tunisia in 2011 and had been placed in the Choucha refugee camp. It was quite difficult to find accurate information about them, especially for those who remained in the country. In order to gain access to the field, my pilot research started when, at the end of March 2015, the second World Social Forum (WSF) took place in Tunis. On this occasion, many activists, who came to Tunis from all over Europe, battled politically for the cause of the refugees who remained in Tunisia after 2011.

English reporters, French photographers, Italian and German activists were present at the activities and seminars organized at the WSF on the issue.<sup>1</sup> During a lecture, a group of refugees from Nigeria and Sudan talked about how their experiences of displacement had affected their lives. Their situation and living conditions suddenly appeared to be related to their political involvement: they stayed in the Choucha refugee camp, located seven kilometres away from the international border of Ra's Ajdir, in the middle of the desert, mainly to protest against the injustices they had been facing in Tunisia. Many of those who had abandoned Libya after the outbreak of the war (and had taken shelter in the Choucha refugee camp) could not return to their homes, and applied for asylum in Tunisia. However, the UNHCR denied asylum to many asylum seekers.<sup>2</sup> Even after the closure of the camp in June 2013, the area around Choucha was still inhabited by 150 people. In April 2015, many of them gradually abandoned the camp, while sixty people remained permanently based there.

I collected evidence and carried out interviews over a period of 85 days during summer 2015, mainly with stakeholders, but also with journalists, judges and sociologists in the cities of Ben Gardane, Medenine and Zarzis, and the Choucha refugee camp. During this time, I also carried out research among both 'rejected' and 'recognized' refugees who had left Libya in 2011, after coming there from Chad, Eritrea, Ghana, the Ivory Coast, Liberia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Somalia and Sudan. I observed these groups in two different contexts: first, in Tunisia's mountainous north, where the climate resembles Mediterranean conditions; second, in Tunisia's south, where it merges with the Sahara and the climate is semi-arid, with several salt lakes – called *chotts* – and a dry central plain, as well as the desert. Thus, part of my fieldwork took place in a radically different context from the north and from Tunis, where discussions on political issues assumed specific tones, as I shall explain.

### The journey towards Choucha

In my journey to Choucha, the main challenge I faced was scepticism toward researchers. The official reluctance towards researchers and refugees were intertwined. The marginalization of those living in the refugee camp is carried out in many ways, not least through official statements and policy. Not only do international organizations' officers and volunteers hesitate to address the people living in the camp using the term 'refugee' – because some are not officially acknowledged as

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- 1 A group of Germans, for instance, shot a documentary film in the camp and organized a workshop with refugees at the WSF; while a French photographer, Samuel Gratacap, promoted a photographic project that was shown in the form of an exhibition at Le Bal, Paris. See [www.le-bal.fr/2015/10/empire-samuel-gratacap](http://www.le-bal.fr/2015/10/empire-samuel-gratacap) (accessed, 28 December 2016).
  - 2 It is estimated that 10 per cent were rejected. See [www.opendemocracy.net/author/oliver-tringham](http://www.opendemocracy.net/author/oliver-tringham) (accessed, 27 December 2016).

such – but they also stopped working in the camp when it was officially closed in June 2013. The reluctance of the local institutions to deal with the issue of asylum seekers shows the importance of official refugee status, as the lack of it causes further marginalization. Local authorities are not only reluctant to intervene directly in order to improve forced migrants' living conditions, they are also uncooperative when outsiders become interested in the matter.

International organizations' stakeholders often refused to refer to rejected refugees, instead calling them migrants. This is despite the fact that many are covered by the definition of a refugee, a term that indicates people forced to leave their native country (Harrell-Bond and Voutira 1992:7). The group of sixty people in Choucha has an acute awareness of such terminology. They are often divided into factions, especially with regard to the spatial division of the camp (corresponding to the country of origin) and self-definition (namely, 'refugees' or 'migrants'). During an informal talk, one of my interlocutors mentioned that in a leaflet published by the World Social Forum in 2013, Choucha camp inhabitants were defined as 'migrants'. He explained to me that this had led to strong conflict among them, because some defined themselves as refugees, and others as migrants. According to this self-definition, corroborated by Harrell-Bond and Voutira (ibid.), I use the term refugee to refer to all the people who in 2011 escaped from Libya. Despite their asylum request being refused, many insisted on calling themselves refugees, as an informed choice of political opinion, because they could not return to their country of origin, and because they experienced separation from their country of origin, from which they had been forced to flee.

