Illegal Migration in Tunisian Rap

This article explores Illegal migration through Tunisian rap. It considers this music as an aspect of resistance and protest against the socio-economic and political conditions which push thousands of Tunisians to cross the Mediterranean in makeshift boats in search of better prospects in challenge to the increasing security and legislative measures crippling mobility imposed by the EU and Tunisian authorities. This article contends that harga songs document the history of the working class in Tunisia and carves the identity of harrga as people who have been marginalized for generations and concludes that the security talks and dialogues remain ineffective as long as the root causes of illegal migration have not been addressed.

Keywords: Illegal Migration, Tunisian rap, Resistance, Marginalization, Security, Immobility, Identity

Introduction

Illegal migration is neither a new phenomenon nor a place specific issue. Whether in the Americas, Asia, Africa, or Europe, illegal migration is the order of the day and despite the fact that the closing decade of the twentieth century was considered the ‘age of migration’ (Castles & Miller 1993) the twenty first century appears to be the century of illegal migration by excellence. This phenomenon is commonly referred to in Tunisia and in Maghrebi countries as harga. This word translates into Arabic as ‘burning’ and refers to the clandestine migration to Europe. It started with the ‘burning’ of Visas which refers to travelling to Europe with a tourist visa and staying there unofficially. However, in recent years, harga has been used to refer to the clandestine migration to Europe in makeshift boats and the derivative harraga to the people engaged in this act, the illegal migrants.

The growing number of harraga and the tragedies it entailed led to growth of artistic and cultural production which documented the experience of harraga. For example, Merzak Alouache, Algerian film producer, traced the journey of the Algerian harrga to Europe in makeshift boats and illustrated the lost hopes of Algerians teenagers. Quite interesting, in Zarzis, a small town on the south eastern coast of Tunisia and a major departure point of harraga, a museum was established to document the memories of harraga by displaying some of the belongings harraga left behind like letters, clothes, shoes…,

However, music remains the main cultural and artistic ‘artefact’ which literally describes the plight of harraga. In this regard, a plethora of songs emerged as a history from below which brings to the fore issues which were left on the margins in mainstream media and official history. Different music
genres, in particular rai, rap and *mizwid*[^1] focused on various aspects of *harga* mainly nostalgia, estrangement, the perilous journey across the Mediterranean, death and the deteriorating socio-economic conditions at home.

Most studies on illegal immigration focused on the condition of illegal immigrants in host countries in particular the issue of integration, alienation and exile (Ketz 2016; Demerdash 2016; Tarr, 2019). This article, however, starts with the world of illegal migrants at home. It is in keeping with Sayad Abdelmalek’s perception of the study of immigration which stressed the need to start the study of immigration at home and considers studies which do not start with the phenomenon of immigration at home as being limited and partial.

In his words, ‘by completely reconstructing the trajectories of the emigrants, it becomes possible to grasp the conditions which led to their departure and which produced a certain type of collective attitude towards emigration’ (Abdelmalek 1970). Reiterating the same point posthumously, Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant (2000) stated that the study of ‘migration must … start, not from the receiving society, but from the structure and contradictions of the sending communities’ and this is the case with this essay which is focused on one type of *harga* songs namely those which decry the socio-economic conditions in Tunisia as the main reason pushing thousands of Tunisians, in particular teenagers, to cross the Mediterranean Sea in search of better prospects. In the course of this article, illegal migration prompted a visit to Tunisia by the Italian Interior Minister, Luciana Lamorgese, to discuss with the Tunisian President Kais Said the spike in the number of *harraga* reaching the Italian Island of Lampedusa (TAP 2020). Lamorgese pointed in her meeting with President Said that 11,191 migrants arrived to Italy this year, almost half of them were Tunisians (Associated Press 2020). However, despite the continuing talks and agreements on illegal migration with the EU, *harga* continued to be treated from a security perspective. In this article, *harga* is treated from a cultural perspective. We will look at *harga* in Tunisian rap through the analysis of a corpus of more than 30 rap songs focused on *harga*. Special emphasis is laid on the way these songs are used as a resistance to the deteriorating socio-economic and political conditions at home which push thousands of Tunisians to embark on a journey wrought with dangers which made of the Mediterranean Sea a crucible of death as more than 2,160 died on their way to Europe in 2018 (Mediterranean Migrant Arrivals 2018).

