

## Post-Return Practices and Experiences of Returnees in Tunisia

WP8 – Country Survey Report

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## About the Project

GAPs is a Horizon Europe Project that focuses on the drivers of return policies and the barriers/enablers in international cooperation on returns. The project aims to address the disparities between the anticipated outcomes of return policies and their actual results by challenging the dominant, one-sided understanding of "return policymaking." Specifically, GAPs:

- Identifies the missing link in the EU's return policy, considering both its internal and external dimensions.
- Explores factors that facilitate or hinder international cooperation.
- Illuminates returnees' experiences and sheds light on the factors that shape their resilience, aspirations and hope in the face of adversities.

The GAPs project is structured into 11 Work Packages, each designed to critically examine the existing legal, policy, and institutional frameworks governing return and reintegration processes. These Work Packages aim to identify best practices, uncover structural and operational gaps, and strengthen the overall effectiveness of return governance and management by generating evidence on returnees' lived experiences, resilience, and hope amid mounting adversities. Using a field survey-based approach, the project generated evidence-based insights to inform more coherent, equitable, and sustainable return policies.

GAPs fieldwork has been conducted in 14 countries: Jordan, Lebanon, Sweden, Nigeria, Germany, Morocco, the Netherlands, Afghanistan, Poland, Georgia, Turkey, Tunisia, Greece and Iraq. This country report has been compiled in the context of the GAPs Work Package Eight (WP8) on 'Post-Return Practices and Experiences of Returnees in Tunisia.

## WP8: Post-Return Practices and Experiences of Returnees in Tunisia

The phenomenon of return migration is often overlooked compared to migration flows into destination countries, even though it is a standard dimension of migration. Return migration occurs when migrants decide to leave their host countries and relocate to their countries of origin or habitual residence. In recent years, there has been growing policy interest in Tunisia in return migration, particularly in supporting voluntary returns and facilitating reintegration (see, e.g., the Tunisia Hims study (2021) and the OECD report (2020)). However, within the broader category of return migrants, forced returns remain understudied. According to the OECD (2020) report on migration, forced return can be defined as "a migratory movement which, although the drivers can be diverse, involves force, compulsion, or coercion".

The GAPs project aims to explore this type of return to gain a deeper understanding of its dynamics and of returnees' reintegration experiences. In particular, the hope and resilience of returnees have not been systematically analysed in previous studies—an area that the GAP quantitative survey seeks to address. In addition, re-migration after return, whether back to the original destination country or to another, remains little studied. This dimension will also be partially captured through the survey.

Work Package 8 (WP8) of the GAPs project focuses on the experiences of returnees in four countries —Afghanistan, Iraq, Nigeria, and Tunisia—and this report specifically examines the

Tunisian case. It presents findings from the field survey conducted as part of WP8 from February 2025 to June 2025, with a particular focus on post-return practices and experiences in Tunisia, covering a total of 164 returned migrants.

The survey was conducted at 66 sites mainly in urban areas, across northern and southern Tunisia. These sites were distributed over 18 governorates (see **Tables 24 and 25** in appendix 1), including Tunis, Mahdia, Sousse, Sfax, Medenine, Kairouan, Gabes, Nabeul, Kasserine, Monastir, Ben Arous, Bizerte, Kebilli, Ariana, Sidi Bouzid, Tozeur, Kef, and Manouba (see **Figure 1 (Map.1)** for more details). Questionnaires were administered through face-to-face interviews conducted by a team of four female interviewers under the supervision of Professor Hassan Boubakri. The survey team travelled to respondents' workplaces and other locations, and each interview lasted on average 45-60 minutes.

Our goal in conducting this representative survey is to better understand the goals, driving forces, and difficulties faced by returnees both during and after their return. The Hope Scale, Resilience Scale, and Depression Scale were among the standardised assessment instruments used in this study. Using these tools, it is possible to evaluate the psychological health of returnees and investigate how structural conditions (such as access to services, legal documentation, and employment opportunities) and broader societal factors (such as social inclusion and community support) affect their ability to cope with hardship. The study's ultimate goal was to identify trends in returnees' strength and vulnerability and to provide data to guide interventions and policies that promote long-term reintegration.

## 1. Country Migration Context: Tunisia

In this section, we focus on information related to the return of Tunisians from the Schengen Area. Tunisia has always been and remains a country of departure. In 2024, 1.8 million Tunisians were living abroad (OTE, 2024), representing 15% of Tunisia's resident population (12 million) (INS, 2025). Eight out of ten Tunisian migrants residing abroad are settled in Europe. With 54% of the total, France is the primary country of residence for Tunisians, followed by Italy and then Germany (ibid.). Nearly half (45.8%) of people living abroad are under 25, and 39% are under 16 (Ibidem).

The geographical proximity of Tunisia connecting North African third countries to Italy is one of the recurring factors explaining the persistence of irregular migration, often crossing the Mediterranean on boats to Italy or, during some years, via the Balkans. It is one of the main characteristics of Tunisian international migration. However, foreign migrants (especially sub-Saharan Africans) transiting through Tunisia use the same routes as Tunisians and are facilitated by the same migrant smuggling networks.

After record numbers of illegal arrivals via the Mediterranean in 2015 (1.04 million) and 2016 (374,000), 2023 was a year marked by an explosion of arrivals (240,683), i.e., 50% more than in 2022 and 126% more than in 2021 (FRONTEX, 2015-2024).

Tunisian has gradually become the first or second source country for these flows. Indeed, 62% of landings on the Italian coasts had Tunisia as their country of departure, i.e. 97,667 people

(UNHCR, 2024). In 2022, arrivals by sea in Italy from Tunisia (32,371 people) represented only 30.8% of total arrivals (Ibid). In 2023, Tunisia ranked first among countries of embarkation for the Italian coast, overtaking neighbouring Libya for the second time (the first was in 2020) (Ibid).

In 2023, 17,489 Tunisian irregular migrants landed on the shores of Lampedusa, representing 17.9% of the total number of migrants arriving from Tunisia, ranking second after Guineans (17,979 migrants) and ahead of Ivorians (15,584 migrants) (Ibid.).

In 2024, landings on the Italian coast fell to 66,617 migrants, less than half the 2023 total (UNHCR, 2025). Disembarkations from Tunisia fell to 19,460 arrivals, an 80% drop in one year (Ibid).

This sharp decline is explained by the impressive resources deployed by the Tunisian coastguard and navy, and funded by some EU Member States, to intercept irregular migrants at sea and transfer them to Tunisian soil (Boubakri & et al, 2025, p.35). In 2023, more than 80,000 migrants (including Tunisians) were intercepted at sea before arriving in Lampedusa (FTDES & Ministry of Interior (Tunis), 2023; 2025). To better deter these irregular departures, the Tunisian authorities readmit thousands of Tunisian migrants from the Schengen area every year. To facilitate the understanding of migration trends, we present in Table 1 a summary of departure flows from Tunisia to Italy.

**Table 1: Departure flows from Tunisia and Central Mediterranean to Italy over the past ten years**

| <b>Year</b> | <b>Country/Arrival area*</b>                                | <b>Number of Arrivals</b> | <b>Remarks</b>   |
|-------------|---|---------------------------|--|
| <b>2015</b> | From the Central Mediterranean (all nationalities) to Italy | 1,040,000*                | Record year of irregular arrivals                                    |
| <b>2016</b> | From the Central Mediterranean (all nationalities) to Italy | 374,000*                  | Sharp decrease after 2015 peak                                       |
| <b>2022</b> | Italy (from Tunisia)  | 32,371                    | 30.8% of total arrivals  |
| <b>2023</b> | Italy (from Tunisia)  | 97,667                    | 62% of total arrivals in Tunisia becomes the main point of departure |
| <b>2023</b> | Lampedusa (Tunisian nationals)                              | 17,489                    | 2nd largest nationality after Guineans                               |
| <b>2024</b> | Italy (total)   | 66,617                    | Arrivals fall by half compared to 2023                               |
| <b>2024</b> | Italy (from Tunisia)  | 19,460                    | Arrivals fall by half 80% compared to 2023                           |

**Note:** \* Data refer to all irregular migrants crossing the Mediterranean, not only Tunisians.

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## 2. Methodological Framework

### 2.1. Collaboration with institutions and organisations

The fieldwork was conducted in close collaboration with the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Office of Tunisians Abroad (OTE), which supported the University of Sousse team. Slightly more than half of the respondents (85 migrants) were reached through contact details provided by Tunisian stakeholders involved in managing return programs that support economic and social reintegration.

Fieldwork in Tunisia relied on coordination with several national and international stakeholders, but access constraints required repeated adjustments to the research strategy. The team initially worked with the Office of Tunisians Abroad (OTE), which has a central office in Tunis and a network of 24 regional directorates. During the pilot phase, cooperation with OTE regional directors was smooth and helped the team identify returnees benefiting from individual reintegration projects. During the main survey, however, cooperation became uneven: some regional directors were reluctant or refused to meet, partly out of concern that migrants would not participate, and data-protection practices limited direct identification. As a result, researchers often had to locate returnees indirectly by visiting neighbourhoods and villages and asking local residents about returnees who had started businesses—an approach that proved time-consuming and sometimes unsuccessful. Because this pathway did not reliably yield participants, the team shifted to a network-based approach, mobilising the local knowledge and personal connections of young researchers (Master's/PhD students) and teachers, which substantially increased participation and roughly doubled the number of completed questionnaires. Despite initial formal interest, the Ministry of the Interior did not provide data on expulsions or geographic distribution despite repeated requests. International partners were also difficult to engage: aside from GIZ, which showed interest and participated in a project workshop but shared no data, French and Italian cooperation bodies either declined or did not respond. It should be noted that France and Italy are, respectively, the first and second-largest sending countries of Tunisian migrants expelled from the Schengen area.

### 2.2. Adapting the questionnaire to the local context

To ensure research integrity, the questionnaire was adapted to the Tunisian context, translated into Arabic, further adjusted to the local spoken dialect, and reviewed by a psychology researcher before administration. Ethical approval (Ref: CEFMS 210/2023) was obtained, and data protection protocols were respected throughout the fieldwork. Informed consent was obtained from all returnees, and respondents were assured that their answers would be kept secure. Despite logistical challenges in locating and recruiting migrant returnees in the absence of an official sampling frame, collaboration with institutional partners proved crucial for enabling access and facilitating data collection. The support of OTE, the Ministry of Social Affairs, and local actors in Sousse significantly enhanced the feasibility and quality of the fieldwork in Tunisia.



### 2.3. Data Collection and Analytical Tools

Unlike in other country contexts where large-scale national databases were available, the Tunisian fieldwork did not rely on a pre-existing probability-based sampling frame. Instead, the survey team used two complementary approaches: (1) in collaboration with institutional entities, such as the OTE (“Office des Tunisiens à l’Etranger” (Office of Tunisians Abroad), the team obtained a list of returnees and interviewed 85 respondents from the list; and (2) it conducted direct outreach to identify and engage further returnees who consented to participate in the fieldwork, resulting in 79 more interviews. In total, 164 were interviewed from January to June 2025.

The sampling approach was non-probabilistic and should be interpreted as exploratory. The survey aimed to document a variety of return experiences in Tunisia. A key limitation of this design is that, given the relatively small, non-probability sample, the findings have limited generalisability to the broader returnee population. This also constrains cross-country comparability within WP8, as differences in sampling strategies and sample composition may affect observed patterns.