As Choucha is located on the Libyan-Tunisian border, a film-maker who worked at the camp suggested that I should apply for a travel pass to give me more freedom of movement. The Tunisian government's reluctance, scepticism and mistrust became even clearer when I applied for this, and they refused my request. At this point, it must be noted that when I first arrived in Tunis by boat at the end of July, I went to several Ministries to obtain visas to visit the border zone of Choucha and do my fieldwork as soon as possible. Three days later, after having visited the Italian embassy<sup>3</sup> and left it with empty hands, I departed Tunis and travelled by train to Sfax. On the next day, I continued by *louage* (a shared taxi) to Tataouine. I then moved to Ben Gardane, a border town located almost twenty-three kilometres away from the camp. There, together with an English journalist, who during the initial research had helped me gain access to the camp, I visited the mayor. Our purpose was to once more request the permission that had been denied days earlier in Tunis. The mayor also denied our request. The next day, we travelled to Medenine, a province where NGO staff and Ministry of the Interior officials were apparently of the same opinion: according to them, no permission was even required to access the Choucha

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3 Italy is my country of origin, and I entered Tunisia on an Italian passport.

refugee camp. However, in contrast to my first visit to the camp, the National Guard controlling the border spotted my presence after only a few hours. After long questioning, it became clear that the soldiers expected to see an official authorization from the Governor of Medenine, who, the following day, refused to accept such a responsibility. Apparently, it exceeded his competence, and he forwarded my written request to the Ministry of Interior in Tunis.

The authorities often referred to security measures to deny my requests. The reluctance to grant permission was often justified by referring to the generally unstable political situation in Northern Africa, especially after the terrorist attacks of March and June 2015 and the subsequent enforcement of security measures. These arguments were often underlined by the fact that the Choucha camp is located seven kilometres from the border. Indeed, some foreign governments also suggested that their nationals should not approach this region. This political climate resulted in frequent stops and in widespread police checkpoints in the region. Consequently, foreigners rarely travelled alone, and when they did, they avoided public transport. Moreover, taking into consideration that most women in Tunisia do not leave the house unaccompanied, especially in the south, it is all the more evident why my journey to the south was difficult. I was often the target of suspicious gazes, police questioning and double checks.

### **Arriving in the south and meeting the forced migrants**

Refugees and migrants also had a certain degree of reluctance with regard to my interest, especially in the first phase of the research. This was one of the main challenges I faced. Their diffidence became even more acute because I had been able to access the camp thanks to activists whose aim was to develop integration and legal assistance services for unrecognized refugees in Tunisia. Their work and role were often targets of criticism in the camp. 'Are you working for them?' – was a recurrent question asked with resignation. Yakoub,<sup>4</sup> who lives between the camp and Ben Gardane, explained to me the general reserve that Choucha inhabitants have towards foreigners:

We granted interviews to journalists, we delivered our point of view, told our stories to activists who arrive for a couple of days or even hours with the presumption of collecting all the information, and who then immediately leave because nobody wants to stay here. We are tired of this way of doing things.<sup>5</sup>

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4 Every individual mentioned in this text has been given a fictitious name, so as to protect their privacy.

5 The interview was conducted in French. The English translation is my own.

The issue mentioned by Yakoub is an often debated topic in Choucha. On the one hand, the presence of external figures in the camp is seen as positive, because of its potential to make their plight public. On the other hand, it is mistrusted as opportunistic: people want to take pictures in the camp, record videos and collect the material they need, and then, leave. Choucha inhabitants look on outsiders as if they were there for their own gain, and not to support their cause.

