
Local hosting and transnational identity

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Tunisian people, rather than their government, led the response to the humanitarian crisis when Libyans started their own revolt and people starting fleeing across the border.

In February and March 2011, Tunisians were managing the fallout from their own revolution. Governmental institutions were on hold, and security and policing were absent in south-eastern Tunisia, the area closest to Libya's western border. Informal but highly effective community efforts in Tunisia, outside the auspices of national and international institutions, played a crucial role in ensuring the safe passage and accommodation of hundreds of thousands of people fleeing Libya. Initially, as groups of migrant workers crossed into Tunisia en route to the airport on the Tunisian island of Djerba, Tunisian villagers organised cooking crews, with men cooking together in community centres and women cooking separately in their homes. They took this food

to the airport as third-country nationals waited for flights home paid for by the international community.

No sooner had these migrant workers left than Libyan families began streaming across the border in search of a safe haven – and ended up staying for five to eight months. One man on Djerba asked rhetorically, “We helped the Egyptians, we helped the Chinese, we helped the Bangladeshis. So when the Libyans came to stay, how could we not help them too?” Another said: “We were busy with the Tunisian revolution. We were dealing with our own problems and then the Libyan problem came. A friend called from Ras Jdir at the border. He said there were masses of hungry people, at



Youth hostel in Douiret, Tunisia, converted for use by Libyan refugee families.

least 40,000, and could I help? So I called all my friends, we had a meeting, and we raised money and we bought food, diapers and mattresses, loaded up twenty pick-up trucks, and headed to the border to deliver everything. After that we went down to where people from the Nafusa Mountains were coming in. There everyone is Amazigh [Berber]. They're Amazigh, we're Amazigh."

Of the hundreds of thousands of Libyans fleeing the violence in their country and going to Tunisia, initially most were Amazigh people from the Nafusa Mountains. The closest safe haven for them once inside Tunisia through the Dehiba border crossing was a camp run by the Emirates only 13 km from the border. Tunisians volunteered as organisers there too, including an entrepreneurial young woman named Insaf who started working with Libyan women and children in the camp to assess their needs, and then presented programme proposals to the Emirati and Libyan men in charge of the strictly gender-segregated camp activities. A short while later, UNHCR established a camp further north in Ramada and Qatar established one still further north outside the provincial capital of Tataouine.

The logistics of refugee hosting

Individuals with no previous experience in humanitarian assistance arranged for the stay of many of the 60-80,000 Libyans who settled mostly in south-eastern Tunisia. Wealthier Libyans rented hotel rooms or sought rental situations outside the auspices of these community organisers rather than accept charity. But most families needed help.

Some families lived with Tunisian families. In addition, in each village or town, one person took responsibility for collecting keys for abandoned houses, emigrants' summer residences and other empty housing. Collectively, villagers cleaned and refurnished these homes, equipped them with stoves, refrigerators and in some cases washing machines, and turned the electricity and water back on if necessary. The settlement process followed a pattern. One or two Libyan families came first with an organiser from the Nafusa Mountains who knew the geography

and customs in southeastern Tunisia. He went directly to villages and asked the local men whether there was housing for those families and potentially for others. The Djerban organisers then showed the Libyan family heads available homes and identified matches. Locals talked about this housing situation as a 'rental', and UNHCR statistics use the same term, but only rarely did money change hands. Even seasoned aid officials said they had never witnessed such a reception by a host country during a refugee crisis.

The shared language and similar customs facilitated Libyan integration into Tunisian villages and small towns. Since pre-school-aged Libyan children in the Nafusa Mountains usually only speak

Tamazight, Libyan women felt reassured living among Tamazight speakers. Additionally, the Amazigh groups on both sides of the border tended to be conservative in regards to gender segregation. Libyan men who were commuting to fight with the rebels needed to feel they could entrust their wives and daughters to Tunisian host communities, although while they were in Tunisia many Libyan women were required to assume roles they previously would have allocated to men, such as taking children to the doctor or procuring rations.

Solidarity and its discontents

In early to mid 2011, Libyans and Tunisians told stories of solidarity. Over a main street of the market town of Tataouine hung a handwritten banner in Arabic reading "Welcome to our Libyan brothers". The support was fortunate, as Libyans doubled the population of the town from 40,000 to 80,000. A Libyan woman in Douiret showed her hand that had been hennaed by a Tunisian woman who offered her tea en route to the settlement camp. She also described a planned marriage between a young Libyan woman in the Dehiba camp and a Tunisian aid worker. People narrated incidents such as these as evidence of good relations between Tunisians and Libyans in the midst of crisis – signalling the kind of integration of displaced populations that is possible when communities share values.

Yet by Ramadan in August 2011, disillusion and tension had set in. The public welcome banners were gone, and stocks of basic necessities like milk, dates and gasoline were running low. With the National Transitional Council's seizure of Tripoli, increasing numbers of pro-Gaddafi supporters and army defectors poured into Tunisia. It was increasingly hard to tell which refugees were on which side of the conflict but Tunisian host communities continued to assume the neutral stance of the humanitarian groups – they offered food and housing to those in need.

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