The survey was conducted in person using paper questionnaires. Responses were first coded manually for each question, then entered into Excel and subsequently analysed in R. This process ensured consistent data entry and enabled systematic quantitative analysis of return experiences across the selected regions (see **Table 25** in appendix 1).

### 2.4. Cleaning of the data

In line with the established guidelines for data cleaning and structuring, we conducted a thorough preparation of our dataset to ensure quality, validity and comparability with the datasets of the other countries involved in WP8.

The process began with an initial audit, during which we verified that all variables adhered to the prescribed naming conventions, confirmed the correct classification of categorical, ordinal, and continuous variables, and checked for implausible values or inconsistencies. Open-ended responses were standardised to ensure uniformity across text fields.

Missing data were carefully analysed both per variable and per respondent. Only a few respondents chose not to answer the question on their average monthly household income. However, we noticed that in more than 30% of cases, the question on the year of migration was omitted. No other variable exceeded the 30% missingness threshold.

To facilitate cross-country harmonisation, we standardised variable names and, used Likert-scale items in the survey instrument. We applied reverse coding to designated negatively worded questions (e.g., items in the Hope and Depression scales) to ensure consistent directionality. These procedures produced a clean, structured, and reliable dataset suitable for psychometric and inferential analyses.

In the section on Hope, Resilience, and Depression among Returnees, we implemented scale recoding, reverse-coding of negatively phrased items, and reliability assessment using Classical Test Theory (CTT). Together, these steps ensure that the psychosocial constructs are measured consistently and accurately across all datasets.

### 2.5 Data protection measures

Several data protection measures were implemented to safeguard participants' privacy. All analyses were conducted at the group level, and no individual-level information is reported in a way that could allow identification. Personal identifiers were not collected beyond what was strictly necessary for the research. Data were stored securely on access-restricted servers, in line with institutional data protection protocols. Only the research team had access to the pseudonymised dataset, and all procedures complied with relevant ethical and data protection standards.

### 3. Respondents Demographics

In this section, we provide a summary of the basic demographics of the participating refugees, descriptive statistics for the survey responses, and a review of the lines of enquiry undertaken on the data for academic research.

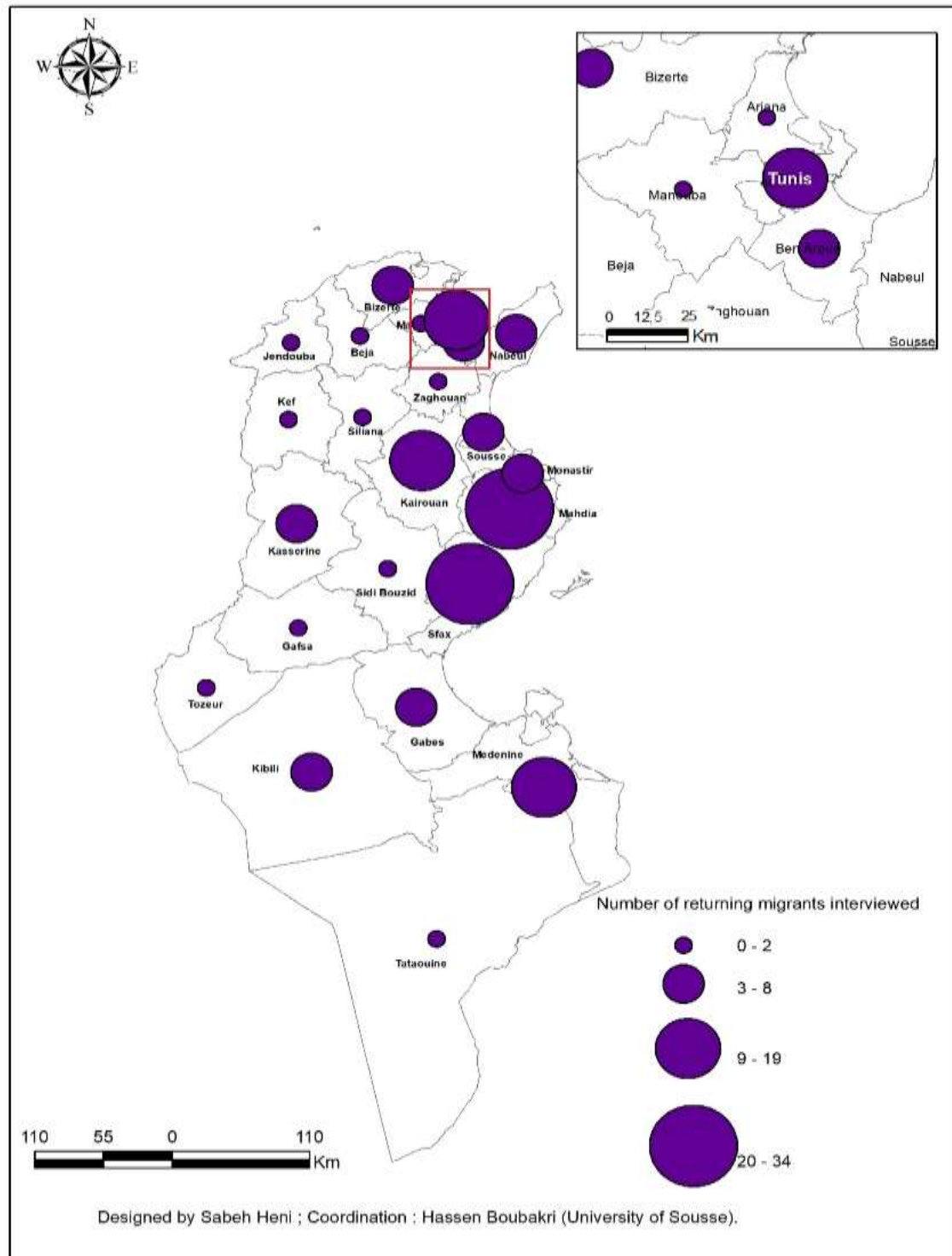
**Gender:** Of the 164 Tunisia survey respondents, only 2 are women. The pronounced gender imbalance in our sample, composed almost exclusively of male respondents, should be acknowledged, as it may influence the interpretation of psychosocial dynamics and reintegration outcomes.

**Age:** The average age of returnees is 33.49 (SD=8.36) years, while the median is equal to 32 years.

**Geographic zones:** For the regions where respondents resided at the time, we present the following distribution in (**Map 1**) covering 18 governorates<sup>1</sup> across the country allows the study to account for regional heterogeneity, thereby enhancing the robustness and generalizability of the findings.

#### Map 1: Geographical distribution of returning migrants interviewed (by governorate)

<sup>1</sup> Tunis, Mahdia, Sousse, Sfax, Medenine, Kairouan, Gabes, Nabeul, Kasserine, Monastir, Ben Arous, Bizerte, Kebilli, Ariana, Sidi Bouzid, Tozeur, Kef, and Manouba

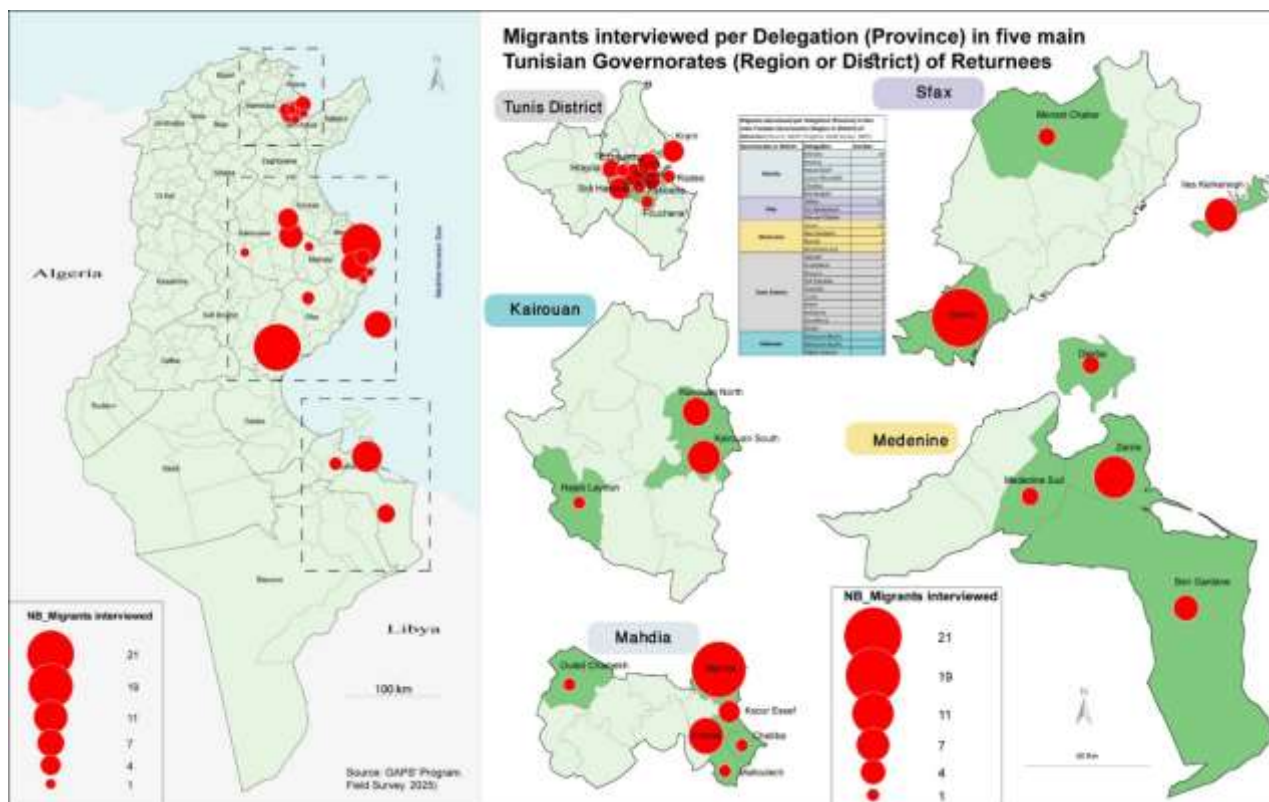


Source: GAPS/ Field Survey (Tunisia, 2025)

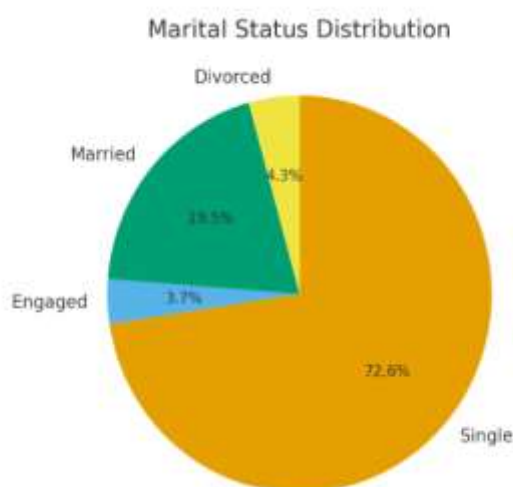
The research team sought out returning migrants in the often impoverished neighborhoods of Greater Tunis (District of Tunis), the capital of Tunisia, or in the

depths of sometimes very remote and isolated rural areas of coastal or inland governorates (**see Map 2**) . Thus, 70% (i.e., 115 returning migrants) of all the migrants interviewed were concentrated in 4 governorates (Mahdia, Sfax, Medenine, and Kairouan) and in the capital (District of Tunis) (Ibid).