### Tunisian Rap and Resistance

The study of the role of music in socio-cultural and political changes in the Arab world is recent in Anglophone literature. Ted Swedenburg studied Egyptian music of protest during the protests against the Mubarak regime in 2011. Similarly, Mark Levine (2012) studied the role played by different music genres during anti-regime protests in the Arab world and stressed the

[^1]: *Mizwid* is a Tunisian popular music with instruments consisting of a bagpipe (from goat skin) and *tabla* (percussion).
importance of music in sociopolitical changes. Thomas Burkhalter (2011) explored, from different angles, the way artists react to war and violence in Lebanon and concluded that reactions are different, but the ‘artistic statement’ has usually been present. In Tunisia, works on the role of music in social and political protest included works on the music of Awled Al Manajim and the way they criticized the socio-economic conditions in Tunisia in particular in the Mining Basin (Chamekh 2020). Other works focused on the role of rap songs in mobilizing people during the Tunisian Revolution (Bouzouita 2013; Ovshieva 2013; Gana 2012; Barone 2016).

More specific to this article is the work by Monika Salzbrunn, Farida Souiaia, and Simon Mastrangelo (2017 and 2019) on illegal migration who explored the way Europe is presented both as a land of opportunity and as a land of ‘disillusion’ in cultural productions about illegal migration in Algeria and Tunisia. The same authors explored the world of illegal migrants through Tunisian popular music and found that it was mired in loneliness, pain, danger and submission to Divine Will.

This article, however, is focused on Tunisian rap songs that deal with harga. It studies this type of music as a music of resistance and protest. Resistance and protest have been used in different contexts ranging from the political, the social, the economic to the individual behavior and lifestyle (Hollander and Einwohner 2004). This in turn makes the definition of these concepts a daunting task. A quick look for the meaning of ‘resistance in Oxford English Dictionary, for example, shows association between ‘resistance’ and fighting for, striving against, acting in opposition to, withstanding someone, a force, a state or a person’ (Oxford English Dictionary 2020). Similarly, protest is linked to ‘objection and dissent.’ These definitions are echoed in a comparative analysis of the different definitions of resistance by Hollander, Jocelyn A., and Rachel L. Einwohner (2004) who concurred that resistance is an activity that ‘occurs in opposition to someone or something else.’ However, the most important element in Hollander, Jocelyn A., and Rachel L. Einwohner’s study of resistance remains signaling ‘political solidarity with the oppressed and downtrodden,’ which gives even the writer the possibility to take sides in ‘power struggles.’ Resistance and protest are linked in this paper to the struggle against marginalization and immobility.

Harga rap songs constitute an aspect of resistance songs. This connection is in keeping with what Habermas conceived as the inclusion of the ‘cultural realm’ (songs) in the ‘public sphere.’ This ‘sphere’ consists according to Habermas of music, art, and literature (Habermas 1991). The focus of this study is on harga songs as aspects of a discourse which resists and protests against the ruling regime and a current state of affairs. Harga songs are calls for action to put an end to the ‘misery’ and its root causes which made a large number of Tunisians ride death boats despite the looming death and the increasing presence of border patrols on both sides of the Mediterranean. Harga rap songs are considered as acts of cultural and political resistance. It is true that these songs were not performed in marches or in street protests, but these acts happen, ‘when people strum guitars and sing’ Street and Savigny
Unlike other songs of harga which stressed alienation, exile, loneliness, misery…etc, these songs encapsulate resistance against poverty, corruption and nepotism.