Once I arrived in the south without authorization, I decided to adapt the research plan to the conditions of the field. I moved the focus of the research to Ben Gardane, and conducted most of the interviews and my observation in the town, where refugees spent most of their time. I often met my interlocutors in public places, as my intention to rent a private flat had been unsuccessful. Several landlords refused to rent to me, claiming that living alone in a border town, as a woman, would make me vulnerable. Among their concerns, there was the fact that many Tunisians could not accept that 'a woman could interact with black men.' Thus, I was often target of episodes of discrimination and racism, while at the same time exposing my interlocutors to significant risks.

### **Refugees and trauma**

Despite the abovementioned limitations and challenges, interaction, collaboration and communication with refugees and migrants proceeded smoothly for most of the research. However, when discussions and interviews deepened and evoked traumatic events, communication nevertheless became complicated. For many, revisiting traumatic experiences and events constituted an emotional challenge. Consulting psychology manuals on refugees and trauma was extremely helpful in order to deal professionally with interviews and informal talks (Citarella 2015; Santone *et al.* 2010), minimizing any negative effects on both the refugees and my research.

It is not widely acknowledged that traumas experienced in the pre-migratory phase also have an impact on refugees' and migrants' psychological states of mind, and many forced migrants in Tunisia, whether they are considered a refugee or a labour migrant, had arrived in the country from Libya having had traumatic experiences. Asylum seekers who reached Libya, where their rights were reasonably protected, lived in a prolonged state of precariousness. While those who were granted refugee status acquired a degree of stability, those considered labour migrants remained in the country for years, even decades, in a condition of socially tolerated instability. In February 2011, when the Libyan government began political persecutions, mostly against Sub-Saharan or West Africans, who, being black, were labelled as Gaddafi's collaborators and had to leave the country.<sup>6</sup> Large groups of people moved to Tunisia,

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6 The Libyan conflict displaced 746,000 people, a figure that includes neither the people who fled to Europe, nor those who returned to their country of origin (Bensaâd 2012). Though Libya, under the Gaddafi regime, played a significant, while not unique, role

over 200,000 in the first few weeks alone. While most major traumas happened in the so-called migratory phase (while travelling) (Santone *et al.* 2010:30), post-migratory traumas also tormented them, and their suffering is just as severe as that of those whose traumas were mainly linked forced migration itself.

My argument here is not meant to highlight the stereotypical image of refugees and migrants as victims of the apparatus of migration, but to highlight the gravity and diversity of their traumas. This aspect complicated fieldwork in terms of interaction, collaboration and communication. Theoretically, migratory traumas are often presented in relation to the episodes of violence practised at a social level (Das, Kleinman and Lock 1996:9–12). The threatening of so-called ‘victims’ is often embedded in a perennial condition of marginalization and exclusion (Green 2011:25; Six-Hohenbalken and Weiss 2011:5).<sup>7</sup> The condition of exclusion is moreover maintained thanks to the contingency of historical events on a national level; though in the realm of public debate the efforts and struggles of the ‘victims’ can also gain recognition (Green 2011:25).

In practice, however, overcoming the obstacle of talking about traumatic events was challenging. Despite the difficulty, and thanks to the theoretical contributions above, I developed a methodological strategy to cope that consisted, mainly, of an interdisciplinary analysis, including psychological, historical and political approaches, tailored to addressing their traumas. Most importantly, I understood that social suffering might emerge also through silence, feelings of shame and self-blame. These emotions were often expressed by the refugees I spoke to, who when they trusted me admitted that they were struggling to come to terms with some of their past experiences. In some situations, they were not able to assimilate past events of violence within the flow of time and in their everyday life (Pichler 2011:189).

How can my reflections on trauma be mobilized in order to analyse better the apparatus of migration, and public and national debates on migration policies? On a national level, aid institutions or external figures should address these issues, in order to achieve their goals. However, one could argue that the EU, in its migration policy, addresses these forms of marginalization and normalizes them as a social burden (Das, Kleinman and Lock 1996:23). The EU often addresses these marginalized people as a threat against its security and welfare – that is, as predatory identities (Appadurai 1991). By following this logic, public opinion witnesses and silently accepts the rejection of foreigners (often bearing traumatic experiences and facing

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in the control of migrations, these migrants often paid a price in terms of a permanent condition of precariousness, violation of human rights, social discrimination, attacks and xenophobic behaviour (Bensaâd 2012:100–1).