**Map 2: Locations (rural and urban areas) of 115 returning migrants**



**Marital Status:** In terms of marital status, 119 out of 164 were single, 32 were married, six were engaged, and seven were divorced. The marital distribution is presented in **Figure 3**.

**Figure 1: Distribution of returnees by marital status**

**Table 2** provides a summary of the distribution of returnees by age , gender and marital status.

**Table 2: Age, Gender and Marital Status**

| Characteristic        | Category / Statistic | n   | % / Value    |
|-----------------------|----------------------|-----|--------------|
| <b>Age (years)</b>    | Mean (SD)            | 162 | 33.49 (8.36) |
|                       | [19,25[              | 20  | 12.35        |
|                       | [25,40[              | 78  | 48.15        |
|                       | [40,59[              | 66  | 39.50        |
| <b>Gender</b>         | Male                 | 162 | 98.8         |
|                       | Female               | 2   | 1.2          |
| <b>Marital status</b> | Married              | 32  | 19.51        |
|                       | Single               | 119 | 72.58        |
|                       | Engaged              | 6   | 3.65         |
|                       | divorced             | 7   | 4.26         |

**Education:** The majority of respondents (62 individuals) reported completing lower secondary education, followed by upper secondary education (37 individuals). A considerable number (35 individuals) had only attained primary education, while 28 respondents pursued non-secondary vocational training pathways as an alternative to completing secondary school. Finally, a small proportion of the sample (2 individuals) had attained a bachelor's degree or higher. This distribution highlights a predominance of lower educational levels among returnees (see Table 3).

**Table 3: Education Level**

| Education Level                            | Number of Individuals |
|--|-----------------------|
| Primary education                          | 35                    |
| Lower secondary education                  | 62                    |
| Upper secondary education                  | 37                    |
| Non-secondary vocational training pathways | 28                    |
| Bachelor's or equivalent education         | 2                     |
| <b>Total</b>                               | <b>164</b>            |

**Household size:** the average household size (i.e., the number of total members living under the same roof) was 4.258 ( $SD = 1.92$ ) -see **Table 4** for more details. Additionally, the majority of respondents who reported being married or divorced had no male or female dependents aged 6-18, while only 24 reported having male dependents and 21 reported having female dependents.

**Table 4: Household size**

| Numbers of individuals by Household | 3  | 4  | 5  | 6  | 2  | 7 | 1 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 13 | Total |
|-------------------------------------|----|----|----|----|----|---|---|---|---|----|----|-------|
| Number of returnees                 | 37 | 34 | 26 | 22 | 21 | 8 | 6 | 5 | 2 | 1  | 1  | 163   |

**Employment:** 33 respondents (20%) reported being unemployed, and 66 respondents reported being labourers ( $n = 63$ ), followed by skilled agricultural, forestry, and fishery workers ( $n = 29$ ). For more details see **Table 5**.

**Table 5: Employment distribution**

| Occupation Category                                 | Number of Individuals |
|---|-----------------------|
| Managers  | 0                     |
| Skilled Workers                                     | 10                    |
| Technicians and associate professionals             | 6                     |
| Clerical support workers                            | 3                     |
| Service and sales workers                           | 10                    |
| Skilled agricultural, forestry, and fishery workers | 29                    |
| Technician  | 1                     |
| Plant and machine operators, and assemblers         | 0                     |
| Labourer / Worker                                   | 63                    |

|                                 |     |
|---------------------------------|-----|
| <b>Armed forces occupations</b> | 0   |
| <b>Unemployed</b>               | 33  |
| <b>Other*</b>                   | 9   |
| <b>Total</b>                    | 164 |

**Note:** Other refers to Entrepreneurs in most cases.

When we asked about the number of household members who contribute financially, the majority of respondents (n=74) reported that only one person in the family works or has an income, followed by 43 households with two working members. Very few households reported more than three income earners. Notably, 10 households reported having no income earners, highlighting economic vulnerability.

In terms of general socio-economic status, the respondents reported the following responses (see **Table 6**) to the question: What is your average monthly household income? Amounts are converted from Tunisian dinars (TND) to US dollars.

**Table 6: Distribution of Returnees by Income**

| <b>Class of Income In TND</b> | <b>Class of Income in US dollars*</b> | <b>Frequency</b> |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------|------------------|
| Without income                | Without income                        | 16               |
| Less than 200                 | Less than 68\$                        | 8                |
| 200-400                       | 68-136                                | 27               |
| 401-600                       | 137-204                               | 27               |
| 601-800                       | 205-272                               | 27               |
| 801-1000                      | 273-340                               | 18               |
| 1001-1200                     | 341-408                               | 13               |
| 1201-1400                     | 409-476                               | 6                |
| 1401-1600                     | 477-544                               | 4                |
| 1601-1800                     | 545-612                               | 3                |
| 1801-2000                     | 613-680                               | 0                |
| More than 2001                | More than 680                         | 8                |
| <b>Total</b>                  |                                       | <b>157**</b>     |

**Notes:** \*1 Tunisian Dinar = 0.34 USD \$ (date 30/ 09/2025). \*\*Seven observations are missing from the dataset.

Note that in Tunisia, the minimum wage (SMIG) is set at 528.320 dinars for the 48-hour system and 448.238 dinars for the 40-hour system. This means that the majority of returnees earn more than the minimum wage.

Overall, the demographic analysis indicates that returnees face significant socio-economic constraints. The sample is predominantly young, with respondents dispersed across most Tunisian regions, supporting geographic representativeness. Educational attainment is generally low, and households are relatively large, often relying on a single income earner. Employment is mainly concentrated in low-skilled occupations, with a notable share of unemployment. Although most respondents report incomes above the national minimum



wage, income levels remain modest and economic vulnerability persists for a substantial portion of the sample. These characteristics provide essential context for understanding reintegration challenges and subsequent analytical results.

#### 4. Date and Route-of-Return Country

All returnees had travelled abroad in the 10 years before the interview. However, a broad look at the history of emigration among the 164 respondents reveals that emigration began as early as 1995.

##### 4.1. Countries that Returnees had Originally Aspired to Travel to

In response to the question, “Which country was the destination from which you emigrated from Tunisia?”, returnees provided a variety of responses. While most had initially been aspired to emigrate to Italy ( $n = 124$  (76%)), many had also planned to emigrate to France ( $n = 16$ , 9.58 %) and Germany ( $n=13$ , 7.78%). Smaller proportions had originally aspired to emigrate to Turkey ( $n = 4$ ), Serbia ( $n=2$ ), Brazil ( $n = 1$ ), the United Kingdom ( $n = 1$ ), the Netherlands ( $n = 1$ ), Spain ( $n = 1$ ), and Switzerland ( $n = 1$ ). **Figure 4** provides a visual representation of these results.

**Figure 2: Initial Destination Countries that Returnees had Aspired to Emigrate to**



Note that only 13 respondents among 164 reported travelling with their family.

##### 4.2. Date of Return

Most respondents reported returning to Tunisia in 2024 ( $n = 56$ ) and 2023 ( $n = 41$ ), with a considerable number reporting returning in 2022 ( $n = 16$ ) and 2025 ( $n = 15$ ). The number of respondents who specified their return earlier was as follows: 2021 ( $n = 11$ ), 2020 ( $n = 6$ ), 2019 ( $n = 4$ ), and 2018 and earlier ( $n = 15$ ) (**See Table 7**).



**Table 7: Number of returnees per year**

| Year                | 2010 | 2011 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 | 2024 | 2025 | Total |
|---------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|-------|
| Number of Returnees | 1    | 5    | 1    | 1    | 3    | 1    | 1    | 2    | 4    | 6    | 11   | 16   | 41   | 56   | 15   | 164   |

#### 4.3 Route of Return

Regarding the country of return, Tunisia emerges as the primary destination, followed by Italy, France, and Germany, which rank second, third, and fourth, respectively (**see Table 8**).

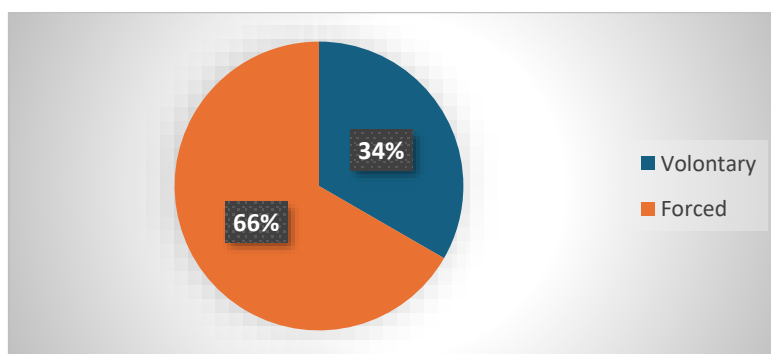
**Table 8: Number of returnees by country of return**

| Country             | Italy | France | Germany | Switzerland | Austria | Brazil | Denmark | Netherlands | Total |
|---------------------|-------|--------|---------|-------------|---------|--------|---------|-------------|-------|
| Number of Returnees | 75    | 43     | 39      | 3           | 1       | 1      | 1       | 1           | 164   |

In response to our question, “How many times have you been forced to return from abroad, and from which country?”, among 164 respondents, 139 reported being returned once, 17 twice, 6 three times, and 2 four times.

#### 4.4. Forced or voluntary return?

As shown in **Figure 5**, among 164 respondents, 66% (n=109) reported being forced to leave the host country, while 34% reported a voluntary return.

**Figure 3: Distribution by Type of Return**

In summary, the predominance of forced and repeated returns suggests that return trajectories are primarily shaped by external constraints rather than individual choice. The

concentration of return dates in recent years should be interpreted with caution, as it may partly reflect the sampling strategy rather than broader temporal trends.

## 5. European countries travelled to and lived in as immigrant

### 5.1. European countries travelled to as emigrants

The respondents reported travelling to various European countries as migrants. The most frequently visited countries (for a period of less than 15 days) were Italy (26), France (18), Germany (15), Switzerland (12), and Austria (10). Other destinations included Poland and Hungary (8 each), Serbia (7), the Netherlands (6), Greece (4), Luxembourg (3), Croatia, Slovenia, Denmark, and Spain (2 each), and the United Kingdom, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, and other specified countries (1 each).

The data suggests that migrants often move through several countries before deciding where to settle permanently. The wide range of reported destinations indicates that migration is a dynamic process, with individuals exploring multiple countries in Europe to find the most suitable place to establish themselves. For this analysis, a country was considered as “visited” rather than “lived in” if the stay lasted less than 15 days.

### 5.2 European countries lived in as an immigrant

The respondents reported having lived in various countries across Europe. The most common countries of residence were Italy (118), France (87), and Germany (57), followed by Switzerland (16), Belgium (14), the Netherlands/Holland (10), Greece (5), Austria (4), and Serbia (4). Smaller numbers lived in Denmark (3), Spain (3), Romania, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Sweden, Norway, Brazil, and those who reported none (1 each).