**Harga Songs as a Resistance to the Pauperization of Tunisians**

Tunisian rappers decried in most of their harga songs the deteriorating socio-economic conditions of Tunisians. They concluded in most of their songs that the ‘ruling mafia’ is pushing Tunisians to ride the waves because they were marginalized and pauperized at home. In his song EL Harba (escape), Psycho M considered harga as the last best resort for Tunisian youth because the country is not meant for the poor. He addressed his Mother, commonly referred in Tunisian endearing terms as loumima or yamma:

Don’t listen to them
They are the ones who made me cry
Those are the ones who kept silent
They turned a blind eye to injustice
I don’t have a way out:
Either I escape or I am burnt
They are the happy few
They made their parents happy
And we are here just for the sake of company
We, either unemployed or imprisoned
I have to cross the sea
Start a new life
I am escaping their draconian laws,
Escaping the police,
I am sorry the country is in ruins
Just those with influence can live
This is their country
This country does not care about us
They threw us to fish
Children of presidents in comfort, they live
They gave us promises,
When in power, in neglect they left us,
More pain, they inflicted on us
We thought they were men of honor
But they were devils with ties.
Pray Darling: May Allah Destroy them.

Claims by Tunisian rappers that poverty at home is pushing Tunisians to cross the Mediterranean Sea in makeshift boats, or what they were referred to
in other parts of Africa as pirogues, are given evidence in statistics by the Tunisian National Institute of Statistics. According to this Institute (2017), poverty rates in Tunisia reached 20.5 per cent in Tunisia in 2010. This percentage reached 36 per cent in rural areas the same year and the number of Tunisians living below the breadline reached almost two million in 2015, with the highest numbers in rural areas. The rates of poverty kept aggravating and in 2016 almost 30 per cent of Tunisians lived below the poverty line. It needs to be mentioned in this context that these rates were manipulated and distorted, mainly for political reasons, and sometimes statistics which document the huge scale of poverty have not been published (Nabli 2017).

The register of Harga songs is replete with expressions related to poverty, deprivation and marginalization. Expressions like hogra (neglect/disdain), maghour (frustrated), misère (misery), mout (death), mahrouk (burnt), …. are common in harga songs. This diction shows that poverty and marginalization are the main factors leading to harga. In the song AL Borkan (The volcano), Klay BBJ decried, in a vulgar language, the condition of Tunisians which push them to escape the country:

People are queuing in front of your prisons
Men escaping in boats,
They either die or they are kidnapped
We are living … in sewers.

The same theme is echoed in other songs by the same rapper who stressed the fact that the conditions at home are leading the Tunisian youth to escape ‘death’ at home regardless of the end. Furthermore, as a consequence of poverty, Tunisian youth have been portrayed as victims of drugs in most of rap songs. For example, Kafon raps:

My friends invited me,
I won’t go
Leave me here
Leave me on my own
Those who like me
I need a Hashish cigar
My mind is brimming with misery
I am fed up,
I want to escape!

Kafon illustrated the experience of Tunisian youth as victims of drug addiction. According to a recent study by the Tunisian Ministry of Health, the consumption of cannabis more than doubled between 2013 and 2017 and the consumption of ecstasy pills increased 7 times between 2013 and 2017. These rates show the sheer scale of this problem and the way the Tunisian authorities

---

Apart from its literal meaning as a boat, the Pirogue is the title of a film about harga which describes the journey of a group of illegal migrants from Senegal to Spain by the Senegalese director Moussa Touré.
are turning a blind eye to plight of Tunisiens. Yet rappers managed to bring to the fore the experiences of the Tunisian youth with drugs. This makes part of what Usama Kahf considered as ‘the Emotional/Experiential dimension’ which is based on the experience of the artist who identifies with a cause and with an audience (Kahf 2007). In brief, most rap songs depicted Tunisian youth as victims of poverty and marginalization and drug addiction as a consequence of the failure of successive governments to address the needs of Tunisians in an environment which has been mired by corruption.

_Harga Songs as Resistance to Corruption_

In addition to the resistance to the deteriorating socioeconomic conditions of Tunisians, Tunisian rap represent a huge reservoir of protest against corruption and nepotism. Almost all rap _harga_ songs decried nepotism and corruption as a major factor shaping the decision of teenagers to ride the waves to Europe. _Espoir Perdu_ (lost hope) by Psycho M & Gaddour is a good example. The protagonist, an elite university graduate, found that for whatever job, you needed a ‘piston’. These practices made this teenager look for ways and found _harga_ as the his last resort. _Espoir Perdu_ tells the story of many Tunisians who considered education as a means of social uplift, but unfortunately found themselves unemployed mainly because of cronyism:

I put all my dreams in my books
I kept dreaming of a perfect future
I focused on my studies
My mother’s prayers with me
Thanks to her I was successful
Being the best changed into a habit
Thanks to Allah I graduated,
unfortunately, my joy was over
My life changed into a nightmare
And you know the story
A diploma was not enough
You need a piston!