7 In the introduction of *Violence Expressed*, these processes are explained through the ‘triangular approach’, which includes perpetrators, victims and witnesses (Six-Hohenbalken and Weiss 2011:5–6).

many dangers in their countries of origin) the EU defines as a ‘refugees’. Such practices and consequent public policies legitimize the apparatus of migration.

### **Tensions between legality and empirical reality**

Legal notions often acquire prominent importance in social contexts. Furthermore, legal statutes can create tangible problems for refugees’ inclusion in host societies. This can in turn affect research and, especially in this case, the ability to get in contact with research interlocutors. If one considers that the Tunisian legal framework is lacking, so far as asylum law is concerned (see below), the scenario appears, at first sight, even more complicated (Grillo 2016).

Tunisian law does not feature instruments to grant legal status to refugees, nor does it provide specific procedures to issue refugee certificates. This falls to the UNHCR, which is responsible for issuing ‘mandate refugee status’ in the country.<sup>8</sup> For this reason, refugees are not able to benefit from refugee rights in Tunisia. Furthermore, local authorities only tolerate the UNHCR refugees’ certificates informally. This negatively affects the refugees’ everyday lives, as it reduces the possibilities of work and increases the risks of exploitation. For example, refugees are not eligible for any type of contract (for instance, with regard to labour or accommodation) as domestic law does not recognize them as legal subjects (Elbassil 2015). Their mere stay in Tunisian territory is considered irregular, and they might be expelled at any time.

All Choucha residents are isolated on a social level, brought to the margins of society after episodes of discrimination and xenophobia, and are psychologically exhausted by being constantly subjected to controls and harassment. Moreover, as already made clear, legal tensions also constituted a challenge to my research. First, my interest in conducting research in an unofficial settlement came to nothing because of the Tunisian authorities’ policies. Already in 2013, they were contesting the terminology used by those who claimed to be refugees and had decided to remain in Choucha. They had instead decided to evacuate the area, and for them the refugees’ conditions were not a priority. When there was any assistance, those who were not legally recognized as refugees were ignored.

In terms of aid resources and rights, both recognized and rejected refugees find themselves in a similar condition of social marginalization. It is true that the presence of the UN and international organizations in Tunisia shows some level of political engagement on the part of the Tunisian government in the field of asylum and migration (Grillo 2016). However, since June 2013, the UNHCR and other international organizations have not provided any kind of assistance to the people who remained in the Choucha camp, and the government have attempted to

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8 According to an agreement of 16 January 1992 (Care 2013).



evacuate the area.<sup>9</sup> In the south of the country, the UNHCR offers financial assistance only to some refugees, namely the so-called 'vulnerable refugees': minors, women with children, the elderly and the sick.

The importance of legal anthropology is largely acknowledged, at least in academia, where fieldwork with refugees is concerned. Asylum law is, however, a field of human rights in which the boundaries between legal and political factors are not always clear. Numerous situations occurred in the camp in which the two spheres overlapped, and asylum law is and remains a field in international law that often oscillates between legal and political realities.

### **EU left-wing activism and the refugees' reality**

Only after the fall of Ben Ali, in 2011, did the presence of foreign activists in Tunisia become noticeable. This is particularly true for foreign activists and journalists interested in migration. Some promote integration projects in the south, as in Tataouine,<sup>10</sup> whereas others organize demonstrations, petitions, international events and other activities aimed at focusing international attention on the situation of migrants and refugees in Tunisia. Choucha, opened in 2011, received particular attention both from local and foreign activists and researchers.

European left-wing activists expected that the plight of the refugees would fit smoothly into their EU political platforms. However, the refugees were not European, nor is North Africa in Europe, and as a researcher, I had to adapt to the context. As the research advanced, I sorted out unexpected research limitations, as having to deal with politically relevant issues also opened up ethical questions. Political aims and intentions also divided activists, who were differently engaged in the refugees' cause. Some worked for the development of integration projects, while others attempted, through protests, demonstrations and public events, to struggle politically against hegemonic debates on resettlement procedures, migration and refuge policies. As with activists, researchers are also interested in the situation of foreigners in Tunisia, and many among them attempted to offer their support in their own way. Within the inherent tensions between activism and academia, and the related questions concerning political issues and ethics, the suspicious attitude of institutions towards foreign researchers, as well as activists, is the aspect that, above all, deserves our attention.