Interestingly, Switzerland and Belgium were rarely mentioned as a destination during migration (see Section 3.2), yet a notable proportion of respondents ended up living there, highlighting the dynamic nature of migration. Many migrants move through multiple countries, exploring living conditions, employment opportunities, and social networks, before deciding where to settle permanently.

### 5.3. Primary European Countries Resided

The distribution of migrants by the country where they spent the most time shows that Italy (74), France (51), and Germany (38) were the primary countries of residence. A smaller number of migrants spent the majority of their time in Switzerland (3), the Netherlands/Holland (2), and one respondent each in Greece, Austria, the Czech Republic, and Belgium. While Switzerland and Belgium attract migrants, many realise that the high cost of living makes it very difficult to survive there. This indicates that while a few countries draw most migrants for longer-term residence, others serve as temporary or less common places of settlement (see Table 9).

**Table 9: Distribution of migrants by the primary residence country**

| Country | Italy | France | Germany | Switzerland | Netherlands | Greece | Austria | Czech Republic | Belgium |
|---------|-------|--------|---------|-------------|-------------|--------|---------|----------------|---------|
|         |       |        |         |             |             |        |         |                |         |

|                    |    |    |    |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|--------------------|----|----|----|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Number of migrants | 74 | 51 | 38 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
|--------------------|----|----|----|---|---|---|---|---|---|

It should be noted that the total number of reported country observations exceeds the number of respondents (n = 164), as some migrants reported living in more than one country for comparable periods; in such cases, each country of residence is counted separately.

#### 5.4. Total Number of visited European countries by migrant

The distribution of migrants according to the number of countries they visited provided in Table 9 shows that the majority visited none (99) country, followed by 32 migrants who visited one country, 17 who visited two countries, and smaller numbers visiting three (4), four (9), five (1), seven (1), and nine (1) countries. This indicates that most migrants tend to limit their movement to a few countries. **(See Table 10).**

**Table 10: Distribution of migrants by the number of countries visited**

|                             |    |    |    |   |   |   |   |   |
|-----------------------------|----|----|----|---|---|---|---|---|
| Number of countries visited | 0  | 1  | 2  | 3 | 4 | 5 | 7 | 9 |
| Number of migrants          | 99 | 32 | 17 | 4 | 9 | 1 | 1 | 1 |

#### 5.5. Number of European countries of residence per migrant

As shown in **Table 11**, the majority of migrants (77 respondents) reported living in only one country, while 45 respondents lived in two countries. A notable number of respondents had lived in three (23) or four countries (11). Only isolated cases of migrants who had lived in five to eight different countries. This highlights that although most migrants remain in a single host country, a subset undertakes longer, more complex migration journeys across multiple destinations. Note that, regarding non-European countries visited or lived in as an emigrant, one respondent travelled and lived in Brazil; a few travelled to Algeria (5) and Libya (5); and one respondent each travelled to Qatar, Jordan, and Morocco.

**Table 11: Distribution of migrants by the number of countries lived in**

|                                  |    |    |    |    |   |   |   |   |       |
|----------------------------------|----|----|----|----|---|---|---|---|-------|
| Number of countries of residence | 1  | 2  | 3  | 4  | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | Total |
| Number of migrants               | 77 | 45 | 23 | 11 | 3 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 164   |

Overall, migration trajectories are characterised by mobility across multiple European countries, with short-term visits often preceding longer-term settlement. Italy, France, and Germany emerge as the dominant destinations in terms of both residence and primary country of stay, while other countries function mainly as transit destinations. Although most migrants lived in one or two countries, a non-negligible subset experienced more complex, multi-country migration pathways.

## 6. Likelihood of Legal and Illegal Re-Immigration

Respondents were asked about the likelihood for which they would legally and illegally re-immigrate to another country. With response options ranging from 1 = very likely to 5 = very

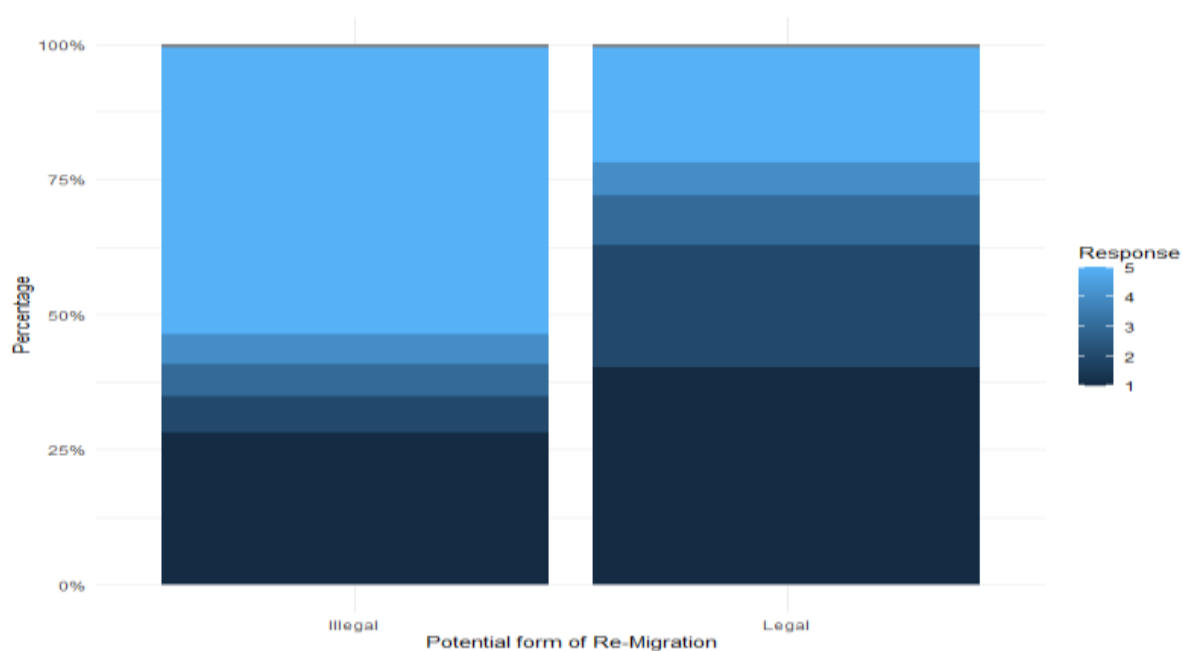
unlikely – for results see **Table 12**. Notably, the mean response was low, as **2.45/5.00** for the likelihood of **legal re-migration** and 3.49 for the possibility of illegal re-migration. Among the 163 respondents, 96 indicated willingness to engage in irregular migration and 67 did not. Similarly, 103 among 163 expressed interest in legal migration, while 60 reported no such intention.

**Table 12: Probability of Legal and Illegal Re-Migration Post-Return**

| Response Scale   | Number of Individuals aspiring legal re-migration | Number of Individuals aspiring Illegal re-migration |
|--|---|---|
| <b>Very Likely</b>   | 66  | 46  |
| <b>Somewhat likely</b>                                       | 37  | 11  |
| <b>Neither likely nor unlikely (somewhere in the middle)</b> | 15  | 10  |
| <b>Somewhat unlikely</b>                                     | 10  | 9   |
| <b>Very unlikely</b>   | 35  | 87  |
| <b>Total number of responses</b>                             | 163   | 163   |

In **Figure 6** we illustrate the proportions of responses across categories for the 163 returnees.

**Figure 4: Reported Likelihood of Legal and Illegal Re-Migration of Returnees**



**Note. Legal** (very unlikely = 21.5% (scale 5), somewhat unlikely = 6.1%, neither likely nor unlikely = 9.2%, somewhat likely = 22.7%, very likely = 40.5% (scale 1); **Illegal** (very unlikely = 53.73% (scale 5),

somewhat unlikely = 5.52%, neither likely nor unlikely = 6.75%, somewhat likely = 6.75%, very likely = 28.22% (scale 1)).

## 7. Motivations for Returning Back to Tunisia

Returnees were asked to rate the relevance of 14 statements regarding their motivations for returning to Tunisia. As detailed in **Table 13**, the most three relevant reasons for return were first that the returnee have been “Deported/forcibly removed from host country “ ( $M = 3.74$ ,  $SD = 1.88$ ), second that the returnee “Could not get visa/permanent residency in host country “ ( $M = 3.12$ ,  $SD = 1.88$ ) and third the “Arbitrary Detention in transit and destination country” of returnee ( $M = 2.65$ ,  $SD = 1.85$ ). In fourth position, family reunification in Tunisia was also reported as a significant reason ( $M = 2.17$ ,  $SD = 1.71$ ). A common feature of the top three reasons is that they reflect externally imposed conditions rather than migrants' voluntary choices. In other words, return is primarily shaped by restrictive migration policies and enforcement mechanisms in Europe and transit countries, which constrain migrants' legal status and mobility. This suggests that returns are mainly the outcome of structural and institutional pressures rather than individual or family-driven decision-making.

**Table 13: Motivations for Returning to Tunisia**

| Reason  | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> |
|---|-------------------|----------|---------|-------|----------------|----------|-----------|
| <b>Deported/forcibly removed from the host country</b>                          | 48                | 2        |         | 7     | <b>106</b>     | 3.74     | 1.88      |
| <b>Could not get a visa/permanent residency in the host country</b>             | 67                | 6        | 2       | 17    | <b>71</b>      | 3.12     | 1.88      |
| <b>Arbitrary detention in transit and destination countries</b>                 | 85                | 9        |         | 16    | <b>53</b>      | 2.65     | 1.85      |
| <b>Family reunification in Tunisia</b>  | 105               | 9        | 1       | 12    | 36             | 2.17     | 1.71      |
| <b>I love my country (Patriotism)</b>   | 101               | 8        | 10      | 20    | 24             | 2.13     | 1.58      |
| <b>People of the host country were unwelcoming or discriminating toward you</b> | 112               | 8        | 2       | 16    | 25             | 1.98     | 1.58      |
| <b>People are being treated well in Tunisia</b>                                 | 121               | 11       | 3       | 22    | 6              | 1.66     | 1.23      |
| <b>Unemployment in the host country</b>   | 128               | 7        | 1       | 11    | 16             | 1.65     | 1.35      |
| <b>There was no one to lead or look after our family in the host country</b>    | 129               | 10       |         | 10    | 13             | 1.57     | 1.26      |
| <b>Poor economic conditions in the host country</b>                             | 136               | 7        | 2       | 7     | 11             | 1.47     | 1.16      |
| <b>Poor security conditions in the host country</b>                             | 135               | 10       | 1       | 7     | 10             | 1.45     | 1.12      |
| <b>Security situation in Tunisia improved</b>                                   | 131               | 12       | 5       | 10    | 4              | 1.42     | 0.99      |
| <b>Economic conditions in Tunisia improved</b>                                  | 131               | 17       | 3       | 8     | 4              | 1.39     | 0.93      |
| <b>Because of natural disasters in the host country</b>                         | 152               | 7        | 2       | 1     | 1              | 1.11     | 0.48      |

**Note.** *M* = mean response for item; *SD* = standard deviation of the response for the item; note that responses are ordered by level of agreement with the most relevant reason at the top and least relevant reason at the bottom. For these questions, data are not available for one respondent, so the total is 163.