The plight of this student is manifest in the number of graduates added to the list of the unemployed in Tunisia. According to the Tunisian Institute of National statistics (2019), a third of Tunisian higher education graduates are unemployed. It is worth noting that the myth of education as a means of social uplift is ‘dead’ in Tunisia and this explains to a large extent the decision of many Tunisians to embark on a perilous voyage in search of better opportunities. In this regard, it is interesting to point to the fact that apart of _harga_ as a clandestine form of migration, Tunisia is witnessing a parallel brain drain of a

---

3This expression refers to people of influence as a key for getting a job. It is commonly known as ‘wasta’ (a medium) in other Arab countries; someone to help you establish the needed connections).
category of educated and well trained Tunisians who were marginalized at home, but found the proper channels to leave the country. A comparison of the factors pushing both categories harraga and legal immigrants shows a similarity of the push factors. For example, in an interview with France 24, Mondher Kouli, Head of the Orthopedic Department at Charles Nicole Hospital in Tunisia, lamented the immigration of Tunisian doctors as a result of the deteriorating conditions in Tunisian hospitals as almost 50 per cent of the new doctors left the country between 2016 and 2019. According to the Economiste Maghrebin (2017), 72 per cent of highly qualified Tunisian graduates left the country in 2018 in search of better and decent work conditions. The same magazine pointed to an unprecedented Tunisian brain ‘hemorrhage’ (Blaise, Tili and Szakal) instead of probing into the reasons pushing many Tunisians to look for an escape.

Espoir perdu illustrates what Kahf (2007) considers as the emotional-experimental dimension of rap music which uses the image of the ‘victim,’ in this case a successful student whose diligence did not lead to the improvement of his social-status after graduation, which is the plight of thousands of Tunisians. This song creates, as Kahf (2007) put it, “identification” with other people with similar ‘conscience invoking experiences.’ At the same time Espoir perdu dispels the stereotypes of harraga as failures, social outcasts, lazy teenagers, dreamers, drug addicts, criminals, … Harga songs served in this way as a voice of the thousands of Tunisians who ended up unemployed especially in an environment which has been for years plagued with endemic corruption. According to a 2018 report by the OECD, even those who want to start their own businesses would face various administrative obstacles which are nurtured by corruption-related practices. Corruption changed, according to the same report, into a barrier to investment as it makes the cost of investment higher, hampers individual initiative and consequently hampers job creation (OECD 2018). The business environment in general has been plagued with corruption and many other imperfections and uncertainties, and was not conducive for substantial investment and enterprise creation. Small entrepreneurs, who are not well-connected to the old political elite, have been particularly affected by the lack of clear rules and rampant corruption. According to a 2018 report by the Tunisia’s National Authority for Combating Corruption, corruption remains among the top concerns for Tunisians. According to Transparency International (2016), 64 per cent of Tunisians considered corruption in Tunisia on the rise and 30 per cent of Tunisians consider government employees among the most corrupt in the country. The same watchdog documented corruption in almost all sectors and administrations. Whether in agriculture, services, education, the police, transportation or health services, corruption is widespread and almost the country at large. The aggravation of levels of corruption in post Revolution Tunisia was well-illustrated in the song Harrag (2015):

Those who used to tell lies are telling more lies.
Those who used to steal are stealing more
Okay, I have to tell you: You stay on your own
We will go!

This song epitomizes a faltering system of governance, which should under normal circumstances combat all sorts of corruption which is pushing teenagers to look for an escape regardless of the means or the costs.