One episode of political engagement in particular will illustrate this point: during my fieldwork, a group of twelve refugees was helped, financially, to take a shared taxi

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9 [voiceofchoucha.wordpress.com/2014/10/06/eviction-of-choucha-refugee-camp-officially-announced](http://voiceofchoucha.wordpress.com/2014/10/06/eviction-of-choucha-refugee-camp-officially-announced) (accessed, 28 December 2016).

10 [refugeelegalaidinformation.org/sites/default/files/160620%20Case%20for%20Legal%20Aid%20for%20Refugees%20in%20Tunisia%20EN%20%20web.pdf](http://refugeelegalaidinformation.org/sites/default/files/160620%20Case%20for%20Legal%20Aid%20for%20Refugees%20in%20Tunisia%20EN%20%20web.pdf) (accessed, 28 December 2016).

from Ben Gardane to Tunis, to protest at the UNHCR office in Tunis. It is still not clear whether the activists, journalists or researchers supported the action. A few hours later, after the beginning of the protest, the group was arrested and taken to El-Ouardia, one of the prisons in which migrants whose stay is considered irregular in Tunisia are usually detained. This was the third time that some of the Choucha camp inhabitants had been detained there. While on other occasions the detained refugees had remained in contact with those who were not imprisoned, this time they decided to switch off their personal mobile phones. Only one number was kept active, but few activists knew that number.

I learned the imprisoned refugees' number from Mohammad, a refugee who used to live in the camp, but who had now moved to Tunis with his family. Thanks to him, I was able to call the imprisoned refugees, and one of them, Kevin, answered. At the time of my fieldwork, Kevin, from Sudan, was one of the most politically engaged refugees. We had spoken on several occasions, both in Tunis and Ben Gardane, and when I asked if the group of the twelve imprisoned refugees needed any help, he recognized my voice, told me that he had no time, and turned off the phone. Such a reaction partially confirmed the hypothesis that, according to the refugees of the camp, the twelve detained refugees only wanted to have contact with those who supported them in Tunis. Afterwards, the imprisoned refugees were taken to Tunis, where they were helped by a Tunisian collective based in the centre of the Tunis medina. The group refused to return to Choucha, though on many occasions they had defined it as the place of their political involvement (Voice of Choucha 2014). Most of these refugees seem to have remained in a situation of emotional, social, psychological and political impasse. After this episode, and at the end of my fieldwork I travelled to Tunis, where, once more, they refused to talk to me.

Once the refugees had been released from prison, the international media published news of their deportation to Algeria.<sup>11</sup> Those who had planned the protest that led to the imprisonment, apparently did so in order to confirm rumours about the prison and verify whether the El-Ouardia authorities actually forcefully deported detainees to Algeria. For this reason, many refugees and activists alike perceived this episode as one in which refugees became victims of their supporters. By menacing detainees with weapons, the Tunisian authorities apparently forced them to cross the Tunisian-Algerian border into the desert, where it is almost impossible to survive.<sup>12</sup> This is a possible reason for the uncertainty as to whether deportations like this really take place. To my knowledge, there is currently only one recorded testimony of a survivor who was deported to Algeria

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11 [ilmanifesto.info/in-tunisia-rifugiati-tra-carcere-e-deportazione](http://ilmanifesto.info/in-tunisia-rifugiati-tra-carcere-e-deportazione) and [inkyfada.com/2015/09/expulse-frontiere-migrant-algerie-ouardiya-tunisie](http://inkyfada.com/2015/09/expulse-frontiere-migrant-algerie-ouardiya-tunisie) (both accessed 27 December 2016).

12 [rightsинexile.tumblr.com/post/122984750857/the-case-of-the-wandering-chadian](http://rightsинexile.tumblr.com/post/122984750857/the-case-of-the-wandering-chadian) (accessed, 28 December 2016).