Overall, the findings indicate that return to Tunisia is primarily driven by externally imposed factors rather than voluntary choices. The top reasons: forced deportation, inability to secure legal status, and arbitrary detention, highlight the significant role of restrictive migration policies in shaping return trajectories. Family reunification appears as the only notable voluntary motivation, suggesting that personal or economic incentives play a secondary role in return decisions.

## 8. Health situation

To evaluate both their physical and mental health, returnees were asked, "What can you say about your health?" Most of them indicated being in good health, with the following frequencies where the total number of responses is 163: Excellent (44), Very good (n=21), Good (n=46), Medium (n=36), and Not good (n=16).

In response to the question "Do you have any chronic diseases?", 151 respondents reported having no chronic conditions, while eight reported having them. Five observations were missing.

## 9. Financial Support for Return and Post-return in Tunisia

### 9.1. Source of Financial Support for Returnees

Regarding financial assistance for returnees, in response to the question "*How did you finance your trip back to Tunisia?*", 43 of the 164 respondents reported relying on their own savings (**See Table 14**). However, the remaining mentioned a total of 46 instances of external support, including assistance from the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 16 cases), the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 5 cases), support from employers or businesses (4 cases), and contributions from family or friends either as loans (8 cases) or as gifts/support (13 cases). Note that this was a multiple-choice question allowing respondents to select more than one source of funding. Five Respondents received financial support from more than one source.

**Table 14: Source of Return Financing**

| Source of Return Financing          | Frequency |
|-------------------------------------|-----------|
| Savings                             | 43        |
| Loan from family or friends         | 8         |
| Gift/support from family or friends | 13        |
| Support from UNHCR                  | 5         |
| Support from IOM                    | 16        |
| Paid for by employer or business    | 4         |
| Other                               | 80        |

**Note.** Other = French government, Italian government, German government, forced deportation, OFII, and others. See Table 14 for more details. Multiple responses are allowed.

**Figure 7** shows that many migrants financed their return with personal resources or informal networks rather than relying on structured institutional support.

**Figure 5: Distribution of Source of Return Financing (percentages)**



For more details about other sources of financing we provide **Table 15**. Within the category of *Other sources of support*, the largest shares were reported under forced deportation (22 cases), the Italian government (12 cases), the German government (10 cases), and the French government (9 cases). Taken together, these account for the majority of responses in this category. Importantly, almost all of these sources are directly linked to forced-return mechanisms, such as deportation measures or government-assisted removals, rather than to voluntary assistance. Only two cases fell outside this framework, suggesting these types of support classified are associated with involuntary return processes. By contrast, the OFII (*Office Français de l'Immigration et de l'Intégration*) cases (6 in total) represent instances of voluntary return support, highlighting the institution's specific mandate to assist migrants who choose to return.

**Table 15 : Distribution of the other sources of support**

| Other sources of Support   | Frequency |
|----------------------------|-----------|
| <b>Forced deportation</b>  | 22        |
| <b>French government</b>   | 9         |
| <b>Deutsche government</b> | 10        |
| <b>Italian government</b>  | 12        |

|                             |           |
|-----------------------------|-----------|
| <b>Charity organisation</b> | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>OFII (France)</b>        | <b>6</b>  |
| <b>Denmark government</b>   | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>Detention centre</b>     | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>Tunisia Embassy</b>      | <b>2</b>  |
| <b>Swiss Embassy</b>        | <b>2</b>  |
| <b>German Embassy</b>       | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>Unspecified</b>          | <b>13</b> |
| <b>Total</b>                | <b>80</b> |

### *9.2. Post-Return Financial support from organisations*

In response to the following question, “When you returned to Tunisia, did you receive money from assisted voluntary return programs?” A large number of migrants (n=120) reported not receiving any financial assistance. The remaining 44 respondents (26,83%) reported they have received some form of financial support, with a total of 52 instances of support from different sources. **Table 16** shows the distribution of the aid received to finance projects after the migrants' return.

We note that only a few returnees reported receiving support from international organisations, such as the IOM (n = 4) and UNHCR (n = 2). A slightly more notable source of assistance came from European governments, including the French (n = 20), Tunisian (n = 11), and German (GIZ) (n = 14). However, compared to the total number of respondents (n = 164), these figures remain very low. This finding suggests that institutional and governmental support is limited and reaches only a small fraction of returnees, leaving the majority to manage their reintegration without substantial external assistance.

**Table 16: Distribution of Financial Aid Received to Finance Post-Return Projects**

| <b>Return Programs</b>   | <b>Number of Individuals</b> |
|--|------------------------------|
| OFII: the French Office for Immigration and Integration          | 20                           |
| OTE (Government of Tunisia)                                      | 11                           |
| GIZ: The Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit | 14                           |
| IOM (International Organization for Migration)                   | 4                            |
| UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)                        | 2                            |



|  |    |
|--|----|
| Others: Tounesna (Tunisian organisation) | 1  |
| Total                                    | 52 |

**Note.** Multiple responses are allowed.

Overall, the findings indicate that the majority of returnees relied on personal resources or forced return mechanisms to finance their return, with only a small proportion receiving structured institutional support. Post-return assistance from government or international organisations remains limited, reaching a minority of returnees. These results suggest the need to expand voluntary return programs and post-return reintegration support, ensuring broader coverage and targeted assistance to help returnees overcome economic and social vulnerabilities.

## 10. Detention Experiences Abroad

A substantial proportion of returnees had been detained while abroad. Of the total 164 respondents, 110 (67%) reported spending time in detention. A total of 54 reported not being in detention.

In terms of total time spent in detention, 26 returnees reported spending less than two weeks. However, the others reported more, such as from two weeks to a month ( $n = 21$ ), more than one month though less than two months ( $n = 21$ ), more than two months though less than six months ( $n = 2$ ), and more than six months ( $n = 21$ ) (see Table 17).

**Table 17: Time spent in detention**

| Duration in Prison                     | Frequency |
|--|-----------|
| Less than 2 weeks                      | 26        |
| From 2 weeks to 1 month                | 21        |
| More than 1 month, less than 2 months  | 21        |
| More than 2 months, less than 6 months | 21        |
| More than 6 months                     | 21        |
| Total                                  | 110       |

## 11. Meaning in Life and Coping with Life's Difficulties

Returnees were asked about the degree to which they derived meaning from the following four domains of life: family, friends, religion, and work/school. Response options for each question were on a zero to 100% scale (with increments of 10), with 0 meaning no meaning at all and 100% meaning "to the fullest extent".

**Table 18** shows that returnees derive the greatest sense of meaning in life from family (96.87%) and religion/spirituality (88.28%), followed by work or school (83.58%). Friends contribute less prominently (44.539%) to their perceived meaning in life. The relatively high standard deviations, particularly for work/school (29.78%) and friends (32.42%), suggest variability in how these domains are valued among returnees. Overall, the data highlight the

central role of family and religious/spiritual engagement in shaping the returnees' sense of purpose and fulfilment.

**Table 18 : Where Returnees Find Meaning in Life**

| <b>Factor</b>             | <b>Per cent (SD)</b> |
|---------------------------|----------------------|
| Family                    | 96.87 (14.64)        |
| Religion and Spirituality | 88.28 (22.84)        |
| Work/School               | 83.58(29.78)         |
| Friends                   | 44.53(32.42)         |

**Note.** *SD* = standard deviation of the percentage score.

Returnees were asked how much each aspect of their lives helped them cope with life's difficulties. **Table 19** provides a breakdown of the relevance of each of the four prespecified facets. This Table shows that returnees' family (86.1%) and religion/spirituality (83.3%) are strong ways to cope with life's difficulties, followed by work or school (73.4%). Friends contribute, featuring less prominently (34.1%).

The relatively high standard deviations, particularly for work/school (36.58%) and friends (33.24%), suggest variability in how these domains are valued among returnees.

Overall, the data underscore the pivotal role of family and religious/spiritual engagement in providing returnees with a sense of purpose and fulfilment, as well as helping them cope with life's challenges.

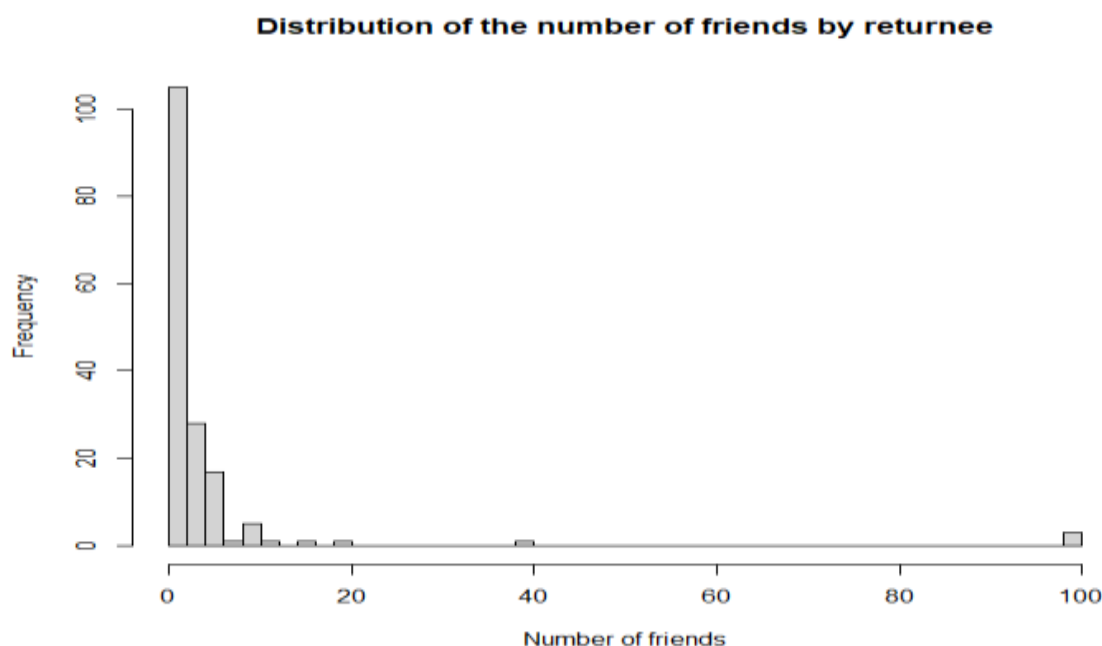
**Table 19: Where Returnees Find Support to Cope With Life's Difficulties**

| <b>Factor</b>             | <b>Per cent (SD)</b> |
|---------------------------|----------------------|
| Family                    | 86.11(28.55)         |
| Religion and Spirituality | 83.27 (29.94)        |
| Work/School               | 73.44(36.58)         |
| Friends                   | 34.07 (33.24)        |

**Note.** *SD* = standard deviation of the percentage score.

Regarding friendships, the average number of close friends reported by returnees was 4.34 (*SD* = 13.77). The minimum reported number of friends was zero (*n* = 53 out of 163) while the maximum was 100. The median of 2 indicates a right-skewed distribution, as confirmed by the histogram in **Figure 8**. Note that the number 100 represents respondents who answered 100 or more.

**Figure 6: Returnees' number of friends – Histogram**



To go further, we calculated the 90th and 95th percentiles, which are 6 and 10, respectively. This means that 90% of respondents have six friends or fewer, 95% have 10 friends or fewer, and only 5% have more than 10 friends.