**Harga Songs as Resistance to Immobility**

**Harga** songs protest against corruption at home, but at the same time present a rejection of the EU immigration restrictions. Europe started from the early 1970s to close its borders. The development of the Schengen Agreement in 1985 made entry into the EU a major challenge. However, with the adoption of the Schengen convention in 1990 and the adoption of a common Visa policy to the European Union, **harga** became the last resort for people seeking to reach the other side of the Mediterranean. In most **Harga** songs, rappers consider EL Babour (makeshift boat) as a source of ‘hope’ and as the majority of working class Tunisians could not get a Schengen Visa through proper channels and sometimes could not afford it, **harga** became the best option to reach their *El Dorado*. Mon3om-DMC FEAT and Akram- MAG’s song VIZA illustrated the rejection of the Visa system:

O’ Boat! Mark me present!
I am on my way to the land of the Roman ladies,
I tore my passport and my documents
The Visa is very expensive for me
-----
I want to have money, green notes!
I travel, life might be better!

The song shows the rejection of the Visa system and instead in a protest style, which is clear in the rhythm of the song, gives this teenager the chance to dream of a better life beyond the confines of embassies. In addition, this song represents a rejection of the Tunisian law which criminalises illegal migration which imposes restrictions on the movement of people, a law which is supposedly meant to protect people from trafficking, but in reality protects the European Union from illegal migration which sought through agreements with Tunisia to externalize the control of immigration. This policy sought to ‘outsource’ migration control to Tunisia to intercept immigrants, asylum seekers, and refugees and arrest them before reaching Europe so as to avoid any kind of obligations towards these people. Tunisia changed, according to crimmigration expert Vasja Badalič (2019), into a buffer zone and a pre-frontier to Europe, a policy that he qualified as being ‘illegal’ and violates the human rights of irregular migrants as the EU started to process even the demands for asylum seekers in Tunisia. According to Badalič (2019) the
Tunisian authorities, on behalf of the EU, engage into illegal practices, which systemically violate human rights, and had perverse effects on illegal migrants to Europe. He concluded that ‘By outsourcing migration controls to Tunisia, …, the EU avoided its international obligations towards asylum seekers coming from/through Tunisia.’

The resistance to immobility is given more legitimacy when we look at the EU/Tunisian agreements on immigration and economic cooperation. These agreements were mostly ‘opportunistic’ and served in particular the EU security and economic interests as the trade agreements with the EU, putatively meant to combat illegal immigration through economic development, were uneven and slowed the growth of Tunisian exports to the EU, protected EU markets, supported industries at the expense of agriculture and in turn aggravated ‘the underdevelopment of Tunisia’s interior’ (Kallander 2013). According to an Oxfam Report (2003), Tunisia’s agreement with the EU, supposedly a means to boost technology transfer, direct investment, and employment, ‘bring only modest or negligible gains’ as it gives advantage to European exports and pushes Arab Mediterranean countries to open their markets to EU exports. In the case of Tunisia, the benefits of the EU are 8 times higher than Tunisia. The same report concluded that the EU agreements with the Arab Mediterranean countries would only lead to more unemployment. Béatrice Hibou (2003) criticised these agreements and concluded that they were not conducive for more investments and development and Tunisia, “le bon élève” of the EU did not benefit of the cooperation with the EU.

Rap Songs and the Identity of Harraga

In addition to the different aspects of resistance encapsulated in rap harga songs, these songs served to carve the class identity of harraga. It is true that the use of class is highly controversial with the frequent references to the ‘decline’, the ‘death’ and the ‘fall’ of class (Nisbet 1959; Clark 1993; Pakulski, Waters and Conley 1999), especially as we are not dealing with a working class collectivity in a traditional manufacturing line, yet ‘class’ remains relevant, as Rosemary Crompton (2008) put it, for the analysis of ‘late modern’ societies. For the purpose of this article, class refers to a social strata of a pauperized people, the focus of harga songs, devoid of the collective political and social agency of the old working class collectivity. In simple terms it is used to stress ‘social inequality and social differentiation’ (Crompton, 2008). We use class to refer to a strata of people who found that they were neglected and alienated at home and therefore the only hope is escape (harga). This class of people appropriated harga songs because they represent for them their everyday travails. For example, It is common to find Tunisians, sometimes even children from working class backgrounds, singing ‘nhib ngataa’ or the

---

4This is a song by the Tunisian rapper Kafon. ‘Nhib ngataa’ translates into English “I want to escape.”
famous Algerian **harga** song ‘**ya babour ya mon amour**’ because these songs represent a mirror of their everyday world and at the same time their dreams of a better world; these songs could not be under any circumstances be appropriated by upper class teenagers and this is the major reason why these songs represent a reflection of the pauperized class identity.