(*ibid.*). Some activists have told me that the number of victims dying in the desert may even be higher than in the Mediterranean Sea, but I cannot verify this. The point here is that, even without first-hand contact, many Choucha refugees and activists heard news of the twelve detained refugees' deportations, but doubted it had actually taken place because of their survival and appearance days later in Tunis.

Before I could attempt to meet the twelve detainees in Tunis, this story led to tensions among those refugees who had remained in the camp. In particular, this was connected to political opinions and to issues of identity and self-determination that were often discussed among Choucha refugees, as I mentioned earlier. This situation not only affected the trust the refugees had in me. Due to rumours of our involvement in this episode, I and a colleague risked expulsion from Tunisia. Fortunately, this suspicion and the subsequent risks were subsequently overcome when the Red Crescent investigated and found us innocent.

Political action affects refugees and inflames suspicion among authorities. The imprisonment story reopened debates that had divided Choucha. For example, it generated a political debate among the refugees themselves about whether or not they should take part in such actions, and whether these actions would actually improve their situation. This episode highlights how the precariousness in refugees' and rejected refugees' lives can be highly politicized, which in turn highlights the authorities' suspicion towards foreign activists and researchers. It is evident that researchers, as well as activists, need to be careful and aware of the consequences of their actions, especially when they affect their interlocutors and colleagues. It is important to be aware of how we affect the social situations we analyse, so we do not negatively impact those among whom we conduct research and undermine future research and social action. However, it is also important to understand how suspicious authorities might intimidate researchers and activists, as this example illustrates, so that we learn to cope with effects that do not only depend on our own actions.

### **Anthropology and border perspectives**

Anthropology forges theoretical and operational instruments that, tackling different contextual realities, enable researchers to develop new perspectives on a broad range of issues. Among these are theoretical instruments to address migration and eventual asylum. The elasticity of anthropology's qualitative methods also permits researchers to adapt research projects to unexpected fieldwork conditions like mine.

My characterization of the Choucha context above illustrates the institutional tendency to isolate the issue of migration from asylum, and consequently the camp inhabitants themselves from a given country's population. In Tunisia, this occurred not only among government agents, but also caseworkers and local authorities, generating a general disposition towards mistrust among the refugees. As I have presented in this article, many of the people I spoke to remained sceptical about my

interest, despite my frequent explanations of my presence, research, interests and methods. During my research, however, the chance to construct a relationship of mutual reliance, respect and shared views enabled me to overcome these hostilities. In particular, an interdisciplinary approach enabled me to holistically frame my interlocutors' conditions of exclusion and focus on their expressions of suffering, which appear to be intimately related to political and public debates about them. Furthermore, illegality came to play a role, when tensions emerged regarding political forms of engagement, especially when EU activists' actions collided with government policy. Thus, I argue that scholars should focus on the analysis of legal notions and other forms of categorization that acquire relevance in political statements, especially so in the European scenario.

By comparing the way Choucha inhabitants were characterized and mobilized by different figures – including the Tunisian government, the UN, the EU, and even foreign activists – with the refugee's own reality, it is possible to notice how these categorizations impact the everyday life of forced migrants. Most importantly, from a legal perspective, not all those I spoke to are considered legal subjects, while in practice, in one way or another, most in Choucha experienced persecution, trauma and forced migration. Investigating the situation of refugees and migrants in the south of Tunisia, I was met with hostility. Conducting research with refugees and migrants then (independently of their legal status), turned out to be a political problem as well as a social strain to me. Yet, this is a task that we scholars cannot avoid if we aim to break the silence on the subject.

The Tunisian context challenged my ethnographic research beyond my theoretical knowledge. Among the strongest obstacles I faced were my interviewees' and the authorities' tendency to isolate the issue of refugees living in southern Tunisia; the uncertainty of working in unofficial settlements with people who are, in many cases, staying irregularly in the country; and finally, the tensions which emerged while interacting with refugees who had undergone deep traumas, as well as the political tensions that affected the context as a whole. All these points are interwoven and affected different stages of the research among refugees. Such deep experiences are hard to process, yet, they compel anthropologists to be politically localized and thus to forge border perspectives, like the one I have sketched here, as a way to deal with the complexity of the refugee problem. So, despite its difficulties, the ethnographic approach has its undeniable merits.

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