In the case of hardship or any other matter requiring immediate attention, returnees report that in most cases ( $n = 133$ ), family would be the first point of contact followed by friends ( $n = 31$ ) and relatives ( $n = 14$ ) (note that 25 persons reported having no potential support person).

In conclusion, these dimensions are particularly relevant for reintegration, as sources of meaning and coping are closely linked to psychological well-being, resilience, and the capacity to adapt to post-return challenges. The firm reliance on family and religious or spiritual resources suggests that returnees primarily draw on traditional and private support systems to restore stability and purpose after return. By contrast, the high variability observed for work/school and friendship indicates heterogeneous reintegration experiences, reflecting unequal access to employment opportunities and differing abilities to rebuild social ties. The comparatively weak role of friendship, combined with the relatively high proportion of respondents reporting no close friends (32%), may point to limitations in social reintegration, potentially driven by disrupted networks, social stigma, or absence of support from local communities. Together, these patterns suggest that while family and religion act as key protective factors, broader social integration remains a challenge for many returnees.

## 12. Social and Cultural Connections

Of the total 164 returnees, the majority ( $n=129$ ) reported attending at least one social or cultural event in the 2 months preceding the interview. **Table 20** provides the number of migrants by Event type. Thirty-three respondents reported not attending any events in the last two months.

**Table 20: The Number of migrants by Event type**

| <b>Event type</b>                      | <b>Count</b> |
|--|--------------|
| <i>Gatherings / Meetings</i>           | 43           |
| <i>Religious celebrations/holidays</i> | 54           |
| <i>Marriage (wedding/engagement)</i>   | 79           |
| <i>Funeral procession</i>              | 80           |
| <i>Khatm (religious recitation)</i>    | 19           |
| <i>Travel for sightseeing</i>          | 5            |
| <i>Other cases</i>                     | 12           |
| <i>Attended to any event</i>           | 33           |

As shown in **Table 20** travel for sightseeing was reported infrequently. This type of event typically requires a budget and discretionary income, which can be difficult for return migrants who often face precarious financial circumstances.

### 13. Application of Socio-Cultural Skills Learnt Overseas

In response to the following question, “Are the skills you acquired abroad relevant to the job or work you are currently doing in your home country?” most respondents stated “not relevant at all” ( $n = 107$ ). The following number of responses for the alternate options suggested that the relevance of the skills acquired abroad is: not really relevant ( $n = 4$ ), a little ( $n = 8$ ), somewhat relevant ( $n = 9$ ), and totally relevant ( $n = 25$ ).

In response to the following question, “To what extent do you believe the professional skills acquired in the host country have enhanced your employability prospects in Tunisia?” most respondents stated “not at all” ( $n = 100$ ). The following number of responses for the alternate options suggested that the application of such skills was quite rare: slightly ( $n = 6$ ), moderately ( $n = 17$ ), significantly ( $n = 13$ ), and extremely ( $n = 17$ ).

**Table 21** illustrates that the majority of returnees perceive the skills acquired abroad as having limited relevance to their current jobs and a weak impact on their employability in Tunisia.

**Table 21: Perceived relevance of Skills acquired abroad and impact on employability**

| <b>Response category</b> | <b>Skill relevance</b> | <b>Employability impact</b> |
|--------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <b>Not at all</b>        | <b>70% (n=107)</b>     | <b>65,4% (n=100)</b>        |
| <b>Slightly</b>          | 2,6% (n=4)             | 3,9% (n=6)                  |
| <b>Moderately</b>        | 5,2% (n=8)             | 11,1% (n=17)                |
| <b>Significantly</b>     | 5,9% (n=9)             | 8,5% (n=13)                 |
| <b>Extremely</b>         | 16,3 (n=25)            | 11,1% (n=17)                |

These findings highlight a limited recognition and applicability of skills acquired abroad within the Tunisian labour market, suggesting both a transferability gap and a mismatch

between foreign-acquired competencies and local demand. Another possible explanation is the limited length or depth of professional experience gained abroad, which prevented respondents from consolidating their skills in ways that could be effectively leveraged upon return.

In contrast to the limited relevance of professional skills acquired abroad, in response to the following question, “Have the socio-cultural skills learned in the host country improved your ability to adapt to different cultural contexts within your home country?” A notable number of respondents ( $n=83$ , 51%) reported that the socio-cultural skills learned abroad improved their ability to adapt to different cultural contexts in their own countries. The other responses are distributed as follows: significantly ( $n = 15$ ), moderately ( $n = 10$ ), slightly ( $n = 11$ ), and not at all ( $n = 43$ ).

These results point to the possibility that returnees can leverage socio-cultural learning, such as adaptability, openness, and cross-cultural communication, to navigate diverse contexts within their home country. This highlights the non-economic value of migration experiences, which can strengthen resilience, integration, and social cohesion even when professional benefits remain limited.

#### 14. Economic Embeddedness

Out of 164 respondents, 120 (73%) reported being currently employed or engaged in income-generating activities since their return. However, income levels appear less favourable for many: 82 returnees reported that their current earnings have decreased compared to their pre-migration income, and 45 stated that their income remains about the same. Only 35 reported an increase in earnings after return.

In response to the following question: “Have you started a business or entrepreneurial venture in your home country since your return?” The majority of respondents answered negatively ( $n=112$ ).

This outcome may be explained, in large part, by the limited financial resources available to returnees, which limit their capacity to launch and sustain entrepreneurial projects.

Additionally, when asked whether they had been able to secure loans or access credit for business or personal purposes in their home country, only 19 of 158 respondents reported success. By contrast, 75 reported being unable to obtain credit, while 64 stated they had not attempted to apply for a loan.

This indicates that, beyond individual financial constraints, broader structural barriers, such as limited access to credit and the absence of tailored support programs, appear to hinder entrepreneurial initiatives. Together, these factors help explain why so few returnees can translate their migration experience into business creation upon return.

When asked about the housing status of their residence, 47 returnees reported owning their home. Others indicated living in rented accommodation ( $n = 16$ ) or in houses purchased through a bank loan ( $n = 4$ ). The vast majority ( $n = 99$ ) reported other arrangements, including family-owned or inherited housing.

Finally, when asked whether they were able to meet their basic financial needs (e.g., housing, food, healthcare) without difficulty, 48 returnees responded “Yes, totally,” 39 said “Somewhat,” 18 replied “A little,” 16 reported “Not really,” and 41 stated “No, not at all.”

## 15. Hope, Resilience, and Depression among Returnees

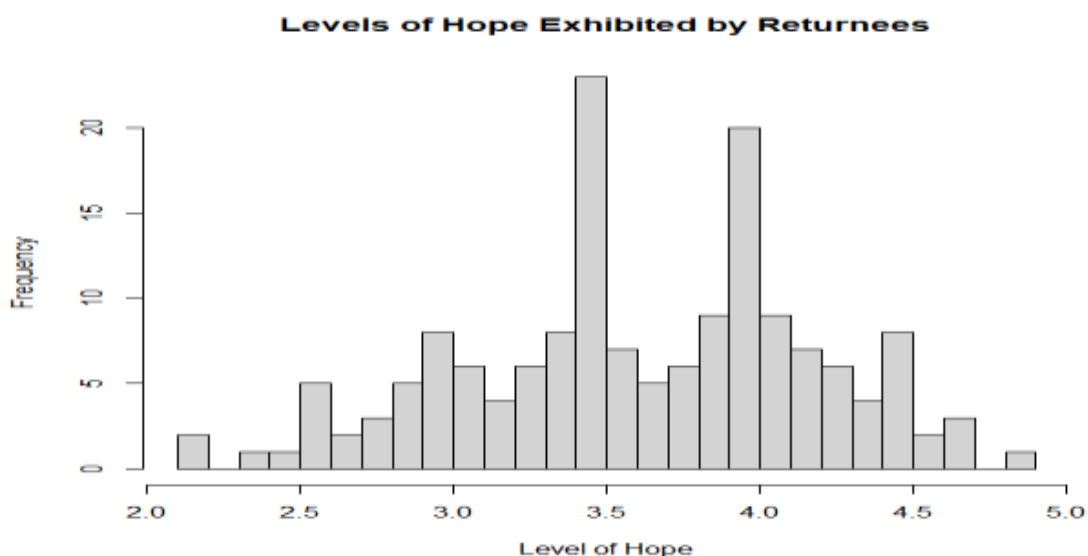
Returnees reported varying levels of hope, resilience, and depression<sup>2</sup>. Note that in this part of the analysis, 19 of 164 cases have incomplete data. We perform our analysis only on our completed data. The Cronbach's alpha values indicate good internal consistency for hope ( $\alpha = 0.665$ ), resilience ( $\alpha = 0.763$ ), and depression ( $\alpha = 0.782$ ), with all items showing positive item-total correlations (Willse, 2018) (see **Tables 26-27-28** in appendix 2).

### 15. 1. Hope

Note that the instrument used to measure refugees' Hope included 12 items (Snyder et al., 1991) associated with higher levels of optimism for life and pursuit of goals alongside minimal levels of worry about one's outlook (see **Table 29** in appendix 3).

In **Figure 9**, we provide the distribution of migrants by the level of hope. As shown in in this Figure, levels of hope reported by returnees ranged from 2.17 to 4.83 (response options ranged from strongly disagree = 1 to strongly agree = 5). From **Table 22**, returnees reported moderately high levels of hope ( $M = 3.62$ ,  $SD = 0.57$ ). This indicates that, although some individuals experienced lower levels of hope, the majority demonstrated a generally positive outlook.

**Figure 7: Distribution of hope levels among returnees**



**Table 22: Summary of the Hope score mean value**

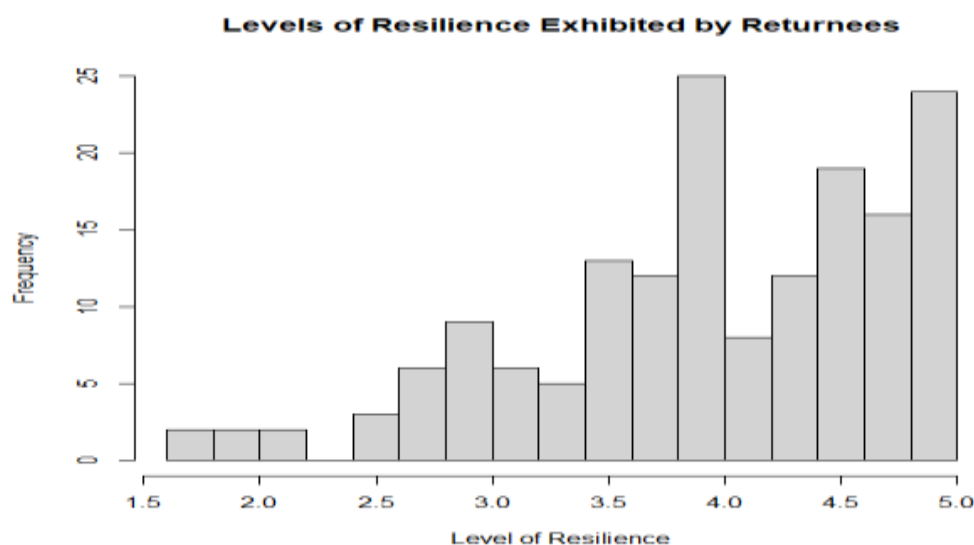
| Minimum | 1st Quartile (Q1) | Median | Mean | 3rd Quartile (Q3) | Maximum |
|---------|-------------------|--------|------|-------------------|---------|
| 2.17    | 3.25              | 3.58   | 3.62 | 4.00              | 4.83    |

<sup>2</sup> See the 12-item hope scale ( $\alpha = 0.665$ ), 6-item resilience scale ( $\alpha = 0.763$ ), and 10-item depression scale ( $\alpha = 0.782$ ) are available in the appendix 3.