The class identity in **harga** songs is reflected through language. These songs are in Tunisian **darija**, where the notion of the working class is manifest in the accent of rappers. The working class accent is clear and establishes the link between the accent (the voice) and the place of **harraga, houma** (working class conurbation in Tunisian dialect). This is a different space; it is simply a ‘different country’ to borrow the expression of Valerie Hey when referring to her experience with the Middle class (Hey 1997), where the linguistic and the material converge to create the identity of **harraga**.

Tunisian rappers use the two main prongs of identity, ‘sameness’ (the common) and ‘differentiation.’ When they stress ‘sameness’, rappers tend to focus on ‘what they share with, and how they differ from others’ [so as] to persuade certain people that they are (for certain purposes) ‘identical’ with one another’ (Brubaker 2000). The stress on sameness in the context of **harga** songs focuses on the common experience of **harraga**. Rappers use frequently ‘we’ in reference to people going through the same ordeal. The use of ‘we’ conveys identification with a common predicament and a common cause. We the poor, the downtrodden, the masses betrayed by successive governments, the people left outside the mainstream media being pushed to quit by the ruling Mafia.

However, when they stress ‘differentiation’, rappers use frequently ‘they’ and them’. Both (they and them) are used to refer to the ruling mafia, those at the origins of the impoverishment and alienation of the first group, the happy few, who do not need to escape. Rapper DJ Costa, for example used “they” in reference to the Tunisian authorities in particular their “misdeeds”:

> They promised us!
> They reassured us!
> When they took power they neglected us,
> They oppressed us,
> They were devils!
> They chased us across the sea,
> They sank our boats,
> your death is better, they said!
> They shut all doors!
> Marble hearted, they are!
> They arrested some,
> The rest, they sank!

‘They’ is used throughout the song in an accusatory tone. The ruling authorities versus the people. They are at the origin of the people’s misery and

---

5‘**Ya babour ya mon amour**’ translates into English as “Oh Boat! Oh My Beloved.” This is an Algerian Rai song by Redha Taliani.
as a consequence, the pauperized class, left to their own devices, they found no other option but ‘EL Harba.’ DJ Costa uses frequently This is their country! … as a refrain throughout his song accompanied with sighs of despair. This dichotomy of the ‘we’, harraga (the pauperized class) versus ‘they’, the privileged, is common in most of harga songs. This dichotomy defines the identity of harraga. They are the poor, the downtrodden, those left behind in official and political policy and discourse.

Harga songs create among listeners a sense of identification and even solidarity with harraga. In most of the songs the country is plagued with corruption, nepotism, and drugs and the last solution is escape. It is a place where values and education are forsaken for money and estates. This is a condition which creates a sense of solidarity with harraga as other people think that these people were deceived and left to their own means and therefore their attempts to cross the Mediterranean should not be criminalized as is the current situation in Tunisia.

Conclusion

Harga songs documented a missing chain in Tunisia’s history. It is the history of thousands of Tunisians who left the country in death boats or who are still planning or dreaming to join them soon. These songs represent acts of protest against the persistent and systematic marginalization and alienation of a large section of Tunisian society. They challenged narratives of an economic miracle under Ben Ali and a democratic post revolution Tunisia, especially when we consider social discontent as a major aspect of democracy.

These songs illustrated the history of the systematic subversion of truth as far as the EU-Tunisia relations are concerned as despite the fact that it is clearly stated in the introduction to the European Agenda on Migration that the policy of the EU should be premised on using the EU global role ‘to address the root causes of migration’ including ‘poverty’ which according to this policy document does not stop ‘at national frontiers,’ (European Commission 2015) security continued to shape the EU relations with Tunisia and harga songs serve to illustrate that the policing of the Mediterranean is a failed solution as long as the root causes of harga are not properly addressed.

---

6 ‘EL Harba’ is the title of the song. It translates into English as “escape.”

References