## 15.2 Resilience

We used the 10-item Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (Connor-Davidson, 2003). **Figure 10** presents a visual of the distribution of responses regarding returnees' resilience. Our classical test theory (CTT) analysis revealed that, after removing items ResilQ1c, ResilQ1d, ResilQ1h, and ResilQ1j, which showed negative item–total correlations in the initial 10-item model—the scale demonstrated improved reliability. The scale gauged returnees' mental capacity to manage misfortune, deal with pressure, and overcome challenges (see appendix 3, Table 30 for details).. Response options for each resilience item ranged between “not true at all” = 1 and “true nearly all of the time” = 5.

**Figure 8: Distribution of Resilience Levels among returnees**



Overall, as reported in **Table 23**, returnees reported a relatively high level of resilience ( $M = 3.96$ ,  $SD = 0.78$ ;  $Md = 4$  on a 5-point scale). This suggests that most respondents perceived themselves as able to effectively cope with adversity, handle pressure, and overcome challenges. The slightly higher median relative to the mean indicates that resilience scores were generally skewed towards the higher end.

**Table 23: Summary of the Resilience score mean value**

| Minimum | 1st Quartile<br>(Q1) | Median | Mean | 3rd Quartile<br>(Q3) | Maximum |
|---------|----------------------|--------|------|----------------------|---------|
|---------|----------------------|--------|------|----------------------|---------|

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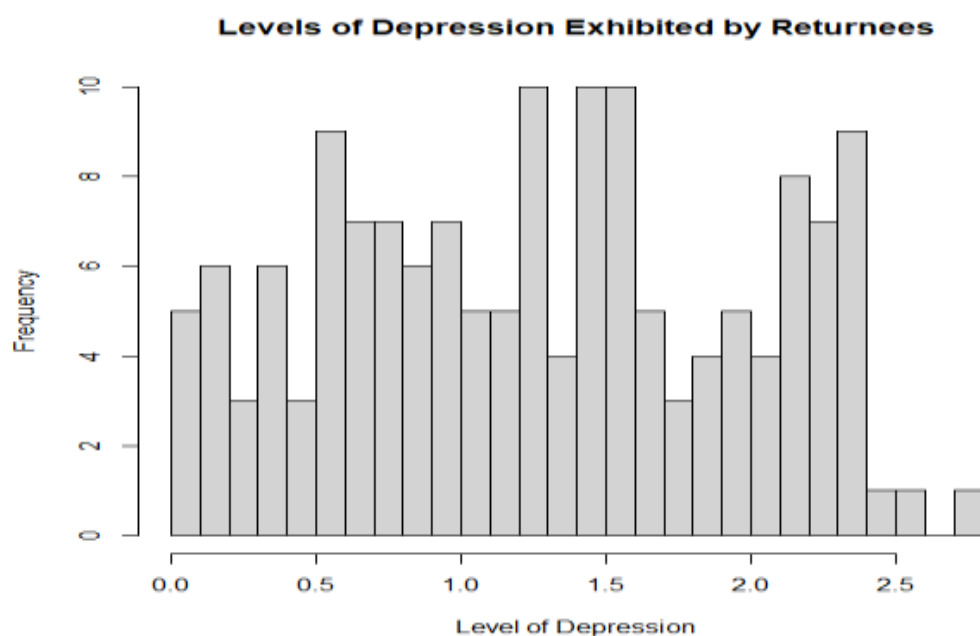
|      |      |   |      |      |      |
|------|------|---|------|------|------|
| 1.67 | 3.50 | 4 | 3.96 | 4.50 | 5.00 |
|------|------|---|------|------|------|

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### 15.3 Depression

To estimate returnee depression, we used the 10-item scale by Björgvinsson et al. (2013), with each item rated from 0 to 3, where 3 corresponds to “always or all the time,” indicating the highest frequency of experiencing the symptom. The scale captured returnees’ lack of focus, feelings of restlessness and inertia, and fear (see **Table 31** in appendix 3 for details). Following conventions in research practice, response options ranged between “never or rarely” = 0 and “always or all the time” = 3. **Figure 11** shows the reported level of depression among the returnees.

**Figure 9: Distribution of Depression Levels among returnees**



As presented in **Table 24**, the mean response to the items for the returnees was 1.32/3.00 (SD = 0.70). The cutoff score of 1.00/3.00 or greater is commonly used for higher depression.

**Table 24: Summary of the Depression score mean value**

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| Minimum | 1st Quartile<br>(Q1) | Median | Mean | 3rd Quartile<br>(Q3) | Maximum |
|---------|----------------------|--------|------|----------------------|---------|
|---------|----------------------|--------|------|----------------------|---------|

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|       |      |      |      |     |      |
|-------|------|------|------|-----|------|
| 0.000 | 0.70 | 1.30 | 1.32 | 1.9 | 2.80 |
|-------|------|------|------|-----|------|

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Although returnees exhibit relatively high levels of hope ( $M \approx 3.62/5$ ) and resilience ( $M \approx 3.96/5$ ), they present notable depressive symptoms ( $M \approx 1.32/3$ ). This pattern suggests that, despite maintaining cognitive hope and coping capacity, many returnees continue to experience emotional distress, likely reflecting the structural and social challenges of reintegration. In other words, having high hope does not mean that returnees do not feel stress or sadness in a challenging post-return environment. This persistence of depressive symptoms despite high resilience underscores the limits of individual coping strategies when structural and socio-economic conditions remain unfavourable.

## 16. Conclusion and Recommendation

### 16.1. Conclusion

This report sheds light on the complex and evolving realities faced by returnees in Tunisia, drawing on empirical evidence collected across 164 returnees. The findings highlight a multifaceted return and reintegration experience characterised by socio-economic fragility. While many returnees demonstrate notable resilience and aspirations for stability, their reintegration trajectories remain constrained by limited employment prospects, financial insecurity, and insufficient institutional support.

In sum, the descriptive evidence shows that returnees' migration trajectories are largely involuntary, characterised by forced returns, low educational attainment, limited institutional support, multi-country mobility, and that more than two-thirds of the respondents reported experiences of detention abroad. These features point to significant structural constraints shaping both migration and reintegration outcomes.

The results of this study point to significant structural challenges within the current return governance and reintegration framework in Tunisia. Although national institutions responsible for migration and reintegration play a central coordinating role, their operational capacity and resources remain limited, particularly amid broader economic constraints. Our findings indicate that post-return financial assistance remains limited in scope, with only a small proportion of returnees (26,83%) accessing any form of financial support. Moreover, reliance on a fragmented mix of government, national, and international funding sources underscores the absence of a coherent, adequately scaled post-return financing framework, raising concerns about the effectiveness and sustainability of current reintegration policies.

Economic reintegration emerges as one of the most critical challenges faced by returnees. High unemployment (20%), modest income levels, and persistent economic vulnerability affect a substantial portion of the sample. Access to financial resources remains particularly limited: only 12% of respondents reported successfully obtaining a loan for business or personal purposes after their return, while the vast majority either lacked access to credit or did not attempt to apply, reflecting both structural constraints and perceived barriers to financial inclusion.

Although family support and cultural (Religion and Spirituality) values continue to play an essential role in providing psychological support, reliance on these informal mechanisms cannot compensate for the absence of comprehensive and inclusive reintegration policies. In this context, it is notable that a significant proportion of returnees (59%) indicated that legal avenues for re-migration remained a viable option, underscoring ongoing dissatisfaction with local reintegration prospects.

The psychological assessment reveals a complex and nuanced mental health profile among returnees. On average, the reported moderately high levels of hope and resilience suggest that many returnees retain a sense of purpose and personal agency despite the adversities associated with return. At the same time, the notable level of depressive symptoms points to an essential psychological paradox: returnees may possess internal coping resources while simultaneously experiencing significant emotional distress reflecting ongoing exposure to structural stressors, including unemployment, financial insecurity, social uncertainty and limited institutional support during reintegration. Despite a relatively mature average age of 33 years, a large proportion of returnees (72.6%) reported being single. This pattern suggests that economic insecurity, psychological distress, and persistent uncertainty associated with the return process may constrain individuals' capacity to form stable family relationships and to marry.

Overall, the evidence underscores the urgent need for a more coherent, coordinated, and sustainable return and reintegration approach in Tunisia. Effective reintegration requires moving beyond emergency assistance toward integrated policies that simultaneously address economic inclusion, social cohesion, and psychosocial well-being. Based on the empirical findings, this report emphasises the importance of strengthening institutional capacity, fostering partnerships between public institutions, civil society, and international organisations, and embedding reintegration policies within broader national development and employment strategies.

## 16.2. Key Recommendations

### **Several key recommendations should be highlighted:**

**1.** Work should be done to improve the alignment of programs with the actual needs of migrants. This responsibility lies primarily with donors, the bilateral cooperation services of the embassies of the leading countries of origin of returning migrants (mainly France, Italy, Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands), and institutional stakeholders in the countries of origin, namely Tunisia.

**2.** We have observed a lack of coordination between bilateral cooperation services with Tunisia (Italian Cooperation, French Cooperation, and other cooperation agencies), even though the funds come from the EU. For example, Italian cooperation does not fund economic reintegration projects for migrants who have voluntarily returned or been expelled from Italy. These projects are supported by entities such as the OFII (French Office for Immigration and Integration) or GIZ (German Agency for International Cooperation). The Commission must ensure a minimum level of coherence among these various European actors.

**3.** Encourage the EU and European bilateral cooperation services to involve the Tunisian government in the design of return programs for their citizens, to improve the effectiveness of these programs in meeting the needs of returning migrants.

**4.** In Tunisia, mitigate the vertical and hierarchical relationships between central authorities and regional and local actors working on these return programs.

**5.** Take into account the main obstacles faced by returning migrants in Tunisia that risk undermining any successful and sustainable reintegration efforts. These obstacles are primarily structural. Examples include the inefficiency of political institutions, bureaucratic red tape, and the weakness of education, healthcare, and social protection systems.

**6.** Better integrate social welfare services at the regional and local levels, as they are well-positioned to meet the needs of vulnerable populations, including forcibly returned migrants who remain without support.

**7.** Among the capacities to be strengthened within institutional actors is the widespread implementation of psychosocial support services for returning migrants, especially those who returned without reintegration plans and who remain destitute. Migrants' own families, and especially women (mothers, wives, sisters, etc.), must also benefit from this psychosocial support.

**8.** Review the amounts allocated to the creation of economic reintegration projects. The current amounts (€5,000) are far below the costs of substantial capital for reintegration.

**9.** Allocate more funds to assist projects that are struggling due to the difficulties migrants face in ensuring their survival. Small amounts (TND 1,000, 1,500, 2,000) are sufficient, for example, to increase store stock to meet customer demand.

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## Appendix 1: Geographic Distribution of interviewed Returnees

### Table 25: Geographic Distribution by Governorate.

| Governorate        | Number of returnees | %          |
|--------------------|---------------------|------------|
| <b>Mahdia</b>      | 34                  | 20,7       |
| <b>Sfax</b>        | 30                  | 18,3       |
| <b>Medenine</b>    | 19                  | 11,6       |
| <b>Tunis</b>       | 17                  | 10,4       |
| <b>Kairouan</b>    | 13                  | 7,9        |
| <b>Gabes</b>       | 7                   | 4,3        |
| <b>Nabeul</b>      | 7                   | 4,3        |
| <b>Kasserine</b>   | 8                   | 4,9        |
| <b>Monastir</b>    | 5                   | 3,0        |
| <b>Ben Arous</b>   | 4                   | 2,4        |
| <b>Bizerte</b>     | 4                   | 2,4        |
| <b>Kebili</b>      | 4                   | 2,4        |
| <b>Sousse</b>      | 4                   | 2,4        |
| <b>Ariana</b>      | 2                   | 1,2        |
| <b>Sidi Bouzid</b> | 2                   | 1,2        |
| <b>Tozeur</b>      | 2                   | 1,2        |
| <b>Kef</b>         | 1                   | 0,6        |
| <b>Manouba</b>     | 1                   | 0,6        |
| <b>Total</b>       | <b>164</b>          | <b>100</b> |

### Table 26: Geographic Distribution by Location.

| Location          | Count (total 164) |
|-------------------|-------------------|
| Skhira            | 21                |
| Mahdia            | 16                |
| Zarzis            | 11                |
| Bradaa            | 7                 |
| Ile Kerkenah      | 7                 |
| Sbeitla           | 7                 |
| Ben Garden        | 4                 |
| Souk Al-Ahad      | 4                 |
| Gabes             | 3                 |
| Kairouan          | 6                 |
| Kelibia           | 3                 |
| Ksour Essef       | 3                 |
| Mallasine         | 3                 |
| Sidi Hassine      | 3                 |
| Djerba            | 2                 |
| El Cabbala        | 2                 |
| Elhkayma          | 2                 |
| Elkram            | 2                 |
| Kabaria           | 2                 |
| Northern-Kairouan | 3                 |

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|                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| Manzel chaker    | 2 |
| Mater            | 2 |
| Moknine          | 2 |
| Nefta            | 2 |
| Tunis            | 2 |
| Wethref          | 2 |
| Zarat            | 1 |
| Al-khazazya      | 1 |
| Al kram          | 1 |
| Awled Ammar      | 1 |
| Awled Chamekh    | 1 |
| Bni Khaled       | 1 |
| Chebba           | 1 |
| Douar Hicher     | 1 |
| El Maleji        | 1 |
| El Yassminat     | 1 |
| El Zahrouni      | 1 |
| ELKEF            | 1 |
| Esaad            | 1 |
| Ezzahrouni       | 1 |
| Ezzouhour city   | 1 |
| Fouchena         | 1 |
| Hajeb            | 1 |
| Hammemet         | 1 |
| South-Kairouan   | 1 |
| Kalaa Kbira      | 1 |
| Korbaa           | 1 |
| Maamoura         | 1 |
| Malloulech       | 1 |
| Matwya           | 1 |
| South-Mednine    | 2 |
| Monastir         | 1 |
| Msaken           | 1 |
| Rades            | 1 |
| Raoued           | 1 |
| Ras Djbel        | 1 |
| Rchercha         | 1 |
| Riadh andalos    | 1 |
| Sabela           | 1 |
| Sahline          | 1 |
| Sousse (Sahloul) | 1 |
| Tunis            | 1 |
| Wardanine        | 1 |
| Wardia           | 1 |
| Yasminette       | 1 |
| Zarzouna         | 1 |

## Appendix 2: CCT Analysis

**Table 27: CCT ANALYSIS FOR HOPE**

| Item    | Item Mean | pBis  | bis   | Alpha If Deleted |
|---------|-----------|-------|-------|------------------|
| HopeQ1a | 4.35      | 0.245 | 0.296 | 0.655            |
| HopeQ1b | 4.48      | 0.349 | 0.436 | 0.646            |
| HopeQ1c | 2.17      | 0.282 | 0.324 | 0.651            |
| HopeQ1d | 3.90      | 0.458 | 0.509 | 0.622            |
| HopeQ1e | 3.73      | 0.227 | 0.251 | 0.661            |
| HopeQ1f | 4.30      | 0.385 | 0.457 | 0.637            |
| HopeQ1g | 3.21      | 0.329 | 0.369 | 0.644            |
| HopeQ1h | 4.19      | 0.486 | 0.572 | 0.623            |
| HopeQ1i | 4.52      | 0.254 | 0.323 | 0.655            |
| HopeQ1j | 3.42      | 0.135 | 0.148 | 0.678            |
| HopeQ1k | 2.83      | 0.401 | 0.445 | 0.627            |
| HopeQ1l | 2.35      | 0.299 | 0.333 | 0.647            |

**Note.** Final Table: alpha=0.655

**Table 28: CCT analysis for Resilience**

| itemName | itemMean | pBis  | bis   | alphaIfDeleted |
|----------|----------|-------|-------|----------------|
| ResilQ1a | 3.793    | 0.465 | 0.513 | 0.741          |
| ResilQ1b | 3.988    | 0.663 | 0.726 | 0.691          |
| ResilQ1e | 4.091    | 0.494 | 0.557 | 0.731          |
| ResilQ1f | 4.067    | 0.561 | 0.629 | 0.714          |
| ResilQ1g | 3.585    | 0.346 | 0.374 | 0.777          |
| ResilQ1i | 4.226    | 0.568 | 0.658 | 0.714          |

**Note.** Final Table: alpha=0.763

**Table 29: CCT analysis for Depression**

| itemName      | itemMean | pBis  | bis   | alphaIfDeleted |
|---------------|----------|-------|-------|----------------|
| DepressionQ2a | 1.583    | 0.511 | 0.568 | 0.756          |
| DepressionQ2b | 1.007    | 0.286 | 0.321 | 0.783          |
| DepressionQ2c | 1.358    | 0.666 | 0.749 | 0.735          |
| DepressionQ2d | 1.437    | 0.603 | 0.699 | 0.742          |
| DepressionQ2e | 1.192    | 0.106 | 0.120 | 0.794          |
| DepressionQ2f | 0.993    | 0.475 | 0.546 | 0.761          |
| DepressionQ2g | 1.437    | 0.630 | 0.727 | 0.739          |
| DepressionQ2h | 1.305    | 0.064 | 0.069 | 0.802          |
| DepressionQ2i | 1.424    | 0.561 | 0.649 | 0.749          |
| DepressionQ2j | 1.437    | 0.482 | 0.555 | 0.760          |

**Note.** Final Table: Alpha=0.782



### Appendix 3: Hope, Resilience and Depression Questions

**Table 30:HOPE SCALE**

| <b>Hope Scale</b>   |   |                   |          |         |       |                |
|---|---|-------------------|----------|---------|-------|----------------|
| [HopeQ1] Select the most appropriate response for each question |   |                   |          |         |       |                |
| No.   | Statements  | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |
| HopeQ1a   | I can think of many ways to get out of a jam.                                   |                   |          |         |       |                |
| HopeQ1b   | I energetically pursue my goals.  |                   |          |         |       |                |
| HopeQ1c   | I feel tired most of the time. [R]  |                   |          |         |       |                |
| HopeQ1d   | There are lots of ways around any problem.                                      |                   |          |         |       |                |
| HopeQ1e   | I am easily drawn into an argument [R]  |                   |          |         |       |                |
| HopeQ1f   | I can think of many ways to get the things in life that are important to me.    |                   |          |         |       |                |
| HopeQ1g   | I worry about my health. [R]  |                   |          |         |       |                |
| HopeQ1h   | Even when others get discouraged, I know I can find a way to solve the problem. |                   |          |         |       |                |
| HopeQ1i   | My past experiences have prepared me well for my future.                        |                   |          |         |       |                |
| HopeQ1j   | I've been pretty successful in life.  |                   |          |         |       |                |
| HopeQ1k   | I usually find myself worrying about something. [R]                             |                   |          |         |       |                |
| HopeQ1l   | I meet the goals that I set for myself.   |                   |          |         |       |                |
| Note. [R]item reversed.   |   |                   |          |         |       |                |

**Table 31: RESILIENCE SCALE**

| <b>Resilience Scale</b>                |  |                 |             |                |            |                          |
|--|--|-----------------|-------------|----------------|------------|--------------------------|
| [ResilQ1] Please respond to each item. |  |                 |             |                |            |                          |
| No                                     | Statement  | Not True at all | Rarely True | Sometimes True | Often True | True nearly all the time |
| [ResilQ1a]                             | I am able to adapt when changes occur.   |                 |             |                |            |                          |
| [ResilQ1b]                             | I can deal with whatever comes my way.   |                 |             |                |            |                          |
| [ResilQ1c]                             | I try to see the humorous side of things when I am faced with problems.                    |                 |             |                |            |                          |
| [ResilQ1d]                             | Having to cope with stress can make me stronger.   |                 |             |                |            |                          |
| [ResilQ1e]                             | I tend to bounce back after illness, injury or other hardships.                            |                 |             |                |            |                          |
| [ResilQ1f]                             | I believe I can achieve my goals, even if there are obstacles.                             |                 |             |                |            |                          |
| [ResilQ1g]                             | Under pressure, I stay focused and think clearly.  |                 |             |                |            |                          |
| [ResilQ1h]                             | I am not easily discouraged by failure.  |                 |             |                |            |                          |
| [ResilQ1i]                             | I think of myself as a strong person when dealing with life's challenges and difficulties. |                 |             |                |            |                          |
| [ResilQ1j]                             | I am able to handle unpleasant or painful feelings like sadness, fear, and anger.          |                 |             |                |            |                          |

**Table 32: DEPRESSION SCALE**

| Depression Scale        |   |  |   |   |                                     |
|-------------------------|---|--|---|---|-------------------------------------|
| No.                     | Statements  | Always or all the time: Five to six days | Most of the time or usually: Three to four days | Somewhat or occasionally: One to two days | Never or rarely: Less than one day) |
| DepressionQ1a           | I was bothered by things that usually don't bother me.    |  |   |   |                                     |
| DepressionQb            | I had trouble keeping my mind on what I was doing         |  |   |   |                                     |
| DepressionQ2c           | I felt depressed  |  |   |   |                                     |
| DepressionQ2d           | I feel that everything I do is an effort to remain alive. |  |   |   |                                     |
| DepressionQ2e           | I am optimistic and hopeful about the future [R].         |  |   |   |                                     |
| DepressionQ2f           | I felt fearful.   |  |   |   |                                     |
| DepressionQ2g           | My sleep was restless                                     |  |   |   |                                     |
| DepressionQ2h           | I was happy [R]   |  |   |   |                                     |
| DepressionQ2i           | I felt lonely.  |  |   |   |                                     |
| DepressionQ2j           | I could not "get going"                                   |  |   |   |                                     |
| Note. [R]item reversed. |   |  |   |   |                                     |

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